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HUE GUAN THYE

Chinese temples and transnational networks:
Hokkien communities in Singapore



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Abstract

This paper is intended as an overview of different categories of Chinese temples and other institutions in Singapore and their transnational networks, in particular on Hokkien communities in Singapore. It focusing on some preliminary research findings related to this Hokkien communities and their religious networks, examines the Minnan (South Fujian) Protector Gods (Regional or Village temple Main Gods) and the Minnan Taoist Altars, as well as their religious networks connecting Fujian, China and the Chinese communities in Singapore. The main argument of this paper is that all the religious networks of the Minnan Main Gods and the Minnan Taoist Altars play a significant role in the transnational movement of resources between Singapore and China, particularly Fujian. These resources include people from all walks of life, various forms of ritual knowledge and innovations, money and materials.

Keywords: Singapore, Hokkien communities, Main Gods, Taoist Altars, transnational networks.

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Contents

1.	The Minnan Main Gods networks	14
1.1	The Goddess of Mazu Network	14
1.2	The Baosheng Dadi Network	20
1.3	The Guangze Zunwang Network	23
1.4	The Anxi Chenghuangye (City God of Anxi) network	26
2.	The Minnan Taoist Altars networks.....	31
3.	The Merger of Minnan Main Gods and Minnan Taoist Altars networks .	34
	Conclusion.....	39

Large-scale waves of Chinese emigration began in the mid-19th century and lasted throughout the early 20th century. Immigrants from the Hokkien regions of Zhangzhou, Quanzhou and Yongchun, as well as those from Chaozhou, Guangzhou and Hainan, left their home villages and migrated to different parts of Southeast Asia, including Singapore. According to the Census Report on Singapore's Chinese population conducted in 1881, the Chinese population, sorted by dialect group, comprised of mostly Hokkiens, followed by Teochews, Cantonese, Hainanese and finally Hakkas (Chart 1). The Straits-born Chinese consisted of hybrids of Chinese and local socio-cultural forms (Chinese-Malay babas and nonyas). Most of them were the descendants of Hokkien and local Malay women dating back to the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. They also included rich Chinese merchants who migrated to Singapore from Malacca, Malaya, during the 1820s. As a result, the Hokkien dialect group has made up the biggest proportion of Chinese immigrants in Singapore since the early 19th century.

Following the arrival and settlement of these Chinese immigrants, the need for spiritual support and a permanent place of worship prompted the establishment of Chinese temples dedicated to the principal gods of the different regional pantheons of southern China. Since then, each of the various dialect groups has set up its temples and associations along the Singapore River bank (Figures 1 and 2). Those who reached Singapore in the late 1920s and 1930s settled in rural villages away from the city area, where they specialized in growing fruit and vegetables. These communities also built temples dedicated to their principal gods within the new villages.

No.	Chinese Dialect	Residents
01	<u>Hokkiens</u>	24,981
02	<u>Teochews</u>	22,644
03	Cantonese	14,853
04	Straits born Chinese	9,527
05	<u>Hainanese</u>	8,319
06	<u>Hakkas</u>	6,170
07	Others	272
	Total	86,766

Chart 1: The Census of Singapore Chinese Population, 1881

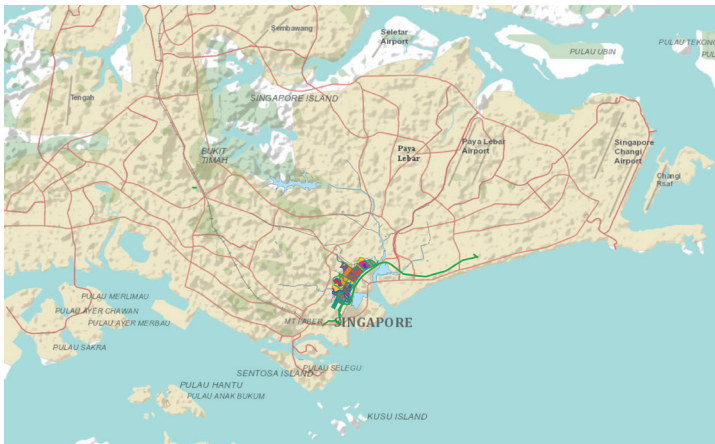


Figure 1: Singapore in 1819 (Picture courtesy of Professor Kenneth Dean)

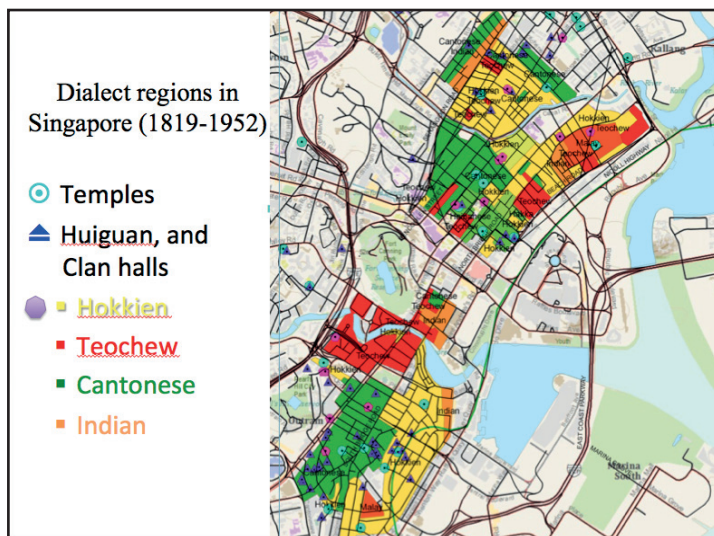


Figure 2: Dialect regions in Singapore (1819-1952)
(Picture courtesy of Professor Kenneth Dean)

However, all these temples were affected by the larger forces of urbanization that took place after Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965 and became independent. While some of them have completely disappeared from the Singapore map, others have merged into various “United Temples”. (Figures 3 & 4). There are currently as many as 300 smaller, primarily rural temples, which have already merged into some 64 “United Temples”.¹ By the second half of the 20th century, the religious landscape of Singapore had already undergone enormous changes.

1 Guan They, Hue. “The Evolution of the Singapore United Temple: The Transformation of Chinese Temples”, in *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, Volume 5, 2011-12. Canberra: The Australian National University, pp. 157-174.

It has been found that, of the 3.77 million Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents in 2010, more than 80% claim to have a religious affiliation. Around 1.5 million Singaporeans claim to be devout Buddhists or Taoists, affiliated with traditional Chinese religions (Chart 2). This is a fairly unusual phenomenon. While most citizens of Singapore are seeking modern materialistic gains, many of them are also embracing the ancient Chinese religions. This clearly shows that the structure of religious beliefs has undergone tremendous changes alongside the economic development of the country. Therefore, a detailed investigation and discussion of how Chinese temples and traditional religious beliefs in Singapore has evolved is warranted, so as to better understand the changes that have taken place within the Chinese community, especially within the largest dialect group, the Hokkien community.

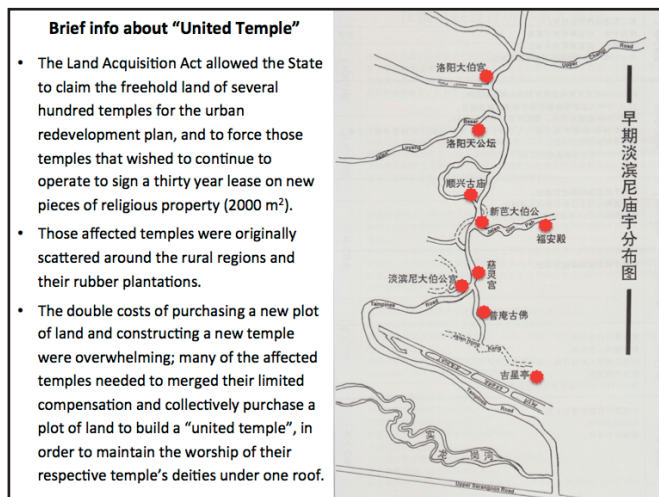


Figure 3: Brief information of “United Temple”



Figure 4: One of the “United Temples”: Tampinese Chinese Temple

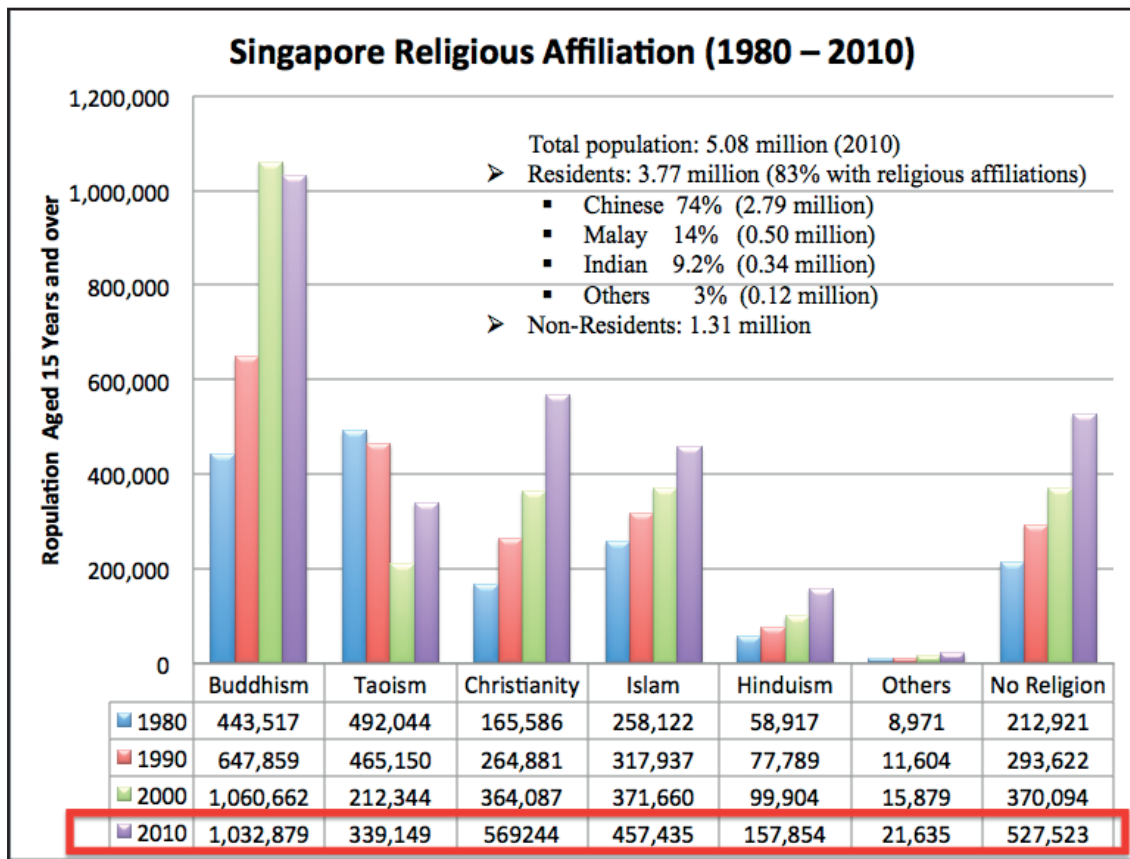


Chart 2: Singapore Religious affiliation (1980-2010)

Religion still plays a very important role in Singapore today, and there are many temples of all ethnic groups around the island. Our preliminary findings of the ongoing survey of Chinese Temples and Communal Associations of Singapore with Professor Kenneth Dean over the past few years indicate that there are more than 800 Chinese temples scattered all over the country. Furthermore, around 1000 HDB medium altars were also noted by the government agency (Chart 3). For the purposes of further study and analysis, these temples and associations can be divided into the following three main categories:

1. Popular Religions and Taoist Altars
2. Traditional Buddhism and Folk Buddhism
3. Native Place Associations and Common Surname Associations

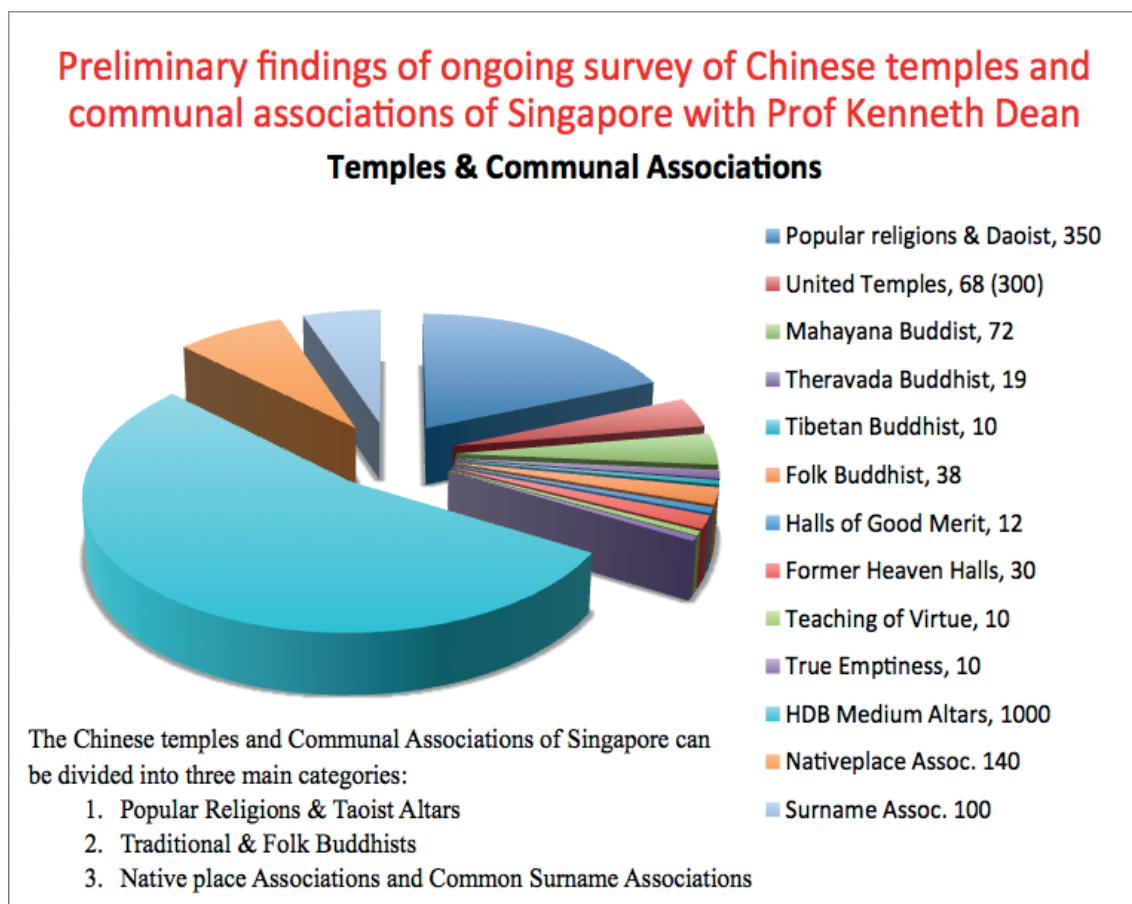


Chart 3: Preliminary findings of ongoing survey project

Category 1. Popular Religions and Taoist Altars

The Popular Religions of Singapore comprise Minnan Main Gods, Taoist Altars, spirit mediums and various sectarian groups (Chart 4). Most of the temples serving these popular religions were founded through a ritual of the *fenxiang* system (splitting incenses), performed before the emigrants left their home villages. The ritual was very simple and could be done by any layman, and not necessarily by the temple's ritual master. Emigrants were usually required to carry an item — a statue of a deity, or at least a packet of incense ashes — with them throughout their voyage by ship. This item had to acquire “spirit power” from the village temple in their home town, after which the ritual would consist of passing the statue of the deity or the packet of incense ashes through the smoke of the incense censer from the temple prayer hall. This ritual often served as an invisible link to the founding temple in the home village when forming a simple altar or a new temple in Singapore. With this assumed link,

obligatory and voluntary donations to the local temple could be pooled to help in the reconstruction of the founding temple, thus forging powerful links in the transnational networks.

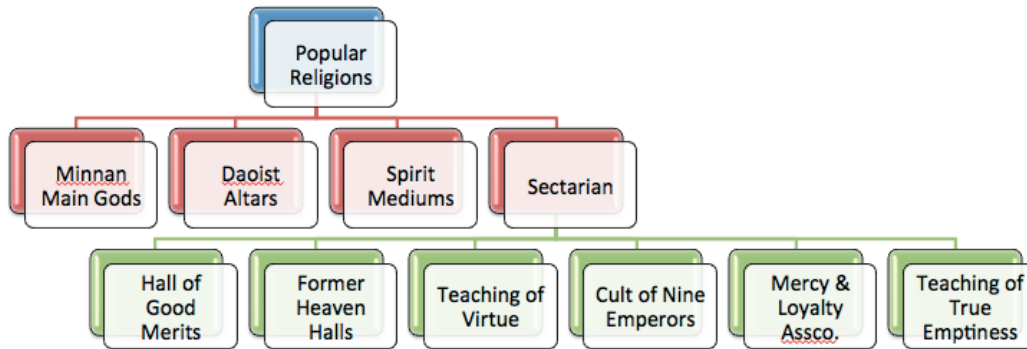


Chart 4: Singapore Popular Religions

Category 2. Traditional Buddhism and Folk Buddhism

Traditional Buddhism in Singapore comprises Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism (Vajrayana Buddhism). Folk Buddhism comprises Guan Yin Tang or Buddhist temples with folk religious practices, for example, spirit mediumship (Chart 5). As with the Singapore Popular Religions, Traditional Buddhism and Folk Buddhism in Singapore also span transnational boundaries. Some temples and monasteries in Singapore have established ties with founding temples in various home villages in China or with founding monasteries by providing financial support for the renovation or refurbishment of the respective founding institutions.

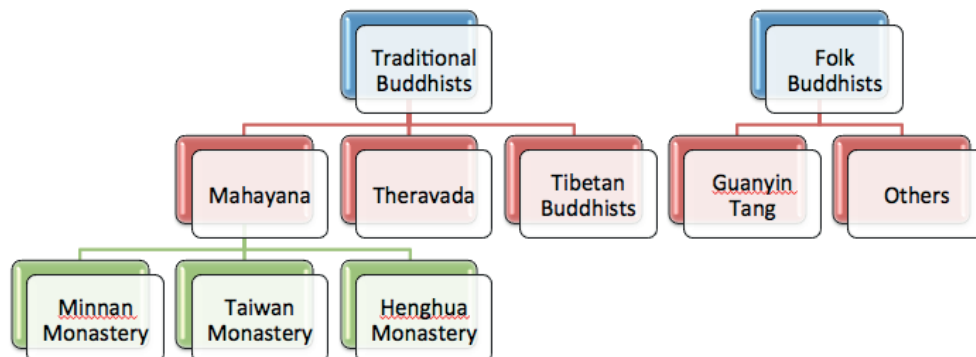


Chart 5: Singapore Traditional Buddhism and Folk Buddhism

This was especially the case with the Cultural Revolution and the Open Door Policy in mainland China, which facilitated the provision of several huge donations pooled from within Southeast Asia to improve the surrounding infrastructure of the founding institutions.

Category 3. Native place Associations and Common Surname Associations

Singapore has five main dialect associations, and many single surname or hybrid surname associations (Chart 6). Many old temples with strong association backing have re-established ties with their founding temples during the last few decades. The new networks between temples have developed well, and there are exchanges of ritual innovation, capital, people and ideas.

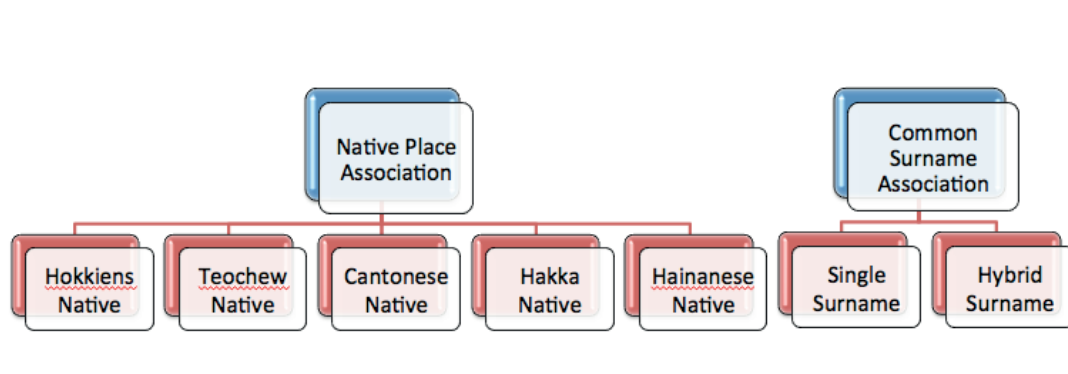


Chart 6: Native place Associations and Common Surname Associations

This is an ongoing research project supported by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany. This project is directed by Professor Peter van der Veer, Co-Director of the Max Planck Institute, and Professor Kenneth Dean, Head of the Chinese Department, National University of Singapore. This paper will focus on some preliminary research findings related to the Chinese Hokkien community and their religious networks. In particular, this study examines the Minnan (South Fujian) Protector Gods (Regional or Village temple Main Gods) and the Minnan Taoist Altars, as well as their religious networks connecting Fujian, China and the Chinese communities in Singapore. The main argument of this paper is that all the religious networks of the Minnan Main Gods and the Minnan Taoist Altars play a significant role in the transnational movement of resources between

Singapore and China, particularly Fujian. These resources include people from all walks of life, various forms of ritual knowledge and innovations, money and materials.

1. The Minnan Main Gods networks

The Minnan Main Gods networks in Singapore comprise the Goddess of Mazu (妈祖), Guangze Zunwang (广泽尊王), Baosheng Dadi (保生大帝), Qingshui Zushi (清水祖师), Anxi Chenghuangye (安溪城隍爷), Xuantian Shangdi (玄天上帝), Xuantianma (玄女妈), Fazhugong (法主公), Donggong Zhenren (董公真人), Guangong (关公), Nezha (哪吒), Wufu Wangye (五府王爷), Zhangsan Xiangong (章三相公), Fuxi Xiandi (伏羲先帝) and Wugu Zhenxian (五谷真仙), just to name a few. In this paper, I will focus on the Goddess of Mazu (the Patron Goddess of fishermen and sailors), Baosheng Dadi (Medical God), Guangze Zunwang (Saintly King Guo) and Anxi Chenghuangye (City God of Anxi) networks.

1.1 The Goddess of Mazu Network

To date, more than 21 Chinese temples and associations dedicated to Mazu as their patron goddess have been found in Singapore. These temples and associations are mainly located in the commercial area surrounding the Singapore River bank, while some of them are situated along or near to various other seashores and river banks. It is notable that Mazu temples or associations have followers from all Chinese dialect clans, surname associations, native places and occupational organizations (Chart 7 and Figure 5). This is a highly unique phenomenon, and can be traced back to as far as the early 19th century.

The practice of worshipping the Goddess of Mazu was introduced to Singapore in the 19th century, when there was a massive influx of Chinese immigrants. A large proportion of these immigrants came from the coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, and some Babas (the descendants of the early Hokkien immigrants and Malay women) came from Malacca, Malaya. Several Mazu altars can be found in “Telok Ayer”, a plot of land adjacent to the stretch of land south of the Singapore River and close to the commercial area occupied by the Europeans. In the 19th century,

01	Tian Fu Gong	12	Ning Yang Huiguan Tian Hou Gong
02	Yue Hai Qing Miao	13	Yong Chun Huiguan Tian Hou Gong
03	Qiong Zhou Tian Hou Gong	14	Fuzhou Huiguan Tian Hou Gong
04	Ban Gang Tian Hou Gong	15	San He Huiguan Tian Hou Gong
05	Mu Shan Sheng Mu Gong	16	Chaozhou Xihe Gong Hui Tian Hou Gong
06	Yun Feng Tian Hou Miao	17	Xi He Jiu Jia Huiguan Tian Hou Gong
07	Xingzhou Jingbang Shan Ting Tian Hou Gong	18	Xi He Villa
08	Xing An Tian Hou Gong	19	Wen Shan Lian Yi She
09	Ling Ci Xing Gong	20	Jin He Fa Lian Yi She
10	San Ba Wang Tian Hou Gong	21	Xing Zhou Tan Shang Gong Hui
11	Linshi Da Zongci Tian Hou Gong		

Chart 7: The Mazu network in Singapore

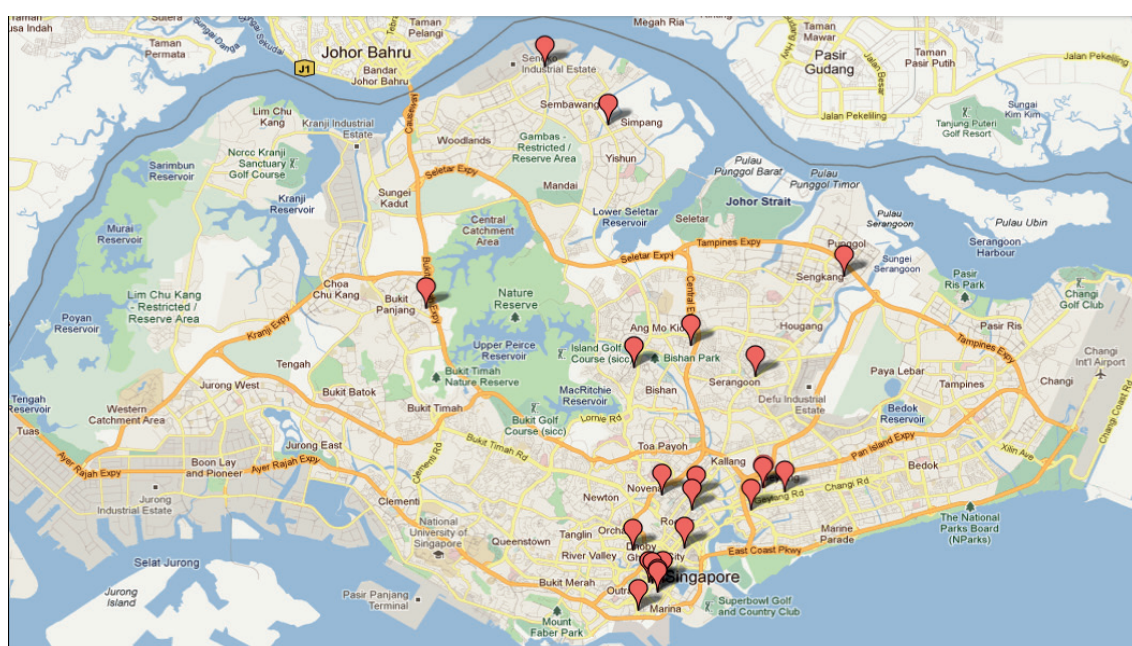


Figure 5: The Mazu temples and associations in Singapore

“Telok Ayer”, the Malay term for “bay”, was where Chinese junks, especially those from Fujian and Guangdong, usually berthed for the loading, unloading and disembarkation of Chinese coolies and their goods. This plot of land had been allocated by the founder of early Singapore, Sir Stamford Raffles, and his Town Committee to maritime trade, since they had long recognized that the trading groups and Chinese junks from the ports of Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, Xiamen, Guangzhou and Shantou (Teochew) were key driving forces for trade between China and Southeast

Asia, being pivotal in establishing Singapore as a free port and trading settlement. Consequently, many of the Hokkien and Teochew Chinese coolie immigrants chose to settle in Telok Ayer. The journey that these Chinese coolies had to complete to get to Singapore took as long as one to two weeks, often resulting in them having to endure harsh conditions. The junks they travelled in were described as “floating hells”, as they were often overcrowded and had poor food and sanitation. The coolies on board could see neither land nor their future, and they could only pray for the Goddess of Mazu’s blessings for a safe sea voyage to Singapore. Hence, upon their safe disembarkation in Singapore, the different Chinese dialect groups quickly set up many makeshift altars along the coastline of Telok Ayer to show their thanks to Mazu, the Goddess of the Seas, for their safe journey.

During the initial development of Singapore, hundreds of Chinese migrants from the surrounding regions flocked to the city to seize business opportunities. These groups of Chinese migrants settled in Southeast Asia (also known as “Nanyang”, the Chinese term for “South Ocean”) and from the late Ming and early Qing periods ran a strong network of commercial ports in places such as Bangkok (today’s Thailand), Riau and Batavia (today’s Indonesia), as well as Malacca and Penang (today’s Malaysia). Many of them became actively involved in the Singapore import and export trade. They imported rice and sugar from the port of Bangkok, spices, birds’ nests and other dried sea foods from the Archipelago of Indonesia, cotton goods from the ports of India, and tea, silk and other daily necessities from the ports of China. They also exported gambier, spices and peppers to Europe and China. Through these activities, the Chinese immigrants amassed sizable amounts of profit. According to traditional Chinese folk belief, these profits represented a great blessing from the Goddess of Mazu, the Patron Goddess who protects Chinese junks and sailors across the South China Sea. Hence, when some of them quickly rose to become leaders of the Chinese communities in Singapore, they built temples to honor the Goddess of Mazu and subsequent temple projects were funded by significant financial contributions from the many owners of Chinese junks that sailed between the ports of Southeast Asia. The leaders of the Chinese communities in Singapore also used the temple of Mazu to bring together the immigrants speaking the same dialect and to build up their own reputations as leaders of the dialect group by performing regular worship and organizing religious processions similar to those held in their villages of origin in China.

The founders of Mazu temples mentioned above included the most prominent of the businessmen, such as the Teochew leader Seah Eu Chin, the founder of the earli-

est Teochew Clan, “Ngee Ann Kongsì”, and the leader of Teochew communities in both Singapore and Riau. In order to pay tribute to the Goddess of Mazu, he took over the small shrines which had been put up in 1826 by immigrants from Teochew (Chaozhou) county in Guangdong province and developed it into a famous Mazu temple of Singapore: the Wak Hai Cheng Bio (Guangdong [Chaozhou] Temple of the Calm Sea). Other temples, like the Heng San Ting Temple (associated with the earliest Hokkien clan in Singapore) and the Mazu temple Thian Hock Keng Temple, were also founded by prominent businessmen, such as Si Hoo Kee, Tan Tock Seng and Tan Kim Seng, the leaders of Hokkien communities in Singapore and Malacca. Thian Hock Keng Temple was mainly dedicated to the Goddess of Mazu, and in the 19th century it was frequented by Hokkien junk-owners and Chinese immigrants, who came to offer thanks for a safe sea voyage from southeast China.

When Thian Hock Keng Temple was built, the original Mazu statue was sculpted in China. As part of the *fenxiang* system, the Mazu statue was brought over to Singapore from Meizhou Island, Mazu’s native village in Fujian’s Putian prefecture, in April 1840. When the Mazu statue arrived in Singapore, there was a grand procession to usher the Goddess of Mazu into the Thian Hock Keng main prayer hall. A vivid eyewitness account of this grand event was provided by a reporter of The Free Press. Ten years later, a commemorative stone inscription was erected inside the temple, which is still the temple’s most important historical artifact. It records the historical background to the construction of the temple and also lists the donors of the building funds among the Chinese leaders of both Malacca and Singapore, as well as many owners of Chinese junks across the ports of Southeast Asia. The construction costs amounted to about 37,000 Spanish dollars. The two presidents of the temple, Tan Tock Seng and Si Hoo Kee, the richest Chinese Hokkiens in Malacca and Singapore at that time, contributed the largest sums: 3074 and 2400 Spanish dollars respectively. The names of other wealthy businessmen from China, Malacca and Southeast Asia, including two Chinese leaders (mayors) from Indonesia, were also clearly recorded in this stone inscription, reflecting the huge religious network, especially in the shipping industry, dedicated to the Goddess of Mazu.

The following excerpts from the stone inscription provide an insight into the attitude of the founders in building this temple to Mazu:

We, the Tangren (Chinese), have come from the interior by junks to engage in business here. We depended on the Holy Mother of the Gods to guide us across the sea safely and we were able to settle down here happily. Things are abundant and the people are healthy. These are due to the God’s blessing. We, the Tangren (Chinese), wish to return



Figure 6: Wak Hai Cheng Bio (Mazu Temple of Theo Chew Clan)



Figure 7: Kheng Chiu Tin Hou Kong (Mazu Temple of Hainanese Clan)

good for kindness. So we met and decided to build a temple in the south of Singapore at Telok Ayer to worship the Heavenly Consort (Goddess of Mazu), day and night. [...] The palace-like architecture looks majestic. To show our highest respect for the Holy Mother of the Gods, the central prayer hall is dedicated to her. [...] It has generally been agreed that the Temple be named ‘Thian Hock’ because God’s blessing is like heavenly prosperity.



Figure 8: Thian Hock Keng (Mazu Temple of Hokkiens Clan)



Figures 9 and 10: The main hall & the stele of the construction of the Thian Hock Keng

1.2 The Baosheng Dadi Network

The earliest record of worship of Baosheng Dadi in Singapore was also inscribed on the same stele as that celebrating the construction of the Thian Hock Keng temple (1850, Figure 10). The excerpts from the inscription are as follows: “To show our highest respect for the Holy Mother of the Gods, the central prayer hall is dedicated to her. To its east is the prayer hall dedicated to Guan Sheng Di Jun, and to its west is a hall for worshipping Bao Sheng Da Di” (Figures 11 & 12). From this inscription, it is evident that the oldest Baosheng Dadi shrine was also in the Thian Hock Keng Temple, a temple built mainly by the Babas from Malacca and Hokkien junk-owners from China and Southeast Asia.

The stele erected at the Baosheng Dadi Founding Temple in Haicang, Fujian, also recorded that a few hundred patrons donated money back to Haicang from Singapore as early as 1896. Two of the biggest donors were Tan Kim Cheng (1829-92), the consul for Japan, Thailand and Russia and the eldest son of Tan Tock Seng, and Cheang Hong Lim (1841-92), the Justice of the Peace and first-rank official of the Qing Dynasty. Both of them became the key Hokkien leaders after Si Hoo Kee and Tan Tock Seng passed away in Malacca and Singapore respectively.



Figure 11: The central prayer hall of Thian Hock Keng



Figure 12: The Baosheng Dadi hall at the west of THK central prayer hall

To date, thirteen Chinese temples and associations dedicated to Baosheng Dadi as their patron god have been found (Chart 8 & Figure 13). The Bao Sheng Miao, founded on the former Johore Road in 1869 or earlier, may be the earliest temple for the worship of Baosheng Dadi as its patron god. This suggestion is based on the date carved on a censer (Qing Tongzhi 8; AC 1869), which also indicates that the statue of Baosheng Dadi had been brought to Singapore from China.

Chin Lin Keng (Zhenren Gong), the most famous Baosheng Dadi temple in Singapore, was founded in 1913 by the Hokkien Quanzhou community on Henderson Road. This temple was later moved to the junction of Henderson Road and Jalan Bukit Merah in 1978 due to the Urban Redevelopment Plan. It had to link up with Long Shan Ting, Jie Gu Dian and Wan Xian Miao to build a “United Temple”, Chin Leng Keng (Zhen Long Gong), in order to continue conducting their daily religious activities. After many years of effort, Chin Lin Keng, inspired by the Union of Taiwanese Baosheng Dadi, gathered all the Baosheng Dadi temples and associations in Singapore and formed a Union of Singapore Baosheng Dadi in the 1990s. In recent

01	Long Feng Dong	08	Ci Ji Tang
02	Guang Shou Tang (Yi Shun United Temple)	09	Bao Sheng Miao
03	Zhen Ren Gong (Zhen Long Gong United Temple)	10	Qin Long Gong
04	Peng Feng Gong	11	Ru Lin Zhang Shi Gong Hui Tong An Ban Qiao
05	Xian Gong Tang	12	Xi He Lian Yi She Nan An Kui Xia Chun
06	Di Jun Tan	13	Yan Ling Wu Shi Zong Hui
07	Ci Ji Gong Sheng Guo Yuan		

Chart 8: The Baosheng Dadi network in Singapore



Figure 13: The Baosheng Dadi temples and associations in Singapore

years, Chin Lin Keng has forged strong ties with hundreds of Taiwan Baosheng Dadi Temples and revived their networks with mainland China by rebuilding the Quanzhou village temple at Xifugong after its destruction in the Cultural Revolution, and by making several pilgrimages with the union temples of Singapore to the Baosheng Dadi founding temples at Qinjiao and Baijiao.

1.3 The Guangze Zunwang Network

Guangze Zunwang (the Reverent King of Broad Compassion, also known as Saintly King Guo) is the protector deity of Nan'an. The founding temple of his cult is in Nan'an, Quanzhou Fujian, Shishan Fengshan Si. The earliest temple dedicated to Guangze Zunwang is Hong San See ("HSS", the Phoenix Mountain Temple), which was founded in 1836 by Nan'an immigrants. Both the statue of the god and the incense burner came from the founding temple in China. Although it cannot be determined with confidence when immigrants from Nan'an first moved to Singapore, it should be noted that there was a tomb in the Qing Shan Ting (Green Mountain Pavilion) in Tanjong Pagar, dated Guangxu 9 years (1829), for 31 anonymous Nan'an immigrants.

The original site of the HSS was near the Qing Shan Ting cemetery. In 1907, the temple was moved by order of the British government to make way for a planned urban expansion. The HSS received 50,000 Straits dollars in compensation and was then moved to its current location at Mohamed Sultan Road. The land area was 40,000 square feet, and the lease was for 999 years. The following year, under the direction of the Nan'an community leader Lin Lu (the father of the Singapore martyr Lim Bo Seng (1909-1945)), the new HSS Temple was built using traditional artisanal methods. It can be said to be a magnificent example of traditional Chinese architecture and in 1978, it was gazetted as a national monument in Singapore. In 2010, three million Singapore dollars were spent on restoring the temple, and it was recognized with a UNESCO prize, becoming the first and only site of architectural preservation in Singapore to win such an award.

To date, we have found eight temples dedicated to Guangze Zunwang as their patron god. Although the number of temples with Guangze Zunwang as their patron god pales in comparison to the number of temples and associations to the Goddess of Mazu, it is notable that Guangze Zunwang remains as popular as the Goddess of Mazu within the Hokkien community, even in today's modern society. Furthermore, the Guangze Zunwang network embodies a connection between Singapore's HSS, and the Nan'an community in particular, with the founding temple of Shishan Fengshan Si and the tomb of Guang Ze Zun Wang in Shishan Nan'an, China. Since the early 19th century, this network has been stimulated by pilgrimage activities and Singapore's huge donations to the Founding Temple and Nan'an Quanzhou, especially since the Cultural Revolution.



Figure 14: Hong San See (the Phoenix Mountain Temple) in Singapore

01	Wei Zhen Miao	05	Feng Shan Si (Chia Chwee Kang)
02	Feng Shan Si (Mohamed Sultan)	06	Feng Shan Tan
03	Feng Shan Si (Jurong)	07	Feng Xuan Gong
04	Feng Shan Si (Changi)	08	Xi Shan Gong

Chart 9: The Guangze Zunwang temples in Singapore

The grand processions of welcome to the main deity statue of Guangze Zunwang from the founding temple to Singapore took place in 1905 and 2014 by means of a Chinese junk and a modern airplane respectively. These processions of welcome played a major role in forging religious and cultural connections. In 2014, in order to show the greatest respect to the main deity statue, which was being transported

from Shishan Nan'an, China, to Singapore, the Singapore HSS gathered the small Guangze Zunwang deity statues from various temples around the island and brought them along with the Guangze Zunwang main deity statue from the Singapore HSS central prayer hall to Singapore's Changi International Airport. The statues of the Goddess of Mazu from Thian Hoek Keng, Dabogong (Grand Uncle) from Shuntiangong and Baosheng Dadi from Pengfengong, as well as several other deity statues, were also taken and marched with as part of this grand parade of welcome.



Figure 15: The Guangze Zunwang temples in Singapore



Figure 16: Welcoming Guangze Zunwang from China to Singapore

The religious functions of this procession are clear and undisputed. By conducting this island-wide grand procession of welcome for the main deity statue of Guangze Zunwang from its founding temple in China across a span of five days, the Singapore HSS reached out and engaged Singapore Chinese from all walks of life, especially the Hokkien and Nan'an communities, as well as followers of several other temples, to take part in this religious procession and ritual.

1.4 The Anxi Chenghuangye (City God of Anxi) network

Compared to the Minnan Main Gods mentioned above, the Anxi Chenghuangye (City God of Anxi) network is a minority within the Hokkien community. However, this network has grown rapidly in the past 30 years, and to date it is one of the most influential Chinese temples in the popular religious context of Singapore.

To date, four temples in Singapore have been found to be dedicated to the City God as their patron god. However, only two of them worship the City God from Anxi, Quanzhou. The other two, older City God temples have Buddhist origins, and it remains unclear which part of China their City God originates from.

01	Du Cheng Huang Miao (General City God)	03	Jiu Chai Ba Cheng Huang Miao (An Xi City God)
02	Shuang Lin Cheng Huang Miao (General City God)	04	Yang Tao Yuan Cheng Huang Miao (An Xi City God)

Chart 10: The Chenghuang temples in Singapore



Figure 17: The Chenghuang temples in Singapore

One of the oldest City God temples is the Seng Wong Beo Temple (Du Cheng Huang Miao, 1905), located in Tanjong Pagar. It was founded by a renowned Buddhist monk, Reverent Rui Yu (1867-1953). Rui Yu was an imperial scholar before he was ordained as a Buddhist monk in Quanzhou, China, during the late Qing dynasty. He had served as an abbot at Hong San See in Singapore before he established this temple. This temple was fully funded by another literary scholar, Khoo Seok Wan (1874-1941), who had inherited a fortune from his father's rice business in Singapore and was able to support Reverent Rui Yu financially. Nonetheless, this City God temple appears to be more Taoist in nature. This could be explained by the fact that this temple was taken over by a non-Buddhist when Rui Yu passed away, thereby diluting the Buddhist influence. This temple is now better known for its popular religious rituals, especially its conduct of ghost marriages, a folk ritual that unites two young, unmarried deceased spirits, as requested by their parents.

Another of the older City God temple is the Shuang Lin Cheng Huang Miao, which is part of the Lian Shan Shuang Lin monastery, another popular religious temple managed by Buddhist monks in Singapore. Based on the stele outside this temple, it was built in 1903 with 3,000 dollars contributed by the founder of the Lian Shan Shuang Lin monastery, Low Kim Pong (1837-1909). He was a devout Buddhist and established the first Mahayana Buddhist monastery in Singapore in 1898. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, these two Buddhist laymen, who founded the City God temples, are not associated with any concrete evidence to prove that their City Gods were from Anxi, Quanzhou.

On the other hand, the City Gods who are worshipped in both the Jiu Chai Ba Cheng Huang Miao (Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple) and the Yang Tao Yuan Cheng Huang Miao (Yang Tao Yuan Sheng Hong Temple) are An Xi City God (“His Respectful Manifested Protector and Master of Qingxi”, 清溪显佑伯主, Qing Xi Xian You Bo Zhu), indicating their origin from Anxi County, Fujian, China. The deity statue in the central prayer hall of Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple is the fifth replicated deity from the City God Temple in Anxi. In 1918, the abbot of the Anxi City God Temple, accompanied by a well-known scholar in the same county, took the fifth replicated deity statue of the City God to Singapore to raise funds for its renovation. When they returned to Anxi to reconstruct the founding temple, they left behind the deity statue for safe keeping in a drama shop at the request of a spirit medium in a trance. Several years later, the deity statue was moved to the Tiangong altar (Jade Emperor God Altar) of Pineapple Hill (near Mount Vernon Hill). Affected by the building of a British military garrison in 1938, the Anxi

community near Pineapple Hill relocated to the land east of Koo Chye Ba (loosely translated from Hokkien as “the farm of *Allium tuberosum*”) and built a temple to worship this deity as their patron god. Forty years later, this plot of land was again acquired by the government, resulting in the union of the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple and the Fengxungong Temple to build a United Temple at Arumugam Road. To date, the United Temple has remained at Arumugam Road.

Over the past 30 years, the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple has exerted a significant amount of effort in trying to reconnect their ties with the City God temple in Anxi, Fujian, China by offering huge donations to reconstruct the founding temple, as well as by building a strong connection with many overseas Taoist and Buddhist groups. These groups include the China Taoism Association, Shanghai Taoism Association, Hebei Province Taoism Association, Jiangxi Province Mount Hulong Tianshifu, Hubei Province, Mount Wu Dang Taoism Association, Taiwan Zhonghua Taoism Association, Taiwan Lu Zhou’s Hutiangong and the Dongyue City God Temple of Anxi, Fujian.

After overcoming many hurdles over the years, this temple has become the most influential Chinese temple in Singapore, with strong transnational networks. During the Cultural Revolution in mainland China, all the City God statues worshipped at the Anxi City God Temple were completely destroyed. Therefore, the fifth replicated statue of the City God in Singapore is the only century-old deity statue from the Anxi founding temple to have remained intact since the disaster. Subsequently, in order to control the misuse of the name Qing Xi Xian You Bo Zhu in Singapore, this temple took over the authority for the *fenxiang* system from the founding temple at Anxi. Now, if any temple from Singapore asks to perform the ritual of *fenxiang* from or in the Anxi founding temple, it should seek prior approval from the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple. It even registered the name of the Qing Xi Xian You Bo Zhu as its official trademark in Singapore. Hence, the local god of Anxi, China, became the exclusive property of the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple in the 21st century.

Due to a rubber replantation scheme in 1926, some of the Anxi emigrants moved to West Coast Pasir Panjang to build a new village, with a formal temple to house a red-paper paintbrush of “Qing Xi Xian You Bo Zhu”. They also brought with them the “Joss Ash” of Qingxi Xianyou Bozhu from the Tiangong altar of Pineapple Hill, where the fifth replicated statue was worshipped temporarily. This formal temple, located in the new village of Yangtao Garden (the farm of Carambola / Starfruit), became a second branch which housed the Anxi City God as a patron god. In 1975,

this temple was affected by the urban redevelopment plan and was rebuilt at Pandan Garden with the formal name of the “Yang Tao Yuan Sheng Hong Temple”.

According to Chinese tradition, City Gods are the protectors of specific territories and can be divided into five levels: Capital City God (aka Wang or Emperor), Provincial City God (aka Wei Ling Gong or Duke), Prefecture Capital City God (aka Sui Jing Hou/Ling You Hou or Marquis), County City God (aka Xian You Bo or Earl) and District City God (aka Nan/Zi or Viscount/Baron). The City God worshipped in Du Cheng Huang Miao is a Provincial City God (also known as Wei Ling Gong) and is therefore the highest-ranked City God in Singapore. However, according to the instructions of the spirit medium in Lide Chuanxin Tang (立德传心堂), the City God in Shuang Lin Cheng Huang Miao is also a Provincial City God, who is not only in charge of Singapore, but was also appointed to oversee the whole of Southeast Asia. Despite having a lower ranked City God (County City God) as compared to the two older City God temples and the most highly ranked City God in Singapore (Provincial City God), the Qingxi Xianyou Bozhu and Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple have a more established and better network across Singapore, China and Southeast Asia in the modern society today.



Figure 18: The Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple



Figure 19: The Yang Tao Yuan Sheng Hong Temple



Figure 20: The 5th replicated deity statue of City God from Anxi Temple

2. The Minnan Taoist Altars networks

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Taoist Masters of Singapore comprised Chinese immigrants from different dialect groups. These include, but are not limited to, the following: the Hokkien Quanzhou Master Tan Gaodai's Hunyuan daotan, Hokkien Anxi Master Yao Chi's Gaoji daotan, Hokkien Anxi Master Shi Yuze's Guangying daotan, Hokkien Nan'an Master Lim Zhongming's Puji tan, Hokkien Fuzhou Master Tan Gongmei's Zhaoyuan daotan, Hokkien Jinmen Master Huang Senshu's Fuling daotan, Hokkien Huian Master Zhang Qizheng's Xilong daotan, Henghua Master Yu Mengwei's Xianji tan, Guangdong Fanyu Master Ho Fatt Cheong's Fatt Cheong Ho Daoyuan, Guangdong Fanyu Master Ho Ruihua's Xuanming Ho Daoyuan, Hainan Yuehui Masters Wang Jingchu and Wang Jingshi's Lingbao Huangtan.

As ritual specialists, Taoist Masters are indispensable for the performance of rites like the traditional communal sacrifices and consecration of Chinese temples. In order to gather primary information, this study utilizes data collected from field research to present case studies of the main Minnan Taoist altar, the Hokkien Master Tan Kok Hian's Hunyuan daotan. This section explores the internal composition of this Hokkien dialect group of Singapore Taoist networks, paying particular attention to its school, lineages and historical development, as well as examining the ritual repertoire that remains in this modern society.

Hokkien Taoist Master Tan Kok Hian and Taoist Federation of Singapore

Master Tan Kok Hian was born in Singapore. From childhood he travelled around with his father, Master Tan Gao Dai, to practise Taoist services. Under the strict guidance of his father, Master Tan gradually learned how to practise the Cheung Chau Festival Ritual (Pure Offerings), Vegetarian Festival Ritual (Fast and Offerings), and other Red and White Rituals (Weddings and Funerals). In several interviews with the Taoist Master Tan Kok Hian, he claimed that he considered himself to be “Longhu Shan, Tianshi Dao, Zhengyi Pai” (Zhengyi Sect, Way of the Celestial Masters, Longhu Mountain). His family has been a follower of Taoism for generations and has successively held the posts of the Abbot of Dongyue Guan in Quanzhou, Fujian, China, for hundreds of years, since the Song Dynasty. According to the records of the Daoist Association of Quanzhou in Fujian, his clan title was “Lian Zhen Tang”, which dates back to the second branch of the Chen clan during the Song Dynasty.

His deceased father, Master Tan Gao Dai (1900-1974), represented the 24th generation of apostles of the Chen clan. In 1925, Master Tan Gao Dai founded the Hun Yuan Dao Tan, the longest-standing Taoist altar in Singapore, and also the most prestigious among the Hokkien Taoist groups. Master Tan Gao Dai, also called Hui Rong, with his Taoist monastic name of Tong Xuan, came from Quanzhou, Fujian Province. He travelled to Singapore from Dong Yue Town, Quanzhou, and founded the Taoist altar several years after reaching, invoking and teaching Taoism, cultivating devotees, as well as reading texts by Hokkien dialect.

Master Tan Kok Hian has been in charge of daily religious affairs at the Taoist altar from the time his father became too old to do so. After his father passed away in 1974, Master Tan Kok Hian formally inherited the post of Abbot of Hun Yuan Dao Tan. As the Abbot of Hun Yuan Dao Tan, he has devoted his whole life to promoting Taoism in Singapore. In 1964, the 63rd generation Heavenly Master of Si Han Tianshi Fu, Zhang En Pu, travelled to Singapore from Taiwan and received a warm welcome from people of the Taoist Altars in Singapore. Heavenly Master Zhang En Pu hosted the ritual of register-granting for the Singapore Taoist Masters, including Master Tan, and gave him “Ding Da” as his Taoist monastic name, which belongs to the generation of “Ding”. To date, Master Tan is the only Taoist Master in Singapore from the “Ding” generation. Subsequently, he went to Longhu Mountain in Jiangxi, China for the Register-granting for multiple times, and was promoted to, and granted the official document for, the noble post of “Shang Qing San Dong Wu Lei”. There are three rankings of the posts for masters: “San Dong Wu Lei”, “Zheng Yi Meng Wei” and “Shang Qing San Dong Wu Lei”, from the lowest rank to the top rank. Therefore, Master Tan now occupies the highest-ranked post for Taoist Masters.

To promote Taoism, Hun Yuan Dao Tan, in cooperation with Taoist Masters of Cantonese and Hainanese altars, celebrated the Manifestation Anniversary of Tai Shang Lao Jun and worked to set up the “San Ching Taoism Association”. This association was officially established in 1979, and it held a grand “Nation-wide Marine, Terrestrial, and Aerial Ritual of Salvation” in 1985, which attracted tens of thousands of people to attend it. This was the biggest Taoist ritual that had ever been held in Singapore. Furthermore, this ritual was an effort involving a whole transnational network, with significant contributions from Master Hau Bo Yeu of Ching Chung Koon in Hong Kong.

In 1988, Master Tan and his religious and social networks planned to establish the Taoist Federation of Singapore. He collaborated with Chinese temples in Singapore

and some other individuals from the Taoist Altars to work towards the establishment of the federation. This federation was approved by the Singapore government and was officially established in 1990. Since then, it has become the central organisation coordinating Taoist groups and Chinese temples in Singapore. As the initiator and the head of the federation, Master Tan took up the heavy responsibility of promoting Taoist culture and knowledge among civilians and communities. Despite the numerous setbacks and frustrations he faced, he never faltered, maintaining his enthusiasm in protecting and promoting Taoism in Singapore.



Figure 21: Minnan Taoist Master Tan Kok Hian and his disciples



Figure 22: The Minnan Taoist Altar Hunyuan Daotan

3. The Merger of Minnan Main Gods and Minnan Taoist Altars networks

The Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple, as already noted, was a village temple with a hundred-year-long history. After it was compulsorily acquisitioned by the government in 1978, the temple cooperated with the Feng Xuan Temple to buy land with a thirty-year land deed in 1984. The Sheng-Feng Lian He Temple (loosely translated from Mandarin as “The united temple of the Sheng Hong Temple and the Fengxuan Temple”) was subsequently built on this land.

In 1989, one of the temple devotees, Tan Thiam Lye, took up a position on the executive board, in charge of the General Affairs of the Sheng Hong Temple. At that point in time, Taoism was beginning to achieve recognition nationally, with the establishment of the Taoist Federation of Singapore, led by Master Tan Kok Hian and some other Taoist figures. When Tan Thiam Lye and the Temple’s executive board realised that the Chenghuang (the City God) was also among the deities of Taoism, they decided to convert from popular religions to Taoism, choosing to embark on developing and promoting Taoism in Singapore instead. To date, Tan Thiam Lye has participated in many popular religious activities and is now a devout Taoist leader. The example of Tan Thiam Lye highlights a useful observation for the purposes of this study. The switch in religious beliefs (from popular religions to Taoism) appears to involve a transition, and the change in religious practice is a process, rather than a split-second decision.

In 1997, which marks the 80th anniversary of the arrival of the City God of Anxi in the Sheng Hong Temple, Singapore, Tan Thiam Lye organised a grand ceremony, called the “Celebration of the 80th Anniversary of the Consecration for Qingxi Xianyou Bozhu and Inauguration Ceremony for the New Temple”. During the event, several Taoist groups from Singapore, China and Taiwan were invited to attend. Prior to this, he had built the Taisui Hall to consecrate the representative Sixty Statues of the deities of the Quanzhen School by modelling them after the design of the Yuan Chen Hall of the Baiyun Temple in Beijing. He had also employed the Quanzhen Masters of the Baiyun Temple to be in charge of daily religious affairs in the temple on a long-term basis in order to enhance the Taoist attributes of the Lorong Kong Chye Sheng Hong Temple. Thereafter, to show recognition and praise for the orthodox schools of thought for Taoism, he initiated another investment to buy a plot of land costing more than \$10 million to build the San Qing Gong Temple for worshipping

the Three Purely Supremes as the main deities. He also erected the Taoism Stele of the Daodejing outside the San Qing Gong Temple.

As Tan Thiam Lye has claimed in my several interviews with him, the San Qing Gong that he founded in the 1990s is not limited to the religious traditions of the Longhu Shan, Tianshi Dao, Zhengyi Pai (Zhengyi Sect, Way of the Celestial Masters, Longhu Mount). It also includes the schools of thought of the Quanzhen school, the Quanzhen Masters, and even some ancient Confucian sages.

In terms of religious practices, the main prayer halls of San Qing Gong and the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple include three shrines, which bring together various different schools of thought in a single location. The Da Luo prayer hall in the middle is dedicated to the worship of the Three Purely Supremes, San Qing Tian Zun, presented in order of rank: Yuan Shi Tian Zun (Primeval Lord of Heaven), Ling Bao Tian Zun (the Heavenly Lord of the Numinous Treasure) and Dao De Tian Zun (the Heavenly Lord of Dao and its virtue), as well as Zhang Daolin Tianshi (also called the Celestial Master of Orthodox Oneness), Xuantian Da Di (the Great Heavenly Emperor of the Highest Palace of Polaris) and Dabo Gong, all of whom belong to the Zhengyi Pai school of thought. The Hall of San-Zu on the left is dedicated to the three most important patriarchs of the Quanzhen School, including Patriarch Lü Chunyang, Patriarch Wang Chongyang and Patriarch Qiu Changchun. Finally, the Hall of Confucius on the right consecrates Confucius, who is adored as the “Great Sage and Teacher”, as well as Mencius and the Seventy-two sages, all of whom are ancient Confucian sages.

The Huai-Si Tang, which is located behind San Qing Gong, is a place for devotees to worship their ancestors and to place the tablets and urns of the deceased. Taoist Masters of Zhengyi Pai, who are from the Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan and Hakka dialect groups, are permitted by Tan Thiam Lye to help devotees conduct Taoist festival ceremonies (the ritual of Fast and Offerings) in Huai-Si Tang to recognise one’s merits and virtues. In addition, the group that conducts the De-Jing Festival ceremonies to worship the Tian Zun and sages in the main prayer hall includes masters of the Quanzhen School, masters who serve regularly in the temple, and some others from the Baiyun Temple in Beijing, China. It is important to note that Tan Thiam Lye has always regarded both schools as equally important, without distinction.

After Tan Thiam Lye had been chosen as the Chairman of the Taoist Federation of Singapore, he chose San Qing Gong Temple as the official venue for the conferences and events of the Federation, driving the temple, which is affiliated to the Temple of the City God of Anxi, to become the symbol of orthodox Taoism in Singapore.

Since managing to establish a foothold for Taoist traditions in Singapore, Tan Thiam Lye has not stopped at merely promoting Taoism. He has shifted his focus to the active promotion of various interfaith events. He goes beyond lip service, promoting interfaith interaction and engagement in Singapore's religiously diverse society. From his point of view, Taoism is just one of the ten religions in Singapore, and interactions with other religious groups and social communities are very important. He believes in, and upholds, the principle of "cooperation and mutual benefits", hoping to develop a beneficial working relationship with other religions to create a harmonious and stable social environment. To achieve this goal, he often invites other religions to the events he holds in the name of the Taoist Federation of Singapore so as to engage and interact with them. Some examples are outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

Since 2002, Tan Thiam Lye has been initiating and organising an annual event called the "Prayer Meeting for Global Peace" in the name of the Taoist Federation of Singapore. Every year, he invites all of the ten religions in Singapore, and one representative of each religion will read from the "Statement of Religious Harmony" together. Then, the different religions will perform their respective prayers in their own unique ways, hoping for global peace, prosperity for the country and peace for the people.

On 9 December 2007, to mark the 90th anniversary of the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple, Tan Thiam Lye collaborated with the Taoist Federation of Singapore and the Inter-religious Organisation of Singapore (IRO) to hold a banquet for ten thousand people, with more than one thousand tables for seated guests, and occupying the first and the second exhibition halls of the Singapore Expo site. The invited guests consisted of representatives and devotees of the religious association made up of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Daoism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Bahai'ism. More than ten thousand domestic and international devotees of these religions shared the dinner in the Banquet Hall of the Singapore Expo, where people read from the "Statement of Religious Harmony" drafted by the IRO in order to motivate people to enhance mutual trust and understanding. All of these activities showed the achievements of the devotion of Singapore in fostering ethno-religious harmony over the years.

In 2010, capitalising on the opportunity to mark the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Taoist Federal of Singapore, Tan Thiam Lye hosted a celebration ceremony entitled "Solidarity, Mutual Trust, Harmony and Common Prosperity" and "The Evening Gala of Multi-ethnic and Multi-religion", by which he hoped to

foster interfaith relations. To dissolve previous interfaith misunderstandings, in the name of the Chairman of the Federation he even invited the Chairman of the New Creation Church, Deacon Matthew Kang, to sing the famous Hokkien song, “One People, One Half” with him.

Over the years, Tan Thiam Lye has never paid lip service to the interfaith communication and events that he has proposed. In order to hold every interfaith event and see it through successfully, he will, without fail, pay a personal visit to dozens of groups and organisations that belong to the ten religions of Singapore in advance, inviting their leaders to join in the banquet. At the same time, he would also ask them to bring along their devotees if they were interested in attending, regardless of the number of interested parties. To ensure further that there are fewer barriers to the active participation of the different religious leaders and devotees, he declares the meals to be free of charge for all parties who are interested in attending the banquet, absorbing the cost of the grand banquet by using San Qing Gong’s funds. In this way, he can better reach his goal of realising interfaith harmony. For example, for the ten-thousand-people banquet that was held in the Banquet Hall of the Singapore Expo, each table cost more than 1,000 Singapore Dollars, with the total cost adding up to one million Singapore Dollars. Nonetheless, he fulfilled his guarantee that all attendees would be given a free meal, even if every religious group brought 10 to 20 tables worth of devotees. In this way, he has successfully engaged many devotees from these groups. From this, it is evident that Tan Thiam Lye strongly believes that interfaith communications in a religiously plural society like Singapore are important. However, these ideals are not just slogans: they not only require the devotion of minds, time and energies, but also entail sufficient financial support. The frustrations behind these efforts were often not recognized.

However, during this process, some hard-line religious groups were still reluctant to attend these events, which promote interfaith communication and mutual trust. This was only the case for certain religious groups. The leaders of these groups nonetheless declined to attend on some pretext, as they have done right up to the present day. What is heartening is that most of the other religious groups, including Buddhist, Muslims, Hindus and Catholics, were willing to take part in these events. During his regular visits to them, Tan Thiam Lye found that some religious groups have never contacted each other, let alone understood each other’s religious traditions. For this very reason, some religious leaders were grateful for the banquet, saying that it had previously been impossible for them to meet or dine with their counterparts, yet on that very day, the Taoist group had managed to get individuals from different

religions to do so. Tan Thiam Lye told me that he was extremely pleased to gather this feedback. In fact, he commented that the differences between religious traditions always impede our interfaith interactions. In order to bridge the gap, one needs to take the first step, a step that can help everyone to end their mutual estrangement. Taoism in Singapore has thus played the vanguard role in taking the first step.

It is thus possible for leaders and devotees from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to stay together harmoniously. For friends from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and even for some Malaysian religious leaders and devotees across the Straits, the banquet was amazing. They were grateful for their treatment and commented that it is still impossible for their own states to hold an event like this. Several years after the banquet, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, delivered a speech in front of all these religious groups, appealing to them to learn from the Taoist Federation of Singapore. This was symbolic of the government's endorsement of their previous efforts.



Figure 23: The main prayer hall of San Qing Gong



Figure 24: The author and Tan Thiam Lye

Conclusion

A wide range of different networks link Singaporean temples, *huiguan*, lineage halls and dialect communities to their founding temples and ancestral sites across Southeast China. These networks may take the form of divisions of incense within popular god cults consecrated by dialect-specific, regional Daoist ritual traditions; master-disciple ties within Buddhist monastic networks; sectarian formations of many varieties; spirit medium-led temples; business ties within native-place *huiguan* associations (usually based within temples); and ancestral ties to ancestral halls (sometimes with invented ancestors and kinship links based on common surnames). Many Singaporean temples, monasteries, nunneries, sectarian movements, *huiguan* and ancestral halls have established strong local and regional (Southeast Asian) networks. These networks are important. Given that the current paper only describes Minnan Main Gods and Minnan Taoist Altars, which have yet to be fully mapped out and analysed, further identification of existing religious networks should be conducted.

In addition, many religious bodies have revived their ties to China in recent years through the provision of assistance in the reconstruction of temples and halls, as well as surrounding infrastructure – something that is sorely needed after the destruction of religious items and facilities during the Cultural Revolution. As research on these networks is still at a preliminary stage, many fundamental questions remained unanswered. Therefore, it is hoped that we can further explore these networks, particularly the transnational networks, in the near future.

