

Beliefs and Customs - Na Tcha

According to popular legend, Na Tcha was the third son of General Li Jing, born at a pass in Chen Tang, where his father was stationed. His mother was pregnant with him for three years before finally giving birth to a ball of flesh, which his father – convinced it was a demon – attacked with a sword. Inside was found the fully-grown boy Na Tcha.

One day, Na Tcha was playing near the Eastern Sea when, during a dispute, he accidentally killed the son of the Dragon King. In order not to involve his parents in this conflict and subject them to the rage of the Dragon King, Na Tcha cut the flesh and bones of the body they had given him and returned it to them.

However, the deity Tai Yi Zhen Ren reincarnated Na Tcha using the roots and leaves of the lotus to reconstruct his body. Na Tcha was thereafter portrayed holding the Fire-tipped Spear and riding on the Wind Fire Wheels, adorned with the Universe Ring about his waist and the Red Armillary Sash around his shoulders. He became an important warrior in the service of the Jade Emperor and was extremely popular as a deity.

In Macao, the beliefs associated with Na Tcha have a history dating back centuries. They are a manifestation of the deep roots of Chinese traditional culture in the territory. It is said that, in the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, a young boy was seen playing with other children at the base of Mount Hill, in Macao, wearing a cloth band around his body and with his hair arranged in two buns – very similar to the aspect of Na Tcha – bounding up and down the rocks without injuring himself. The local community considered this vision a divine manifestation of the spirit of Na Tcha and therefore built an altar on those very rocks, dedicated to the deity, a spot known today as “The Old Altar of Na Tcha”.

In the second half of the 19th century, several epidemics spread through Macao, severely threatening the local population, who did not have the means to avoid contagion. Na Tcha appeared in the villagers’ dreams, instructing the people to drink water from the stream atop Mount Hill infused with Chinese herbal medicines. Following the god’s advice, the population regained their health, and the epidemics were gradually eliminated. To thank the deity for saving them, and to continue to pray to Na Tcha for his blessing and protection, the local community also built, in 1888, the “Na Tcha Temple” by the Ruins of St. Paul’s.

The belief of Na Tcha in Macao has a history spanning more than 300 years, having developed unique characteristics, based on the fusion of folk stories with local customs and cultures. The Na Tcha Day is celebrated on the 18th day of the 5th month of the lunar calendar, and Macao’s two Na Tcha temples arrange numerous ceremonies in his honour. These include a procession and rituals requesting his divine protection against sickness, as well as happiness and peace for the local population and for the nation.

The Historic Centre of Macao was inscribed on UNESCO’s “World Heritage List” in 2005, serving as an example of the coexistence and mixture between the Eastern and Western cultures, as is well represented by the Na Tcha Temple, which is located within this ensemble, near the St. Paul’s Ruins. To ensure the preservation of this folk belief and associated rituals, and its transmission to future generations, the Macao S.A.R. Government inscribed “Na Tcha Beliefs and Customs” on the List of Macao S.A.R. Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2012.