The City-God Temple of Shanghai: A Protective Presence

By Rosita Dellios

The practice of erecting temples for the guardian deities of cities was common across civilizations in the ancient world. A well-known example was the goddess Athena as the protector of Athens. The practice continued with the advent of Christianity, often through the saints associated with a particular town and its place of worship. For China, whose civilization has been continuous for some 5,000 years, the practice continues to this day with Chinese folk religion honouring gods that often represent heroic figures that were deified after their death.

This is well illustrated by a temple dedicated to protecting modern Shanghai – China’s largest city (pop. 23 million). The Shanghai Temple of the Town God (Chenghuang Miao) is the best known Daoist temple in Shanghai. It is located at Fangbang Middle Road, Huangpu, within the old walled city of Shanghai.

Today the walls are gone but the protective function of the temple has been revived, along with the restored Ming-era Yuyuan Garden and the historic shopping district known as Yuyuan Old Street.

Yuyuan Old Street: Historic shopping areas renovated in the traditional style.

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The Temple of the Town God actually honours not one but three main gods. In their earthly existence they lived in the Shanghai area and performed good works. Taken in chronological order, the first god is the famous general and chancellor of the Western Han Dynasty, Huo Guang (died circa 68 BCE). He deposed an unfit emperor to save the country. He was the original city god for the county of Shanghai, but the temple was not at its present site. In the current temple, which was built in the 15th century during the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644) and subsequently renovated, Huo Guang’s statue is enshrined in the front hall.

The second god is Qin Yubo (1295–1373), who became the main god of the city. He was a celebrated civil servant during the late Yuan Dynasty, but was reluctant to take office under the new Ming emperor who desperately needed him to overcome a corrupt court. Qin Yubo finally accepted and became, among other duties, chief imperial examiner. So well did he perform, he was posthumously honoured by Hongwu Emperor with the title ‘City God of Shanghai’. His statue is enshrined at the back hall of the temple.

During the last of China’s imperial dynasties, the Qing, a general by the name of Chen Huacheng (1776–1842) died defending Shanghai in the First Opium War (1839–1842) against the British. He became the third god of the city.

As noted by one of the main Daoist Masters at the temple: “The town god looks after the people of Shanghai – and the foreigners too!” (Master Lu, Chenghuang Miao)
Qin Yubo was made ‘City God of Shanghai’ by the founder of the Ming Dynasty.

As well as the three main gods, there are other specialised gods. One pair represents the arts of civilization (wen) and the arts of war (wu). The former is represented by Wen Chang as the God of Literature. His help is often invoked by writers and scholars needing inspiration, as well as students seeking to do well in their exams. Directly opposite him is enshrined Lord Guan, the God of War, who is the deification of the famous General Guan Yu (162-220 CE). His heroic military deeds were immortalised in the historical novel, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.
The God of War is not bloodthirsty but known for his righteousness and loyalty. He is also valorised for his martial knowledge and his capacity to prevent war and oppose those intending to disturb the state. This is part of Chinese strategic culture which traditionally prefers to seek protection and security by non-military means. Other aspects of Lord Guan are his association with learning and wealth.

Besides the halls of the gods, the temple comprises nine palaces: Huoguang Palace, the Sixty-year Cycle Palace, the God of Fortune Palace, Cihang Palace, the City God Palace, Empress Palace, Parents Palace, Guansheng Palace and Wenchang Palace.

During the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, worshippers were unable to access the temple. Merchants decided to build a new temple in the Shanghai International Settlement. However, after the war, worshippers returned to the temple in the old city. Further disruption occurred when traditional Chinese culture – including the three main spiritual traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism – came under attack during a particularly radical period in Chinese politics. This was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution which began in 1966 and lasted a decade. More moderate voices came to prevail in the Chinese system with reforms being introduced in 1979 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping.
Restoration work on Temple of the Town God was completed in 2006. It was reconsecrated by Daoist clergy and worship resumed once again. Now that the temple itself has been protected and restored, it has much to offer in return.

Protection can take many forms, from keeping a city safe to the inhabitants’ psychological health. The valuable work done by Daoists in Shanghai – where there are 33 temples – includes helping people to cope with the stress of modern living and to find ways of relating to their needs. To this end, classes are held at the temple. For example, business executives will learn the tea ceremony, which is both useful in entertainment and brings serenity of mind. Those who want to be strong will participate in the taijiquan (tai chi chuan) classes, while others study or listen to Daoist music. Young people have the martial arts that inculcate disciple. Old people enjoy visiting the temple, and the temple – through its members - visits the elderly at their homes every month. Daoism, as China's earliest spiritual tradition, has much to offer 21st century society and can help Confucian and Buddhist efforts too.

Let us conclude with images that tell us much about the Daoist worldview and Chinese traditional culture:

The Abacus: At the entrance of the temple courtyard there is a huge abacus, indicating “Whatever you calculate, Heaven calculates better.”
On the roof may be seen the Sanxing (Three Stars). These popular deities in Chinese folk religion personify longevity, high rank, and prosperity.

Worshipers and visitors at the courtyard of the temple, which hosts many activities, including traditional performances and Daoist rituals.