An Immigrant Chinese Sea God in Australia: The Chinese Background to Sydney’s Retreat Street Temple

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Abstract: This article attempts, in the words of Henry Min-hsi Chan, to restore “the ‘Chineseness’ and the ‘China’ of the history of the Chinese in Australasia”. It concerns one of Australia’s most significant Chinese temples, the Palace of Hongsheng, otherwise known as the Yiuming temple, in the Sydney suburb of Alexandria. The temple was built in 1909 by a ‘native-place’ association for people from Gaoyao and Gaoming counties in Guangdong province in southern China. It explores the Chinese background to the temple, tracing the cult of its god and then surveys surviving temples dedicated to him in Hong Kong, Macau and the contiguous parts of the People’s Republic of China.

Introduction

In the semi-industrial Sydney suburb of Alexandria, in a cul-de-sac off Botany Road called Retreat Street, there is a small complex of terraced houses. In the far corner, away from Botany Road, stands one of Australia’s most significant Chinese temples, the Palace of Hongsheng (Hongsheng gong 洪聖宮). This small precinct is entered by passing under a traditional Chinese gate built in the early 1980s. It was designed by the former Sydney Deputy Lord Mayor, and now member of the NSW Legislative Council, Henry Tsang. The temple and the houses were built in the first decade of last century by the Yiuming Society, a Chinese “native-place” association for people who came from two adjacent counties in Guangdong Province in southern China—Gaoyao 高要 (Gouyiu in Cantonese pronunciation), and Gaoming 高明 (Gouming). The entire precinct has remained in their possession since then. The housing has been, and still is, used for new arrivals from the districts the Society represents, and for old people from their community without the means or support to live elsewhere. The back wall of the cul-de-sac, the two facing rows of houses and the Chinese gate form an enclosed area that is remarkably peaceful, given its busy location. Residents often sit outside along the fronts of the houses.

This article will provide the Chinese background to this temple, tracing the cult of the god who is enshrined in it, and surveying the surviving temples dedicated to him in Hong Kong, Macau and the contiguous parts of the People’s Republic of China. By doing so, it will place the Retreat Street temple in a religious and historical context that has largely been overlooked in existing work on it.

A few years ago Henry Min-hsi Chan, to whose memory this volume of Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies is dedicated, outlined his thoughts on the future of the study of Chinese people in Australia and New Zealand. In that essay he urged scholars to develop a “new historiography of the Chinese in Australasia” characterised, in his felicitous phrase, by “the ethnographic eye and the Sinological ear”. His goal, and indeed the broad goal of this essay, was to restore, “the ‘Chineseness’ and the ‘China’ of the history of the Chinese in Australasia”. As a whole, when religion has been considered in studies of the Australian Chinese, links

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2 The Retreat Street temple was the subject of a project of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney that resulted in the book The Lions of Retreat Street: A Chinese Temple in Inner Sydney edited by Ann Stephen (Sydney: PowerHouse Publishing, 1997). Curated by the Museum’s social history section, the book documented the temple itself and its various decorative and ritual objects.
4 Ibid., p. 7.
back to the Chinese homeland have only been seen in terms of general religious affiliations. One aim of my essay, therefore, is to demonstrate how understandings of the Yiuming temple are broadened and deepened by an appreciation of the original religious contexts of this cult. Whether, in the early twentieth century, people from Gaoyao and Gaoming thought they were in Australia temporarily or had settled permanently, their decision to enshrine one god in their temple rather than another surely reflected continuing and deep religious affiliations with their home region.

Retreat Street
To get to the Palace of Hongsheng, visitors must walk through a short passage between two buildings—a community room and the temple itself—into a walled courtyard. The temple is oriented on a north-south axis: the door is in the south at the courtyard end and the altar against the northern wall, whose other side faces the street. The circuitous route visitors follow is necessary for two reasons: first, it protects the temple from bad spirits, as spirits cannot turn corners, and it means

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5 All photographs are by the author.
6 An exception is in The Lions of Retreat Street, where the Guangdong origins of certain of the accoutrements of the temple are acknowledged (see below, Note 10). Another exception might be the works of Kok Hu Jin. In his series Chinese Temples in Australia, which began publication in 2005, Kok usefully documents the inscriptions found on the various plaques and scrolls in the temples, as well as other artefacts and statues, where they are extant. When Kok “postulates a likely or probable translation” (Chinese Temples in Australia, Vol. 1, “Chinese Temples in Victoria”, Bendigo: Golden Dragon Museum, 2005, p.11) of these inscriptions, he often finds what he calls “covert messages” in them. However, the existence of such “covert messages” remains speculative.
that the altar can face south, back towards the door, which is the traditional and correct orientation for Chinese temples of all kinds.  

The temple itself consists of a single room hung with various banners, lights, carved scenes from stories made famous in Chinese opera and popular fiction, an altar table, and the altar itself. The temple was more opulent before 1996, when an accidental fire damaged some of the most impressive pieces of paraphernalia.  

The temple is made of brick and has a blue tiled roof. A row of decorative tiles runs across the east-west ridge-line above the entrance. On the sides of the front door is a pair of inscriptions, a typical feature of all temples. In this case they read:

[right]  Vast blessings extend everywhere, and joyfully ascend to the Kingdom of Pi

[left]  Sagely compassion spreads broadly, and happily penetrates to Mount Mei

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7 This orientation is based on yin-yang cosmology where the god faces the yang direction of south (as does the emperor on earth). The fact that the yin and yang polarities arguably should be reversed in the southern hemisphere has not affected the traditional orientation of temples.

8 See Stephen, *The Lions of Retreat Street*, p. 37
As is usual in these inscriptions, the first characters in each line indicate the name of the god enshrined in the temple. Thus, on the right, the first character is *hong* 洪, read here as “vast”, and on the left the first character is *sheng* 堅, “sagely”. The references to the Kingdom of Pi, Piguo, and Mount Mei, Meishan, are not immediately obvious. Both are place names but neither is close to Guangdong: Meishan is in Sichuan province in the south-west of China and Piguo (which ceased to exist as a place name many centuries before the Retreat Street temple was built) was in present-day Shandong in the north-east. Why these two places should be mentioned in these inscriptions is obscure. A possible explanation derives from the occurrence of the name Piguo in the title the Duke of Piguo 邳國公. This title was posthumously awarded to one Su Chao 蘇绰 (498-546) during the first years of the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and was inherited by his son Su Wei 蘇威. Meishan’s most famous son is undoubtedly the Song Dynasty poet and prose writer Su Shi 蘇軾, also known as Su Dongpo 蘇東坡. Thus, it may be that the Piguo/Meishan connexion relates to the Su family (a Su family website makes this connexion and mentions these two historical figures). This supposition is strengthened by the list of the first management committee of the Retreat Street temple, which contained three people with the family name of Su from a total of seventeen members (there were also four members of the Cai family, however). In addition, during the nineteenth century one of the most notable of local worthies was Su Tingkui 蘇廷魁 (1800-1878, born in Guangli, near Zhaoqing, on the north side of the West River) whose exploits at the national level, as well as his meritorious service in Gaoyao.

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9 See *Zhou shu* p.23.395, *Sui shu* 41.1185, *Bei shi* 63.2243. I thank Nathan Woolley for finding these references.


11 “Organisational Constitution and Detailed Regulations of Yao Ming Hongfu Temple” 要明洪福堂組織章程及詳事細則, Article 8, document supplied by the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.
and Gaoming, would undoubtedly have been known to the builders of the temple.\(^{12}\)

If the supposition that the Retreat Street temple was somehow linked with the Su family is correct, further research into that family’s connexions with the Chinese community in nineteenth-century Sydney, as well as with Gaoyao and Gaoming counties, would be warranted.

Inside the temple, a “lantern” or square of windows in the roof illuminates the interior. On each side of the entrance is a model of an opera stage depicting scenes from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi 三國演義*). This famous novel also appears to be the source of motifs found in other decorative features in the temple, including the superbly carved altar table that was, unfortunately, severely damaged in the fire. The altar itself suffered damage too. Also in the shape of a stage, it is magnificently carved, and now has a statue of the god Hongsheng enshrined within. On each side of the altar, inscriptions read:

[right] The enrichment of virtue flows far, bringing benefits for one thousand li.
[left] The light of compassion illuminates everything, bringing peace to the ten thousand families.

Other uplifting inscriptions are found around the temple on plaques and banners, often donated when the temple was established. The various items of temple paraphernalia were imported from Guangdong at the same time.\(^{13}\)

One of the saddest results of the fire was the partial burning of the altar painting of the main god to whom the temple is dedicated. Currently, a painting of a temple dog forms the backdrop for the statue of the god. However, in religious terms this is of little consequence as the vital objects for worship are the spirit tablets that stand in front of the picture and give the names and titles of the gods.

Reading from centre to right to left, which is the sequence of importance, those gods are:

“**The Great King, Hongsheng who brings Great Benefits, Imperially Appointed.**”

“**The Imperial Lord, Sage Guan of the Nine Heavens who Subdues Demons.**”

“**Star Lord Caibo of All the Heavens who Brings Fortune.**”

The third of these gods, Caibo 財伯, is the God of Wealth, a common resident in popular temples both overseas and in China. The second, Sage Guan, is Guandi 關帝, or Guangong 關公, the Martial God who is seen as the epitome of righteousness and loyalty. He is the single most popular god in Chinese temples in Australia, although it is worth noting here that Guandi is worshipped in the Retreat Street temple in his demon-subduing role rather than in any of his other guises. One of those other roles is as a God of Wealth but here Caibo takes that role. In other Chinese temples in Australia, such as the one in Glebe in Sydney or in South Melbourne, both of which were built by the Seeyup 四邑 native-place association, Guandi is the primary god and the various inscriptions in those temples refer to his different roles and virtues. Hongsheng, the primary god of this temple, is not as common a god in Australia or in the Chinese world as Guandi. Indeed, *The Lions of Retreat Street* simply states that “little is known of him”.\(^{14}\) This assessment will be challenged in the following section of this article devoted to Hongsheng.

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\(^{13}\) On the objects in the temple see, Suzanne Chee and Angus Tse, “Federation Feng Shui: Reading the Temple Objects,” in Stephen, *The Lions of Retreat Street*, pp. 41-57.

\(^{14}\) Ibid, p. 47.
Figure 4. Altar, Yiuming Temple
The Retreat Street temple belongs to a tradition that is usually called Chinese popular religion, or sometimes village religion. It is the religion most Chinese people practice, and have practiced, for most of Chinese recorded history. It is to be distinguished from the formal, book-based, institutional and clerical forms of religion such as monastic Buddhism or priestly Daoism practised by a tiny minority of Chinese. It is best understood as a religion of practice rather than belief or faith, where the particular gods honoured will differ from village to village but will consist of various deities from the institutional religions as well as deified heroes and local gods, often associated with the notable geographical features of the area.

The Retreat Street temple is used by the community on significant occasions such as Chinese New Year and is open for worshippers to come when they so desire. It is often quiet and empty, which is quite usual for village temples both in Australia and in China. Wally Ha, in the story about his life in *The Lions of Retreat Street*, says that, “The temple has been very important to me as I believe everyone should unite and help their fellow villagers. I have worked at the temple as Zhili/Jiglei [manager] in charge of prayer, celebration of the birthdays of the gods and visits to the ancestral graves during Qingming [Pure Brightness] festival and have continued the practice of the Lion Dance.”

At the time the temple was built, some in the Chinese community did not share Wally Ha’s sentiments that it represented an important means to maintain the unity of people from the same district and to offer them assistance. The Sydney Chinese paper, the *Tung Wah Times*, reported on 22 May 1909 that the Yiuming Society had a temporary wooden temple at a rented property in Waterloo but had bought land on which to build a permanent temple—thus, the Retreat Street temple as we know it today was a replacement for a pre-existing temporary structure. I have not been
Penny: Hongsheng and the Retreat Street Temple

able to ascertain when the first temple was established. The Society had imported from China an incense burner and other accoutrements to hold rituals in its new, brick temple and had held a lion dance in celebration before many onlookers. However, the article concluded with this disapproving note: "We huaqiao who dwell in foreign countries live in today's civilised world. The public benefit is regarded as important and private customs are cast aside. Yet, we see this occurrence! – such superstitious religious customs flourishing!"

About two weeks later, again prompted by the building of the temple, the same newspaper devoted its editorial to the topic of atheism—it was against traditional religion, citing Confucius’s dictum to “respect the ghosts and spirits but stay far from them.” In the same issue an anonymous correspondent wrote bemoaning the building of the temple, complaining about the waste of money and land involved and putting the whole thing down to superstition. “Today’s world,” he said, “is not a world of spirits.”

Clearly, in 1909 the idea of building a permanent temple did not meet with universal approbation within the broader Chinese community. Discussions like these, of course, were reasonably commonplace in early-twentieth-century China, with groups of reforming intellectuals desperate to change the outlook of the Chinese people on matters ranging from systems of government to family structure, and from the form of the language to the nature of religious practice. The Tung Wah Times stood squarely with the modernisers. In any issue of The Tung Wah Times, the first items always concerned news from home, followed by international stories, stories concerning Australia in general, and only then community news. Not surprisingly, the Chinese community of Sydney was well informed and active in debates about the destiny of China in the modern world.

News of the new temple reached Melbourne and was also the subject of comment in the Melbourne Chinese paper known by its English title, The Chinese Times. In its 22 May 1909 issue, we discover that some of the directors of the Yiuming Society itself, whose organisation had paid for the temple, shared the reforming bent and viewed its building as pointless, resigning their posts in protest. At the end of this article, The Chinese Times commented that, just as this temple was being built in Australia, the Chinese education authorities were, ironically, considering converting temples into primary schools at home.

Unfortunately, apart from the controversy that surrounded its creation, very little other information is available for much of the Retreat Street temple’s subsequent existence.

The God Hongsheng

Who, then, is the god enshrined in the Retreat Street temple? Hongsheng is the god of the South Seas, whose records date back to the Sui Dynasty (581-618) when he was first honoured by the imperial court. The practice of honouring gods, or even of enfeoffing them, in a parallel manner to the way the court would ennoble mortals, was not unusual. It is generally considered an endorsement by the court of particular cults, and the virtues they encouraged. It rendered them “orthodox” in a classificatory system where the distinction between “orthodox” and “heterodox” rested precisely on whether the cult was approved by the state. Nonetheless, the granting of official titles by the imperial court was a signal honour, implying imperial

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15 The Tung Wah Times, 22 May 1909, p. 7.
16 The Tung Wah Times, 5 June 1909, p. 2.
18 The Chinese Times, 22 May 1909, pp 8-9. A manuscript translation this article can be found in the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, with the title, “How the Gods Spread Overseas.”
19 For an introduction to the practice of enfeoffment of gods, see Valerie Hansen, Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127-1276 (Princeton University Press, 1990), Chapter 4.
recognition of Hongsheng’s powers, protection of the cult by the officials of the state, and the guarantee of continuing largesse from the central government in terms of temple building and upkeep. That Hongsheng was regularly honoured over a period of more than 1100 years, and by every major dynasty during that time, indicates a continuing belief in his power and authority.

Hongsheng was first honoured in 594 under the Sui Dynasty when the emperor Wendi established sacrifices to the south sea god in Guangdong. In 751 he was subsequently enfeoffed by the Tang Xuanzong emperor, acquiring the title Guangli wang, or King of Great Benefits. During the period between the Tang and Song dynasties, both of which ruled over a united China, several short-lived regimes had control over various smaller parts of the territory. The Southern Han (907-960) ruled the coastal regions of present-day Guangdong, Guangxi and northern Vietnam as well as the island of Hainan. In the last years of that dynasty, in 958, the south sea god was enfeoffed as Zhaoming di, the Emperor of Luminous Brightness. In 1041, the Northern Song Renzong emperor enfeoffed him as Hongsheng, Sage Hong, the name by which he is now best known. In 1053, Renzong added Zhaoshun, Luminous Prosperity, to his title and, at the same time, granted his wife the title Mingshun furen, Lady of Bright Prosperity. In 1145 under the Southern Song (1127-1279) the Gaozong emperor enfeoffed six of his sons and associates with lordly titles and in 1165 the Xiaoqiong emperor added Weihuang, Majestic and Illustrious, to Hongsheng’s title. At this stage his accumulated title had grown to Nanhai Guangli Hongsheng Zhaoshun Weihuang Wang, Sage Hong, who brings Great Benefits, the Majestic and Illustrious King of the South Seas of Luminous Prosperity. Under the Yuan, in 1291, Lingfu, Numinous Response was added to his title. In 1370 Taizu, the first Ming emperor declared him the God of the South Seas and in 1409 the Yongle emperor added that he was the Ninghai bo, the Elder who Pacifies the Seas. Finally, in 1725 under the Qing dynasty, he was enfeoffed under the title Nanhai Zhaoxing Longwang, Luminous Brightness Dragon King Spirit of the South Seas.

Thus, every major dynasty since the Sui has acknowledged this god and added to his glory. In each case, of course, there were specific circumstances or events that prompted these imperial honours but space does not allow for a detailed exposition of them. As well as these honours, stelae preserved in the Huangpu temple, record provincial level or national level officials sacrificing to Hongsheng on a regular basis throughout the centuries. In this context it should also be noted that Chinese gods are not automatically promoted as they get older. Some gods fade away and some rise up in status—their position depends on how effective they are in answering pleas for help. His succession of honours suggests that Hongsheng maintained his potency, at least as far as the court was concerned.

This special relationship with the imperial centre is commemorated in a series of inscriptions that have been preserved in the major Hongsheng temple in Huangpu, near Guangzhou. Among these inscriptions are expressions of the gratitude of the court to Hongsheng for exerting his numinous power to overcome or prevent maritime disasters, or other catastrophes that came from the sea. There are also inscriptions that were made from the words of emperors in their own hands, such as the first emperor of the Ming (1370), and the Kangxi emperor of the Qing (1703) (see next page).

20 The granting of titles to Hongsheng, as well as other important events in his history can be found in, Zeng Yimin, *Sui Tang Guangzhou Nanhai shen Miao zhi tan su* (Taizhong: Donglu Shushe, 1991), pp. 84-96
With such an illustrious past, we could presume that narratives about Hongsheng would abound, or at least that his identity would be clear. In fact, this is not so, as the stories that circulate about him, summarised below, would indicate. Indeed, as basic a datum as the meaning of the “hong” in Hongsheng is not agreed upon (thus I refer to him here only as Hongsheng or Sage Hong).

One of the most common stories claims that Hongsheng was originally a local official called Hong Xi 洪熙 who lived during the Tang Dynasty, serving in the town of Guangli just north of the West River about thirty kilometers east of Zhaoqing. By this account Hong Xi was learned in astronomy, geography and meteorology and built a kind of weather station from which he observed various natural phenomena such as clouds and wind. From these observations he was able to make forecasts that were useful to those who were embarking on sea or river voyages. Apparently, many were saved from disaster because of his selfless work for the people. As is the case with Chinese officials who, over the centuries, have gained the love of the people they ruled, after Hong Xi’s death he continued to help those who asked him for assistance, and gradually this devotion became a fully-fledged cult.

There are two reasons to be suspicious of this story, both of which concern specific details in it. First, Hong Xi is said to have lived in Guangli. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that in 751 he was granted the title Guangli wang by the Tang emperor. However, at the time that the title Guangli was given to the

21 One source says that Hong Xi lived during the Ming Dynasty. See Yim Shui Yuen, Experiencing the Clan Culture of the New Territories (Hong Kong: Wan Li Book Company, 2006), p. 115.
south sea god, the title Guangde wang 廣德王, the King of Great Virtue, was given to the god of the eastern sea, the title Guangrun wang 廣潤王, the King of Great Enrichment, was given to the god of the western seas, and the title Guangze wang 廣澤王, the King of Great Favour, was given to the god of the northern seas. In other words the title Guangli wang was formulaic and parallel to the other three titles granted at the same time. The fact that the south sea god has Guangli in his name does not, therefore, imply any connexion with the town of the same name. In fact, the town of Guangli is not reported in Chinese sources on historical geography until the Qing dynasty (1644-1911); and even if it had existed a millennium or so earlier, it would have been of so little consequence that notable officials would not have been stationed there.

The second detail of this story that arouses suspicion is Hong Xi’s name itself. While it is certainly possible for there to be someone called “Hong Xi”, it also happens that this is the reign name for the Ming Renzong 仁宗 emperor whose short reign last from 1425-26.

Keith Stevens, an expert in Chinese deities who was resident in Hong Kong for many years, reports that in the Saikung area of Hong Kong—the nearest point on the mainland to the notable Hongsheng temple on Kau Sai Chau—some people maintain that he was “a great Ming dynasty general who protected the first emperor of the Ming.” On the island of Cheung Chau, also the site of a Hongsheng temple, “an aged fisherman” told Stevens that Hongsheng was a farmer’s son turned renegade who, objecting to high taxation, proclaimed himself the Great King of the Mountains, Shan Dawang 山大王. Like Robin Hood he stole from the rich and gave to the poor, but later he surrendered to the emperor and was given the title Loyal and Righteous Officer, Zhongyi shi 忠義士.22

Another version of the Hongsheng story comes from the nineteenth-century cleric John Henry Gray, author of Walks in the City of Canton (1874), who lived in southern China for many years.23 Gray wrote:

On crossing the bridge named 德興橋 Tak-Hing-Kiu [Dexing qiao], we entered a large temple called 洪聖廟 Hung-Sing Miu [Hongsheng miao]—a shrine this [sic] which stands in honour of the god of the southern ocean. This canonized saint was, when in the flesh, a member of the Chuk family, and was, to all his compères, known by the name of Tchek. He was born during the Sui dynasty, which royal house reigned over China from A.D.589 to A.D. 620. He, in due course, married a lady named I’wat. After a life of great usefulness, he was, at an advanced age, gathered to his fathers. Upon him, eventually, posthumous honours were conferred.24

Gray then proceeds to list some of the titles mentioned above.

In a few temples, notably the one in Jiangmen (see below), Hongsheng is claimed to be one of the four Dragon Kings, Longwang 龍王, who rule over the four seas. This, of course, follows the tradition represented by the relatively late title bestowed on him in 1725 by the Yongzheng 隆正 emperor of the Qing. It is significant that so few temples note Hongsheng’s status as a Dragon King. This absence implies that local traditions about his identity, even across the relatively

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22 This information comes from notes Stevens made for his book, Chinese Gods: The Unseen World of Spirits and Demons (London: Collins & Brown Limited, 1997), which were omitted from the published volume (personal communication, 28 March 2008). I thank him for allowing me to quote from them.


24 John Henry Gray, Walks in the City of Canton (Victoria, Hong Kong: De Souza & Co., 1875), pp. 170-71. Unfortunately Gray does not give characters for the personal names mentioned here and they are not possible to construe from his romanisation.
small area represented by the Pearl and West River deltas and their tributaries, were not standardised. Exactly when the different traditions arose, and under what circumstances they survived, were forgotten, or were superseded is a subject for further research that I hope to pursue in the future.

On the basis of the various narratives and identifications summarised here, it is reasonable to conclude that the Hongsheng cult does not seem to have been subjected to the thoroughgoing kind of standardisation that has been observed for other imperially sponsored Chinese local cults. This variety of stories is more characteristic of a cult that has spread organically from locality to locality, with religious explanations growing and withering without the interference of the state.

Guangdong Temples: Huangpu

The Retreat Street temple may be the only Chinese temple in Australia that enshrines Hongsheng but, like all Chinese temples, it exists as part of a web of religious affiliation based on the process known as fenxiang or ‘the division of incense’. When a new temple is established, incense ash is brought from an established temple and ritually installed in the burner of a new temple, thus, “a clear and direct relationship of descent from the ancestor temple” is created between the two. A new temple not only marks the ritual establishment of a new community, it also irrevocably links that community through its temple into a web of religious affiliation in the present, and into the past.

The Retreat Street temple is, therefore, not only connected through generations of temple establishment back in time, it is also linked more or less closely into a network of other local temples that trace their ancestry back along the same paths. Standing out amongst these Hongsheng affiliates (although not necessarily the source of their founding incense) is the largest Hongsheng temple, the Temple to the God of the South Seas (Nanhaishen Miao). It is located in the town of Huangpu, now almost an outer suburb of Guangzhou, far from the shiny new high-rise buildings and tourist hotels of the centre. Now some distance from the main course of the Pearl River and separated from it by a large power station, it originally stood in a strategic place for maritime propitiation in the days before industrial shipping and container wharves. (See Figure 7 over page.)

The temple surrounds have changed markedly in recent years. Before the massive changes to the area around it that began in 2005, visitors had to approach the temple down a grimy lane of ramshackle houses and stalls, and then through a patch of overgrown wasteland. Now the houses and stalls have disappeared and a vast paved area surrounds the temple. A huge eight-part mural entitled ‘The

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27 Unfortunately, I have not so far been able to trace the source of the Retreat Street temple’s founding incense.

28 Several introductory Chinese studies have been published on this temple: Huang Miaozhang, Nanhaishen miao (Guangzhou, Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2005), Long Qingzhong, et. al., Nanhaishen miao (Guangzhou, Guangzhou shi wenguju, 1985), Wang Chuan, Nanhaishen miao (Guangzhou, Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2002). Wang Yuanlin, Guojia jisi yu haishang silu yi ji: Guangzhou Nanhaishen miao yanjiu (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 2006), Zeng Yimin, Sui Tang Guangzhou Nanhaishen miao (Taizhong: Donglu shushi, 1991).
Map 1. Extent of Hongsheng temples in Guangdong and adjacent regions, with approximate
nineteenth-century Gaoyao and Gaoming borders (ANU Cartography)

Figure 7. View from the front gate of the Nanhaishen temple, Huangpu, Guangdong
Complete Chart of Boluo’, Boluo quantu 波羅全圖, depicting river and ocean voyaging in ‘traditional’ style, covers a snaking wall near the main entrance. The lane has been transformed into a major road giving access to an expansive car park with designated parking for more than twenty buses. The nearest bus stop on the main road has been renamed ‘Temple of the God of the South Seas’. Most strikingly of all, a branch tributary of the Pearl River has been constructed to allow tour boats from Guangzhou to dock outside the temple at the culmination of their cruise.

The Huangpu temple complex itself is surrounded by a wall and contains several free-standing pavilions as well as an enclosed courtyard. Visitors enter through a main gate building with guardian statues on each side. This gate gives on to a small courtyard with two large steleae: on the one on the right is engraved the great Tang scholar-official Han Yu’s essay on the temple from 819; the other has a Northern Song essay from 973 on the rebuilding of the temple. The next building encountered is the Yimen, or Gate of Ceremony. This is a generic name: a yimen was the gate of a local government office complex in traditional China that separated the entrance area from the interior, as this gate does. On the sides of the Yimen facing back towards the front entrance are two statues. On the right is the figure of a foreigner (see Figure 10, page 69 below); on the left is Empress Golden Flower, Jinhua niangniang 金華娘娘, a goddess found across Guangdong whose assistance is sought in matters of conception and childbirth.

Figure 8. Main courtyard, Nanhaishen temple, Huangpu, Guangdong

Passing through the Gate of Ceremony, visitors enter a large courtyard surrounded by colonnades. This courtyard also has two steleae: one has an inscription from the hand of the first emperor of the Ming (1370), the other from the Kangxi emperor of the Qing (1703). Around the colonnades are several smaller steleae dating from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries commemorating the

29 The meaning of ‘Boluo’ is discussed below.
propitious interventions of the God of the South Seas. In the centre of the courtyard is the Ritual Pavilion, Liting 礼亭, with a large altar table and, in front of it, the incense burner.

At the head of the courtyard stands the Hall of the God of the South Seas where Hongsheng himself is enshrined (see Figure 9). On each side of the hall there are three more statues which together constitute Hongsheng's designated Six Lords, recognised by the court in 1145. Two of these are his sons, three are worthies who served him and one is another rendering of the foreigner, whose statue also stands in the Yimen. Behind this main hall is another that enshrines Hongsheng’s wife, with an accompanying goddess (whom I have not been able to identify but who is described in the accompanying sign as “affable”) and a large “Dragon Bed”, that is, an emperor’s bed. At the side of the rear hall are two small shrines. One is dedicated to the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, Guanyin, the other to the dragon king.

Figure 9. Hongsheng altar, Nanhaishen temple, Huangpu, Guangdong

The Foreigner
One of the major points of interest in books and articles about the Huangpu temple is the figure of distinctly non-Chinese appearance represented twice in different parts of the temple. Although wearing Chinese clothes, he has dark brown skin and a dense black beard and moustache. He is depicted with his left hand above his eyes, looking into the distance. The information board near his image in the Yimen says (in its own English translation):
Legend has it that the ship came from the ancient Pippala to China along the Marine Silk Road and anchored in front of the South China Sea God temple in Guangzhou. While a sailor was planting a pippala tree before the temple, the ship suddenly set sail. Looking at the disappearing ship in the distance, the sailor burst into tears. Later he died in the temple. The later generations took him as the envoy of friendship and erected a statue of him in the temple. The statue in traditional Chinese clothes recalled the moment that he raised his left hand to his forehead, hoping for the ship’s returning. He was granted the title of “Daxisikong”, commonly called “homesick foreigner”. Therefore the temple was also named Pippala Temple. Someone has proved that he was an ancient India minister who paid tribute to the imperial court in the Tang Dynasty; someone believed that he was the fourth brother of Bodhidharma. He was the historic witness of friendship between China and foreign countries by sea.

Figure 10. Statue of the Foreigner, Nanhaishen temple, Huangpu, Guangdong

This text requires some explication. The name Pippala Temple in Chinese is Bolou miao 波羅廟, ‘bolou’ here being understood as an abbreviation of ‘boboluo’ 波羅, one transliteration of the Sanskrit ‘pippala’, the *ficus religiosa* or sacred fig. This is the variety of tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment, that is, the Bodhi Tree, a descendant of which allegedly still grows in Bodh Gaya. The ship carrying the seamen is said to have come from “the ancient Pippala” which in Chinese is rendered as *gu Boluoguo* 古波羅國, literally the ancient country of Boluo. There is no record in Chinese of such a name. If it were the country in which the Bodhi Tree was located, this would indicate the seaman came from the ancient
Indian state of Magadha which ruled over large parts of present north-eastern India. Zeng Yimin maintains that this story can be traced back as far as the Song Dynasty.\(^3^0\)

Confusion has arisen in many Chinese sources on the Huangpu temple concerning its alternative name, Boluo miao. It so happens that the word Boluo 菠蘿, an exact homophone of Chinese rendering of pippala but written with slightly different characters, means ‘pineapple’. Thus, in journalism and tourist guides, this temple is often called the Pineapple Temple.\(^3^1\) This confusion also gave rise to the bizarre statement on another sign in the temple that says, “East of the Yimen is the famous statue of the Fan [Indian] foreigner watching pineapples.”

The meaning of Daxisikong 達奚司空, the title granted to the foreigner, is not clear. Sikong 是一个 ancient title for one of the most senior officials in the central government, usually translated as ‘Minister of Works’. Daxi on the other hand is only known as a rare double-barrelled Chinese family name. One tradition concerning this title is that the first two characters of Daxisikong are a transliteration of a Sanskrit name, Dharsi.\(^3^2\) This Dharsi is said to have been a brother of Bodhidharma, the Indian monk who, by some accounts, brought Chan (Zen) Buddhism to China in 527, arriving by sea in Guangzhou. The name by which Bodhidharma is usually known in Chinese is Damo 达摩, which shares its first character with Daxi (that is, Dharsi 達奚), an occurrence that possibly gave rise to this story. By this account, Dharsi did not accompany his more famous brother to the capital but stayed on in Guangzhou, taking up residence at the temple of the God of the South Seas, observing “the coming and going of the ships, the change of weather on the sea. Later he stood petrified on the seashore. People made a statue of him on the left side of the Temple in his memory.”\(^3^3\) There are many stories and legends about Bodhidharma—often contradictory—but this is the only one, as far as I am aware, in which he is accompanied to China by a younger brother who takes up residence and lives out his life in Guangzhou.

There is another possible explanation for the presence of the foreigner in the Temple of the South Sea God which may explain the origin of some of the stories outlined above, but is speculative. This concerns another Indian Buddhist monk who, while well enough known in Chinese Buddhist history, does not rank in fame with Bodhidharma. His name was Paramartha, known in Chinese as Boluomotuo 波羅末陀. He was one of the great translators of Buddhist scriptures of the medieval period ranking with the supreme Kumarajiva who lived about 100 years earlier. Paramartha was born in 499 and left India as a missionary around 545. Arriving in Guangzhou on September 25, 546 he proceeded to the then capital of Jiankang, where he met Emperor Wu of Liang who prostrated himself before Paramartha. After almost sixteen years of travelling from monastery to monastery, translating and teaching, he left for home from the Yangzi River port of Liangan (near present day Wuhan) in late 562. Early the next year, after three months at sea, he was forced back to land at Guangzhou. As it turned out, Paramartha never returned


\(^{31}\) See, for instance, *Quintessential Travel in Guangzhou: A Galaxy of Historic and Cultural Attractions in the City of Guangzhou* (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Travel and Tourism Press, 2004), p. 41. This book has parallel English and Chinese versions of the text, and boluo is actually written with the ‘pineapple’ characters. Also “Pineapple Temple fair kicks off in Guangzhou”, an article originally in *Dayang xinwen* (Guangzhou Morning Post) accessible at [http://gzmp.dayoo.com/gb/2006-03/16/content_2447661.htm](http://gzmp.dayoo.com/gb/2006-03/16/content_2447661.htm), in which it is stated that the seaman “planted some seeds of pineapples”.

\(^{32}\) Zeng Yimin 曾一民 maintains that this tradition derives from the hand of Ruan Zun 阮遵 who lived in the eleventh century.

\(^{33}\) See “Pineapple Temple fair kicks off.”
Penny: Hongsheng and the Retreat Street Temple

Paramartha clearly gained fame in Guangzhou as miraculous stories grew up around him. According to one, he used to cross the Pearl River to an island on which he sought retreat, floating on his sitting mat or on a lotus leaf. The seventh-century source, *Further Lives of Eminent Monks, Xu Gaoeng zhuan*, notes that, "there are many examples of such marvels," in relation to him.35

The primary reason that Paramartha may be associated with the Temple of the God of the South Seas is that the first two characters of his name in Chinese, Boluomotuo, are the same as the alternative name for the temple, Boluo miao. Boluo, itself, though known in the name for the pippala, is much more commonly associated with Chinese translations of Sanskrit Buddhist words (particularly words that were translated in Tang and pre-Tang times) such as Paramita, Paramātma (the great modes of virtuous conduct by which people can obtain nirvana), Prajñā (the first section of the Vinaya rules), Pratimoksa ("deliverance"), and also, of course, Paramartha ("ultimate truth"), the name adopted by the monk under discussion here. A temple associated with someone known as Boluomotuo (and the meaning of that name) would naturally be abbreviated for euphonic reasons simply to Boluo miao.

Secondly, as we have seen, Paramartha died in 569 and pious stories of his marvels (which may already have been current) were recorded less than a century later. The traditional date for the founding of the Temple of the God of the South Seas is 594. These dates are temptingly close: twenty-five years after the death of an extraordinary figure is about the right length of time for a local cult to develop and require commemoration.

Thirdly, the fact that Paramartha was forced to land at Guangzhou after intending to return home is an almost exact correspondence for the image of the foreigner looking out to sea with homesickness, as the sign in the temple has it.

This identification is speculative, as noted above. If, however, it is correct, then it follows that the early history of the Temple of the God of the South Seas has important Buddhist connexions. This is a topic that requires a deeper level of research than I have been able to conduct at this stage.

Other Guangdong Temples

Another Hongsheng temple can be found near the city of Jiangmen, which is located on the West River, the second major maritime thoroughfare of Guangdong. Upriver from Jiangmen, and also on the west side of the river, are Gaoming and Gaoyao, the two towns that give their names to the counties from which the people who built the Retreat Street temple came. The Jiangmen temple is located on an island in the river called Chaolian, adjacent to the town. Not as large as the Huangpu temple, it is still a major construction. It is located in a precinct that also houses a clan hall and a school. Now landscaped with a lake and ornamental bridges, the Hongsheng Park, as it is called, is regarded as one of Jiangmen’s tourist sites.36

This Hongsheng temple dates from 1600, although all the objects inside the temple were destroyed in the Cultural Revolution and have since been replaced. Two figures accompany Hongsheng in the Jiangmen temple. The first is Wang Laien, Deputy Governor of Guangdong at the beginning of the reign of the

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35 Quoted in Ibid, p. 34.
36 On the Jiangmen temple, see Helen F. Siu, *Agents and Victims in South China: Accomplices in Rural Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 79-83. The following two paragraphs are based on her work.
Kangxi Emperor (1662-1722). Wang successfully remonstrated with the emperor to allow the people of the region to return to their villages after the government had ordered them to move from the coast into the mountains. This was ostensibly to protect them from the predations of pirates but was actually directed against Ming loyalists taking action against the new dynasty. The second is 天后 (also known as 媽祖) probably the most widespread of sea gods in south-eastern China. Tianhou and Hongsheng rarely appear in temples together as they rule over the same natural phenomena.

The Jiangmen temple was, in fact, originally a Tianhou temple. The story goes that a Jiangmen local posted on government business far to the north successfully sought intercession from Hongsheng to heal his sick mother. His mother then asked that the efficacious image be brought back to Chaolian. As it was being paraded near the Tianhou temple it suddenly became too heavy to move. After due spiritual work, the Hongsheng image was installed in that temple with a new side altar being established for Tianhou.

There are references to several other Hongsheng temples in the People's Republic that I have not yet been able to visit. One is located in a village called 馬安崗 near 清遠, a city up the North River from Guangzhou. Originally built in 1736, it enshrines Hongsheng as its main god with the Great Teacher who Exhorts People to Do Good, Quanshan dasi, and Grandpa Elder Su, Sugong yeye, accompanying him.37

Figure 12. Interior, Hongsheng temple, Jiangmen, Guangdong
Luo Yixing reports that there is a Hongsheng temple in a village called Huanggang near Lubao, about forty kilometres south of Qingyuan, also on the North River. He relates that this temple is popularly known as the Temple of the Three Surnames, sanxing miao as it is owned by the Huang, Zeng and Zhi clans. In the central hall of this temple Hongsheng is enshrined with the Emperor of the North, Beidi, while a subsidiary hall enshrines Guandi. Luo also refers to a Beidi.  

There was also a Hongsheng temple in the historical (and abandoned) village of Daqitou near Leping, north of Foshan. Called the Imperial Old Temple, Diwang gumiào, it was “removed” (chaidiao) in the 1970s. Finally, there was a Hongsheng temple in Wuzhou, on the West River, just over the Guangdong border in Guangxi. 

As far as I have been able to discover, there is only one Hongsheng temple extant in either of the historical Gaoyao or Gaoming counties, and there is none in either of the county towns or in the city of Zhaoqing, that lies directly across the river from Gaoyao. The one that does survive is in the village of Pingtang, in the Genglou district of modern Gaoming district (Gaoming has been absorbed into Foshan County). Genglou is some fifty kilometres inland from the West River, so its association with fishermen or seafarers is mysterious. Apparently, originally called the Double Dragon Temple, Fulong miao, it was built during the Jiaqing reign period of the Ming. 

Hong Kong and Macau Temples
In the People’s Republic of China, as we have seen, Hongsheng temples are not widespread but among those that have survived are some substantial structures, including the temple complex that functions as the current focal point of the cult. In Hong Kong the situation is almost the opposite. In this geographically limited territory, there are numerous Hongsheng temples but almost all of them are small single-room buildings, essentially serving villages that are based on single clans. The following is a table of the temples I have been able to identify giving the location, name of the temple and the gods that accompany Hongsheng. In the temple on Peng Chau, Hongsheng is the subsidiary god to Tianhou, while in Wang Chau he has equal status with Chegong. Following the table is a map of the territory showing locations of the temples.

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39 Li Fan et al., Tanyou Daqitou (Hong Kong: Zhongguo pinglun xueshu chubanshe, 2005), accessed March 2008 on-line at: <http://web01.chinareviewnews.com/cm-webapp/cbspub/secDetail.jsp?bookid=4370&secid=4390>, Chapter 4, p.6-7


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Accompanying Gods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ap Lei Chau</td>
<td>Hongsheng gumiao</td>
<td>Taisui, Guandi, Guanyin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheung Chau</td>
<td>Hongsheng miao</td>
<td>Taisui, Hua Tuo, Guanyin, Longmu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hang Mei Tsuen</td>
<td>Hongsheng gong</td>
<td>Unaccompanied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ho Sheung Heung</td>
<td>Hongsheng gumiao</td>
<td>Hongsheng gumiao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Leng</td>
<td>Hongsheng gong</td>
<td>Unaccompanied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kau Sai Chau</td>
<td>Hongsheng gumiao</td>
<td>Taisui, Hua Tuo, Guanyin, Longmu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mui Wo</td>
<td>Hongsheng gumiao</td>
<td>Hongsheng gumiao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peng Chau</td>
<td>Tianhou miao</td>
<td>Hongsheng is subsidiary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Po Toi O</td>
<td>Hongsheng gong</td>
<td>Accompanied, but only Hongsheng identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sai Pin Wai</td>
<td>Dawang gumiao</td>
<td>Yanghou dawang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sha Lo Wan</td>
<td>Bagang gumiao</td>
<td>Not visited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shui Tau</td>
<td>Hongsheng gong</td>
<td>Xiulao shenren, Taisui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tai Kok Tsui</td>
<td>Hongsheng miao</td>
<td>Guanyin, Hexiang, Dizangwang, Baogong, Beidi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tai O</td>
<td>Hongsheng gumiao</td>
<td>Yutou dawang, Baogong, Guanyin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tong Fuk</td>
<td>No Name</td>
<td>Shuijinggong dawang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanchai</td>
<td>Hongsheng gumiao</td>
<td>Baogong, Guanyin, Jinhua, Taisui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang Chao</td>
<td>Ersheng Gong</td>
<td>Cheong, Baogong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wong Chuk Hang</td>
<td>Dawang yemiao</td>
<td>Not visited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuen Chau Tsai</td>
<td>Dawangye, Erwangye</td>
<td>Erwangye, Sanwangye, Erwangye</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Map 2. Current sites of Hongsheng temples in Hong Kong (ANU Cartography)
In addition to these temples, it is clear that several more have not survived into the present. In a note published in 1980 in the *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Anthony Siu listed temples of all kinds on Lantau Island, site of the new Hong Kong airport. Amongst these were no fewer than eight Hongsheng temples, with four listed as “ruined” or “completely disappeared”. The ones that survive on Lantau are at Mui Wo, Sha Lo Wan, Tai O, and Tong Fuk.  

If this rate of demise were extrapolated across the territory, there might have been up to forty Hongsheng temples in Hong Kong alone. Apart from temples, there also exist small shrines that are not usually included in lists of notable places of worship or historic buildings. One of these that I encountered accidentally is at Tai She Wan on High Island (see Figure 14 over page). The temples are found across the extent of Hong Kong, in the most urbanised areas such as Wanchai on Hong Kong Island and Tai Kok Tsui on Kowloon peninsula as well as in old villages in the New Territories, near the border with the People’s Republic, and on several outlying islands. Their locations are, however, not accidental. Hongsheng is a god worshipped by fishermen and seafarers. Almost all the temples are located within easy access of the sea or of a river—as are the temples over the border. However, this phenomenon is somewhat obscured today by the large extent of land reclamation that has taken place in Hong Kong. The Wanchai temple, for instance, is located on Queen’s Road East, now some 700 meters as the crow flies from the harbour’s edge. Most of this intervening land is reclaimed and is a mass of skyscrapers and freeways. As is clear from Map 3 on page 79, the temple once stood about 100 meters from the harbour, within easy

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Figure 14. Hongsheng altar, Tai She Wan, High Island, Hong Kong

Figure 15. Hongsheng temple, Cheung Chau, Hong Kong
Figure 16. Hongsheng temple, Ap Lei Chau, Hong Kong

Figure 17. Hongsheng temple, Ho Sheung Heung, Hong Kong
access for boatmen who had landed their vessels. In addition some temples have been moved. The Tai Kok Tsui temple, for instance, once stood in Fuk Tsun village which was destroyed as development pushed north from Kowloon. Originally close to the shore, its site is now almost a kilometer from the harbour. All that remains of Fuk Tsun village is its name, adopted for the street in which the temple is now located. Similarly, the temple in Yuen Chau Tsai, while still close to water, was moved to make way for a freeway.

It is also clear from Map 2 that the location of the Hongsheng temples does not correspond to the current population aggregations of Hong Kong. There are none, for instance, in Tuen Mun, Tsuen Wan or Shatin, to nominate three major urban centres. The reason for this is that most of the Hong Kong temples were built in the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, although some are considerably earlier. They thus predate British suzerainty over the territory, and those that do not were built before Hong Kong became a populous settlement. In other words, the distribution of Hongsheng temples reflects the settlement patterns of Hong Kong before British influence.

The listing of accompanying deities in the table shows that the gods enshrined with Hongsheng are not uniform. While it is true that several popular gods in Hong Kong reappear—Taisui, Chegong, and the ubiquitous Guandi—it is certainly not the case that Hongsheng belongs to a regular cohort. Sometimes regional preferences are obvious as in the case of Great King Fishhead, Yutou dawang, who is only found in the temples of Tong Fuk and Tai O that are both on the western end of Lantau. It is also worth noting that the bodhisattva Guanyin is found in four of the temples but she is the only Buddhist figure present in a significant way. This varied selection of gods is good evidence for the way local Chinese religion works, as essentially based on efficacy. Gods rise and fall in popularity according to their ability to grant the wishes of those who attend them. These wishes may concern occupational success or the avoidance of occupational hazards—in Hongsheng’s
case to be safe at sea—or they may healing the sick. One consistent plea to certain goddesses is for conception and the safe delivery of sons—Empress Golden Flower is popular in south-eastern China for these pleas and she is found in the Wanchai Hongsheng temple. Thus, the presence of certain gods in these temples indicates that requests made to them continue to be successful. Guanyin’s presence can be seen as an indication of her personal power rather than any approval of specific Buddhist doctrine. In fact, as a general observation, doctrine plays little part in the religious activities of village Chinese.

In Macau, five temples enshrine Hongsheng. In three of them he is a subsidiary god, including in the impressive Temple of Realised Lord Kang, Kang zhenjun miao 康真君廟, in the old town. The two temples in which he is the primary god are both located on the island of Coloane 九澳 away from the main city. One called the Temple of the Great King, Dawang miao, is at Hac Sa village 黑沙村, the other, called the Palace of the Three Sages, Sansheng gong 三聖宮, is located near Samseng 三聖 beach (named for the temple) on the north-eastern side of the island. In the latter, the gods that company Hongsheng are Guandi and Tangong 譚公, another god of fishermen and seafarers.43

Conclusions

This article sought to investigate the Chinese background to the god Hongsheng who is enshrined in the Retreat Street temple in Sydney. It has demonstrated that while, perhaps not the most illustrious god from south China, he can nonetheless boast a recorded history of close to 1500 years. His temples were found across the Pearl and West River systems and remain active in Hong Kong and Macau, at least. His efficacy as a protective deity had clearly not diminished by the later nineteenth century, so it was hardly surprising that a group of émigré Chinese from Gaoyao and Gaoming counties decided to enshrine him in their new temple in Sydney at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was, after all, one of the more important of the gods of their home villages.

This survey leads inevitably to a sad but unsurprising observation relating to the relative density of Hongsheng temples in Hong Kong and Macau compared with that in the People’s Republic. I have identified a total of twenty temples in which Hongsheng is the primary god and another four where he is present in a subsidiary position in these two small territories. At the same time I have found only a handful that remain in the People’s Republic. There is no reason to suspect that the arbitrary national borders established by colonial powers in the nineteenth century have any relevance to the cult of Hongsheng and every reason to suppose that his temples were more or less as common on both sides of these borders. Given this, the rate of destruction of temples is extraordinary. Exactly when, and under what circumstances, this destruction occurred is unclear. Investigation of the question would first, of course, require an assessment of the numbers and location of temples at some point in the past at which we can be reasonably certain that destruction had not started, perhaps in the middle of the nineteenth century to allow for the depredations of the Taiping rebellion (1850-64) which was both strong in Guangdong and enthusiastically iconoclastic. It would then be necessary to trace the political, social and religious circumstances—local and national—under which the temples that had been identified had subsequently disappeared. Such a history of the destruction of the temples of one cult in a delimited area would form a kind of

43 It should be noted that I have been unable to find firm records of Hongsheng temples in Southeast Asia. This may simply be a case of not having had the opportunity to complete a survey of all possible sites. It may, however, also indicate that the number of people emigrating from Gaoyao and Gaoming was insufficient, comparative to people from other areas, to be able to maintain their own community organisation, and thus temple, as seems to have been the case in San Francisco.
religious and social history rare in Chinese studies, one that would give insights into the particular and local effects of broad historical movements.\textsuperscript{44}

The destruction of temples and their paraphernalia is a radical form of erasure, but even where Hongsheng temples survive, loss and forgetting is as characteristic as preservation. In Hong Kong, for example, where these temples are celebrated as examples of ‘Hong Kong heritage’, some have been moved from their original sites and contexts, have been re-oriented, or have had the topography on which they were sited—fundamental to the \textit{fengshui} of the structure—radically altered through land reclamation. This is also the case in Sydney, where Hongsheng migrated with his community. The site on which his temple stands would originally have had access to Shea’s Creek, but that was converted into the Alexandria Canal at the end of the nineteenth century and the temple is now landlocked.\textsuperscript{45}

\textit{The Lions of Retreat Street} ends with transcribed stories from the elders of the Sydney temple. In the course of their reminiscences, three of them recall temples from their home villages in which one of the enshrined gods was the Great King, Dawang. As has been noted, Dawang is another name for Hongsheng: three of the Hong Kong Hongsheng temples—those at Sai Pin Wai, Wan Chau Hang and Yuen Chau Tsai—use this designation. It is, perhaps, a mark of the forgetting that has characterised the history of Chinese religion—especially local religion—in modern times and amongst expatriate communities that none of these elders made the connexion.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} While these observations relate to Hongsheng temples, it should be noted that they are unlikely to be a special case. In general, temples are much more common in Hong Kong and Macau than over the border, and it is unlikely that Hongsheng temples were especially targeted during any anti-religious campaign.

\textsuperscript{45} Ann Stephen characterises the canal’s present state as “a storm water drain surrounded by factories.” \textit{The Lions of Retreat Street}, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, pp. 68, 71, 73. Wally Ha, indeed, says (p. 71), “At home we had a village temple about the same size as Retreat Street but there were less objects and different gods. Among the gods at my village temple there was Dawang/Daiwang [Great King] and Guanyin/Gunyem [Bodhisattva or Goddess of Mercy].”