

# The past and present days of thian hock keng temple



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## Introduction

Thian Hock Keng Temple (Tianfu Gong) is one of the oldest Chinese temples in Singapore. It was built in worship of Mazu, the Goddess of the Seas. It is linked historically to the events, after which Sir Stamford Raffles had established Singapore as a trading port in 1819. There were a few Chinese junks, especially those from Fujian, which came to trade in Singapore, and these sailing vessels were berthed at Telok Ayer. They were regarded as the driving mechanism for trade between China and Southeast Asia, which had benefited from the Singapore's economy and foreign trade. Most Chinese immigrants settled in Telok Ayer; moreover, in 1821, they built a joss house on the water's edge of the Telok Ayer basin in order to thank Mazu for blessing their journey to the South China Sea. Since the arrival of the first Chinese junk from Fujian in Singapore, the large-scale immigration began from 1830s. Most immigrants travelled south to seize business opportunities or look for a job. They were predominantly the Hokkiens. On arrival in Singapore, they would usually make offerings to Mazu with the purpose of showing the gratitude for their safe voyage ("Thian Hock Keng," n. d.).

In 1839, Mr Tan Tock Seng and Mr Si Hoo Kee, who were wealthy merchants from the Hokkien clan, donated a large amount of money to rebuild the joss house on the Telok Ayer street as the Thian Hock Keng Temple. Other donations came from grateful immigrants, who had become wealthy businesspersons. As the temple was principally dedicated to Mazu, the statue of Goddess Mazu (Tian Hou) was shipped to Singapore from Fujian in April, 1840. With the establishment of the temple, a place for worshipping was built, as well as a focal point for the Hokkien immigrants, who assisted

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people in various spheres such as settling disputes and job opportunities. It was, thus, recognized as a significant temple of the Hokkien community. In addition, this facilitated the attracting more Hokkien coolies to look for a living in Singapore. In the middle of 19th century, the Hokkiens formed the largest community, which consisted of 43 percent of Singapore's Chinese population.

In 1907, Emperor Guangxu of Qing Dynasty bestowed an imperial calligraphic plaque " Bo Jing Nan Ming" to Thian Hock Keng Temple. This four-character phrase means " Waves be gentle in the South Seas", and it was a blessing for the Chinese emigrants. However, it can be argued that it was an attempt by the Qing Imperial court to gain support from overseas Chinese against their political rivals (" Thian Hock Keng, 1842, conserved," 2005).

It also served as a fund-raising centre for China. For instance, Thian Hock Keng Temple was used as a performance venue that aimed at raising funds for the Sino-Japanese war. Most funds were contributed by the Chinese businessmen, who were successful in their business in Singapore.

During the colonial period, the temple was also used as a meeting place for the Hokkien clan association (Huay Kuan). Huay Kuan was formed in order to serve their clansmen, and it had contributed significantly to the Chinese business community. In this essay, the significant role of Thian Hock Keng Temple will be examined through the site observations. These include the establishment of the Chinese regional identity, reinforcement of individual's leadership position and development of business networks. The paper will

also study the temple's architecture and interpret some of the pictorial homophones and its symbolisms.

### Establishment of the Chinese Regional Identity

The construction of Thian Hock Keng Temple was an obvious strategy to create a sense of common identity among the Hokkien community. The temple, which was built by the early immigrants, was principally dedicated to Goddess Mazu. According to the legend, Mazu was born on Meizhou Island (Fujian) during the early Northern Song Dynasty. Hence, the presence of Goddess Mazu's statue in the main hall allows suggesting that most of the early Chinese immigrants were from Fujian (Hokkien) province in China. The honouring of the recognizable goddess and rituals at the temple generated a sense of society and played out as the only linking point back to their hometown in China. The worship of the Seas Goddess, Mazu, has further spread across South East Asia, especially with the Chinese diaspora of the 19th and 20th centuries. Wang Rongguo indicates that migrants came along with their religious beliefs and customs into the foreign lands. Once they settled in the novel environment, they began erecting temples, which functioned symbolically as the pillar of "spiritual support". In the past, the Chinese immigrants tended to group according to their place of origin and dialect. Furthermore, they stressed the significance of their Chinese regional identity. Therefore, many of the activities hosted in Thian Hock Keng temple were mainly for the Hokkien immigrants, and they were often mingled around the temple's premises.

Today, the temple plays a diverse role in the multi-cultural Singapore. Tourists and locals are attracted by various traditional activities. These include the celebrations of the Chinese New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival and other cultural activities celebrated in the temple. People of any background are welcomed to these performances. Numerous tourists come to Thian Hock Keng with a desire to cognize the outstanding role of the temple. In this context, it becomes a medium for cross cultural understanding.

#### Reinforcement of Leadership Position

The local Hokkien community leaders tried to strengthen their leadership position and social status through the contributions and active involvement in Thian Hock Keng Temple. A commemoration stone inscription can be observed in the present Thian Hock Keng Temple, which was erected in 1850. This is a momentous historical artifact, and it relates the background to the construction of the temple. One of the founders, Tan Tock Seng, has contributed generously to the construction. One reason of his contribution would be to gain recognition among the Chinese immigrants, especially the Hokkiens. He was able to enhance his social status through an active involvement in temple activities such as Qing Ming Festival. His popularity evolved gradually, and he was seen as a representative of Hokkien community. Tan Tock Seng's leadership position in the Chinese community was thus acknowledged by the colonial government, and he was appointed as Justice of the Peace in 1846. As a result, he could use his influential power in political and social arena to develop and expand his import-export

business in Singapore. This explains why Tan Tock Seng was not only a renowned philanthropist, but also a successful merchant.

There was also a list of other donors of the building funds on the stone inscription. The amount donated by the wealthy Chinese merchants could be used as a measure of their authority in the Hokkien clan association. It could be interpreted as a pivotal part of merchant's community leadership rather than an aspect of their charity work.

In addition, the preservation of Hokkien Huay Kuan building (sited on the right wing of Thian Hock Keng) could also reflect the Hokkien Huay Kuan as an influential clan during the colonial period. It was formed predominantly by rich Hokkien businessmen and merchants to serve the Hokkien community such as providing assistance and settling disputes between business rivals. Hence, they were viewed as the de facto leaders of the Chinese business community.

#### Development of Business Networks

Thian Hock Keng Temple also served as a focal point for providing support and effective networks for businesses. The temple was initially situated on the waterfront, a few yards from where Chinese junks would disembark to load and unload goods at Telok Ayer basin. Once on shore, merchants, sailors and passengers would travel to the temple to give offerings to thank Goddess Mazu. Those departing people would also make their way to the temple to pray for a safe journey back. As a result, Thian Hock Keng Temple has not only become a place for spiritual blessings, but also a point for regional exchange of knowledge. 4 It allows merchants and traders from <https://assignbuster.com/the-past-and-present-days-of-thian-hock-keng-temple/>

different countries to gather and share their business experience, and at the same time it creates a trade network. Mark Ravinder Frost mentioned that temple was “ often providing traders and others with a far wider access to information than their extended families and businesses could provide.” (2005). Moreover, the newly arrived Chinese immigrants could relate news from other immigrants on details of job or business opportunities, especially for those from Fujian (Hokkien) province.

However, the idea of facilitating valuable networks in the temple has diminished over the years. In the present days, most visitors of Thian Hock Keng Temple are tourists and people from other ethnic groups. There are also some Chinese devotees. However, the majority of them leave immediately after they have made their offerings and do not socialize with others. It is even rare to see businessmen and traders sharing their experiences or news about commercial opportunities. One of the reasons can be due to the land reclamation, where the transit point for junks to disembark was removed. Businessmen, traders or new immigrants do not alight at the bay near the temple premises. Hence, the temple has lost its significant role in providing a favourable location for forming networks. In addition, Thian Hock Keng Temple was gazetted as a national monument in 1973 due to its historical significance. It was protected from damage and modification, and thus many events or activities are forbidden in the temple, except for the festival and celebration purposes. Therefore, the temple has become a place of historical interest, where it attracts more tourists than traders and new immigrants.

Architecture and Symbolism of the Temple

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The temple is characterized by elaborate symbols represented by carvings and paintings, as well as a specifically structured system made of timber. These decorations differ from the widely spread Northern Chinese style. During the construction of the temple, the work of Zhangzhou artisans was supposedly used since the struts of the temple have a distinguished pumpkin shape. Nonetheless, Quanzhou artisans could have been involved, as well. The main purpose of assumption is the carving of winged-fairies above the principal entrance. The temple has orange clay roof tiles. These tiles are widespread in the temples and houses, built in the traditional Southern Fujian style. A certain influence of Philippines of the sixteenth century can be traced. Green drip tiles, gates of cast from Glasgow, Delft wall and Minton floor tiles were used in the temple's construction. Of the above, mentioned products were of a remarkable quality and specifically imported, which contributes vastly towards the perception of the Hokkien Towns' taste as unique to a considerable degree.

## Conclusion

Thian Hock Keng Temple is a remarkable cultural heritage site for the inhabitants of the town and its visitors, as well. It has preserved the history of Singapore for lots of generations. This is achieved through the architectural design of the temple, which encompasses most of the aspects of the original inhabitants of the town. However, in terms of a modern life, the site has been converted to the commercial use. This is done through preserving it as a tourist site, where a lot of emphasis is placed on the attraction, rather than the conservation of history. However, Thian Hong



Keng Temple has grown to become more commercial in order to welcome a substantial amount of tourists and students.

Thian Hock Keng represents a success of migrants, who also contributed towards the welfare of others. Besides the multiple roles that the temple plays, it holds the spirit of those, who found it, by paying a tribute in terms of religious practices, cultural and social needs of the Singapore natives, and tourists all over the globe.

Many Chinese immigrants came to Singapore to take advantage of the business opportunities offered by its growing prosperity. These early immigrants participated in many forms of trades. Furthermore, they varied from gambier cultivation to import-export business, acting as middlemen for many trading firms in Europe. In the current perspective, Chinese business plays a crucial role in the economy of any country. Moreover, these businesses make up the majority of the small media enterprises and employ a substantial number of the country's workers. Chinese businesses have been forced to change and adopt a more modern approach in their way of conducting their business due to the competitive nature of the world economy. They conduct business in a specific manner, in which traditional practices of keeping their family members in the business are adopted. Therefore, they miss on a chance to tap new talents on the wider society.