

The Lantern Festival

By the Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism

In Chinese tradition, the lunar New Year of the Dog is a time of festivities and celebration. On the New Year eve, it is customary for the family to visit the local flower festival and buy seasonal flowers to welcome the New Year. On New Year's day relatives will visit each other bearing New Year wishes and gifts. These practices also extend to organizations. Very often, businesses and corporations will hold group visits, extending greetings to other organizations and their members. The lunar New Year is a time in which people renew contacts with each other and re-establish goodwill within the community. On the fifteenth day of the first month of the year lanterns are often hung in homes and businesses. The lanterns are said to bring fortune and prosperity to the family for the New Year. This practice becomes even more important when, in the previous year, one has met with good fortune, such as the birth of a child. On this

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occasion, lanterns will be hung in the home and relatives and friends will be feasted.

The lunar New Year Festival of Lanterns falls on the day that marks the beginning of the First Season. According to Taoist tradition, the year is divided into three seasons. The First Season begins on the fifteenth day of the first month. The Second Season begins on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. The Third Season begins on the fifteenth day of the tenth month. The first season is ruled by the Lord of Heaven and his birth falls on the fifteenth day of the first month. The Second Season is ruled by the Lord of Earth and the Third Season is ruled by the Lord of the Waters. In Taoist religion, it is said that the Lord of Heaven grants prosperity, the Lord of Earth forgives wrongdoing, and the Lord of the Waters protects us from suffering and disaster. Therefore, in conjunction with the celebration of the new year people also celebrate the birthday of the Lord of Heaven and ask him to grant fortune and prosperity. In addition to hanging lanterns, special

ceremonies for the Lords of the Three Seasons are also performed.

The origin of the Lantern Festival can be dated back to the Han dynasty (1st century A.D). It is believed that the festival evolved from a ceremony in which the Han emperors sacrificed to a god called The Ancient One. In the Historical Records, Sima Qian describes a ceremony in which the Han emperor gazed at the sky from sunset to sunrise. Since the ceremony took place throughout the night, many lanterns were lit to illuminate the sacrificial area. People began to gather to see the splendour of the spectacle and gradually the ceremonies became an event for the populace as well as the nobility.

There is an interesting legend surrounding the Festival of the Lanterns in the Tang dynasty (8th century A.D.) The emperor and the empress were lighting the lanterns in the palace in celebration of the New Year. By that time the Festival of the Lanterns had become a tradition, and in many cities there were entire fairs devoted to exhibiting and selling

lanterns. In that particular year, the lanterns in a town called Guang Lin were unusually beautiful. In the midst of festivities the emperor turned to his chief diviner, the Taoist master Yi, and said to him, "Do you know where the most beautiful lanterns are displayed this year?" The Taoist master replied, "Sire, it is in the town of Guang Lin that the most beautiful lanterns can be found." The emperor then said, "Can your magic take us there so we can have a look at the lanterns?" The Taoist master said, "Surely." With that, a bridge appeared in the main hall of the palace. The Taoist master stepped onto the bridge and beckoned the emperor and empress to follow. The emperor's bodyguards and the court musicians filed behind. When all were standing on the bridge, the structure left the ground and flew into the air. After a short while, the light of the lanterns in Guang Lin could be seen. The emperor could see rows and rows of lanterns lining the streets and crowds of people milling among the stalls in the fair stands. The bridge descended and hovered above the people. The crowds looked up and exclaimed that the immortals were visiting the earthly realm. They saw figures

floating on a cloud radiating many colors and heard music from heaven. The city officials were alerted and many came to prostrate themselves before the "immortals" and "gods". The emperor was delighted. The next day, the emperor received a message from the mayor of Guang Lin describing in detail the "visit" of the "immortals" and stating that the entire city felt blessed by the event.



During the Festival of the Lanterns, many people also gather to have a snack of soup and round dumplings. The "roundness" symbolizes harmony, peace, and goodwill. In the town of Xiamen (Amoy) in particular, lanterns are not only displayed in fairs but hung outside homes. It is said that the Lord of Heaven visits the earthly realm on the day that marks the beginning of the First Season. The Lord of Heaven is like a child. He enjoys playing with children.

Therefore, during the festival night, many children carry brightly-coloured lanterns

through the streets to attract the Heavenly Lord's attention. In this way the children will receive the blessings of the god.

In Hong Kong, the Festival of the Lanterns is a major affair at the Yuen Yuen Institute. The Yuen Yuen Institute is a centre devoted to the study and practice of Taoism. During the festival, thousands of lanterns are hung on the grounds. Each lantern carries a symbolic significance, whether it be fortune and wealth, or good health. Many people hope to receive a lantern whose symbolic significance is meaningful to them. The lanterns are given in return for a donation to the Institute. The proceeds go to maintaining the Old Age Home and the hospitals and schools run by the Yuen Yuen Institute. The donations frequently run into millions. In this way, the elderly, the young, and the sick are taken care of. The founders of Fung Loy Kok Taoist Temple, Mr. Moy Lin shin and Mr. Mui Ming-to, were also founders of Yuen Yuen Institute. They carried the tradition of the Festival of the Lanterns to Canada, which usually is celebrated at the International Taoist Tai Chi Centre in Orangeville during special events.