

TANG-KI SELF-MORTIFICATION

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Self-mortification is a hallmark of *tang-ki* worship. However the *tang-ki*'s theatre of pain is not performed in order to impress an audience; instead it is a religious practice in which the *tang-ki* as warrior god, arms himself to do battle with evil demons.



Plate 1: A *tang-ki* is held to be a god incarnate. The blood of the *tang-ki* is therefore replete with spirit power. *Tang-kis* often cut their tongues and the blood is smeared on pieces of yellow paper to make evil-repelling talismans. Photo: Author

The difference between *wen* (文) and *wu* (武) *tang-kis*, a point of clarification:

The mediums of the southern Chinese are divided into two categories; the *wu* warriors and the *wen* scholars. *Wen tang-kis* feature mainly in spirit-writing (*fujī* 扶乩) cults. The god possesses the medium, and through him moves a planchette which usually takes the form of a tri-forked peach branch. The *wu tang-kis* in contrast, have little to do with writing beyond scrawling characters to make talisman. The *wu tang-kis* are in the majority, or at least are the more visible because the basis of their worship is the performance of theatrical spectacles.

Self-mortification as practice of the *wu tang-ki*:

The *wu tang-ki* is a warrior god and *tang-kis* exorcise by doing battle with evil spirits. There are 108 confrontations between good and evil. All the woes of Heaven and Earth are caused by evil influences of which there are thirty-six celestial elements and seventy-two terrestrial forces. These baleful elements are matched one for one by godly generals, thirty-six in Heaven and seventy-two on earth.

In his battle against demons, the *tang-ki* often self-mortifies using instruments that feature the number 108. Self-injury caused by such an instrument is believed to summon the 108 generals to exorcise the 108 evil influences. Thus a *tang-ki* may employ a nail ball with thirty-six, seventy-two or most efficacious of all, 108 nails, protruding from it. He swings this nail ball against his body wounding himself with many pricks (plate 2). *Tang-kis* also climb ladders of swords, lie on knife beds and sit on sword or nail chairs. All feature some combinations of the numbers thirty-six and seventy-two. For example the ladder of sword may be six feet¹ tall (seventy-two inches), or *tang-kis* may climb up and down the ladder several times, so that the total number of times their bare feet step upon the rungs of sword equals 108. There may be 108 nails in a nail chair and thirty-six or seventy-two swords in a bed of knives (plate 3).

While self-mortification is a definitive feature of *wu tang-ki* worship, it is not an essential practice in a *tang-ki*'s routine; neither should it be described as a central performance element. *Tang-kis* self-mortify only when the occasion demands it. *Tang-ki*'s usually do not self-mortify during their regular consultation sessions when devotees come for oracles or cures. Only special occasions such as celebrations of important feast days, or the *yiū-keng*, demon exorcising tour, or a specially commissioned attack against particularly virulent evil spirits will feature self-mortification.

When do *tang-kis* self-mortify?

Tang-kis self mortify only for specific reasons:

1. To draw blood to be used to make talismans against evil.
2. To 'present arms' before the Heavenly Emperor.

3. To arm himself for a fierce demon fighting mission, such as the *yiou-keng* (*yiou-keng siew suat* 游境收煞 (H) pinyin *you jing shou sha*, *tang-ki* tour in order to exorcise evil influences) or demon exorcising tour of his precinct.
4. To purify a sacred space, or to exorcise demons from a ritual space on the eve of an important worship ceremony.



Plate 2: A *tang-ki* nail ball. This is swung against the body. Photo: Author



Plate 3: A *tang-ki* chair fitted with knife blades. Photo: Author

Theological reason behind self-mortification:

Taoist cosmology entirely informs the act of *tang-ki* self-mortification. Self-mortification is not performed to satisfy a morbid audience or to do penance.

Self-mortification can be expressly to draw blood or not to. If the purpose of self-mortification is not to draw blood, then the shedding of blood is incidental rather than central to the performance. This does not mean that when the *tang-ki* does not seek to draw blood, he will not bleed, or that the *tang-ki* would avoid bloodshed by inflicting only superficial self-injury. Strangely, the most brutal acts of self-mortification draw little blood, but light wounds made to produce blood will obligingly bleed copious amounts.

Blood is shed to bring about an outflow of *yang* energy to overcome *yin* negativity. Charms represent orders to divine soldiers to deal with problematic demons. The *tang-ki*'s blood smeared on a charm, in addition to the stamp of his seal of office, signals the seriousness of his intention, and therefore makes the talisman doubly potent (plate 1).

Fierce self-mortification is performed when the *tang-ki* arms himself in preparation for a particularly difficult battle ahead. Here self-injury is not in order to draw blood, but weapons are pierced into the flesh of the *tang-ki* to super-charge him with spirit power. The *tang-ki*'s weapon is formidable beyond the ordinary, besides being an instrument of war, it has inherent spirit power as well as *qi* energy. The weapon invokes the ferocity of the tiger spirit and is imbued with the presence of a deity. When such a weapon is pierced into a *tang-ki*, it transmits its potency into the *yang* forcefield of the body of a *tang-ki*, thus super charging the *tang-ki* with *yang* energy.

The *tang-ki* commands the armies of the five directions:

Tang-kis usually pierce their flesh with five skewers topped with the wooden heads or flag standards of the generals of the five celestial armies (plates 4a and 4b). By this act, the *tang-ki* takes command of the heavenly forces. In important exorcistic routines, such as the *yi-u-keng*, the *tang-ki* will embed into his flesh one, three, five, eighteen, thirty-six or seventy-two needles. He may also run through his cheeks skewers that extend up to seventy-two *choon* (see endnote one) long, and three, five or seven *hoon* wide. All the numbers are ritually significant.



Plates 4a and 4b: A *tang-ki* pierced with skewers topped by god-heads representing the commanders of the five celestial armies of the five directions. Photos: By kind permission of Victor Yue.

Self-mortification to purify a ritual space:

The piercing of *tang-kis* with skewers or the drawing of blood with which to write talismans should be contrasted with the spectacular rituals such as fire-walking, washing with hot oil, or dancing the Seven Stars Constellation. These are powerful ceremonies of ritual cleansing performed, for example, in order to exorcise demons from a ritual space on the eve of an important worship ceremony or to purify the congregation and bind them in a community of worship. Again, while the overt display is a theatre of pain, the performance purpose is not self-mortification for its own sake.

Walking on fire, or crossing over fire, as for example by simply stepping over a small pile of burning spirit money or over a stove filled with lit coals is considered a purifying ritual. A *tang-ki* who washes with hot oil without being scalded testifies to the truth of his possession, for in the seventh court of hell, sinners who have borne false witness are boiled in a cauldron of oil (plate 5).



Plate 5: A *tang-ki* sits in a cauldron of hot oil. Photo: Author

The dance of the Seven Stars is a potent exorcising ritual performed at important occasions such as a *tang-ki* initiation. It represents a ‘running the gauntlet’ ritual with the *tang-ki* fighting a safe passage through evil for his devotees. The Seven Stars ritual may be an ordeal by fire or it might feature the use of weapons to cut the flesh of the *tang-ki* and produce a free-flow of blood.

ⁱ In the Singaporean Hokkien community, the Chinese system of measurement used in rituals features the *chioh* (pinyin *ying chi* 英尺) literally a ruler-length, which is a little shorter than the British foot, the *choon* (英寸 pinyin *ying cun*) is a tenth of the *chioh*, and the *hoon* (英分 pinyin *ying fen* literally ‘division mark’) represents one-tenth of an inch. This measurement must be contrasted from the Chinese metric system.