

“Temples of Tainan” by Professor TG Duffy



When my good friend, Dr. John Chen invited me to go Tainan temple-hopping in late August 2013 with his colleague and master-restorer of temples, Mr. Wong, the result was a splendid summer visit. Tainan City is the regional capital of southern Taiwan and is the oldest city which faces the Taiwan Strait. Tainan's complex history of renewal inspired its popular nickname "the Phoenix City". Mr. Wong is head master of wood sculpture of JinY and is one of the noted temple restorers in Tainan with a special familiarity with Tibetan materials. I could scarcely have wished for better expertise to accompany my temple tour!

Tainan was initially established by the Dutch East India Company as a trading base called Fort Zeelandia. After Dutch colonists were defeated by Koxinga in 1661, Tainan remained as the capital of the Tungning Kingdom until 1683 and afterwards the capital of Taiwan prefecture under the rule of Qing Dynasty until 1887, when the new provincial capital was moved to Taipei. Tainan has been historically regarded as one of the oldest cities in Taiwan, and its former name, Tayouan (大員), has been claimed to be the origin of the name "Taiwan". It is also one of Taiwan's cultural capitals, for its rich folk cultures, Taoist rites and other living local traditions covering everything from child birth to funerals. The city houses the first Confucian school–temple, built in 1665, the remains of the Eastern and Southern gates of the old city, and countless other historical monuments.

Tainan has more Buddhist and Taoist temples than any other city in Taiwan and these largely survived Japanese occupation. The Japanese renamed the city several times: Tainanken in

1895, Tainanchō in 1901, and then Tainanshū in 1920. Tainan served as the capital city. The Japanese transformed Tainan with modern infrastructure- old narrow streets and city walls were demolished and replaced with wide streets that form the cityscape of the modern-day Tainan city center. Luckily the temples survived! The Republic of China (ROC) took over the island in 1945 after World War II. Tainan City and Tainan County became separate local entities in 1946 and the region continued as one of the Taiwanese cultural capitals for its abundant historic monuments.



The city is dotted by Taoist temples, the lives of Tainan citizens are closely related to many Chinese gods and temples. For example parents bring their children to Qiniangma, the children's goddess- this celebration is unique to Tainan. Before exams people visit the Wenchangdijun, the literacy god. Many final year students visit the temple in June. Those asking for marriage would visit Yuelao, the god for marriages. People also visit temples for many reasons, from simply praying for good luck to consulting with the other world.





Tainan is famous for its diversity and density of temples and shrines. Some of them are the only of its kind on Taiwan Island. In all, there are officially listed seven Buddhist temples and eight Taoist shrines (七寺八廟).



The seven Buddhist temples are:

- Kaiyuen Temple, originally the royal gardens of the Tungning Kingdom, became a Buddhist temple in 1690.
- Zhuxi Temple, founded in the Tungning Kingdom period.
- Fahua Temple, founded in the Tungning Kingdom period.
- Mituo Temple, founded in the Tungning Kingdom period.
- Longshan Temple, founded in the Qing Dynasty.
- Chongqing Temple, founded in the Qing Dynasty.
- Huangbo Temple, founded in the Qing Dynasty but demolished by the Japanese. The worshipped statues were migrated to the Altar of Heaven temple.

The eight Taoist shrines are:

- Datianhou Gong (大天后宮), the Grand Sea Goddess temple. Originally the residence of the King Ningjing of the Tungning Kingdom.
- Sidian Wumiao (祀典武廟), the Official God of War temple, built in 1665.
- Dongyue Dian (東嶽殿), the God of Hell temple, built in 1673.
- Fuchenghuang Miao (府城隍廟), the temple of the Prefecture City God, built in 1669.
- Longwang Miao (龍王廟), the shrine of the East Sea Dragon God, built in 1716 but demolished by the Japanese.
- Fengshen Miao (風神廟), the Wind God temple, built in 1739. It is the only Wind God temple on Taiwan Island.^[5]
- Yaowang Miao (藥王廟), the Medicine God temple, built in 1685.

- Shuixian Gong (水仙宮), the Water Gods temple, built in Qing Dynasty after Wutiaogang was constructed.

There are many other well-known temples and shrines not on this list, such as the Altar of Heaven temple (天壇) and the re-built Xilai temple (西來庵) etc. They are all the centers of religion in Tainan. Due to its abundant numbers of temples and shrines, the traditional temple decoration crafters such as Mr. Wong flourish in Tainan. There are masters still passing their knowledge to maintain the temples in the traditional way. As the first capital of Taiwan, some 300 ancient sanctuaries, from the island's first Confucian temple to its first Taoist temple.



The Confucius Temple, also called the Scholarly Temple was built in 1665 when Cheng Ching, son of Koxinga so as to offer lectures and cultivate intellectuals. It was the first learning institute of children when Taiwan was ruled by Qing Dynasty. As the result, it is also called the First Academy of Taiwan. The Confucian temple serves as a popular tourist attraction. Due to the Chinese tradition where different trades and regions worship different Taoist gods the city later developed into neighborhoods each with own center temple. After 300 years of Chinese migration, the city has become a showcase of Taoism and Chinese Buddhism temples. Thus Tainan is a veritable temple wonderland. Here are some of the sights I enjoyed on this trip. Matsu Temple is a busy, gorgeous temple. Legend has it, that following a former king's death; his five concubines hung themselves within this temple. This temple is also very large. Two cavernous main rooms are followed by smaller rooms in back. Along one wall couples can post their wedding pictures because it is thought that the fidelity the five concubines showed towards the King could be absorbed by new couples as well.



Official God of War Temple

The God of War temple is an amazing sight to see. The red boards by the door were once used to keep women out of the temple. Visitors can purchase tokens and religious medals for protection or luck. Incense can also be purchased by donation so that visitors can worship here. For a more curious sight to see, check out the back of the temple. In the back of the temple there is a large pit where a large number of turtles are swimming.



Lady Linshui Temple

This temple is dedicated to the protection of children-or to women who want to have a child. Visitors can see ornate carvings and walls gleaming from gold inlay. Lady Linshui is assisted in her task by 36 helpers.

Dongyue Temple

This temple could almost be considered the number one temple in Tainan- The temple is also a rather eerie one to see. Worshippers come here to commune with the gods and ask advice on next steps- the last room is devoted to the demons of Hell. This temple is very authentic; visitors can throw divining sticks, offer incense to Taoist gods, and talk to the dead through spirit mediums.

Confucius Temple

This is the oldest Confucius temple in Taiwan and one of the best. The area is also dotted with beautiful old banyan trees and visitors can purchase a map of the temple area with their entrance fee. The palace area has a great deal of old musical instruments, instruments for ritual sacrifice, and old antique artifacts. Tainan is a fabulous city and region for a visit and an interesting contrast with the modern capital of Taipei.



The author with master temple craftsman Mr. Wong. For more details on the restoration of Tainan's temples see www.jinyi.idv.tw. With special thanks to Mr. Wong and to Dr John Chen for their kind assistance during my trip.