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RECENT QUEST FOR RELIGIOUS ROOTS: THE
CULT OF GUANGZE ZUNWANG, TEMPLE
NETWORKS, AND INTER-TEMPLE RIVALRIES
IN SOUTHEAST CHINA, 1978-2009

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**Recent Quest for Religious Roots:
The Cult of Guangze Zunwang, Temple Networks, and Inter-Temple
Rivalries in Southeast China, 1978-2009***

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Abstract

This paper examines the issues surrounding the revitalization of Guangze Zunwang 广泽尊王 religious networks between Southeast China and the Chinese overseas in Singapore and Malaysia from 1978 to 2009. It demonstrates how the Chinese overseas quest for the religious roots of Guangze Zunwang's cult has contributed to the rebuilding of the Shishan Fengshan Temple 诗山凤山寺 in particular and the sacred temples of the cult of Guangze Zunwang in general. The resurgence of diasporic religious networks has facilitated the transnational movement of financial resources and allowed overseas Chinese to make regular pilgrimages and participate in religious activities in China. I argue that this renewal in religious ties, which has led to the proliferation of pilgrimages and religious exchanges to the cult's sacred sites in China, and exchanges from China to Singapore and Malaysia, on one hand, has benefited both the Shishan Fengshan Si and the overseas temples, and yet, on the other hand, has also resulted in religious competition and inter-temple rivalries among the various sites of the cult in China.

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Introduction

Each year, on the twenty-second day of the second and eighth lunar months, devotees of Guangze Zunwang 广泽尊王 (The Reverent King of Broad Blessings) in Nan'an 南安, throughout the Quanzhou 泉州 region in Fujian 福建, China, and even all over parts of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, celebrate the birthday and ascension of the deity. The cult, which originated in China more than a thousand years ago, remains very popular in the present-day among the Chinese communities in Southeast China and the ethnic Chinese overseas.¹ The sacred legends and stories of miracles and spiritual efficacy associated with the deity have continued to attract believers from all walks of life. The end of the destructive Cultural Revolution and relaxation of control over religions in China since 1978, have brought about a rapid resurgence of Chinese traditions and religious practices. The religious revival in China, as Daniel Overmyer puts it, is an aspect of “greater social freedom” which has accompanied the economic liberalization and development of the post-1978 period. Consequently, religious traditions in many parts of China have revived their activities and organizations in the last twenty years, and have rebuilt their churches, mosques, and temples.²

In the context of China's Open-Door Policy and the relaxation of religious control, Chinese overseas devotees of Guangze Zunwang from Singapore and Malaysia were able to visit China and make pilgrimages to the deity's sacred sites. This has not only allowed the rebuilding and restoration of Guangze Zunwang sacred sites in Southeast China, but has also

¹ In this study, I adopt Paul R. Katz's definition of “cult,” which refers to “a body of men and women who worship a deity and give of their time, energy, and wealth in order for the worship of this deity to continue and thrive.” See Katz, *Demon Hordes and Burning Boats*, p. 3.

² Overmyer, “Religion in China Today,” p. 1. See also Yang, ed., *Chinese Religiosities*; Ashiwa and Wank, ed., *Making Religion, Making the State*.

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contributed to the revitalization of the diasporic religious networks connecting China and the Chinese diaspora. This paper examines the issues surrounding the revitalization of Guangze Zunwang religious networks between Southeast China and the Chinese overseas in Singapore and Malaysia from 1978 to 2009. It demonstrates how the Chinese overseas' quest for the religious roots of Guangze Zunwang's cult has contributed to the rebuilding of the Shishan Fengshan Si 诗山凤山寺 in particular and the sacred temples of the cult of Guangze Zunwang in general. The resurgence of diasporic religious networks have facilitated the transnational movement of financial resources and allowed Chinese overseas to make regular pilgrimages and participate in the religious activities in China. I argue that this renewal in religious ties, which has led to the proliferation of pilgrimages and religious exchanges to the cult's sacred sites in China, and exchanges from China to Singapore and Malaysia, on one hand, has benefited both the Shishan Fengshan Si and the overseas temples, and yet, on the other hand, has also resulted in the religious competition and inter-temple rivalries between the different principal sites of the cult in China.

Dealing with Issues Pertaining to the Cult of Guangze Zunwang: A Critique

The cult of Guangze Zunwang has received a fair amount of attention from a number of scholars. The first major study on the cult is Keith Stevens' short article published in 1978. Stevens offers an estimated number of Guangze Zunwang temples in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan, and provides a brief account of the life and times of the deity, and his subsequent deification.³ While this article provides a concise and useful narrative of the background of Guangze Zunwang, it strongly lacks academic analysis, and

³ Stevens, "The Sainly Guo (Sheng Gong)," 193-198.

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neither discusses the spread of the cult nor its existing religious networks between China and the Chinese overseas. Kenneth Dean's influential monograph, which examines the history and practices of three major popular cults in Southeast China, namely Baosheng Dadi 保生大帝 (The Great Emperor Who Protects Lives), Qingshui Zushi 清水祖师 (The Patriarch of the Clear Stream), and Guangze Zunwang, discusses a number of multifaceted issues surrounding the deity: the prominence of the cult; its historical sources; the divergent legends of the deity; the history of the temples; the differences between the Confucian and Taoist interpretation of the deity in two temple gazetteers; the popular ballads and scriptural innovations; the deity's self-criticism; and the co-existence of Confucian and Taoist rituals dedicated to the god.⁴ As the geographic focus of Dean's study is the Minnan 闽南 "Zhang-Quan 漳泉" region of Southeast Fujian, the overseas dimensions as well as the cult's diasporic religious networks are left out in his discussion. A number of Chinese language works have begun to study the spread of the cult of Guangze Zunwang and the proliferation of its temples overseas. One such work is by Li Yukun 李玉昆 who looks at the origins and spread of the Guangze Zunwang's cult. He argues that the faith facilitates interactions between China and the Chinese overseas, which promotes peace and harmony.⁵ Li suggests that the cult remains highly significant in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, and he briefly surveys the temples in Taiwan, Singapore, and Indonesia.⁶ Zhuo Kehua 卓克华 examines the Guangze Zunwang temple in Lugang 鹿港, Taiwan. His article has three aims: first, to discuss the spread of the cult from China to Taiwan; second, to narrate the history and

⁴ Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults*, pp. 131-171.

⁵ Li, "Guangze Zunwang xinyang jiqi chuanbo," 122.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

development of the faith; and finally, to show how the custom of “celebrating the sixteenth birthday” (*zuo shiliusui* 做十六岁) is believed to have originated from the cult.⁷ A third study by Li Tianxi 李天锡 investigates the propagation of Guangze Zunwang’s cult and its influence among the overseas Chinese. He briefly surveys the temples in Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand, and argues that the religious belief serves three important functions: first, sentiment towards the homeland; second, promotion of traditional Chinese culture; and finally, maintaining close ties between the overseas Chinese and their ancestral place of origin.⁸ The three studies are quick to discuss the overseas transmission of the cult and its significance in facilitating interactions and ties between the Chinese diaspora and China. However, they simply attribute such interconnectivity to the presence and popularity of the cult, without considering the existence of any broader diasporic religious networks in any form.

Previous literature on the Guangze Zunwang’s cult either neglect the diasporic issues surrounding the belief, or emphasize the spiritual ties without offering further analysis on the existence of any diasporic religious networks. Indeed, as Kristofer Schipper pointed out in his study of the Baosheng Dadi’s cult and its spread to Taiwan, *fenxiang* 分香 (*fen-hsiang*—also known as *fenxianghuo* 分香火 [*fen hsiang-huo*]), which literally means “division of incense and fire”—is an important and widely adopted institution in China for the spreading of popular cults and the founding of branch temples (*fenmiao* 分庙). Whenever a new cult group or temple is established, the devotees will fill an incense burner (*xianlu* 香炉) with ashes

⁷ Zhuo, “Lugang Fengshan Si: Mutong huacheng shen, xinyang bian Taimin,” 232-272.

⁸ Li, *Huaqiao Huaren minjian xinyang yanjiu*, pp. 109-128.

collected in the incense burner of an existing temple of the deity.⁹ Schipper argues that this practice gives rise to a network of *fenxiang* relations which made villages, corporations, and guilds, part of a wider communication system that carried out tasks efficiently, and in some instances continue to do so.¹⁰ Therefore, the significance of the *fenxiang* relations between Southeast China and the Chinese diasporic community can by no means be ignored. For this reason, Tan Chee-Beng (Chen Zhiming 陈志明) and Wu Cuirong's 吴翠容 book chapter marks a departure from the earlier studies. Using Shishan Fengshan Si, the ancestral temple of Guangze Zunwang's cult, as one of their case studies, Chen and Wu argued that the transnational networks connecting South China and the Chinese overseas have contributed to the vibrant economic development in Shishan Town 诗山镇 since the Reform and Open-Door period.¹¹ While their brief study neither attempts to highlight the historical development nor paint a complete picture of the Guangze Zunwang religious networks, it is an important starting point in demonstrating the continuance and significance of such diasporic connections.

Since the beginning of the Open-Door Policy, many ethnic Chinese in overseas communities have begun to trace their roots to their village homes in mainland China. "Collective memory," as Kuah Khun Eng argues, served as a "powerful force" in pulling the Chinese overseas back to their ancestral village (*qiaoxiang* 侨乡) and facilitated the reinvention of social-cultural and religious roles.¹² Religious attachment to founding ancestors and clan deities were crucial in re-establishing the links between the Chinese

⁹ Schipper, "The Cult of Pao-sheng Ta-ti and its Spreading to Taiwan," p. 397.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 413.

¹¹ Tan and Wu, "Shishan kuajing guanxi yu jingji huodong," pp. 249-269.

¹² Kuah, *Rebuilding the Ancestral Village*, p. 1.

overseas with their ancestral homeland in China.¹³ The Chinese of Nan'an origins, in and outside of China, worshipped Guangze Zunwang as their ancestral deity, and those in Singapore in particular played important roles in initiating the rebuilding of Shishan Fengshan Si and revitalizing the cult's diasporic religious networks. This essay therefore builds upon Chen and Wu's initiative and attempts to answer the following questions: How did religious attachment to clan deities in general and to Guangze Zunwang in particular lead to the resurgence of transnational temple networks in post-Mao China? Why did the renewal in religious ties contribute to the proliferation of pilgrimages and religious exchanges between Southeast China, Singapore, and Malaysia? And perhaps most significantly, what were circulated along these religious networks, and what kind of impact did they make? This study therefore aims to uncover the dynamics and significance of the transnational religious linkages between China and the Chinese diaspora. By using the cult of Guangze Zunwang and its religious networks connecting Southeast China and the Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia as a case study, it seeks to contribute to the current literature on Chinese popular religion and Chinese diasporic studies.

Fieldwork and Sources

The fieldworks for this study were conducted in Quanzhou and Xiamen 厦门 during the summer of 2008, and in Singapore and Malaysia from December 2007 to April 2009. In Quanzhou, I conducted my research at Shishan Fengshan Si, as well as at the major sacred

¹³ Tan, "Introduction," p. 11. See, for instance, Zeng, "Shequn zhenghe de lishi jiyi yu 'zuji rentong' xiangzheng," pp. 117-133; Zeng, "Zushen chongbai," pp. 139-162; Tan and Wu, "Shishan kuajing guanxi yu jingji huodong," pp. 249-269; Ashiwa and Wank, "The Globalization of Chinese Buddhism," 217-237; Ashiwa, "Dynamics of the Buddhist Revival Movement in South China," 15-31.

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sites of Guangze Zunwang's cult. On most occasions, I was accompanied by Chen Zhonghe 陈中河, the Deputy Director of Shishan Fengshan Si, who was extremely helpful and generally forthcoming. He shared with me the history, beliefs, and practices of the cult, brought me to the various temples, and introduced me to their leaders. My fieldwork in Singapore and Malaysia was made possible with the kind assistance of Tan Aik Hock (Chen Yifu 陈奕福) from Singapore Hong San See (*Xinjiapo Fengshan Si* 新加坡凤山寺), and Cheah Chay Tiong from Kuala Lumpur Shanyun Gong 山云宫, respectively. They helpfully provided me with background information, introductions, and useful leads to invaluable research materials.

This study depends on a wide range of written sources: temple and association publications, Overseas Chinese and local gazetteers, temple inscriptions, newsletters, newspapers, and unpublished private records. The most important sources are the temple publications and private records that I collected from Shishan Fengshan Si and the major sacred sites in China. These materials offer precious information on the cult of Guangze Zunwang and its diasporic religious networks connecting China and the Chinese overseas. The sources from Singapore and Malaysia consist of the commemorative temple and association publications as well as newsletters published by the various Guangze Zunwang temples. Most of the commemorative publications contain many useful articles, newspaper clippings, photos, reports, and speeches that demonstrate the religious ties between Southeast China, Singapore, and Malaysia. I also referred to the stone inscriptions and temple steles for further details of the cult and temples, which are at times unavailable in print. Finally, in addition to the written sources, I conducted interviews with eight prominent

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leaders from the Guangze Zunwang temples in China, Singapore and Malaysia, and two independent researchers of the cult (please refer to Appendix for brief biographies of informants). These informal and loosely structured interviews are used to supplement the gaps in written materials, and to offer more breadth and depth to this research.

The justification for focusing on Singapore and Malaysia is that the Nan'an migrants and the cult of Guangze Zunwang arrived in these two host countries roughly around the same time. Given the geographical proximity and shared Chinese immigrant history of these two places, it is more worthwhile to examine them in parallel. Another reason can be attributed to the continuous presence and prominence of the cult and its religious institutions among the ethnic Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia. This significantly provides the basis and possibility for research.

Who is Guangze Zunwang?

There are divergent legends surrounding the short life of Guangze Zunwang (also known as Guo Shengwang 郭圣王).¹⁴ According to Kenneth Dean, there are three major sources which recorded the legend of the deity. This first is Yang Jun's 杨浚 *Fengshan Si Zhibiue* 凤山寺志略 (A Brief Record of Fengshan Si) published in 1888. The second and perhaps more popular one is the *Guoshan Miaozhi* 郭山庙 (Gazetteer of the Guoshan Temple), which was compiled in 1897 by Dai Fengyi 戴凤仪, a Shishan Hanlin academician. Both Yang Jun and Dai Fengyi began by providing their own account of Guangze Zunwang, followed by quoting the versions in *Min Shu* 闽书 (The History of Min) and *Quanzhou Fuzhi* 泉州府志 (Gazetteer of Quanzhou Prefecture).¹⁵ The third source is based on Sinologist J.J.M. de Groot's (1854-1921) fieldwork conducted in Xiamen, first in 1877-1878, and again in 1886-1890.¹⁶ De Groot, a scholar of Chinese religion, did not consult both the *Fengshan Si Zhibiue* and the *Guoshan Miaozhi*. Instead, he translated the legend of Guangze Zunwang given in *Minshu* and *Quanzhou Fuzhi*. As Dean points out, there are variations in the three versions over several issues, including the origin of the tomb of the Guangze Zunwang's father, the manner of the deity's death and ascension, and his spirit-marriage to a young woman. He suggests that such fragmentary legends "reveal deep-seated tensions among the various social groups, temple networks and political groups around the cult, and their religious leaders."¹⁷ Li Tianxi also compared the different sources and noted the three unclarified problems concerning the age of the deity, the different names of the temples, and the deity's

¹⁴ See Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults*, pp. 135-142.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the two sources, see *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

consort and his children.¹⁸ Despite the slight divergence in the three major accounts, the generally accepted legend of Guangze Zunwang is briefly as follows.

Guangze Zunwang, originally known as Guo Zhongfu 郭忠福, was born in Shishan, Nan'an County in the Fujian province of China, on the twenty-second day of the second lunar month in 923 during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907-960). Guo Zhongfu's mother had an auspicious dream announcing his birth. The boy was known to be very filial and virtuous. When Guo Zhongfu's father passed away and the family was too poor to pay for a tomb, he worked as a shepherd so that he could afford a proper burial for his late father. A geomancer noticed his filial piety and pointed to a mountain belonging to Elder Yang (*Yang zhangzhe* 杨长者) and told him to bury his father's remains there as it would be most auspicious. Guo Zhongfu kowtowed and thanked the geomancer, and sought Elder Yang's permission in setting up a tomb for his father. After providing a proper burial for his father, Guo Zhongfu returned to the foot of Guo Mountain (*Guoshan* 郭山) to take care of his mother and work as a shepherd. When Guo Zhongfu was sixteen, on the twenty-second day of the eight lunar month in 938, he led a cow to the top of Guo Mountain. He then sat meditating on an old vine and suddenly passed away. When his mother arrived, she pulled his left leg and asked him to look far. This explains why the deity is depicted with his left leg resting down and eyes wide opened. After his unexpected demise, the local people built the Guoshan Miao (also known as the *Jiangjun Miao* 将军庙) to commemorate and deify him.¹⁹

¹⁸ Li, *Huaqiao Huaren minjian xinyang yanjiu*, pp. 113-117.

¹⁹ *Guoshan Miaozhi*, pp. 50-51; Liang, ed., *Guo Zhongfu*, pp. 15-16; Li, *Fengshan Si Chuanshuo*, pp. 1-9; Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults*, p. 135-142.



Figure 1: A statue of Guangze Zunwang in Shishan Fengshan Si

Photo by author

The enfeoffment of Guo Zhongfu happened approximately two hundred years after his death in the Southern Song period (1127-1279) following a series of miracles associated with him. These miracles include fighting Japanese pirates (*wokou* 倭寇), putting out fire, and healing the sick. During the Jianyan 建炎 period in 1130, Japanese pirates frequently raided the coastal areas of Fujian. On one occasion, when the pirates were nearing, Guo Zhongfu appeared on a white horse and tricked them into a stream where many were drowned. Consequently, the region was safe from pirate raids. Following that, during the Shaoxing 紹興 period (1131-1162), the palace caught fire and suddenly burst into flames. Guo Zhongfu was believed to have appeared on a white horse to put out the fire in the palace. Following

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the miracles, Emperor Gaozong 高宗 conferred him with the title of “Weizhen Guangze Hou 威镇广泽侯” (Marquis of Awesome Protection and Broad Compassion), and presented a temple stele to Weizhen Miao 威镇庙. In the Shaoxi 绍熙 period (1190-1194), the deity again helped to put out a fire in the Song palace. Emperor Guangzong 光宗 was delighted and bequeathed Guo Zhongfu as the “Weizhen Zhongying Fuhui Guangze Hou 威镇忠应孚惠广泽侯” (Marquis of Awesome Protection, Loyal Responses, Trustworthy Kindness, and Broad Compassion). During the year of Kaiqing 开庆 (1259), Guo Zhongfu was bestowed the title of “Weizhen Zhongying Fuhui Weiwu Yinglie Guangze Zunwang 威镇忠应孚惠威武英烈广泽尊王” (Reverent King of Awesome Protection, Loyal Responses, Trustworthy Kindness, Awesome Prowess, Martial Energy, and Broad Compassion) by Emperor Lizong 理宗 for miraculously curing his mother's illness. During the ninth year of the Tongzhi period (1870), after a long pause of more than 600 years, Guo Zhongfu was bestowed the additional title of “Weizhen Zhongying Fuhui Weiwu Yinglie Bao'an Guangze Zunwang 威镇忠应孚惠威武英烈保安广泽尊王” (Reverent King of Awesome Protection, Loyal Responses, Trustworthy Kindness, Awesome Prowess, Martial Energy, Protector of Peace, and Broad Compassion) for subduing rebellions, making rain, and getting rid of plague. In addition, the emperor bestowed the titles of Taiwang 太王 (Grand King) and Taifei 太妃 (Grand Queen) on Guo Zhongfu's parents, and officially sanctioned the eighth lunar month as the sacred month, in which the deity would visit the tomb of his parents.²⁰

²⁰ *Guoshan Miaozhi*, pp. 55-64; Liang, *Guo Zhongfu*, pp. 16-18; Li, *Fengshan Si Chuanshuo*, pp. 20-24; 27-28; Dean,

Because Guangze Zunwang was a native of Nan'an County, his legends and miracles were often closely connected and associated with the local community. Therefore, he is popularly regarded as “the pillar of support for the Minnan people, the symbol of unity among the Nan'an community, and the patron god of the Nan'an associations.”²¹ There are four principal sites associated with the cult of Guangze Zunwang.²² The first and most significant one is the Shishan Fengshan Si (also known as the Guoshan Miao) which is regarded as the ancestral temple (*zuting* 祖庭). The temple is located in Shishan Town of Nan'an County and is believed to be the site where Guo Zhongfu ascended and became a deity. Shishan Fengshan Si was constructed during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. There are slight discrepancies over its exact year of establishment. For instance, while Dai Fengyi mentions that the temple was established in the second year of Jin Tianfu (937),²³ the Shishan Fengshan Si's recently published official guidebook suggests that it was built a year later in 938.²⁴ Liang Yi 梁毅, however, mentions that the temple was constructed between 947 and 948.²⁵ From the various accounts, it is difficult to ascertain the exact date of establishment. Nevertheless, it was likely that the temple was founded between the 930s and 940s. The Shishan Fengshan Si remains the most important Guangze Zunwang pilgrimage site in the present-day. The second, and by no means less important temple, is the Longshan Gong 龙山宫, often known as the “temple at the foot of the mountain (*xia'an* 下庵).” The temple is about a kilometer away from the ancestral temple and situated in the

Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults, pp. 142-143. I have adopted Kenneth Dean's English translation of Guangze Zunwang's honorific titles.

²¹ Liang, *Guo Zhongfu*, p. 1.

²² Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults*, p. 140.

²³ *Guoshan Miaozhi*, pp. 68-69.

²⁴ Nan'an Fengshan Si Siwu Weiyuanhui, ed., *Quannan mingsheng xilie congshu: Fengshan Si*, p. 1.

²⁵ Liang, *Guo Zhongfu*, p. 62.

present-day Shishan Park (*Shishan Gongyuan* 诗山公园). Longshan Gong is thought to be built upon the site of the former residence (*ziju* 祖居) of Guo Zhongfu in 938.²⁶ The third sacred site is the Taiwang Ling 太王陵. It is the tomb of Guangze Zunwang's parents and is located at Jingu Town 金谷镇 of Anxi County 安溪县, which is approximately twenty kilometers away from Shishan Fengshan Si. The Taiwang Ling was erected during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period but the exact year remains unknown.²⁷ The annual pilgrimage on eighth lunar month from the ancestral temple to the tomb, as mentioned earlier, was only started by the Tongzhi emperor in 1870. The final temple is the Weizhen Miao, closely located to the Taiwang Ling in Anxi County. The temple was also established during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period and was presented a temple stele by the emperor during the Song period.²⁸ The four sacred sites, having gone through centuries of socio-political changes, turbulence, destruction and reconstruction, continue to exist today and remain vital to the devotees of the Guangze Zunwang in general, and the Nan'an people in particular.

²⁶ *Guoshengwang Zuju: Longshan Gong*, p. 1.

²⁷ *Taiwang Ling Weizhen Miao*, pp. 1-7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.7-14; *Guoshan Miaozhi*, pp. 71-72.



Figure 2: Shishan Fengshan Si in present-day Nan'an, China

Photo by author

Setting the Context: From Disruption to Reconnection

The broader socio-political changes were crucial to understand the disruption of religious networks between China, Singapore, and Malaysia between the late 1940s and 1978. Two important events that occurred in tandem resulted in the distancing of the temple networks. The first was the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Since the early 1950s, many religious organizations and devotees have suffered “increasing restrictions on their freedom to carry on religious activities.”²⁹ The PRC authorities set up the Religious Affairs Bureau (*Zongjiao Shiwujū* 宗教事务局) in 1954 under the State Council with branches at provincial and local levels to serve as the government agency in carrying out religious

²⁹ MacInnis, *Religion in China Today*, p. 1.

policy and dealing with religious groups. The Religious Affairs Bureau played an important intermediary role between the Chinese authorities and the various religious groups. It took charge of affairs such as evicting illegal occupants of churches, mosques, and temples, as well as interfering in the internal affairs of local religious groups. However, some Religious Affairs Bureau officials had an “anti-religious bias” and viewed all religious groups with suspicions.³⁰ As a result, the bureau became more of an obstructor than an enforcer of the policy of freedom of religious belief. Hence, the establishment of the PRC in 1949 led to the exacerbation of the amount of restrictions and regulations of religions in China, and subsequently the gradual disruption of Guangze Zunwang religious networks.

The Malayan Emergency in British Singapore and Malaya was the other significant event that contributed to the weakening of diasporic religious ties between China and Southeast Asia.³¹ The British colonial government declared a state of emergency from 1948 to 1960 to counter the communist insurrection led by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The founding of the communist PRC in 1949 became a morale booster and source of motivation for the Chinese-dominated MCP.³² This greatly increased British anxiety, resulting in the implementation of security measures such as the mass resettlement of the rural Chinese to administer the ethnic Chinese communities.³³ The establishment of the PRC and the declaration of the Malayan Emergency caused psychological fear among the overseas Chinese community in general, and the Chinese entrepreneurs for instance, as they were afraid of being labeled “political suspects” for maintaining communications or other close

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ For extensive studies of the Malayan Emergency, see, for instance, Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats*; Jackson, *The Malayan Emergency*; Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare*.

³² Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats*, pp. 156, 315-318.

³³ Ibid., pp. 173-205.

associations with the new PRC government. In addition, the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya had to write in to the British colonial administration to seek endorsement if they wanted to go to China. In fact, many Chinese businessmen, such as Tan Keong Choon, even felt the need to apply for Singapore permanent residency before departing to seek business in China.³⁴ The socio-political situation in Singapore and Malaya greatly weakened the connections and interactions between the overseas Chinese and China, and this had a serious dampening effect on the diasporic religious networks.

The Cultural Revolution launched by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 in 1966 was a time of “intense destruction of old social and cultural traditions.”³⁵ The Chinese communist government attacked popular Chinese religion as “feudal superstition.” Subsequently, most of the local religious activities and practices were banned, and their temples were destroyed or confiscated. In addition, many ritual specialists were either attacked or imprisoned, along with “countless local spirit mediums, temple caretakers and lay devotees.”³⁶ It was a difficult and tormenting time for all religions in China. The Shishan Fengshan Si, as well as the other principal sacred sites of the Guangze Zunwang’s cult, were badly affected by the Cultural Revolution. Shishan Fengshan Si suffered the worst fate of all; it was demolished to the ground on May 21, 1966, and the land was impounded by the communist authorities. The religious leaders were also arrested and sent to communist reformation camps. The government later built the Shishan Agricultural Secondary School (*Shishan Nongzhong* 诗山农中) on the plot of confiscated land.³⁷ The devastating effects of the Cultural Revolution were

³⁴ Huang, “The Founding of the PRC,” p. 183.

³⁵ Overmyer, “Religion in China Today,” p. 2.

³⁶ Dean, “Local Communal Religion in Contemporary South-east China,” p. 33.

³⁷ “Lidai chongjian”; Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan’an, China.

not limited to the destruction of the building, statues of deities, sacred scriptures, temple documents and records. The diasporic connections between the ancestral temple and the overseas branches were also cut off.

The other Guangze Zunwang sacred sites suffered government seizure of temple properties as well but were able to avoid the fate of the ancestral temple which was entirely destroyed. Longshan Gong was taken over by the communist authorities. Although the statues of deities and religious scriptures were destroyed and the religious leaders were either “arrested or chased out from the temple,” the temple remained standing and was used by the government for “unknown administrative purposes.”³⁸ Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao were also confiscated by the communist government and suffered minor destruction inflicted by communist authorities. As Zhao Wanchao, the Director of Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao, recalled:

The communist authorities took possession of Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao during the Cultural Revolution. The tombstones at Taiwang Ling, the sacred grave of Guangze Zunwang's parents, were smashed into pieces by the Chinese authorities. The land, however, was left undeveloped but all religious activities and pilgrimages were prohibited for the next ten years... Weizhen Miao was fortunately to suffer minor damages during the Cultural Revolution. Although many images of deities were either destroyed or beheaded [pointing to the beheaded immortal carvings on the temple pillars erected in the *yichou* 己丑 year of the reign of Emperor Guangxu 光绪

³⁸ Lü, interview by author, 22 May 2008, Nan'an, China.

(1889)], the temple was not demolished. Most fortunately, several temple plaques of great historical value, including one which dated back to the *Songqing Yuanyuannian* 宋庆元元年 (1195), managed to survive the terrible ordeal.³⁹



Figure 3: Beheaded immortal carvings on the temple pillars at Weizhen Miao

Photo by author

Religious activities and practices came to a standstill during the Cultural Revolution. The Guangze Zunwang temples and sacred sites were summarily closed down and taken over by the state. Concomitantly, overseas Chinese and their institutions were considered ideologically suspicious and undesirable by the PRC government during the Cultural

³⁹ Zhao, interview by author, 22 May 2008, Anxi, China.

Revolution because of their alleged “bourgeois background and foreign connections.” For this reason, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission was disbanded and the privileges previously accorded to the overseas Chinese as a “cushion” to adjust themselves to the communist system were eradicated and withdrawn.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the ultra-left faction in the government regarded the overseas Chinese, particularly those from Singapore and Malaysia, with greater caution. The anti-communist stance of the recently independent Singapore and Malaysia governments caused the Chinese authorities to also perceive the overseas Chinese in these countries as reactionary and resistant to revolutionary change.⁴¹ The reports on the Cultural Revolution in China had a negative impact on the overseas Chinese. This significantly reduced the flow of returning overseas Chinese to “negligible proportions.”⁴² In addition, restrictive travel measures imposed by the Singapore and Malaysian government greatly discouraged the overseas Chinese from traveling to China during the Cultural Revolution period.⁴³ Therefore, it was extremely difficult for religious leaders from the Guangze Zunwang temples in Singapore and Malaysia to organize any visits to China. This severely cut off the communications and linkages between China and the two Southeast Asian countries.

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 with the death of Mao Zedong and the arrest of the “Gang of Four.” The rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 in the mid-1977 and his confirmation in office at the Eleventh Party Congress, made it possible to bring about a new economic policy for China to realize the “four modernizations” in the fields of

⁴⁰ Chang, “Overseas Chinese in China’s Policy,” 281.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁴² Fitzgerald, “Overseas Chinese Affairs and the Cultural Revolution,” 121.

⁴³ Tan, interview by author, 4 March 2008, Singapore; Zhou, interview by author, 1 January 2008, Sabah, Malaysia.

agriculture, industry, technology, and defence.⁴⁴ After a decade of religious suppression during the Cultural Revolution, the policy of freedom of religion was restored at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress in December 1978. Following that, churches, mosques, and temples started to reopen and begin their religious activities.⁴⁵ In 1982, “Document 19: The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during our Country’s Socialist Period,” an official directive on China’s religious policy, was circulated widely through the Party channel. In the same year, the freedom of religious beliefs was included in the revised constitution on 27 April 1982 as “Article 36: Citizens of PRC enjoy freedom of religious belief.”⁴⁶ Another action which was taken to protect the freedom of religious belief was the inclusion of “Section 147: On the Crime of Illegally Depriving People of the Freedom of Religious Belief” into the PRC Penal Code. As such, Deng Xiaopeng’s reform and open-door policy and the gradual liberalization of religious policy in China created a possibility for the overseas Chinese to rebuild the Guangze Zunwang temples and to restore the diasporic religious networks between China and Southeast Asia. Such changes laid the foundation for the rebuilding of the Guangze Zunwang temples and the revival of the cult’s diasporic religious networks, thus allowing the quest for religious roots to take place in the post-1978 period.

⁴⁴ Brugger, *China: Radicalism to Revisionism, 1962-1979*, p. 206.

⁴⁵ MacInnis, *Religion in China Today*, p. 7.

⁴⁶ “Article 36, Religious Policy,” in *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Rebuilding Temple, Resurging Networks

Wu Hongye 吴鸿业 (1922-1998), a Singaporean Chinese of Nan'an ancestry, was a major personality in the reconstruction of Shishan Fengshan Si and the resurgence of the cult's religious networks. Wu Hongye's grandfather was born in the Shishan Town of Nan'an County, China and migrated to Singapore in 1890 to work as a coolie. A thrifty and hardworking young man, he managed to save enough money to purchase a plot of farmland and brought along his eldest son Wu Kunjia 吴昆佳 to work in Singapore. Wu Kunjia was married at the age of 16 and his son Wu Hongye was born in Singapore in 1922. The Wu family continued to maintain close ties to their ancestral native place in Shishan, Nan'an County. In 1929, probably due to the impending Great Depression, Wu Hongye's grandfather sold all his properties in Singapore and the entire family returned back to their village home in China. The family established the Shishan Primary School (*Shishan Xiaoxue* 诗山小学) in their hometown, and Wu Hongye served as a teacher and later, as a principal in the school.⁴⁷



Figure 4: Wu Hongye

Source: *Xinjiapo Nan'an*

Huiguan 80 zhounian

jinian tekan, p. 129.

After the end of the Sino-Japanese War, Wu Hongye returned to Singapore in 1946 to work in his uncle-in-law's coffee import-export business. As a member of the Nan'an community in Singapore, he became an active member of the Singapore Hong San See and Singapore Lam Ann Association (*Xinjiapo Nan'an Huiguan* 新加坡南安会馆). Wu Hongye

⁴⁷ Li, "Jugong jincui wei huiguan shiye fazhan de Wu Hongye xianxian," in *Xinjiapo Nan'an Huiguan 80 zhounian jinian tekan*, p. 129.

served as the Director of Charity (*Cishangu zhuben* 慈善股主任) in the 26th Executive Committee of the Singapore Hong San See and Lam Ann Association from 1960 to 1962, the Director of Economics (*Jingjigu zhuben* 经济股主任) in the 27th Committee from 1962 to 1963, and the Director of Education (*Jiaoyugu zhuben* 教育股主任) in the 28th and 29th Committee from 1964 to 1967. He was later elected as the Chairman and served in the 30th to 34th Committee of the Singapore Hong San See and Lam Ann Association from 1968 to 1977. During his ten-year tenure, Wu Hongye made significant contributions to the Nan'an temple and association in Singapore. He was the main leader behind the fundraising effort for the construction of a new five-storey Nan'an Association building and the renovation of Singapore Hong San See. After completing his term as the Chairman, Wu Hongye continued to serve as a Permanent Advisor of the Executive Committee and remained highly regarded as a leader of the Singapore Nan'an community till his death in 1998.⁴⁸

Throughout his successful career and prolific community leadership in Singapore, Wu Hongye remained closely attached to his ancestral home village in Shishan, Nan'an County, and to Shishan Fengshan Si, the ancestral temple of Guangze Zunwang. The Open-Door Policy and the relaxation of religious control in the late 1970s provided him with the opportunity to visit and make contributions to his ancestral native place and temple in China. Wu Hongye made a trip to his ancestral village and temple in 1978 and was saddened to discover that Shishan Fengshan Si was demolished to the ground during the Cultural

⁴⁸ Li, "Jugong jincui wei huiguan shiye fazhan de Wu Hongye xianxian," p. 129; "70 nian xishuo congrou: Xinjiapo Nan'an Huiguan shi," in *Xinjiapo Nan'an Huiguan 70 zhounian jinian tekan*, p. 36.

Revolution. The Communist government had even converted the sacred plot of land into the Shishan Agricultural Secondary School.⁴⁹

As a devotee of Guangze Zunwang and a leader of the Singapore Hong San See, Wu Hongye felt that it was his imperative to rebuild the ancestral temple in Nan'an County. When Wu Hongye returned to Singapore, he started gathering support from the overseas Chinese of Nan'an ancestry and devotees of Guangze Zunwang in Singapore, Malaysia, and Philippines to reconstruct the Shishan Fengshan Si. The enthusiastic support that he received from the Nan'an community in these three Southeast Asian countries allowed him to promptly embark on the temple rebuilding project.⁵⁰ On August 19, 1978, a few months after he visited China, he completed his proposal for the project and had his mother-in-law Lü Hui 吕会, who was residing in Shishan, Nan'an, to submit it to the Nan'an County Returned Overseas Chinese Federation (*Nan'anxian Guiguo Huaqiao Lianbehui* 南安县归国华侨联合会) on his behalf.⁵¹ The proposal was approved by the local Chinese authorities on February 25, 1979 and a fundraising committee consisting of seventeen members was formed with Lü Hui appointed as the chairperson. A groundbreaking ceremony for the temple rebuilding project was conducted on November 5 of the same year.⁵²

Following the successful approval of the Shishan Fengshan Si rebuilding project and the groundbreaking ceremony, Wu Hongye, under the auspices of Singapore Hong San See

⁴⁹ Nan'an Fengshan Si Siwu Weiyuanhui, ed., *Fengshan Si*, p. 2; Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan'an, China.

⁵⁰ Tan, interview by author, 4 March 2008, Singapore.

⁵¹ The Nan'an County Returned Overseas Chinese Federation was established in 1953. A semi-government organization, it mainly handles the affairs concerning the returned overseas Chinese in China and the Chinese in overseas communities. It also seeks to protect their legal rights and interests. See *Nan'an Huaqiaozhi*, pp. 150-163.

⁵² "Lidai chongjian"; Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan'an, China.

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and Lam Ann Association, established the “Fengshan Scenic Area Fundraising Committee (*Fengshan Youlanqu Choujianhui* 凤山游览区筹建会) in 1980.”⁵³ The committee raised a total of RMB 50,000 to kick off the project.⁵⁴ In 1982, the temple rebuilding project received approval and support from higher-level Chinese authorities: the Provincial Religious Affairs Office (*Shengzongjiao shiwuchu* 省宗教事务处), Jinjiang Regional Commissioner Office (*Jinjiang zhuanyuan gongshu* 晋江专员公署), and Nan’an County United Front Department (*Nan’anxian tongzhanbu* 南安县统战部). The Nan’an City Shishan Scenic Area Management Board (*Nan’anshi Shishan Youlan Guanlichu* 南安市诗山游览管理处) with Lü Hui as the chairperson was officially established on November 3, 1982 to be the central administrative body of Shishan Fengshan Si.⁵⁵ The commencement of the reconstruction of the ancestral temple and creation of the temple management marked the revitalization of religious networks between Shishan Fengshan Si, the ancestral temple in China, and the Guangze Zunwang overseas branch temples amongst the Chinese diaspora. Given that diasporic networks were almost indistinguishable from institutions,⁵⁶ the cult’s temples in this case were therefore important institutions in its diasporic religious networks. The religious networks, which were built on the reproduced symbols of the Guangze Zunwang’s cult, led to the flow of money into China and greatly contributed to restoration of Shishan Fengshan Si, and later, other Guangze Zunwang sacred sites in the country.

⁵³ Wu Hongye was appointed the Secretary-General of the committee, with Hong Zaiquan appointed as the Director, Lin Jianqing as Deputy Director, and Chen Ruihan as Treasurer. See “Lidai chongjian”.

⁵⁴ “Nan’an Shishan chongjian Fengshan Si: 1980 nian Xinjiapo juankuanzhe minglu,” in *Xinjiapo Nan’an Huiguan 70 zhounian jinian tekan*, p. 181.

⁵⁵ “Lidai chongjian”; Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan’an, China.

⁵⁶ McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change*, p. 20.

With the construction of Shishan Fengshan Si underway, the revitalized religious networks helped to channel more funds from the overseas branch temples and devotees, particularly from Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Hong Kong, and Taiwan to the ancestral temple in China. The Hong San See and Lam Ann Association under the capable leadership of Wu Hongye, Chen Ruihan 陈瑞汉, Huang Xijing 黄西京, and Lin Wenyan 林文鸳 raised approximately RMB 240,000 for the construction of the main shrine in 1983.⁵⁷ A year later, Wang Liancheng 王连成, a wealthy overseas Chinese devotee from Malaysia, made generous contributions to the building of the temple gateway. The religious networks also brought in more donations from temples and devotees in Philippines, Hong Kong and Taiwan over the next few years and facilitated the further expansion of the ancestral temple. In 1992, Daqian Si 大千寺, a Guangze Zunwang temple in Manila, Philippines, as well as devotees Lin Shuzhe 林树哲, Yang Lianjia 杨连佳, and Xu Weifu 徐伟福 from Hong Kong donated a huge sum for the building of the central hall (*zhongdian* 中殿). In the next year, Director Xie Zaixing 谢再兴 together with fifteen Taiwanese devotees from Tainan Xiluodian 台南西罗殿, a Guangze Zunwang temple in South Taiwan, offered a large undisclosed sum of donation for the construction of the Mahavira Hall (*Daxiong Baodian* 大雄宝殿). The hall was completed in 1994. On April 31, 1996, a grand consecration ceremony was held at the Shishan Fengshan Si to celebrate the successful rebuilding and expansion of the ancestral temple, a major project that lasted more than a decade.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ “Nan’an Shishan chongjian Fengshan Si: 1983 nian Xinjiapo juankuanzhe minglu,” in *Xinjiapo Nan’an Huiguan 70 zhounian jinian tekan*, p. 182.

⁵⁸ “Lidai chongjian”; Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan’an, China.

The resurgence of religious networks did not only contribute to the rebuilding and further expansion of Shishan Fengshan Si. Money from the overseas temples also moved through the religious networks and played a considerable role in the restoration of three other principal sacred sites of the cult of Guangze Zunwang: Longshan Gong, Taiwang Ling, and Weizhen Miao. Together, this greatly contributed to the revival of the cult in post-Mao China and the strengthening of its religious ties with the Chinese overseas communities.

Taiwang Ling, the tomb of Guangze Zunwang's parents located in Jingu Town of Anxi County, was first rebuilt in the early 1980s by a group of young local Chinese who had applied unsuccessfully for years to obtain permission to emigrate to Hong Kong. The motivations of their endeavor were unknown. Nevertheless, their rebuilding efforts have significantly contributed to the revival of religious procession and traditional sacrifice at Taiwang Ling.⁵⁹ Following the reconstruction of Shishan Fengshan Si and the resurgence of religious networks, representatives from several overseas temples from Singapore and Malaysia including the Singapore Hong San See, Douyalan Longshan Miao 斗亚兰龙山庙, Kinarut Zhennan Si 京那律镇南寺, Papar Tengnan Tang 吧巴腾南堂, Yabi Binan Tang 亚庇碧南堂, Namin Shengwanggong Gong 纳闽圣王公宫, and Anshun Fushun Gong 安顺福顺宫, visited the sacred tomb and made generous donations to Taiwang Ling and the nearby Weizhen Miao.⁶⁰ The contributions from the Singapore and Malaysian temples via the recently revived religious networks made possible the renovation and restoration of the Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao that had been severely damaged during the Cultural Revolution. Following the restoration of the Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao, the Chinese

⁵⁹ Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults*, p. 131.

⁶⁰ *Taiwang Ling Weizhen Miao*, pp. 6-7; Zhao, interview by author, 22 May 2008, Anxi, China.

authorities placed the two temples under a single religious administrative unit known as the Taiwang Ling Scenic Tourist Area (*Taiwang Ling Fengjing Liyouqu* 太王陵风景旅游区).⁶¹

With the restoration of Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao and their reconnection to the religious networks, pilgrimages and processions made by both the local and overseas Chinese have very much prospered. The officials of the Fujian Provincial Religious Affairs Office even stated in 1987 that “the month-long pilgrimages to the tomb were the largest and most significant expression of popular activity in Fujian today.”⁶² Longshan Gong, the former residence of Guangze Zunwang, was restored much later in October 1990 by Dai Xinmin 戴新民 and his wife Bi Rong 碧容. The wealthy Filipino Chinese couple of Nan’an ancestry and devotees of Guangze Zunwang played a major role in rebuilding the temple and linking it to the invigorated religious networks between China and the temples in Southeast Asia.⁶³



Figure 5: Taiwang Ling

Photo by author



Figure 6: Longshan Gong

Photo by author

⁶¹ Zhao Wanchao, interview by author, 22 May 2008, Anxi, China.

⁶² Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults*, p. 131.

⁶³ *Guoshengwang Zuju*, p. 1; Lü Mingcong, interview by author, 22 May 2008, Nan’an, China.

As Kenneth Dean has observed, the revival of religious activities in contemporary Southeast China began and spread most rapidly in coastal Fujian, where connections with Chinese overseas provided valuable financial support. In the early 1980s, many temples were being rebuilt, and by the mid-1980s, local temple festivals and rituals have been revived. Towards the end of the decade, there was a high tide of religious activities, as “temple networks and regional ritual alliances were reestablished through the performance of collective processions and Taoist rituals at central temples.”⁶⁴ With the reconstruction of the sacred sites and restoration of diasporic religious networks, the Guangze Zunwang’s cult has revived and flourished in Southeast China. From the 1990s onwards, the overseas Guangze Zunwang devotees in Singapore and Malaysia started making pilgrimages to China. The Chinese counterparts since then have also begun to make religious exchanges to the two Southeast Asian countries.

Pilgrimages and Religious Exchanges

According to Chen Zhonghe’s personal notes, out of the 60 pilgrimages to Shishan Fengshan Si from 1986 to 2001, 35 pilgrimages were made by the devotees from the temples in Singapore and Malaysia.⁶⁵ The first century-old temple to send representatives to visit Shishan Fengshan Si, with no surprise, was the Singapore Hong San See whose leaders had initiated the rebuilding of the ancestral temple. Two other century-old temples from

⁶⁴ Dean, “Local Communal Religion,” p. 37.

⁶⁵ Chen Zhonghe told me that there are many gaps in this record and that he has yet to collate the pilgrimages since 2001. These private notes, despite their various shortcomings, have provided me with a good rough idea of the pilgrimages that were going on and the temples that were involved from 1986 to 2001. “Dongnanya yu geguo lilin Fengshan Si jinxiang Lueji”; Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan’an, China.

Malaysia, the Penang Qilinling Fengshan Si 麒麟岭凤山寺 and Taiping Fengshan Si 太平凤山寺, also started making pilgrimages to Shishan Fengshan Si in 1996 and 2002 respectively.⁶⁶ The newer temples that were set up by the Chinese overseas communities in Singapore and Malaysia after 1949 were also quick to do so. These included the Changi Fengshan Si 樟宜凤山寺 and Jurong Hong San See Association 裕廊凤山寺 in Singapore; the Shanyun Gong and Zengguang Fengshan Si 增光凤山寺 from Kuala Lumpur; the Guoqiaotou Fengshan Gong 郭桥头凤山宫, Lugu Dao Daifu Miao 鲁国大夫庙, Nan'an Dian 南安殿, and Yinyang Dian 阴阳殿 from Penang; and the Douyulan Longshan Miao, Kinarut Zhennan Si, Namin Shengwanggong Gong, Papar Tengnan Tang, and Yabi Binan Tang from Sabah.⁶⁷ The revitalization of religious networks has greatly contributed to the proliferation of pilgrimages over the last two decades. These diasporic links facilitated the Singapore and Malaysian Chinese's quest for the sacred roots of the Guangze Zunwang's cult as well as their search for familial ancestral roots in contemporary China.

⁶⁶ “Dongnanya yu geguo lilin Fengshan Si jinxiang Lueji”; “Taiping Fengshan Si jianmiao 150 zhounian,” *Nanyang Shangbao*, 16 November 2002.

⁶⁷ “Dongnanya yu geguo lilin Fengshan Si jinxiang Lueji”; Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan'an, China.



Figure 7: Pilgrims from Papar Tengnan Tang and

Yabi Binan Tang of Sabah, Malaysia

Photo courtesy of Shishan Fengshan Si

The pilgrimages made by overseas temples can be broadly categorized into minor and major pilgrimages. A minor pilgrimage normally lasts a day and is basically a visit to the Shishan Fengshan Si, the main ancestral temple. On the other hand, a major pilgrimage can take up to three days. Apart from going to Shishan Fengshan Si, pilgrims would also make a trip to Longshan Gong, make sacrifices at the tomb of the parents of Guangze Zunwang at Taiwang Ling in Anxi and visit the nearby Weizhen Miao. Some would even visit all thirteen temples (*Shisan Hangci* 十三行祠) dedicated to the thirteen sons of Guangze Zunwang.⁶⁸ While many overseas temples are keen to make pilgrimages to the ancestral temples and sacred sites, it requires a lot of preparation and effort. For this reason, some overseas temple leaders regard such pilgrimages as a “logistic nightmare” if they were to send a delegation of pilgrims from Singapore and Malaysia to China on their own effort, without seeking any

⁶⁸ Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan’an, China; Zhou, interview by author, 1 January 2008, Sabah, Malaysia.

assistance from the Shishan Fengshan Si.⁶⁹ This is because the Guangze Zunwang temples in China are located in the rural areas and can be quite inaccessible to most foreign visitors. For instance, getting from Xiamen Airport to Shishan Fengshan Si requires the traveler to first take a two-hour bus ride from the airport to the Nan'an Bus Terminal followed by another hour bus ride to the Shishan Bus Terminal. After reaching the bus terminal, the only available public transport to Shishan Fengshan Si is the motorbike taxi (*modi* 摩的) which can only ferry two passengers at a time. Compared to Shishan Fengshan Si, Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao are even more inaccessible. The two sacred sites situated about 30 kilometers away from the main temple, are located near the rural tea plantations in the Jingu Town of Anxi County. It takes more than an hour to get there on a private transport, passing through several hill ranges and tea plantations before getting to the temples.⁷⁰ In addition, arranging for the accommodations of the pilgrims is another major problem which most overseas temples encounter.⁷¹

The revival of religious networks between Shishan Fengshan Si and the overseas temples have enabled temples in Singapore and Malaysia to make arrangements directly with the ancestral temple in organizing both minor and major pilgrimages. From my interviews with temple leaders from Singapore and Malaysia, I found out that all they need to do is to contact the Director or Deputy Director of Shishan Fengshan Si, and inform them about the

⁶⁹ Low, interview by author, 7 May 2008, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Zhou, interview by author, 1 January 2008, Sabah, Malaysia.

⁷⁰ Chen Zhonghe told me that there is no public transport to Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao. Many inexperienced drivers are unable to locate the two sites and may even lose their way. Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan'an, China.

⁷¹ Shishan Fengshan Si constructed the Shishan Hotel (*Shishan Binguan* 诗山宾馆) in 1997 to provide accommodation for the pilgrims. However, the hotel had to close down in 2007 due to mismanagement and lack of manpower and finance. "Shishan Binguan," *Nan Feng*, 12 October 2001; Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan'an, China.

date of their arrival. The ancestral temple would then make the necessary transport arrangements to pick them up from the airport and prepare accommodation for the pilgrims at a reasonable price.⁷² As one respondent puts it:

Our connections with Shishan Fengshan Si have greatly facilitated our pilgrimages in China. All we need to do is to contact [Director] Huang Shiqun 黄仕群 and he will make all the necessary arrangements for our pilgrimage. With a reasonable fee, Shishan Fengshan Si will prepare the transport arrangements that will pick us up from the Xiamen Airport and send us to Nan'an to visit the temple. The main temple will also plan for our trips to the other important sacred sites. Hence, our temple does not need to worry about the logistic issues involved.⁷³

For the overseas temples, staying connected through the diasporic religious networks and making pilgrimages to the ancestral temple and other sacred sites are highly symbolic and significant for two main reasons. First, being a part of the religious networks and going on pilgrimages allow the temples to strengthen its religious efficacy and legitimacy. It symbolizes the official blessings and recognition from the “sacred roots” of the cult, which in turn, helps the overseas temple to assert its “orthodoxy” abroad.⁷⁴ For this reason, during the pilgrimages, the leaders from the overseas temples would usually carry along a small

⁷² Tan, interview by author, 4 March 2008, Singapore; Low, interview by author, 7 May 2008, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Zhou, interview by author, 1 January 2008, Sabah, Malaysia; see also Tan and Wu, “Shishan kuajing guanxi yu jingji huodong,” p. 257.

⁷³ Low, interview by author, 7 May 2008, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁷⁴ For a study of territorial cults and pilgrimages, see, for instance, Sangren, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community*, pp. 61-92.

statue (*jinsben* 金身) of Guangze Zunwang from their respective temples to receive consecration—known as “passing over the incense burner (*guolu* 过炉)”—at the Shishan Fengshan Si.⁷⁵ By returning the statue of the deity on pilgrimages to its originating temple, the image is believed to have been “recharged with *ling* 灵 (efficacy).”⁷⁶ Therefore, the overseas temple leaders believe that by doing so, the statue of Guangze Zunwang will be empowered and become more efficacious than before. This act symbolizes the divine endorsement of the continuing existence of the branch temples. In addition, temple leaders from overseas would also exchange souvenirs with the leaders of the ancestral temple and sites in China. Presenting a souvenir to the ancestral temple symbolizes the completion of their pilgrimage and at the same time, receiving a souvenir from the “source” serves as a certification of the overseas temples’ “spiritual authenticity.”⁷⁷

Second, when the devotees from overseas temples make pilgrimages to China, they often make generous monetary contributions to their “sacred roots.” Money was collected from the Chinese overseas and re-channeled through the religious networks to China. These donations, for instance, have allowed Shishan Fengshan Si to complete many of its recent building projects and greatly assisted the expansion of the temple over the last decade.⁷⁸ It is clear that to a large extent, pilgrimages from overseas temples are an important source of income for the Shishan Fengshan Si in China:

⁷⁵ Low, interview by author, 7 May 2008, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Zhou, interview by author, 1 January 2008, Sabah, Malaysia.

⁷⁶ Sangren, *Chinese Sociologies*, p. 52.

⁷⁷ Tan, interview by author, 4 March 2008, Singapore; Zhou, interview by author, 1 January 2008, Sabah, Malaysia.

⁷⁸ Shishan Fengshan Si is currently constructing a sheltered walkway connecting the various prayer halls and has collected a large sum of donations from the pilgrims. Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan’an, China.

The Chinese overseas played a very crucial role in the rebuilding and expansion of [Shishan] Fengshan Si... As the exchange rates for Singapore and Malaysia are much higher than China, they are able to make more monetary contributions than the local Chinese devotees. Because of their active connections with the ancestral temple and the amount of money they donated, it is not surprising that we can see many of their names on the donors' plaque all over the temple.⁷⁹

The resurgence of religious networks since the late 1980s has allowed devotees from overseas temples from Singapore and Malaysia to make faithful pilgrimages to the ancestral temple and other sacred sites in China. So far, the flow of resources in the religious networks has only been discussed as a unidirectional transfer: from overseas into China. However, there was a high degree of reciprocity in the Guangze Zunwang religious networks that connected China with Singapore and Malaysia.⁸⁰ This was shown in the religious exchanges made by the temple leaders from Shishan Fengshan Si to the temples in Singapore and Malaysia on special religious celebrations as illustrated by two recent examples. Huang Shiquan and Chen Zhonghe, both the Director and Deputy Director of Shishan Fengshan Si, personally attended the inauguration ceremony of Shanyun Gong's new temple complex in Kuala Lumpur in September 2005. The two leaders represented the ancestral temple in sending their blessings and prayers to this Malaysian branch temple.⁸¹ A year later, the Director attended the 170 year anniversary of Singapore Hong San See. On behalf of

⁷⁹ Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan'an, China; "Fengshan Si fangmingbang," Shishan Fengshan Si, Nan'an, China, 2007.

⁸⁰ Nan'an Fengshan Si Siwu Weiyuanhui, ed., *Fengshan Si*, p. 17.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Shishan Fengshan Si, he presented a plaque which reads, “Ancestral Lord of All Ages (*Wanshi Zongzun* 万世宗尊),” to the Singapore leaders.⁸² Following the commencement of the renovation of Singapore Hong San See in 2007,⁸³ the leaders of Shishan Fengshan Si rendered considerable helpful assistance regarding the construction materials and architectural knowledge to the Singapore temple restoration committee.⁸⁴ This greatly strengthened the religious ties between the two countries.



Figure 8: Director Huang Shiqun (third from right) presenting a plaque to Chen Yinglai (fifth from right), the then Chairman of Singapore Hong San See

Source: Nan'an Huixun, 18 (January 2007): 11.

⁸² Nan'an Fengshan Si Siwu Weiyuanhui, ed., *Fengshan Si*, pp. 17-18; “Nan'an fuguang lueying xueni hongzhua,” *Nan'an Huixun*, 18 (January 2007): 11.

⁸³ For information on the renovation of Singapore Hong San See, see *Fengshan Si Chongxiu Huibao*, pp. 1-4; ““Jianwan' xiufu bainian gumiao,” *Lianhe Zaobao*, 21 December 2008.

⁸⁴ Tan, interview by author, 4 March 2008, Singapore; *Lianhe Zaobao*, 21 December 2008.

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In summary, with the revival of the religious networks, an increasing number of overseas temples from Singapore and Malaysia have made pilgrimages to Shishan Fengshan Si and the sacred sites in China. To reciprocate their commitment to the ancestral temple and strengthen this spiritual relationship, leaders from Shishan Fengshan Si have embarked on religious exchanges to Singapore and Malaysia on special occasions to offer their blessings and support. This reciprocal nature of the religious networks has created a win-win situation for both the ancestral temple in China and the overseas branch temples in Southeast Asia. On one hand, Shishan Fengshan Si profits from the monetary contributions of the overseas temples which enables its leaders to carry out expensive construction and renovation projects to improve the temple. On the other hand, the overseas temples have a much easier time preparing and arranging for the pilgrimages as the main temple would make all the necessary arrangements for them. Furthermore, they are able to obtain the intangible spiritual benefits from their pilgrimages to China and religious exchanges of the visiting leaders to their temples. Staying connected to the “religious roots” becomes a sign of sacred endorsement from the place of origin of the cult, greatly helping the overseas temples to strengthen the perceived religious efficacy and legitimacy in their respective countries.

Religious Competition and Inter-Temple Rivalries

An unintended consequence of the revival of religious networks and the proliferation of pilgrimages is the rise in religious competition and rivalry between the ancestral temple and the other important Guangze Zunwang temples in China. Inter-temple disputes are far from being unusual and P. Steven Sangren has rightly pointed out the bitter and enduring conflicts between the Mazu 妈祖 temples in Taiwan at Xingang 新港 and Beigang 北港, as well as

those at Tucheng 土城 and Mazugong 妈祖宫. These temples characteristically claim to be the sole legitimate successors to the older temples, and accuse each other of profiting from gullible pilgrims and tourists.⁸⁵ While the disagreements among the Mazu temples in Taiwan are mainly caused by issues surrounding the spiritual and historical legitimacy of the temples, the rivalries between Shishan Fengshan Si and the other Guangze Zunwang temples can be attributed to pragmatic monetary concerns. Because of the lucrative income derived from the donations of the Chinese overseas by the ancestral temple, the other sacred sites also want to have a share of the pie. However, Shishan Fengshan Si in China has prominently established itself as the central nodal point in the diasporic religious networks (see Diagram 1). Subsequently, this leads to the unequal distribution of foreign financial resources—most of the donations go to the ancestral temple. As a result, this becomes a major source of latent inter-temple rivalries in recent years. While the temple leaders in China appear polite to one another when they meet on religious occasions, there are undercurrents of jealousy and resentment towards the main temple.

⁸⁵ Sangren, *Chinese Sociologies*, pp. 49-53.

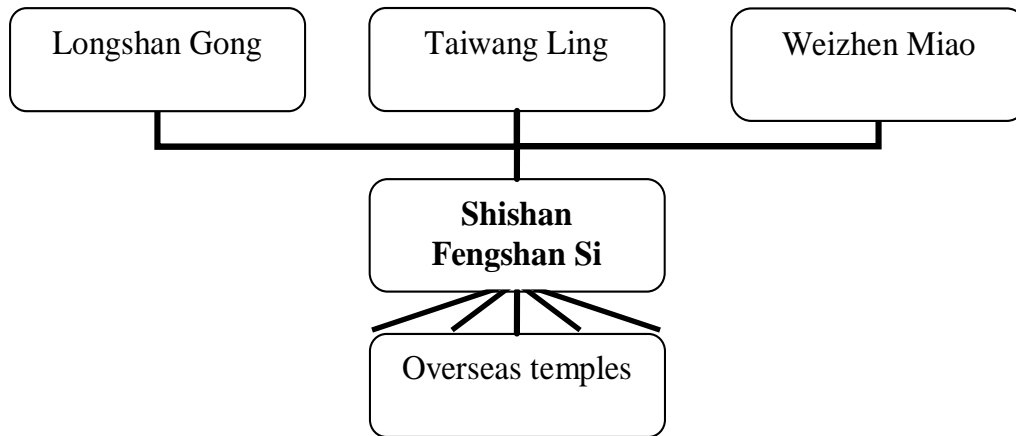


Diagram 1: The Guangze Zunwang religious networks between China and the overseas temples since the 1980s. Shishan Fengshan Si has prominently established itself as the central nodal point in this network.

The Shishan Fengshan Si, with its status as the ancestral temple and its close connections with the Chinese overseas, is able to triumph in this religious competition for donations. As mentioned earlier, since the temple “monopolizes” the transport and accommodation arrangements of the pilgrims, overseas visitors have to visit the ancestral temple first, then followed by the other sacred sites according to the schedule arranged. Hence, Longshan Gong, Taiwang Ling, and Weizhen Miao have by default, lost out and became secondary on the pilgrimage schedule. They are even required to follow the instructions and arrangements given to them by the main temple. This is the common sentiment shared by the two leaders of the disadvantaged sacred sites:

Shishan Fengshan Si makes all the important decisions and arrangements for the pilgrims while all we can do is to wait for their instructions... Since the

pilgrims visit the [ancestral] temple first, they are likely to collect the most donations. By the time they come over to Longshan Gong, they will have less money to contribute. That's why our temple, unlike [Shishan] Fengshan Si, receives very little overseas donations and remains so poor over the years.⁸⁶

Being the Director of Taiwang Ling Scenic Tourist Area, I need to manage two important temples: the Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao. Despite having an additional temple to manage, I do not receive extra support from the overseas temples. I think this is because [Shishan] Fengshan Si has been “sucking” most of the donations from pilgrims when they visit the temple. By the time they visit Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao to pay respect at the tomb and deity on the second or third day, they only have very little money left to help us. That's why [Shishan] Fengshan Si is so rich and we are so poor.⁸⁷

While it is difficult to substantiate the two respondents' assertions that Shishan Fengshan Si has “sucked” away all donations from the overseas pilgrims and hence leaving very little for the remaining temples, there are significantly fewer overseas donors on the donors' plaque at the three temples as compared to the main temple.⁸⁸ Understanding the economics of sacred sites would better explain the sensitivities involved. As it is very

⁸⁶ Lü, interview by author, 22 May 2008, Nan'an, China.

⁸⁷ Zhao, interview by author, 22 May 2008, Anxi, China.

⁸⁸ The names of the donors are arranged according to their nationality or locality in China. Therefore, it is easy to know where they came from. See, for instance, Hulingmiao Chongjianzhi, Taiwang Ling, Anxi, China, August 2007.

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expensive to maintain and manage sacred sites and “any conservation and repairs are such a specialized business, usually requiring specific materials only available at additional cost,” temples have to compete for limited available resources.⁸⁹ In this case, Shishan Fengshan Si has emerged victorious at the expense of its poorer counterparts.

As managers of sacred sites always wish to attract more worshippers and pilgrims, they tried to adopt various marketing strategies to achieve its goals.⁹⁰ Shishan Fengshan Si advertises itself through the printing and distribution of brochures and booklets, and distributes them to the pilgrims of the overseas temples during their visits.⁹¹ This has furthered the religious competition and intensified the rivalries with the other temples as the ancestral temple depicts itself over prominently as the single most important temple of the cult of Guangze Zunwang, neglecting the other prime sacred sites in its advertising materials. The Director of Longshan Gong seemed deeply upset and openly mentioned this in the interview:

If you look at the brochures and booklets published by the [Shishan] Fengshan Si, you will notice that the temple does not even mention about us in their publications. This is because they want to make the whole world seem that they are the one and only important temple for Guangze Zunwang worship... For a person knowledgeable about Guangze Zunwang worship, one will know that the Longshan Gong is as important as the [Shishan] Fengshan Si. While [Shishan] Fengshan Si is known as the “temple on the

⁸⁹ Shackley, *Managing Sacred Sites*, p. 79.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁹¹ Chen, interview by author, 20 May 2008, Nan'an, China.

summit (*ding'an* 顶庵)” because it was the mountain site where the deity attained his enlightenment, Longshan Gong is the “temple at the foot of the mountain (*xia'an* 下庵)” and was the former residence of the deity. Therefore, it should be accorded equal importance... Unfortunately, Longshan Gong remains unknown to many overseas pilgrims and [Shishan] Fengshan Si does not seem interested to let others know more about us.⁹²

Comparison between the booklets published by Shishan Fengshan Si and Longshan Gong shows that it is true that the former completely left out the other Guangze Zunwang sacred sites in its publications.⁹³ On the contrary, Longshan Gong accorded equal importance to Shishan Fengshan Si and notably featured the temple as the “temple on the summit” on the front inside book cover.⁹⁴ The highhanded approach of Shishan Fengshan Si can perhaps be interpreted as an attempt to claim a higher status in the temple hierarchy and exert its domination over the other temples in China. Furthermore, by portraying itself as the first and foremost temple of the Guangze Zunwang's cult, it allows itself to be permanently retained as the central nodal point in the religious networks connecting China and the temples abroad. This has permitted the temple to benefit from the flow of money from overseas at the expense of the other Guangze Zunwang temples.

⁹² Lü, interview by author, 22 May 2008, Nan'an, China.

⁹³ See Nan'an Fengshan Si Siwu Weiyuanhui, ed., *Fengshan Si*.

⁹⁴ See *Guoshengwang Zuju*.

Concluding Remarks

The period since 1978 witnessed the reopening of China and the implementation of a more liberal religious policy. The overseas temples and devotees of Guangze Zunwang have played a pivotal role in rebuilding the Shishan Fengshan Si and revitalizing the temple networks between China and the overseas temples. The overseas temples in general and the temples in Singapore and Malaysia in particular have made numerous pilgrimages to China over the last two decades. The Chinese counterparts from Shishan Fengshan Si also have reciprocated by embarking on religious exchanges to these two Southeast Asian countries. This has contributed to a win-win situation for both the ancestral temple in China and the overseas branch temples in Southeast Asia. While the Shishan Fengshan Si is able to be rebuilt from ground zero and continues to receive tangible monetary gains from the overseas devotees, the overseas temples benefited from the intangible religious legitimacy and efficacy.

Following the revival of temple networks and the proliferation of pilgrimages, there is a rise in religious competition between the ancestral temple and the other Guangze Zunwang sacred sites. This is because Shishan Fengshan Si has firmly established itself as the central nodal point in the temple networks and in fact benefited the most out of the temple networks. Since the main temple makes the arrangements and even plans the schedule of the pilgrimages, the other sacred sites have appeared to be at its mercy. While scholars such as Daniel Overmyer and Kenneth Dean have favourably pointed out how the Chinese overseas have assisted in the revival of religion in contemporary China, they have neglected the contentious issues that have accompanied their contributions to the religious resurgence.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Overmyers, "Religion in China Today"; Dean, "Local Communal Religion in Contemporary South-east China".

The economic resources that the Chinese overseas have brought to China via the revitalized temple networks have become a source of inter-temple rivalries between the ancestral temple and the other sacred sites. The unequal distribution of resources between the various temples is a possible sign that religious revival in China over the last two decades has been uneven. Furthermore, temples worshipping the same deity have been competing against one another over the influx of foreign resources. This unintended consequence of religious revival and reestablishment of diasporic temple networks is likely to stay and become an increasingly pressing problem for the temples in China and abroad.

Finally, despite the ever-changing socio-political context affecting Southeast China and the ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, local cults in general and the cult of Guangze Zunwang in particular have always been a significant driving force in bonding the Chinese overseas to their ancestral homeland in China. This story is neither unique to the Guangze Zunwang's cult nor the Nan'an diasporic community. Given the long history of large-scale Chinese migration and the religious transplantation of local cults such as Baosheng Dadi, Mazu, and Qingshui Zushi from Southeast China to the various host countries around the world, the study of Chinese popular religion has to be re-examined beyond the local level. For this reason, future studies on local cults in Southeast China should not neglect their transnational dimension, and more attention can be paid to their respective diasporic networks.

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Appendix: Brief Biographies of Informants

Cheah Chay Tiong is a Malaysian Chinese. He was sworn in as the General of the South at Shanyun Gong when he was 21 years old, making him the youngest representative in the temple. Since then, he has been actively assisting in the religious festivals and conducting rituals at the temple. Cheah participated in more than six major processions organized by the Papar Tengnan Tang in Sabah during his undergraduate studies at University Malaysia Sabah. He has recently compiled a list of Guangze Zunwang temples from Sabah to Brunei.

Chen Zhonghe was born in Nan'an, China. He has been the Deputy Director of Shishan Fengshan Si since 1997. Chen is actively involved in the preservation of temple records and preparation of temple publications. He is also a prominent community leader, and is the Deputy Director of Nan'an County Shishan Town Returned Overseas Chinese Federation (*Nan'anshi Shishanzhen Qiaolian* 南安市诗山镇侨联) and the Honorary Director of the South Wudang Martial Arts School (*Nanwudang Wushuguan* 南武当武术馆).

Lau H. T. was born in Penang, Malaysia. He is a devotee and an independent researcher of the Guangze Zunwang's cult. Lau is actively involved in the activities and rites at the various temples in Penang.

Helen Low is a Malaysian Chinese. She and her late husband, Tony, founded Shanyun Gong in a humble single story home in the late 1960s. Helen was actively involved in the logistics of the temple, including preparing meals for the temple devotees, while her husband as the head medium led all rituals and rites. She became the head and main caretaker of the temple after the demise of her husband three years ago.

Lü Mingcong was born in Nan'an China. A former fire fighter, he was appointed the Director of Longshan Gong in 2004. Lü is an active community leader and serves in the committee of Nan'an County Shishan Town Returned Overseas Chinese Federation.

Ronni Pinsler's parents were Romanian Jews. His late parents fled communist-occupied Romania for Singapore in 1948 and later gave birth to him in Singapore. Pinsler was raised by an amah who used to take him to Chinese temples. He is currently a gems trader and an independent researcher on Taoism and Chinese popular religion. Pinsler has a huge photo collection of Chinese temples and deities in Malaysia and Singapore. He is the photographer of *An Illustrated Cycle of Chinese Festivities in Malaysia and Singapore* (Singapore: Jack Chia-MPH Ltd, 1987).

Tan Aik Hock is a Singaporean Chinese of Nan'an ancestry. He has recently been appointed the Acting Chairman of Singapore Hong San See and Lam Ann Association. Previously, he was the Vice Chairman and senior committee member. Tan maintains close links with Shishan Fengshan Si and organizes regular visits to Nan'an, China.

Yeo Cheng Hee is a Singaporean Chinese of Nan'an ancestry. His father, Yeo Teow Koon, has been a devotee and loyal supporter of Changi Fengshan Si since the 1960s. In 1978, Yeo

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was invited by a *kampung* friend to help out in the temple and he later became a regular volunteer. He served in the temple management committee between 1988 and 1999. He became the treasurer from 1997 to 1999 and decided to resign from the temple committee in 2000. Yeo started to make annual pilgrimage to Shishan Fengshan Si since 1998 and has since become a close friend of Chen Zhonghe. He led twenty devotees on pilgrimages to the ancestral temple in 2000 and 2002.

Zhao Wanchao was born in Anxi, China. He is the Director of Taiwang Ling and Weizhen Miao for more than a decade. Zhao is also the Deputy Director of Jingu Town Returned Overseas Chinese Federation (*Jinguzhen Guiguo Huaqiao Lianbehui* 金谷镇归国华侨联合会).

Zhou Xinjia is a Malaysian Chinese of Anxi ancestry. His late father, Zhou Yuming, was the founder and Guangze Zunwang spirit medium of Papar Tengnan Tang. Since young, he has been actively involved in the activities and celebrations at the temple. Zhou is a businessman and currently a senior committee member of Papar Tengnan Tang.