



GES1005 Everyday Life of Singaporean Chinese: Past & Present

Temple Group Report

Tutorial Group D3

Temple ID: 156

Temple Name: Thian Ling Chong Toh Tong Temple

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Temple Overview	
Temple Name	Thian Ling Chong Toh Tong Temple 天灵总道堂
First Location	around Kembangan area
Current Location	472 Changi Road
Establishment Year	1953
Main God	真空祖
Dialect of Temple	Hokkien
Origin of Founding Temple	Jiangxi, China
Type of Land	Freehold

History in China

天灵总道堂 originated from Jiangxi, China during the Qing dynasty. Its founder, 廖帝聘 (1827-1893), was more commonly known as 廖祖师 among the locals. With his involvement in charitable acts and selfless attitude, he earned a lot of respect from the locals. When he was still schooling at sixteen years old, he got to know more about Lin Zexu¹, who was imposing strict bans on opium. 廖祖师 was inspired by Lin Zexu, and advocated the quitting of opium for the betterment of the country and personal well-being. After his wife passed away at a young age and left him childless, he was determined to practice Taoism, and learn more about nature's forces. Despite his parent's objections, 廖祖师 continued his practices and wished that one day he would use his acquired knowledge to help the world.

廖祖师 later mastered the meanings of 《道与空》 and came up with his own set of beliefs, also known as 《空中大道》. His main belief revolved around how everything revolved around the simplicity of thoughts, and to follow nature's principles. Subsequently, this philosophy laid the foundation of 《真空教》, which was later spread to the Straits/Nanyang as the basis of Taoism. With reference to the basic religion 儒释道, 廖祖师 wrote four scriptures: 《报空宝卷》, 《无相宝卷》, 《报恩宝卷》 and 《三教宝卷》. The core belief of this religion is centred around the idea of emptiness which is regarded as the essence of its central creed, and represents a very significant philosophical theory. Coupled with the practice of meditation and enlightenment, 真空教 considers the Unification of Hearts as the sole and supreme means of attaining salvation. The religion advocated abstinence from smoking as a cure for illnesses.

¹ Lin Zexu was a Chinese scholar official during the Qing dynasty, who was well known for his role in the First Opium War. He was highly praised for his strong opposition against opium trading and smoking, which was believed to be the primary catalyst of the First Opium War.

Later 廖兆元 and 廖兆扬 joined 廖祖师 on this spiritual endeavour. Among all those who benefitted from the quitting of opium, three people (namely 赖仁章, 凌邦璧 and 张声见) became the disciples and were imparted with the knowledge of 《空中大道》. With the effort of these six people, 《真空教》 prospered.

However, 廖祖师 passed away on the sixteenth of the eleventh month of the Lunar Calendar (农历十一月十六) 1893 as he was sabotaged for embezzlement by local officials. This practise was later carried down to Singapore by the current temple caretaker's father who came from Yong Chun, Fujian, who set-up 天灵总道堂.

History in Singapore

Opium smoking was a popular activity when the British opened to trading with China. The population of opium addicts mainly comprise coolies, especially the poor and the elderly. However, crime rate escalated quickly with the growth of opium smoking. Therefore, 天灵总道堂 started in the early 1900s with an agenda to discourage opium smoking, and welcomed anyone who needed help in quitting opium addiction. The devotees had to go through five mandatory activities every day, which was believed to speed up the process of quitting opium smoking.

i. Narrating Ritual Manual

The founder wrote the ritual manual to keep the devotees occupied during their stay in the temple, and the content of the manual was mainly talking about how emptying your thoughts would help you achieve a better state of mind. This manual was written with the intention of being narrated in Hokkien.

ii. 甩手 Prayers

The devotees would also engage in the practice of 甩手 prayers, which was an exercise to improve blood circulation and concentration, as well as to strengthen back muscles. The exercise involved raising both arms up to shoulder level, and then swinging quickly to the back.

Fun fact: MP Tan Chuan Jin visited 天灵总道堂 during this temple tour around Singapore, and practiced the 甩手 exercise as recommended by the temple keeper. Later, his visit together with a brief temple history of 天灵总道堂 was published in the local Chinese newspaper.

iii. Drinking Divine Tea

Devotees are encouraged to regularly drink tea, as it is believed to help detoxify their bodies of toxins from opium drugs.

iv. Frequent Showers

The process of quitting opium caused body temperature to rise, hence devotees were always experiencing discomfort from this heat. Thus, to alleviate their discomfort and prevent medical heat conditions, devotees took frequent showers throughout the day to lower their body temperature.

v. Sleeping on Sand

In the past, the temple's courtyard was covered with sand. This was meant for devotees to sleep on at night as it was believed to remove the 气 from their body and aid them in their process of quitting opium.

It would typically take around 10 days to quit opium smoking, but people usually continue with this practice for extended periods of time, to escape from external influence (e.g. friends) which would lead them back to addiction. Quoted by the temple keeper, “不是鸦片想你, 是你想鸦片” which loosely translates to “it's not about the opium missing you, but you how you miss opium”. Hence, devotees usually stay for about a year, going back to the temple to sleep after work to prevent themselves from picking up the habit again.

Temple Layout

Temple Entrance:

天灵总道堂 has adopted a traditional one-hall design layout with a courtyard in front of the hall, entered by a simple gate. (*refer to Figure 2*) The gate has a pair of couplets located at sides of its structure. “真有仙茶能却病, 空從跪拜得延年” which means that the temple serves a tea that could cure illness and if you are willing to pray, you can attain a good life and longevity. (*refer to Figure 3*)

Courtyard

The courtyard was used as a resting place for devotees to spend their nights during the process of quitting opium. However, people use it as a carpark now. (*refer to Figure 3*)

Hall Entrance

The entrance consists of a plaque and a pair of couplets situated at the sides. “南洋真空教天灵总道堂” signifies the name of the temple and the religion that is being practice. “天道挂施为主宰, 灵光临照偏江山” represents the pursuance of the act of giving as their main objective and allowing the light within oneself to spread over a vast area. (*refer to Figure 6 & 7*)

Hall

The hall is divided into three sections: a main area for devotees to conduct rituals, two resting rooms and a small rectangular space for the altars. In the main area, portraits of 真空教's forefathers are displayed to serve as a remembrance for their past contributions to the religion and its devotees. A donation box is located at the left side of the main area for the maintenance of the temple. Additionally, the act of giving carry out by devotees is to hope that 真空祖 will help them to make their wishes come true as well. The main area is further split into two portions to separate men and

women during the performance of rituals. Women must stand on the right side whereas men have to stand on the left side. The division is evident from the arrangement of the founder and his wife's portraits, and signage located at each side. (*refer to Figure 8 & 9*)

Altar

真空教 do not have any figurine or portrait of 真空祖 on the altar. Instead, it has the words “空” and “中” in the middle, which signifies the centrality of everything evolved around the emptying of minds. In 天灵总道堂, it has two altars. As can be seen from *Figure 8*, the main altar has a “T” shape structure and it is used to place the chanting instruments, censers and offerings such as oranges and tea. Moreover, mirrors can be found at the sides of the paintings to encourage devotees to look at themselves while praying. (*refer to Figure 7*) There is an offering table behind the altar, where two vases, two lamps and a small censer were placed in the middle. (*refer to Figure 8*). Chairs are later added around the altar to facilitate the praying practice as majority of the devotees now are of old age.

Others

Besides the above mentioned artifacts, there are plaques found inside the hall as well. Such as “灵光临照”, “空心化性”, “大德敦化”, “回光返照”. (*refer to Figure 5,6 &9*) Furthermore, a marble tablet can be found at the entrance of the hall, carved with contributors' names who had donated money for the construction of 天灵总道堂 back in 1953. (*refer to Figure 8*)

Past Practice

In the past when government regulations were still lax with regard to religious animal sacrifices, 天灵总道堂 was grounds for 放花, a practice popular among Singaporeans looking to be healed from disease or illness. The process of 放花 is as follows: before entering the main hall, the devotee writes his name on a piece of paper, which will then be conveyed to the temple elders at the altar. The devotee then enters the main hall and takes his place before the altar, following which the elders will perform a ritual and chant on behalf of the devotee. Concurrently, a sacrifice, usually a chicken, will be sacrificed in the courtyard by temple staff. The animal is believed to be a sacrificial body which carries the disease or illness on behalf of the devotee, and takes it away in death. During that time, larger animals such as sheep and pigs may also be involved as a sacrifice, depending on the gravity of illness. Although not uncommon, 放花 would be considered a special ritual for the temple, requiring preparation and coordination between the temple and devotee in advance. Apart from 放花, members of 天灵总道堂 come down occasionally for personal prayers and exercise such as 甩手功 as mentioned above.

农历初九 is the birthday of 真空祖. Devotees would come together and celebrate with banquet and getai. Auctions would take place to raise fund for the temple, and the items that were usually auctioned are vases and alcohols. Members would also make donations.

Present Practice

Following tightened regulations by the Agri-food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA), livestock must be purchased from approved vendors, and the transport, handling, and slaughtering have to be conducted in a specific manner. Hence, due to the red tape and complex application procedures, 天灵总道堂 no longer practices 放花, but is still open to members and the public who wish to pray.

真空教 devotees now come to the altar, often to pray for answers or enlightenment, according to the aforementioned doctrine of their belief. Though most believers have small personal altars at home which carry the symbolic 空中图 coupled with a mirror, they still believe in praying at the full-blown altar in the main hall of 天灵总道堂, to be reminded of the origin of their faith and seek inner peace. With a small membership base of approximately 40 members, temple activities are only limited to the annual celebration of the founder's birthday.

Future Plans

Since the founder's passing in 1927, 真空教's activities have lessened, and was ultimately eradicated after China's reform. However, 真空教 continues to have an impact on the Nanyang Chinese in Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

Unfortunately, 天灵总道堂 took on a passive stance and could not keep the younger generations interested in their faith. Despite their ability to keep their temple grounds on a freehold lease, membership numbers have dwindled as members pass on with age, and temple activities have quietened since. In 2013, an old folks home was founded within temple grounds as part of its extra-curricular activities, which is overseen by current temple keeper, Ricky.

Ricky assured us that 天灵总道堂 is registered with the Singapore Registry of Societies, which will ascertain the next caretaker of the temple if he were to pass on.

Conclusion

天灵总道堂 was unusually quiet and solemn, with a well maintained main hall, but a forgotten courtyard and backyard. We observed numerous cars parking in the courtyard for free parking space, so they could eat at nearby coffeeshops, completely unfazed by the presence of the temple. The small rooms that lined the corridors to the backyard were dark and poorly maintained, reminiscent of an abandoned dormitory. Perhaps westernization has not only impacted the Singaporean way of life, but intruded into our spiritual realm and brewed a heart of nonchalance. We may still be God-fearing and engage in various forms of religious activity, but do we delve deep into the teachings and doctrine of the belief? Or are we just dabbling on the surface of diluted religion made accessible to all?

Appendix

Experience/ Difficulties faced during temple visit

The temple is currently being taken care of by Ricky, who was the second generation of temple caretaker. Thus the information passed down may be inaccurate and more often forgotten as the religion is obsolete in today's world. He did offer us a book to let us reference more about the religion, however he had difficulty locating the book during our visit. Thus, some of information collected about the religion were based on secondary research.

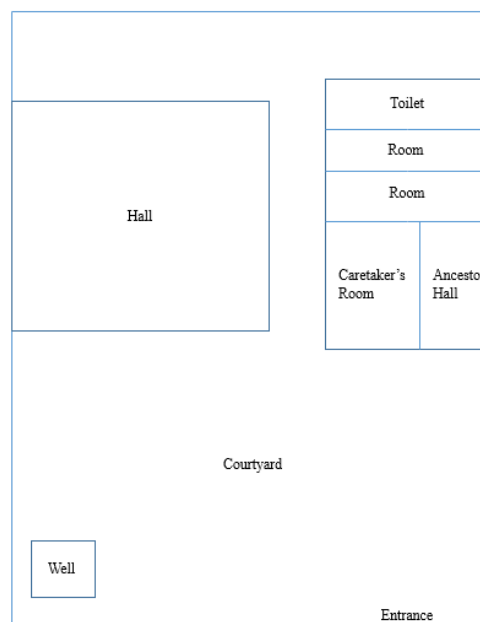


Figure 1 Temple Layout (Diagram is not drawn to scale and is for illustrative purposes only.)



Figure 2 Temple Entrance



Figure 3 Couplet at Temple Entrance



Figure 4 Courtyard



Figure 5 Hall Entrance



Figure 6 Couplets at Hall Entrance



Figure 7 Plaque at Temple Entrance

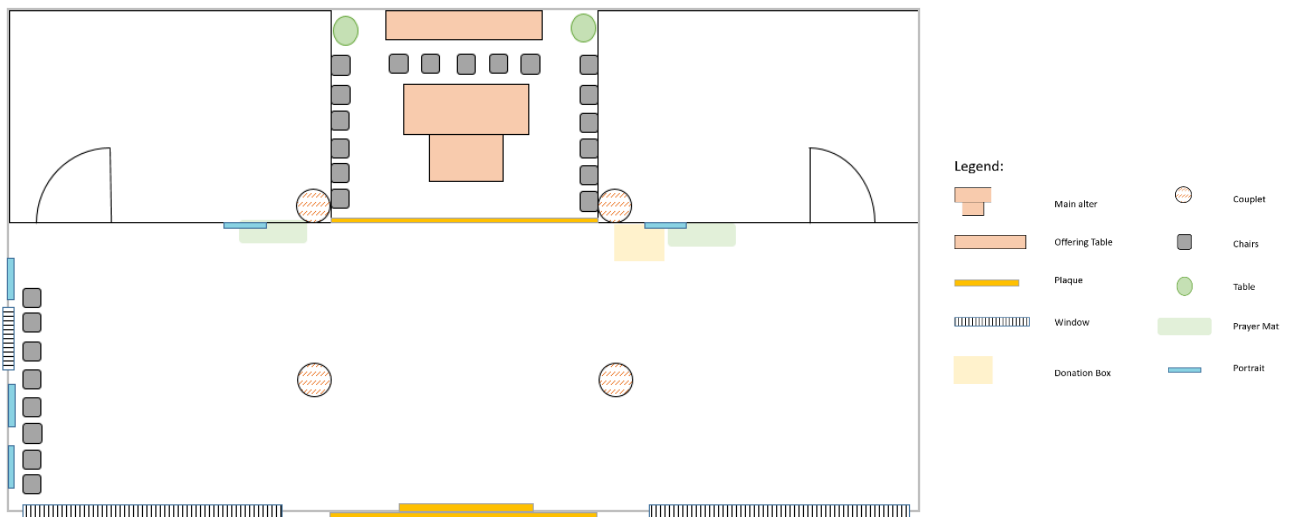


Figure 8 Hall Layout



Figure 9 Altar



Figure 10 Artifacts



Figure 11 Tablet with name of donors



Figure 12 Plaque I



Figure 13 Plaques II



Figure 14 Newspaper article on MP Tan Chuan Jin's visit to the temple