

# Xinzhuang's Temple Street and Community Development

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**Abstract.** During the latter half of the 19th Century, Taiwan lacked deep water harbours that could take in large steamboats, and goods had to be transferred via Xiamen to Taiwan. At the time, Xinzhuang was an important shipping dock, attracting all sorts of trade activities, and migrant settlers built great temples to worship the gods from their home town. The environment and religious festivals strengthened the community and provided a sacred space to remember homeland ceremonies. However, as the shipping points shifted, Xinzhuang lost its commercial viability, and the delicate balance among the various migrant societies that gathered around the rich profit and convenient traffic location was disrupted. Conflicts broke out between different racial groups and the harmony that previously existed in the communal living space was torn apart and broke down into opposing racial territories. Today, the original appearances and topography of the old Xinzhuang streets have faded in time, and the ebb and flow of various faiths have contributed to the prosperity and decline of different religious sites, yet the temples dotted around the street houses pay witness to the convergence and disruptions among the migrant communities. Therefore, this research will trace the area's historical developments to explore the contemporaneity of Xinzhuang's temple street, in the effort to understand the relationship between historical traits that have since vanished and contemporary urban topography.

**Keywords:** Xinzhuang's Temple Street, Urban Topography, Community Development.

## 1. Introduction

In "The Image of the City", Kevin Lynch emphasises the importance of historical elements and collective memories within urban societies, including key factors that we refer to nowadays such as sense of place, identity, orientation and attraction, are all related to historical influences, and history is the accumulation and progress of long term human activity, changing events and life experience. A community can be a physical residential area and needs not to be limited by scope or size. This living entity is based on four basic components: 1. The social relations of human activities; 2. The physical space that is necessary for this living community; 3. The balance between physical space and ecology, and issues surrounding organic coexistence, so that the man-made space may incorporate the natural environment; 4. Overall values and cultural meaning (Chao-Li Kuo, 1998). Christian Norberg-Schulz wrote in "The Concept of Dwelling" that communities need to be understood in relation to their surroundings. Hara Hiroshi (2011) also mention that it is the constant changes in the manifestation of a community that gives it its charm. Although the original appearance of the Xinzhuang street houses are no longer visible, its temples stand and bear witness to the comings and goings of the community and the progress of history.

## 2. Xinzhuang's Temple Street

### 2.1. Transition of the Old Streets

The large numbers of immigrants that arrived in Xinzhuang not only brought about agricultural and commercial prosperity but also formed an administrative centre with special emphasis on education. Classic academies and free schools were established one after another, and the communities flourished within this unique topography. However, with the shifting of the shipping lanes and rail tracks, Xinzhuang lost its prominent position. In "The Image of the City" (1960), Kevin Lynch mentions five major elements necessary for formation of a city, including path, edge, districts, nodes and landmarks. The key components of a city are its centre and paths. The plaza, obviously, takes on the role of the centre, while the streets around it are

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the paths. In the case of Xinzhuang's temple street, each of the nine temples display the characteristic of a centre, which extends outwards via the pilgrimage routes and religious sites, creating a complex whole that comprises centres, paths and districts, and the coexistence of groups of different faiths within the same space. Today, the old Xinzhuang district borders on the Tamsui River, the paths include Huanho Street and Old Zhongzheng Street. Instead of being confined to one specific street, it extends to both side, spreading a planar surface. Three little alleyways, perpendicular to the old street, still remain today, and there are eight water gates on the river-facing side, forming a "linear community".



Figure 1 Xinzhuang's Temple Street map

- |                         |                    |                       |                 |
|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Martial Saint Temple | 2. Tian Hou Temple | 3. Kwong Fuk Temple   | 4. Earth Temple |
| 5. Wenchang Temple      | 6. Port Temple     | 7. Tidal River Temple |                 |

There are two land god temples guarding each extremity of the community, both facing inwards. Within, eight temples are scattered around the community, each a landmark, providing religious and social focal points. A lot of the old streets and alleys carry names that denote historical origins, such as Mistress Street, Tit-Touching Lane, Oxcart House, Theatre Alley, Salt Hall, Water-Fetching Lane, Rice Market Lane, Hornymen Lane, and Pickle Lane. Yet, with time, all but a few ancient houses along the old street have withered and disappeared, and the original fabric of the streets vanished too, leaving only the odd old house scattered around the area.

Even though the traditional street houses have disappeared, the spirit of the place is still preserved in local shops that, despite the tides of time, have retained their old crafts. There is a sense of life and reality that has been preserved through the process of development. It tells the tale of three hundred years of glory. On a quiet day, you may still catch a glimpse of the old streets and communal topography; come night, the area turns into Xinzhuang's most bustling night market, as though inheriting the splendour of the past, the spirit of the space continues to evolve with temporal needs, while the nine temples remain the anchors for local spirituality, exuding a different, more romantic and religious sense of locality.



Fig 2: night market



Fig 3: Temple Street

## 2.2. Transformations of the Temples

In the early stages of community development, the populace often consists of related immigrants from the same family, carrying the same last name. Settlements like these are often more coherent, stable and experience less conflict. There is also a higher density of interactive scope. Immigrant groups in Xinzhuang originate overwhelmingly from Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, Guangdong and Chaozhou. Given that there are nine temples in Xinzhuang, each worshipping different deities, it is fair to argue that these groups have each formed a religious centre at the heart of their respective communities. Yet, when conflict of interest arose between the different immigrant groups, the peaceful balance would be disrupted and the communities that had gathered around the temples would fall apart with it, affecting the popularity of the temples.

From the high density of temples in the Xinzhuang area, we can imagine how every activity in those days was about survival. For a temple to exist, it has to have certain purposes and meanings, be it conscious or subconscious. The motivations and needs that give rise to religious belief and the resulting space are closely intertwined. Taiwanese deities are often represented with imageries of “crossing salty water” because when the ancestors crossed the Strait, they lacked the skills to conquer the dangerous waters, that and the Ching Court’s maritime ban rendered the journey extremely challenging and unpredictable. Hence, once they made it to Taiwan successfully, they would use incense bags or small statues of their hometown deities they had brought with them to set up new temples here and continue their worship.

The central deity among fishermen and fishing villages is Matsu. When migrants from the mainland arrived in Xinzhuang, they started by building small temples to worship the goddess of the sea (Kangxi 25, 1686). Since Xinzhuang was an important harbour and financial district of the Taipei area, the residents were wealthy enough to import building materials from Fujian to expand the small temple into a grand palace, renaming it “Tian Hou Temple” (Queen of the Heavens). In the year Qianlong 18 (1753), the temple was refurbished and renamed “Tsu You Temple”. Tsu You Temple was the common religious centre of the Min people. Even though they left their native home to come to Taiwan, they carried this nostalgia with them for over a century, and the Tsu You Temple was a place of faith where one could remember their gods and ancestors. This situation remained intact until the battles between the Zhangzhou and Quanzhou communities broke out in Xianfeng 3 (1853). In the end, the Quanzhou people of Xinzhuang made peace with the Zhangzhou people of Banqiao, and Lin Guo-Fang of the Lin Ben-Yuan family of Banqiao carried the spirit of the Xinzhuang Tsu You Matsu to Banqiao to be worshiped there, which later became the Banqiao Tsu You Temple. The Tsu You Temple faces the Liji water gate, which was especially built in recent years to allow Matsu a direct view of the Tahan River again. The main entrances of the two Tsu You Temples are set in opposite directions, facing each other in the distance as a token of remembrance.

Xinzhuang rose through commercial activities. To protect their commerce, residents prayed for heavenly protection. Since Guan Yu is known for his loyalty and credibility, he came to be seen as the martial god of fortune and guardian of the police. Therefore, in Quanlong 25 (1760), the Martial Saint Temple was erected, mainly worshipping Guan Yu. At the time, this was one of the largest martial temples in Taiwan. In the year Xianfeng 3 (1853), the the Martial Temple was destroyed by fire as it was inflicted in the battles between Zhangzhou and Quanzhou migrants in the Banqiao and Xinzhuang areas, and was not rebuilt

until Tongzhi 1 (1862). In the early years, the old streets between the Martial Temple and Tsu You Temple were the most vibrant and prosperous in Xinzhuang. Thus, we can conclude that the Martial Temple and the Tsu You Temple benefited from the Quanzhou migrants' prosperity in the Xinzhuang area. Yet on the other hand, the Guang Fu Temple greatly suffered from the departure of the Chaozhou people, nowadays it is almost derelict, not even a snack shop or a cold-drink stand can be found around it, and there are hardly any worshippers, greatly contrasting the Tsu You Temple on the west side of the old streets and the Guan Temple set in its bustling neighbourhood. All this reflects the historical ebbs and flows of the Xinzhuang area.



Fig 4: Tian Hou Temple



Fig 5: Martial Saint Temple

The Xinzhuang temple street formed when migrant mainland Chinese gathered in a multicultural setting. With the conscious or subconscious influences of family rearing, religious beliefs, culture-lingual differences and group mentalities, communal identities were gradually shaped and passed down through generations. As the community and its physical space took shape, it also served the purpose of passing on community traditions, hence the adaptations of specific spatial conditions and organisations. Within this context, religious architecture distinguishes not only the location but also its emotional and environmental values.

### 3. Conclusion

Over 300 years ago, migrant settlers came to Xinzhuang in search of a new fortune. Faced with the floods of the Tamsui River and the unstable weather on the sea, each group gathered and developed its own ceremonies based on its own deities. The seemingly complicated and obscure religious activities reflect the simple intentions of paying respect to the heavens and ancestors, to give thanks, to ask for blessings and protection, and to express hopes and expectations of life. Religious festivals, such as Matsu's regular touring, all trace back to the footsteps of the ancestors. The challenging processes of the ceremonies serve as a reminder of the hardships that the then immigrants had to endure, thus consoling the spirits of the participants and their fears and hopes of the future. Xinzhuang frequently holds large scale religious events, including festivals celebrating the birthdays of local deities, the annual ghost festival and other irregularly scheduled temple events. These shared local activities not only express the people's devotion to their religious beliefs, but are also a display of unity and integration of the local communities.

By examining the concentration of the old Xinzhuang temple streets, we can see the history of the local communities, and how, when the population was still relatively low, all the different groups were able to live alongside each other peacefully. However, as friction increased over land, profit and religion, the communities gradually broke apart and dispersed. Nowadays, the glory of the Xinzhuang temple streets have faded in time, replaced by night markets and street vendors, and the frequent complaints by local businesses about traffic problems in the narrow temple streets. The area is tightly knit and the streets are small, and many residents long for urban regeneration. However, it must be noted that once traces of such community developments have been erased, they can never be replaced. Whether or not to conserve this communal space presents a challenge and reveals conflict between local and external points of views, creating a veritable tug war between the two. The only thing that we can be certain of is that the nine temples in

Xinzhuang's temple streets will be preserved for their religious functions, regardless of urban planning, and they will remain witness to Xinzhuang's past glory and local history.

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