



SSA1208:

Everyday Life of Chinese Singaporeans: Past &
Present

Temple Visit Group Report

Tutorial Group: D1

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All that we could gather about Xiū Běn Táng (Chinese: 修本堂) through the internet was its location and so our great adventure began upon arrival at 50A Joo Chiat Place. We saw

a plaque that reads 《修本堂》 on the second floor among a row of shop-houses. The store on the ground floor is shared between Hoe Jen Kee Coffee Powder and Heng Heng Joss Paper. Beside the store is a flight of hair-raising stairs that leads to the Taoist temple. We carefully made our way up and gently knocked on the door on our left. No response. We asked the Uncle selling coffee powder on the ground floor for help and he immediately reached out for a set of keys and passed it to us, holding on to the assumption that we knew what we were doing. We kindly rejected the offer and went back during lunchtime when the owner is said to be around. At lunchtime, we entered into the realm of the sacred and gained as much knowledge as we could.

This temple first established in a house at Geylang Street 17 about 50 years ago and made one move to 50A Joo Chiat Place. It has been in Joo Chiat for over 20 years. The lease for the house is renewed every 3 years and it is postulated to remain until the owners can no longer pay for the lease. This temple is the only one that is authorized by the Taoist Association (Chinese: 道教总会). It is a self-sustaining temple handled by a handful of men, among which we were fortunate enough to be able to interview the main owner of the temple. One amongst the few notice boards is a tabulation of the amount of money received and expended in 2015¹. In 2015 alone, the temple has suffered a loss of S\$3288. The owner did not complain about the loss because he is not in favour of publicizing the temple. He believes that this temple is a place for friends and families to worship and seek comfort in. Only a small circle of friends, families and those “fated” or “called upon (by the Gods)” visit this temple. Another notice board mentions the different special occasions such as 30th March 2017 (Chinese: 三月初三; 星期四) which is the main God's Birthday, the Hungry Ghost Festival which fall on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month (in Gregorian calendar, it usually falls on August or September) and 20th November 2017 (Chinese: 十月初三; 星期一) to celebrate the birthdays of all the Gods.

Xiū Běn Táng is a small-scale Taoist temple residing in a supposedly ordinary home with a living hall, a room and a kitchen. When we stepped foot through the main door, on our left is the living room with the main and secondary Gods. On our right is the kitchen area for the washing and preparation of tea and food for the Gods. Right before us is a room with another set of secondary Gods. When asked about the significance of the temple's name, the owner

¹ Refer to Figure 1

explained to us with a tone of personal gratitude towards the following three words: 《修》, 《本》 and 《堂》. In order to achieve the teachings and philosophies underlying the three words, one has to attain it progressively. Firstly, 《修》 signifies self-cultivation. It is the process of educating ourselves via a gradual process of acquiring knowledge. We learn to differentiate between the good and the bad and consequently make an implicit choice of following the good or the bad which can be seen through our actions. Are we kind with our words and helpful with our actions? Or do we slander, betray or hurt others? Self-cultivation leads us to the second word - 《本》. 《本》 refers to our innate personalities and characteristics. If we cultivate goodness, it will be manifested in our personalities, our characters and behaviours. Lastly, to reward us of our good deeds and nature, we will be blessed with 《堂》 which is isomorphic to “having many children and grandchildren” (Chinese: 子孙满堂). In all, Xiū Běn Táng follows that through self-cultivation of good deeds, our future generations will be blessed bountifully. As demonstrated, Taoism is a religion that has deep philosophical teachings and these teachings have shaped the life of the Chinese for more than 2000 years. They do not worship a single God but rather, a smorgasbord of Gods.

Chinese mythology and ancient religions gave rise to a pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. In particular, the Queen Mother of the West (Chinese: 西王母), or commonly known as “Wang Mu Niang Niang” (Chinese: 王母娘娘) to the keepers of the temple, is the main Daoist deity that safeguards this small temple. As the word “Mu” suggests, she is regarded as a mother to her worshippers, which explains why the owner asked us to greet his “mother” when we first stepped into the temple. She became one of the most powerful symbols of immortality and happiness during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) and is currently one of the more prominent figures in Taoism. She is placed at the top of the main shrine, and below her are the many different secondary Gods that serve and protect her². Her birthday which falls on 三月初三 calls for celebration, where a variety of offerings such as rice and fruits are given. A procession used to be carried out on her birthday as well, where the keepers of the temple would carry the palanquin³ around the neighbourhood. Sadly, because there are too few keepers and most of them have grown old, they no longer have the manpower nor the strength to carry out this procession and the last time they did so was in the year 1998.

² Refer to Figure 2

³ Refer to Figure 3

There are many secondary Gods in the temple, each have their own meaning and role. Despite it being a Taoist temple, it consists of both Taoist and Buddhist gods. This is interesting as Chinese Buddhism evolved under the influence of Daoism, and the interaction between these two religions is apparent here. Below Wang Mu Niang Niang is a separate shrine that houses Tu Di Gong (Chinese: 土地公), the Lord of the Soil and Ground and his wife, Tu Di Po (Chinese: 土地婆), the Grandmother of the Soil and Ground. He is believed to repel evil spirits and thus many people have his altars placed in their homes. Directly opposite Wang Mu Niang Niang is the whip-wielding, three-eyed, bearded statue of Wang Ling Guan, a fierce warrior god. He is known as the temple guardian deity that wards off any form of negative entities and forces and the main protector of Wang Mu Niang Niang, which is why he is placed directly opposite in order to watch over her. To the right are statues of the Sanxing (Chinese: 三星; “Three Stars”): Shou, Lu and Fu, popular deities in Chinese folk religion. They are easily identifiable; Shou holds a long stick, has a bald head and often carries a peach of immortality, Lu wears a mandarin outfit, and Fu is often seen with a scroll and sometimes with children. They personify longevity, status and prosperity respectively. On the left are three portraits of Amitabha Buddha (Chinese: 阿弥陀佛) (center) and his two attendant bodhisattvas, Mahasthamaprapta (left) and Avalokitesvara (right). Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is also known as Guan Yin (Chinese: 觀音), the Goddess of Mercy, who will listen to anyone who seeks her help. A smaller, fourth portrait of Gautama Buddha, the primary figure of Buddhism, hangs on the right of these portraits.

Despite the many teachings that each God provides, the owner told us that it is not necessary to do everything that the Gods tell us to do. Instead, the most important thing is to pray with an open mind and heart, and be good to people, which is something that all religions teaches. For instance, when people perform divination with sticks (Chinese: 抽簽), they seek the Gods for advice and the advice is given to them through a stick with number on it. Upon receiving the number, they will search through a book⁴ and read the advice that corresponds to the given number. The book is a non-changing one and hence, people have to interpret the objective advice and give it a subjective character that fits their own situation. Due to the

⁴ Refer to Figure 4

subjective interpretation, the owner strongly suggest that we have to keep an open mind when reading such advice because ultimately, the onus is on us for every final decision we make.

As mentioned, this simple temple is mainly for praying and to seek comfort and advice. The person in charge does not allow for anymore rituals and processions to be carried out after certain events that happened in the past. Spirit medium possession in the temple is strictly forbidden. In the back room of the temple where the God of Hell⁵ is placed, there is a wooden chair where spirit possessions used to take place⁶. The chair was brought to the current location before the current owner took over. Back then, spirit medium possession still took place and only stopped after the changing of owners. The temple also no longer accepts money to carry out certain rituals/processions. This is due to the lack of manpower and aging caretakers. There are only two people looking after the temple and both of them are relatively old. They are physically unable to perform certain rituals hence they stopped accepting money for performing processions. This is mainly why the temple has been making a loss every year as mentioned above.

Visiting this temple has been a meaningful experience. Despite being from different religious backgrounds, we all learned something new after visiting the temple. For those who are Taoists, we learned more about the background and origin of Taoism, as well as the symbolic meaning behind different practices and placements of deities within the temple. For those who have other religious beliefs, we were exposed to an entirely new religion and the complexity and beauty of the various facets of the religion, from the simplest practices and traditions to the more elaborate and intrinsically unique aspects of it. We gained a new insight about the struggles and challenges faced by the caretakers of temples. To the uninformed observer or maybe even the more casual followers of the religion, it may seem like these caretakers have a peaceful and untroubled existence, simply taking the large number or responsibilities that they have as they come, such as being unable to carry out respective rituals, worrying about lease and juggling duties between the limited manpower. These are things that outsiders would not have known about unless they are actively involved in the temple's day to day matters. Despite such circumstances, the caretakers manage to keep the temple running. While asking about the temple, we realised that there will be no one to take over the temple

⁵ Refer to Figure 5

⁶ Refer to Figure 6

after the caretaker retires. It is a trend that kept reappearing among a lot of temples across Singapore, which is that there is no next generation to take over the upkeep and running temples. With the rising education levels of Singaporean youths, many are unwilling to take on a responsibility that sadly more and more are seeing as being vastly irrelevant and uninspiring.

It is important to keep traditions such as visiting temples alive because they used to be a big part of everyday life in Singapore in the past. Such traditions have manifested into a culture unique to Singapore alone and tells a story that is rich in history and laden with deeper, more intricate meanings. Due to Singapore's vision as a global city-state and the influence of Western countries, modernization and urbanization has caused more and more temples especially ones that are as small as the one we visited to be closed down because of their lack of funds and resources, or demolished in order to make way for newer buildings. Losing this avenue to learn about Chinese values and teachings would be a loss to our society. This visit has opened our eyes to valuable teachings and these should be passed down to future generations, if not they would grow up without being able to learn a whole set of meaningful values.

Appendix

修本堂

月分	交付租金	交付水电费	交付电话费	交付和仁记	交付其他	交付堂内开支	总收入	总支出
一月	\$1,000	\$127.57			\$42.5	—	—	
二月	"	\$136.04				—	—	
三月	"	\$152.17				—	—	
四月	"	\$130.54		26-4-18 \$213.90		13-4-15 \$1330		
五月	"	\$138.5		22-5-20 \$206.1	27-5-15 \$192.5	27-5-15 \$495	27-5-15 \$374	
六月	"	\$128.23		28-6-13 \$50.2		—	—	
七月	"	\$138.56				—	—	
八月	"	\$144.92			2月寿筵 22-8-25 \$50	30-8-25 \$1080		
九月	"	\$137.80				—	—	
十月	"	\$136.21				—	—	
十一月	"	\$136.27			即公筵 16-11-25 \$65.00	22-11-25 \$1080		
十二月	"	\$138.25				—	—	
总共	\$12000 \$1665			\$426.90 \$2183	\$115	\$13101		

年份 2015

总收入 \$13101

总支出 \$16389.90

PROFF/LOSS \$3288-

Figure 1: Notice board depicting the total income and expenditure in 2015



Figure 2: Wang Mu Niang Niang (王母娘娘) and secondary gods



Figure 3: A palanquin was used to carry Wang Mu Niang Niang around the neighbourhood during her birthday (in the past)

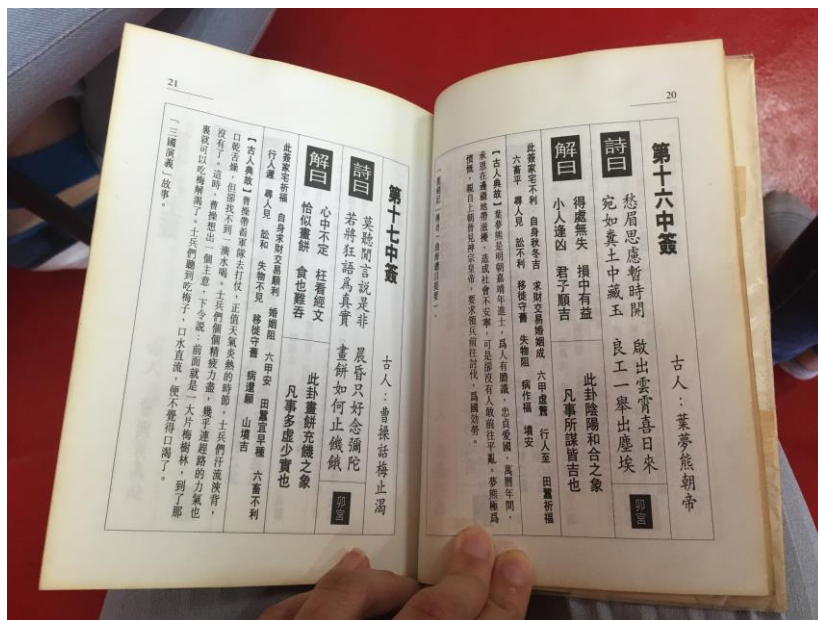


Figure 4: The books used during the process of divination with sticks to seek advice



Figure 5: The God of Hell which is situated in a smaller, separate room in the temple



Figure 6: The chair used where spirit medium procession was carried out in the past