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# Temples Get a Makeover

by Caleb Ho, Nicole Chan & Rene Lam



The scent of burning incense and threads of smoke permeate the air in the Kwun Yum Temple in Hung Hom. This classic Chinese temple, dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy, was built in 1873 and attracts crowds of worshippers.

Among them is Frankie Wong Chi-chung, 24. Wong lights up a bunch of incense sticks, places them above his head and bows to the deity. It is something he has done many times.

Wong grew up in the neighbourhood and has been coming here since he was a small child. Although he has just completed his master's degree in Australia, his years of immersion in Western culture have not dampened his devotion to Buddhism.

As soon as he returns to Hong Kong, he cannot wait to go for thanksgiving. "So far I think this place has not changed much," Wong says.

Hung Hom's Kwun Yum Temple is one of the 600 Chinese traditional temples in Hong Kong. It was renovated in 1889 and 1901. Most of the features and traditional practices have persisted since then.

"Although it is bare and the queuing is a pain, it is worth making the effort if you want to express your gratitude," Wong says. He appreciates the traditional Buddhist traits evident in the temple.

On the other side of Kowloon, the renowned Taoist Sik Sik Yuen Wong Tai Sin Temple, has undergone a revolutionary facelift. After three years of renovations, Sik Sik Yuen opened the doors to a 10,000 sq ft underground prayer room, Tai Sui Yuen Chen Hall, beneath the main altar. The hall is decked in gold and cool marble and comes with state-of-the-art gadgets.

A far cry from the traditional smoke-filled gold-gilded main altar, the atmosphere in the new shrine is imposing in a totally different way.

A dome-shaped ceiling looks down on worshippers. On it, there is a digital astrological map of the heavens; LED lights, representing the stars rotate in accordance with the four seasons; 28 Chinese constellations are carved on the four pillars supporting the dome.

Worshippers must pay \$100 to enter this prayer room. For that they get three sandalwood incense sticks which emit less smoke than traditional joss sticks. They have to pay another \$300 if they wish to deposit a prayer offering to their correspondent *Taisuiyuenchen*, one of the 60 statues representing the Taoist gods of time in the prayer room.







When the list of wishes is placed inside a box in front of the statue, a beam of red light illuminates the worshipper's face and a white mist is emitted from behind the statue. These indicate the god has received their wishes.

Head of the Temple Lee Yiu-fai says the new settings and innovative use of technology are designed to encourage more "rational belief" and reflective, spiritual worship, and to "dispel superstition".

"Every feature inside is based on cultural background; every decoration reflects historical, analytical and aesthetic values. It is not for blind worship," Lee explains.

The Wong Tai Sin Temple is not the only temple to get a modern reworking. In the New Territories, Tuen Mun's Miu Fat Buddhist Monastery is a striking modern temple that some might think looks more like a sports stadium.

The shrine of glass and metal is reminiscent of a lotus flower, or hat worn by the Kstigarbha, a bodhisattva usually depicted as a monk. The construction lasted for 10 years and was completed in 2009. It adjoins an older complex, Ten Thousand Buddhas Hall, which was built in 1981.

The two structures of the monastery present an interesting contrast in style: the traditional temple adorned with a huge golden-yellow tiled roof and dazzling, gold dragons winding around the pair of 20-metre high columns at the entrance; the modern temple a huge, light-filled, airy and column-less space encased in glass curtain walls.

The abbot, Venerable Sau Chi, believes that with its modern architecture, the temple provides an environmentally friendly, peaceful and solemn place for worship and retreat. "We weighed the pros of a modern temple to society and the environment against the cons," he says. Sau Chi believes no form or style should be proscribed in Buddhist architecture.

While Sik Sik Yuen and Miu Fat Buddhist Monastery aim for higher religious objectives through modernisation, some believers prefer smaller old-style Chinese temples.

Lee Wing-hong and his friend, who only identified herself as Ms Mak, are regular worshippers in the traditional Kwun Yum Temple in Hung Hom and they disapprove of the practices at the big, prestigious temples, particularly the Wong Tai Sin Temple.

"There are lots of annoying restrictions, such as the number of incense sticks one can bring inside," they

Courtesy of Sik Sik Yuen Wong Tai Sin Temple



The modern Tai Sui Yuen Chen Hall of the Sik Sik Yuen Wong Tai Sin Temple.



People worshipping at the Wong Tai Sin Temple.


**"No matter how architecture changes, the religion remains the same."**

explain. Also Mak recalls the security guards were rude and unfriendly. "And they dumped our incense sticks so quickly that they took them away in a few minutes once you inserted them," her friend Lee adds.

They both believe donations should be given from the heart and find it unreasonable to charge an entry fee for certain halls. In fact, they think Wong Tai Sin Temple is gradually turning into a tourist attraction and they stopped worshipping there after the renovation.

Modern religious architecture is not a new phenomenon. Examples can be found around the world, including the Water Temple designed by Tadao Ando in Japan and the chapel at Ronchamp, France, built by Le Corbusier.

Although some worshippers in Hong Kong may not agree, the people behind Hong Kong's modern temples say their aim is to provide tranquil and pure settings for worship.

As historian Siu Kwok-kin, who heads the Centre for Hong Kong History and Culture Studies of the Chu Hai College of Higher Education, says: "No matter how architecture changes, the religion remains the same." 







*Some believers still prefer worshipping at the smaller old-style temples, like the Kwun Yum Temple at Hung Hom.*



*The Sakyamuni Buddha at the Miu Fat Monastery.*



*The traditional Kwun Yum Temple in Hung Hom.*