PULAU UBIN FO SHAN TING

Ubin’s Fo Shan Ting Da Bo Gong Temple is the main temple of the island. It has been the centre of community life since at least the mid-1800s.

However, visitors may miss the main Hilltop Temple atop 佛山 Fúshān “Buddha Hill.” Instead, they tend to visit only the Village Temple, which draws attention largely on account of its wayang stage.

An inscription at the Hilltop Temple dates to 1869, some years after John Turnbull Thomson used Ubin granite to build Horsburgh Lighthouse in 1850. Thomson even sketched Chinese stonemasons dressing the stone. Granite quarrying ended in 1999 on Ubin— a Malay name meaning “granite.”

The 150-year-old Village Temple bears architectural traditions from both southern China and the diasporic Chinese in Southeast Asia. While the façade is reminiscent of temples in southern China, the interior layout is designed for the tropics. Due to termite infestation, the village temple and the wayang stage, one of only three left in Singapore, undertook a mass restoration in 2018, which was subsequently completed in April 2019. The newly-renovated temple has retained its traditional architecture style and was repaired with traditional tools. The restored temple has used treated wood to ensure greater resistance against termites.

TUA PEK GONG FESTIVAL 2019

Since 2008, the Temple Committee has been recruiting new members from devotees who are not former Ubin residents.

The current committee thus comprises Ubin residents (present and former) as well as mainlanders from Singapore. The Tua Pek Kong Festival is the biggest annual event on Ubin, drawing huge crowds.

大伯公千秋 Dábógōng qiānqiū

Twelve days of the Tua Pek Kong Festival on Ubin
Celebrating its 150th year on Ubin

The year 2019 marks the temple’s 150th-year anniversary. This year’s festival features an elaborate procession around the kampong to invite the image (金身 jīnshēn “golden body”) of Tua Pek Kong on a sedan chair back to the Village Temple. The procession is led by the dragon and lion dance troupes, the twelve zodiac signs, a Teochew drums performance, and then the Guan Jiang General (官将首 guānjīnshǒu “chief of official commanders”) who protects the Tua Pek Kong. Finally, the “golden body” of the Tua Pek Kong is brought to the temple. Following the procession, the practitioners visit the main Hilltop Temple to invite Tua Pek Kong, the Tiger God and the Earth God to the festival.

The 12-day festival is the grandest festival that Ubin has ever seen, featuring an additional 6 days of celebratory activities, such as Teochew drum performances (潮州锣鼓 chaozhouluogu), Hokkien puppet shows (加礼戏 jialixi).
THE WAYANG STAGE
It is typical of Southern Chinese temples to have a wayang (performance) stage facing the temple altar across an open space. Wayang is a Malay term for “performance”, referring to the stage where shows are performed to entertain the gods. At present, only three temples in Singapore still have an open plaza space and a wayang stage: Tua Pek Kong Temple on Ubin, Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple on Balestier Road, and Tan Kong Tian between Sungei Ulu Pandan and Ulu Pandan Road. Most Singapore temples no longer have the space, due to urban redevelopment. Instead, they merely erect temporary canvas and plank stages in any available open space, such as a field or an HDB carpark. Most Chinese temples in Malaysia and Indonesia still have a temple plaza and wayang stage.

TUA PEK KONG
Tua Pek Kong is the popular Hokkien name for 福德正神 (Fu De Zheng Shen), the local deity in charge of prosperity. There is a Tua Pek Kong for each location. For instance, the Ubin Tua Pek Kong would be in charge of Pulau Ubin while the Loyang Tua Pek Kong, another famous Tua Pek Kong, is responsible for Loyang. In Singapore, the Tua Pek Kong 千秋 (birthday) is generally celebrated on the second day of the second lunar month. But the Ubin Tua Pek Kong communicated his wish to have it on Vesak Day instead. He gave the reason that since his temple was on Ubin’s Buddha Hill, he wanted to emulate the Buddha and become a Bodhisatva – hence his choice of Vesak Day, Buddha’s birthday, as his festival day.

THE JADE EMPEROR
The Jade Emperor ranks highest on the pantheon of Chinese gods. All deities report to his court. All temples have urns for him at their entrance which always faces south. All devotees pay their respects by lighting joss-sticks to him. He is included in almost every ceremony.

The Jade Emperor is more popularly called 天公 Tian Gong (or Tin Kong in Hokkien), often worshipped daily in people’s homes, with the Tin Kong incense urn hung above the main entrance or main window of their homes. As the Jade Emperor cannot spend the night in the human realm, he is invited to the Tua Pek Kong Temple only at 11 pm (子时), which is the beginning of a new day.

THE TIGER DEITY
The Tiger Deity, called Haw Iya in Hokkien, protects against evil influences and dark magic. At Ubin, he has his own cave in the Hilltop Temple. At the Tua Pek Kong Festival, Tiger God is offered pork fat, eggs, dried bean curd and noodles.

THE EARTH DEITY
Like Tua Pek Kong, the Earth God is in charge of a local area but has a specific focus on agricultural fertility. He is common in agricultural villages across China. Another locality deity is Datuk Kong (in Hokkien), whose name indicates Malay origins. The existence of this god implies recognition by the Chinese migrants that they are living in a non-Chinese territory where the indigenous spirits of the land are not Chinese. Shrines to local Datuk Kong are found in the temples of Ubin. Datuk Kong is offered Malay food, as he is believed to be Muslim.
TWELVE DAYS OF THE TUA PEK KONG FESTIVAL ON UBIN

INVITATION TO THE FESTIVAL

The Tua Pek Kong Festival typically begins on Vesak Day but ritual preparations start the day before. However, the 2019 iteration of the festival begins on May 12, 6 days before Vesak Day (May 18) in celebration of the temple’s momentous 150-year anniversary. Preparations include erecting an altar for the Jade Emperor and crucially, bringing Tua Pek Kong from the main Hilltop Temple to the Village Temple by carrying his image (金身 jīnshēn “golden bodies”) on a sedan chair, which sways from side to side due to his energy. Accompanying him are Tiger God and the Landlord God (地主公 Dìzhǔ Gōng).

TEOCHEW OPERA (OR WAYANG)

The traditional entertainment during the festival is Teochew opera, performed for four days and evening, usually by Sin Sin Yong Hua (新新荣和潮剧 Xin Xin Rong He) Teochew Opera. Different operas are performed every day.

Look out for the ritual before the daily performance when costumed opera performers descend from the stage, carrying the child god of theatre to the Tua Pek Kong temple, where they offer joss sticks to Tua Pek Kong and put the child god on the altar facing the stage for him to watch the opera. The costumed performers are in the roles of 状元 Zhuàngyuán “the best graduate at the highest imperial examination” and his wife carrying their son who is the child god of theatre. After the performance ends, the child god is carried back to the rear of the stage until the next day when the ritual is repeated.

On the last evening of its four-day performance, the opera troupe stages a ritual called Húlŭ shōu yāo 葫芦收妖, "Capturing evil spirits in a gourd" , said to capture all evil spirits roaming on the island.

DISTRIBUTION OF OFFERINGS

Offerings to the gods are made by devotees to give thanks for blessings and to seek divine assistance for the future. In the past, the offerings included a sheep, which is no longer allowed by the authorities. Devotees now offer an uncooked pig in lieu of the sheep. The full set of offerings includes 五生 wǔ shēng (“five living things”) – a fish, a crab, a roast pig, a roast chicken and a braised duck – 5 types of fruit, 6 bowls of uncooked vegetarian food and 6 types of sweets. Hundreds of roast chicken and roast duck are ordered for distributing to the devotees. Packets of tea leaves and multi-coloured biscuits are also offered.

GETAI

In response to popular demand, Gētái (literally: “song stage”) is performed on the fifth and last evening of the festival. Enjoy the rousing performance by singers in glitzy costumes, the comic banter in Hokkien by the comperes, and the vocal participation of the audience. Gaining in popularity as Seventh Month entertainment since the 1970s, getai is now increasingly staged during temple festivals too.

CLOSING THE FESTIVAL

At the end of the Festival, Tua Pek Kong and the Tiger God are returned to the hilltop temple.
**PROGRAMME FOR THE 2019 TUA PEK GONG FESTIVAL**

**SUN MAY 12 四月初八日 (4M8)**
- 10:00 AM Inviting the General of Five Camps (五营将军)
- 11:00 AM Procession of the gods, twelve zodiacs, dragon and lion dances, with the accompaniment of Teochew drums
- Inviting the Tua Pek Kong
- Visit to the main hilltop temple of Tua Pek Kong
- Inviting the Tua Pek Kong, Land Deity and Tiger Deity

**MON MAY 13 四月初九日 (4M9)**
- 08:00 AM Leading a ritual ceremony for the invitation of the San Yuan deities
- Hokkien puppet shows

**TUES MAY 14 – FRI MAY 17 四月初十日 至 十三日 (4M10-4M13)**
- 08:00 AM Hokkien puppet shows

**SAT MAY 18 四月十四日 (4M14)**
- 02:00 PM Ritual to enhance one's luck (First session)
- 07:00 PM Ritual to enhance one's luck (Second session)
- 11:00 PM Sin Sin Yong Hua Teochew Opera performance

**MON MAY 20 – TUE MAY 21 四月十六日 至 四月十七日 (4M16-4M17)**
- 07:00 PM Sin Sin Yong Hua Teochew Opera performance

**WED MAY 22 四月十八日 (4M18)**
- 02:00 PM Sin Sin Yong Hua Teochew Opera performance
- 07:00 PM Jinan Gymnastics Council presents dragon and lion dance
- Temple feast

**FREE EVENING BUMBOAT FERRY 18/05/19—23/05/19**
Free two-way ferry services between Ubin and Changi during the evening will be sponsored throughout the celebration.

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