

At the gates of hell

The towering insanity of a race called Chiang Ku

BY KEN MURRAY

IN THE SEVENTH LUNAR MONTH OF the Chinese calendar, in the Buddhist and Taoist traditions, the spirits of the dead are released from hell to walk amongst the living. Ghost Month, or the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, is marked by ceremonies that honour the dead and rituals thought to ward off evil spirits.

In the Taiwanese county of I-Lan, an area known for its traditional folk arts and customs, the end of Ghost Month is celebrated in the city of Toucheng with *Chiang Ku*, an ancient athletic contest known as "Stealing the Lone Object." Despite its significance, many Taiwanese never have the opportunity to see the ceremony firsthand.

"It is said that the chaotic animation of this game scares away the ghosts that have not yet returned to the underworld and that luck will follow whoever wins the contest."

— Government Information Office, Republic of China

After a rowing regatta near Toucheng on Sept. 1, my teammates and I travelled to the festival site by bus. *Chiang Ku* was part of a larger carnival, complete with stuffed animals and midway games, candy floss, and, of course, carnies. There were also food booths — row upon row of barbecued pigs, sliced open and ribs exposed. The flesh was scooped out and served on sticks to happy customers.

In a large clearing, thousands of spectators assembled in the darkness in front of a massive tower. The tower, sitting on a spot symbolizing the gates of Hades, was more than 150 feet tall and lit up like a Christmas tree. It was made of several levels: 10 poles, each about 50 feet high and roughly two-and-a-half feet in diameter, jutted from the ground to support a platform, like the legs of a stool. They looked like stripped tree trunks. On top of the platform were 13 bamboo towers, each significantly taller than the height of the platform. Each tower was festooned with a large coloured flag and topped with a long thin tree branch. At the end of each branch was a cluster of leaves and a smaller flag.

Around the tower base — right by the gate to Hades — stood groups of men in white team uniforms. Each team gathered next to a pole. A guide explained that the poles were covered with lubricant. The competition was a climbing race. The first athlete to conquer the tallest bamboo tower claims the "safety flag" and a medal.

"On account of its special frame, the (tower) is not easy to climb. The participants must have enough energy and patience to reach their destination. The essence of the Chiang Ku ceremony is concern for the dead. Its aim just reflects the humanic (sic) spirits of the Chinese people."

— 1997 I-Lan International Collegiate Invitational Regatta web site

Although we arrived at about 11:30 p.m., there was still an agonizingly long wait in the 90-degree heat until the competition began. On and on, speeches were made over the loudspeaker. Lost without translators, we were left to chat, contemplate the tower, or nod off to sleep.

I studied the monstrous tower. Our guide explained that the bamboo towers were covered in packets of food and treasure, which athletes would throw down to audience members after the event.

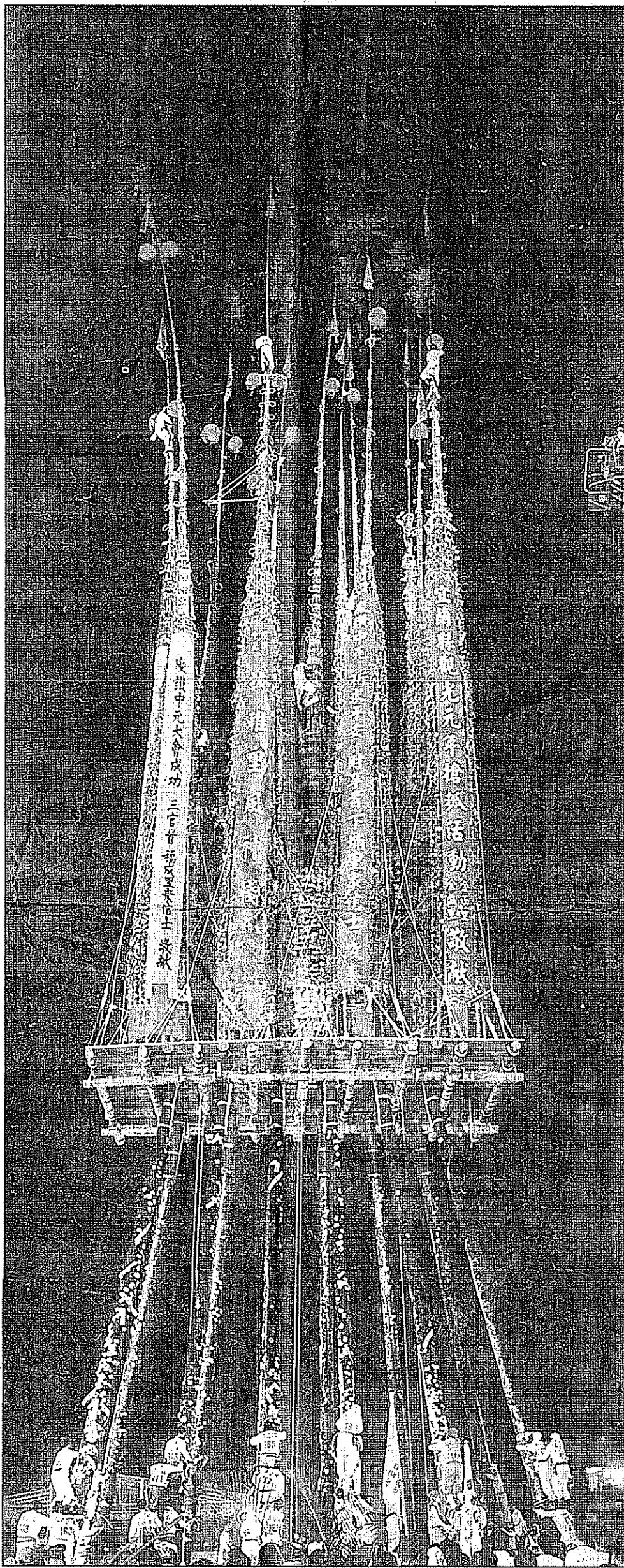
This religious ceremony is just like many churches back home, I thought — gaudy, confusing and lacking any visible connection between theory and practice. I, who spent a dog's age trying to figure out how one became Christian by being sprinkled with water, was now trying to make the connection between this strange edifice and the act of sealing demons back into Hell.

Byron, our soft-spoken attaché who had grown up in I-Lan, explained that the victors are rewarded handsomely (rumour has it that each man receives a new car). Hearing this, a couple of my teammates suggested we enter the race (many thanks, in retrospect, that nobody took this suggestion to heart).

IT WAS MADNESS. GROWN MEN WERE SACRIFICING THEIR BODIES IN A GAME IN WHICH THE ODDS WERE LOADED AGAINST THEM.

For more than an hour I slipped into half sleep. All the while, the Mandarin voice droned through the loudspeakers. In my daze, the uniformed men looked more and more like prisoners in white fatigues.

We, too, were in uniform and had been since arriving in Taiwan more than a week earlier. On this night, most of us were wearing monogrammed golf shirts and beige pants, some of the guys still wore



In I-Lan, Taiwan, the end of Ghost Month is celebrated with Chiang Ku, an ancient athletic contest known as "Stealing the Lone Object." Luck is said to follow the contest winner.

blazers from the regatta's closing banquet a few hours earlier. We looked like frat boys, I thought, who got horribly lost on the way to the sorority party.

Our final race as a rowing crew had been that afternoon. Like any good race, it had been an exercise in exhilaration, pain, focus, exhaustion exceeding pain and, at the end, relief. We had placed second overall, and were generally happy with the result.

Groggily, I began to muse about religion and sport, athletics as religion. I knew many rowers who pursued the sport religiously. Have athletics, I wondered, ever been part of religion? I contemplated the Olympics of antiquity and their connection with the Greek gods. Beyond that, I was lost. Do North American athletics ever figure directly in North American religion? They should, I figured. After all, spectator sports inspire more emotion and faith in the populace than any single religion ... and do so across racial, cultural and economic lines. Why doesn't the canon of Judeo-Christian religion incorporate athletics into religious festivities?

In my half-wakened state, this made more and more sense. This tower before me was the greatest medal podium ever constructed, and at its tallest height was the medal. How different from us, I

thought: Where we, every four years, glue ourselves to TV sets to watch Olympic athletes run, jump, swim, ride, row, paddle, fight, leap, wrestle, punch, cycle and whatever else in order to climb the medal podium (a podium no taller than a footstool), here in Taiwan the sport itself was the act of climbing the medal podium. To boot, it was a religious ceremony. What a perfect union. How completely holistic.

I reveled in dazed, edge-of-sleep logic. It was quite clear: In North America and, perhaps, all of western culture, we place our athletes on a great pedestal and worship them with tremendous ardour. At our traditional altars, however, most of us offer little or nothing of our souls, merely deference or our occasional attendance. But *Chiang Ku* united religion and sport in this great clearing, in front of this tower, this podium, this pedestal. The Taiwanese had figured it out. The athletes climbing the podium were front and centre as part of the religion. If we could do the same, we would have the gospel according to Gretzky, the parable of the 18th green, and the *Hallelujah Chorus* as sung by the NFL Evangelical Choir. Charles Barkley could deliver sermons and we could have national religious holidays celebrating the birth of Donovan Bailey. And, I thought as I fell into a deeper sleep, what a great way

to keep attendance up at church.

When I awoke, sweat was rolling down my skin under my shirt. Overhead flew miniature lanterns, almost like hot-air balloons. Written inside each, we were told, were the hopes and fears for the coming year. After rising several hundred feet in the air, they disintegrated into a burning flutter of embers that quickly expired and drifted back to the ground as ashes.

I sat up and drank a can of asparagus juice to relieve the heat, contemplating the TV crews frantically moving about the tower base, and thinking to myself "asparagus juice?" The camera teams were climbing into cherry pickers that would take them six and seven storeys into the sky to film the race.

And then, like a gunshot, a mighty voice rang out. Everyone faced the tower in silence. I sat upright, wide awake. Everything seemed frozen — the uniformed athletes in focused huddles, the thousands of spectators and the camera crews. Here it is, I thought, the start of the great religious journey, the kickoff of the great football game.

The voice cried out again. The teams began a mad dash. Each team started by building a human ladder — the first man hugged the pole, the second climbed to the first man's shoulders and hugged the pole. Man three climbed the first two and enacted an identical embrace.

No team had enough players to ladder their way to the top, however (nor would any player have had the strength to be on the bottom of that many people). At some point, one of the guys had to break for the top. The first man to do so was directly in front of us. He scurried up from the human ladder and reached the top of the greased pole with what I thought was astonishing speed. At the top of the pole, his troubles began.

Each pole joined the platform base like a table leg. Each was several feet removed from the platform's edge. The lucky guy who made it to the top then had to, greasy hands and all, fingertip his way along the underside of the platform and launch himself up, over and around the edge before he could continue to climb the tower.

When watching North American sports on TV you often hear comments like "Wow, she's so skilled, that looked easy!" or "It's unbelievable how graceful he appears while exerting such effort." No one made this look easy, nor was anyone graceful.

The first fellow to lose his grip went feet first, plummeting more than 50 feet for a bone-shattering arrival at terra firma.

"Did you see that?" said the guy to my left in disbelief.

I was stunned, expecting everything to grind to a halt for a medical crew. Surely this would be the end of this year's ceremony/festival/competition/insanity. The guy must have broken both legs. How could they go on?

But there was little reaction from the crowd. The fallen man was tended by his teammates on the ground. They hoisted him, in agonizing pain, to their shoulders and ran through the crowd. Our group included at least three former lifeguards, who grimaced and cringed with each bouncy step. No spinal boards in sight. The rest of the teams kept climbing.

The ambulances, we learned later, were parked outside the clearing, somewhere around our bus. One guy in our group went up to see what had cushioned the athlete's landing. He returned with a blank face and one word, "Sandbags."

"In the past, people were hurt and even killed as they struggled to reach the coveted object, and for this reason the game was banned for a long time."

— Government Information Office, Republic of China

WE COULD HAVE THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO GRETZKY AND THE PARABLE OF THE 18TH GREEN

As the climbing continued I imagined the legal waivers, disclaimers and other paperwork that would be required to stage this event back home. Then another guy lost his grip and fell sideways in a slow cartwheel motion. Halfway down, his shoulder smashed into the head of one of his teammates. The teammate fell right behind him. Again, little reaction from the crowd, some attention from the teammates, and then the tortuous, shoulder-top parade to the waiting ambulance.

Our shock turned to hilarious disbelief. The sheer madness of this contest was overwhelming the ability to be respectfully polite. Grown men were sacrificing their bodies in a game in which the odds were heavily loaded against them. This was not a pedestal, I thought, it was a sacrificial altar. In trying to climb the great medal podium, the athletes ran a high

chance of ending up as a footnote, with crumpled limbs. It was like having a trap-door at the 50-yard line that swallowed whole defensive lines.

I started to laugh. Soon almost everyone in our little enclave of foreigners was in hysterics. I heard once that laughter can be a reaction to situations beyond intellectual or emotional comprehension. I could not get my head around what I was seeing. I don't know if anyone has ever laughed at me for competing in rowing, it's possible. But rowers are not set up to fail, nor do they risk certain and serious injury.

A few minutes later, one of the players made it to the top side of the platform, escaping the greased pole nightmare. He scaled the largest of the bamboo towers, right up to the base of the long tree branch. Pulling a knife from his belt, he went to work on the tree. Within moments, it fell awkwardly past the edge of the platform to the ground where his teammates recovered the safety flag and the medal. By act of gravity amidst acts of insanity, this team had won.

Still the other teams kept climbing, slithering, pondering, reaching, slipping and falling. Each was an image of the damned in Hades, groping through infernal darkness in futile desperate attempts to escape. The players would eventually either (a) reach the platform, climb their respective towers and slash down their respective trees; (b) glide back down the poles to the ground, feeling, I suspect, great shame; or (c) fall to the ground, retaining, if not victory, then at least martyrdom.

The most spectacular near-death incident, beyond men falling from great heights, occurred when one of the felled tree branches took a sharp turn on the way down and flew like a javelin straight into the platform, penetrating a full two feet through the underside and missing a climber's head by about six inches.

Throughout the competition, the camera crews on the cherry pickers broadcast live to the nation while fireworks explod-

ed overhead. During the final half hour that we were there, the TV people focused heavily on one man who was stuck in a precarious position underneath the platform. After reaching the top of the pole he had made a fatally tentative move to push on. With his legs wrapped firmly around the pole, he reached backward along the underside of the platform. He did not lunge far enough out to reach the platform edge, but far enough that most of his weight was supported through his arms at the spot where he had grabbed on to the platform's underbelly, clinging there desperately. He looked like a bug on the ceiling, his back parallel to the ground. He had nowhere to go. If he were to release his legs from the pole, he would dangle freely, leaving only seconds before arm strength dissipated and he plunged 50 feet. If he were to release his handgrip, he would have flipped around and hung head-down the length of the pole, supported only by his grease-covered legs.

We discussed his predicament for several minutes — how would he get out? The TV crews zoomed in periodically — close enough to read the label on his shirt and record every wince and frantic expression.

The novelty of this man's situation soon wore off. By the time we left, most teams had moved past the pole-climbing stage. The other contenders were ripping packages from the bamboo towers. Still, this guy would not give up. I began to believe he would still be clinging to his spot in four hours when the sun rose. Even as we watched, his body seemed to be mutating, his arms transforming into fixed rigid claws, designed for the singular purpose of hanging on. I believe he had come to accept his fate as a static object. He was going nowhere. We, the ogling crowd, grew bored and left.

We walked quietly through the crowd to our bus, where we sat in silence for the drive back to our hotel.

Silence occasionally punctuated by a comment like "What the hell was that?" or a disbelieving, "Each time someone fell ...

the others just kept climbing!" Short bursts of laughter followed by more ponderous silence.

On the plane home the next day I wondered if, say, we were to pull a hairstylist from an Asian salon, or a worker from a rice paddy, or a banker from an office, and fly them over to sit front and centre to watch football, hockey, boxing or auto racing, would they react with the same confused, hilarious horror? I don't think so.

Mind you, if you were to bring the same person to church, explaining that they were about to witness a holy rite, and the rite turned out to be 70-foot-high, trapeze-borne anvil toss and spear-catching contest, then maybe they would laugh.

"The revival of Chiang Ku has made it once again possible to enjoy the energy and activity of this competition. Not only does this preserve the traditional significance of this folk activity, it also provides healthy sport as well!"

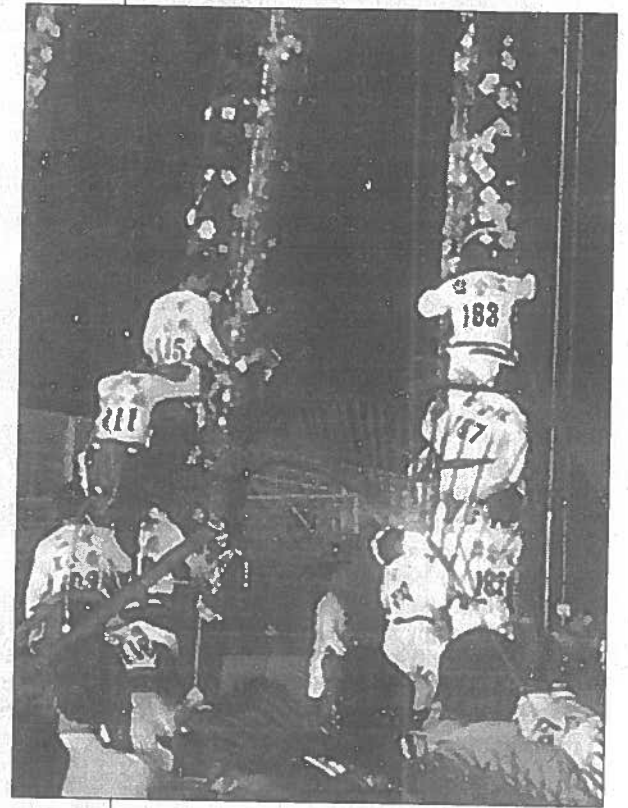
— Government Information Office,

My favourite moment at the festival occurred when Byron, our calm, quiet and insightful diplomat, noticed how the competition was affecting us. Seeing us in shock and watching us break into fits of incredulous laughter, he seemed a bit embarrassed. Moments later, when yet another man fell, he turned with a sheepish smile and said, "Yes ... this is a dumb game."

From the TV news, we learned that no one had died in this year's *Chiang Ku* contest.

Ken Murray is a member of the University of Toronto rowing team.

THE FIRST FELLOW TO LOSE HIS GRIP WENT FEET FIRST FOR A BONE-SHATTERING ARRIVAL AT TERRA FIRMA.



STEALING THE LONE OBJECT

Soaring 150 feet in night sky, above, the *Chiang Ku* tower offers a death-defying challenge for climbing teams, who must form human chains to begin their ascent of the structure's greased poles. No one makes it look easy.