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The Magnificent Thian Hock Keng Temple

By Asif R. Chowdhury

With its numerous glistening high-rises all around the island showcasing modern architecture, Singapore is globally recognized as an ultra-modern city-state. Nestled among tall buildings, one occasionally catches glimpses of

some often-colorful temples with unique designs and architecture. The apparent grandeur of these temple buildings is very likely to pique the interest of anyone who is even slightly culturally or historically inclined. These

ancient-looking temples almost look out of place, as if somehow transported from ancient China or India. These places of worship, with their traditional architecture surrounded by the contemporary glass-and-steel high rises, are a testament to how the old and the ancient are harmoniously intertwined with the new and the modern in this city-state.



Despite being a tiny island nation, Singapore is home to ten different forms of religion. According to a report by Office of the International Religious Freedom, the main religions practiced widely here are Buddhism (33.2%), Christianity (18.8%), Islam (14%), Taoism (10%), and Hinduism (5%). About 1% of the population consists of Jews, Sikhs, Jains, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Zoroastrians, while 18.5% do not identify with any particular religion. Numerous places of worship for many common religious groups are scattered all over the island. There are more than 1000 Buddhist and Taoist temples in tiny Singapore,

both small and large, old and new, of various shapes, sizes, and designs. Almost all of them adorn some form of traditional Chinese architecture.

Surrounded by some of the high-rise buildings of the financial district stands the oldest temple in Singapore, the famous Tian Hock Keng, or the "Palace of Heavenly Happiness." This 180-year-old temple easily stands out for its grand design and magnificent style steeped in traditional Chinese architecture with many historical artifacts. Its history goes back to 1839, almost to the very early days of the island.

Soon after Sir Stamford Raffles first arrived in Singapore in 1819, he quickly recognized the immense potential of the island to become a central British trading hub due to its strategic location in Southeast Asia with deep sea access. Almost immediately, Sir Raffles started planning to build up the island. He realized early on that they would need a significant workforce to get this done. So, the British brought workers from their then-Indian colony. The development also started to attract many Chinese immigrants who flocked to the island from



mainland China, especially from the Fujian Province, looking for work and a better future. They sailed across the sometimes treacherous and often lethal South China Sea in wooden junks, which could take as long as two weeks. Once they had safely arrived in Singapore, many of these migrants would first stop by a small makeshift shrine located on the shore of Telok Ayer Basin to show their gratitude and respect to the Sea Goddess, Ma Zu. This was the humble beginning of the historic Tian Hock Keng temple, located on Telok Ayer Street in Chinatown, close to the financial district. In those days, the location would

have been oceanfront. Now, due to the reclaimed land program, it currently sits quite inland.

As the Chinese immigrant community started to grow, there was a need to transform the make-shift prayer hall into a proper place of worship. The local Chinese community decided to build a temple following the design and architecture of the temples of Southern China. The construction of Tian Hock Keng started in 1839. Since there were no such temple buildings in Singapore then, artisans and workers were brought from Fujian province to help build the structure. Much of the materials





and artwork were brought from mainland China, such as the granite pillars and the stone ornaments we see today. The temple is essentially a wood construction, but interestingly, built without a single nail, following an intricate ancient Chinese practice.

Undertaking such a significant endeavor was not cheap. The total cost of the construction was \$37,000 Spanish dollars which is more than one million US dollars in today's currency. Most funds were received as public donations, most of which went towards purchasing the land. The largest donation, about \$30,000 Spanish dollars, came from Tan Tock Seng, a well-known philanthropist of the day from Malacca. The local Tamil Muslims, known as the Chulia community, also contributed to the building of the Thian Hock Keng. Walking around the temple complex, one may notice several Indian-looking figures holding up the roof beams. These were built as an acknowledgment of the contribution of the Chulia community. This is a testament to the religious harmony, mutual respect, and support among

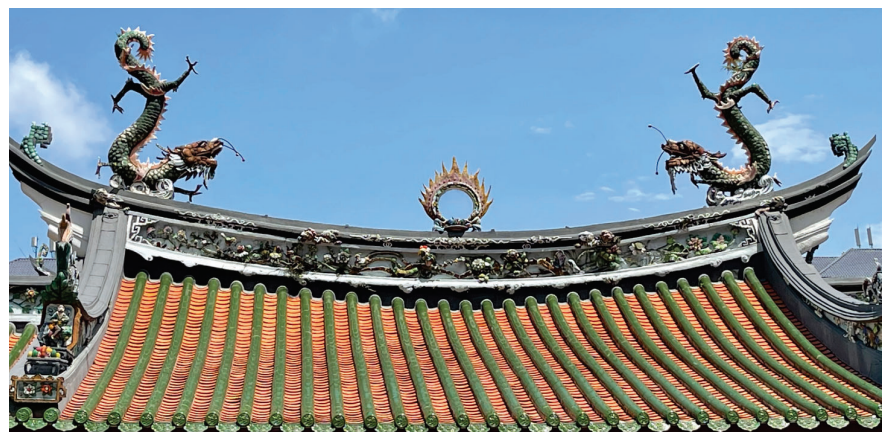
the different faiths that existed even during the early days of Singapore. The construction of Thian Hock Keng was completed in 1841.

The main deity of the Thian Hock Keng is, of course, the Sea Goddess, Ma Zu. The statue of Ma Zu was brought from the city of Meizhou in Xinghua Province in mainland China in 1840. The local Chinese community celebrated the statue's arrival with huge fanfare. The celebration lasted for days, but on the primary day, the procession "...extended nearly a third of a mile, to the usual accompaniment of gongs, and gaudy banners of every color, form, and dimension," as observed by Charles Burton Buckley, a prominent resident of the then colonial Singapore and also a historian who has written extensively about the history of the island.

Buckley went on to add the following about the event: "But, what particularly engaged the attention of spectators, and was the chief feature of the procession, were the little

conveyed in a very elegant chair, or palanquin, of yellow silk and crepe, and was surrounded with a bodyguard of celestials, wearing tunics of the same color." The statue of Ma Zu was placed in the main prayer hall in the center of the temple, where it still stands today.

There is an interesting history behind the Chinese sea goddess. She was a legendary figure who lived in the Fujian Province from 960 to 987, with an uncanny ability to predict the weather, particularly sea storms. Her name was Lin Mo Niang. The story goes that her unique ability had saved many seafarers' lives. After she passed away, she was deified as the Sea Goddess Ma Zu. The goddess is worshipped within the Chinese community throughout China and Southeast Asia, including Taiwan, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. There are several MaZuist temples in the region. She is particularly revered among the Hokkien communities, and her "temple festival" is a significant event for the Hokkien people.



girls from five to eight years of age, carried aloft in groups on gaily ornamented platforms, dressed in every variety of Tartar and Chinese costumes....The divinity (the statue) herself was

The Thian Hock Keng complex is built using wood, featuring a series of pavilions. Following Chinese tradition, the temple has three halls: the entrance hall, the main prayer hall in the middle, and

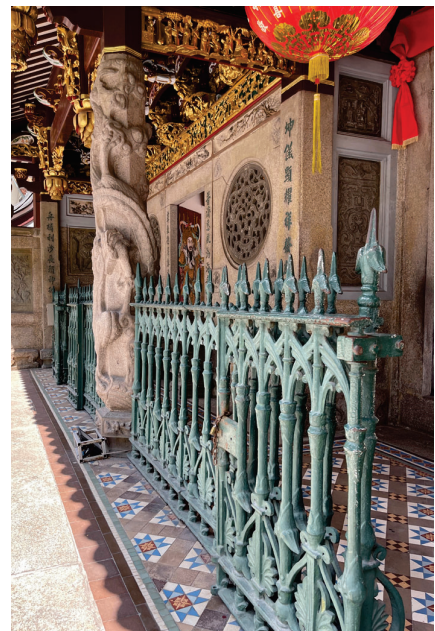
a smaller hall in the rear. All the roofs are designed in traditional Hokkien architectural style, featuring curved roof ridges with an upturned "swallow tail" like design. On the edges of the roofs of both the entrance hall and the main hall, four colorful dancing ceramic dragons symbolize justice and power. The large doors of the main entrance hall are adorned with gold paintings of Buddhist figures and dragons. Guarding the temple doors are the traditional sentinels of Taoist temples, the stone lions.

Passing through the main entrance, one arrives in the beautifully tiled courtyard of the main temple with a large bronze incense stand in the middle. From the courtyard, depending on where one is standing, some of the modern high rises of the financial district come into view, standing in sharp contrast to the traditional architecture of the temple. Across the courtyard is the main prayer hall, which holds the statue of Ma Zu. The decor in the main hall – such as the gilded beams and ceilings; the red,

Smaller alleyways on both sides of the main three halls lead to the monks' quarters and are also lined with smaller shrines dedicated to other gods. There are two pagodas on each side with octagonal bases. The one on the left is a shrine dedicated to Confucius, while the one on the right houses the ancestral tablets of the Hokkien immigrants.

Behind the temple, along the outer back wall, there is a mural painted by the well-known Singaporean artist Yip Yew Chong, which illustrates the history of the city's Hokkien community. Visitors will be amiss if they don't stop by to look at this long, illustrative mural.

There are 12 Chinese deities in the temple complex beside Ma Zu. This includes Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy; Cheng Huang, the City God; Baosheng Dadi, the God of Medicine and Health; Guansheng Dijun, worshipped for spiritual protection; Confucius (a favorite among students and their parents); and Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy.



within the temple compound. Even today, the association's office is in one of the tall glass high-rises on the opposite side of the temple. A new pavilion, built in 1913 and annexed to the main temple called the Chong Hock Pavilion, was the site of Singapore's first girls' school. It was established in 1915. The school was geared towards the local Chinese girls, with Hokkien as the language of instruction. The school has since moved to Yishun, and the pavilion now serves as a decorative tile shop and a music box museum.



back, and gold lacquered wood; the dragon and the phoenix figures; and the tiled courtyards – are typical elements of Fujian design. Behind the main temple is another courtyard with a smaller altar dedicated to Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy.

The temple's history has been deeply intertwined with the history of the Singaporean Chinese, especially the Hokkien community. The first Chinese association, Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, or Hokkien Clan Association, was founded in 1849

In 1907, one of the last emperors of China, Emperor Guangxu of the Qing Dynasty, presented a scroll of Chinese calligraphy to the Thian Hock Seng temple, which translates to English as "Waves be calm over the South Seas." The calligraphy artwork was presented in appreciation of the contribution of the Singaporean Chinese community towards the Celestial Kingdom. (It is ironic to some extent as, within a decade, the same Nanyang community would broadly support Sun Yat-sen, a staunch republican and the first president of China, who fought against the imperialist rule to form the People's Republic of



China). The artwork presented by the emperor is kept with the National Heritage Board of Singapore for safekeeping.

Over the years, the temple has seen a few additions and has gone through some renovation work. Soon after its completion, a Pagoda was added, known as Chung Wen Pagoda. It is dedicated to learning, literature, and poetry. The temple was renovated in 1906 when wrought iron gates were installed to protect the temple complex. Interestingly, these wrought iron gates, which are still part of the temple complex and may look a little out of place to some observant eyes, were imported from Glasgow. In 1973, Thian Hock Seng was gazetted as a Singapore National Monument.

By the 1990s, the almost 150-year-old Thian Hock Keng was severely in need of significant restoration. Many of its wooden

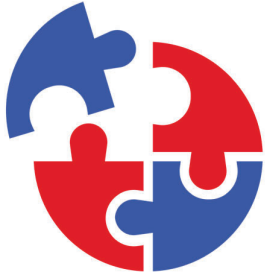
structures were infested with termites. The Hokkien Huay Kuan Association took it upon themselves to see to this important task of preserving the historic site. A committee was formed to oversee the restoration work by the association. Adhering to guidelines set by the Singapore Preservation of Monuments Board (now Preservation of Sites and Monuments) on the conservation of national monuments, the original physical appearance, and the temple's façade were preserved. Particular effort was also made to preserve the original materials beyond repair due to their historical significance. Once again, craftsmen from the Fujian province were brought in to ensure that the restoration work did not interfere with the temple's original look and feel. The more than 70 craftsmen included wood carvers, artisans, and stonemasons. The restoration work began in 1998 and was completed in 2001. It took two and a half years to complete at a cost of S\$4 million. The restoration project won the temple many awards, the most prestigious being the honorable mention in the 2001 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards.

In terms of scale and history, Thian Hock Keng may not be on par with many of the older and much larger temples in the region, particularly in China, Japan, and Korea. However, it can certainly and easily compete with most of them in terms of its magnificent design and religious significance. As one

walks down Telok Ayer Street and the entrance hall of Thian Hock Keng comes into view, you can't help but be awed looking at its ancient-looking grand façade amid all the surrounding glass buildings. Today, the temple remains an important place of worship for the local Hokkien population, just as it was during its early days when the Chinese seafarer routinely stopped by to pay their respect and gratitude to Ma Zu. Its traditional Chinese architecture truly stands out among the skyscrapers and can be a sight for sore eyes, which might otherwise tire of looking at the many glass-steel-and-brick high-rises. With its rich heritage, long history, ancient look, and magnificent design, Thian Hock Keng is a must-see while in Singapore.



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