

Welcome to Guandi's Temple – A Mystic Sanctuary of Asian Cultures in Houston

By Teresa Tomkins-Walsh

Visiting the Texas Guandi Temple is a step through the looking glass, a journey into a mystical world that invites a re-envisioning of self. Within the iron gates that surround the temple are statues of heroic figures, graceful goddesses, and temple dogs. Inside the temple are representations of gods set upon elevated altars where sticks of incense burn in giant brass bowls of sand and offerings of fruit await each god's pleasure. Texas Guandi Temple is a site for the practice of millennia-old religious traditions and celebrations, but it is also a testament to the sacrifice, survival, and heroism of earthly people who chose Houston as their home. Life inside and around the Texas Guandi Temple reflects the multicultural character of the United States and the diversity of Houston. It is both a community unto itself and a cultural site open to the city.

A large building with an elaborate exterior reflective of Asian ceremonial architecture, Texas Guandi Temple is surprisingly invisible in the sense that many pass by it on the I-45 northbound frontage road between Cullen and Scott, but few take notice. This is partly because the building sits back a block from the road and partly because those who do notice assume that it is a restaurant, similar in appearance to the nearby Kim Son Restaurant. An architect from China designed the Texas Guandi Temple, the largest temple in the United States dedicated to Guandi. Materials for the building and for the interior also came from China.

For those who venture inside the temple, an experience transcending religious beliefs and cultural assumptions awaits. Approaching the grounds, one notices the three-tiered roof laced with red and gold and the fire of dragon tongues. Immense double doors that feature fierce representations of Guandi invite visitors inside. Guandi's importance is reinforced at the entrance to the temple, where his daunting figure stands on an altar higher than a man's shoulders.

Long revered in Chinese culture and Taoist tradition, Guandi is a Chinese god, also known as Guan

Cong, Guan Y, Kuan Ti, and Wudi. Guan Yu, a soldier and a general and perhaps a bean curd peddler in his early life, was a mortal man until captured and executed. After death, he became Guandi, and his popularity increased among the common people. In 1594 a Ming dynasty emperor canonized Guandi as god of war and protector of China and all its citizens.¹

Guandi's role in the temple's founding and naming is profound and personal. Originally from China, but arriving in the United States from Vietnam in 1978, Charles Ngo and his wife Carolyn survived and thrived in Houston, working from food stamps to minimum wage to opening their first business. Their Fifth Ward grocery store had been the target of several robberies. During one particularly vicious robbery, Charles Ngo believed he would die. After Charles shot one robber, a second perpetrator seized the gun and held it to Charles's head. Feeling a strong connection to Guandi, Charles prayed to his patron, and finally, the thieves left without causing further harm. Charles Ngo credits Guandi with his survival.

Charles then felt called to build a temple honoring Guandi and recognizing his good fortune at being rescued from a Vietnamese boat and accepted into the United

States. Working with the Hainam Association, Carolyn and Charles raised money to build the temple and sought Guandi's influence as they searched for a site. After locating properties, they performed a traditional Chinese fortune quest by clapping elliptical wooden tokens together and dropping them with a prayer. If the tokens fall symmetrically, there is no answer; but if the tokens fall in opposition, the answer is yes. They performed this ritual at the temple site, asking Guandi if he liked it, and he answered "yes." The Ngo family and the Hainam Association purchased the land on Milby Street along I-45 and opened the temple in 1999.²

Guandi is not the only figure represented in the temple. Around the long U-shaped hall stand altars with representations of traditional Chinese dei-



Images of Guandi adorn the large front temple doors as protection for the temple and as a decorative element.

All photos courtesy of author unless otherwise noted.



UH anthropology students explore Chinese fortunes. By shaking a canister of numbered sticks until one separates from the others, the supplicant matches the stick to one of the numbered sheets, then reads the appropriate fortune.

ties labeled with Chinese characters and their Vietnamese names written in Latin orthography. With a ceiling as high as a cathedral's and passageways wide enough to allow a celebratory dragon, the temple is cavernous and awash in color and textures. Velvet and satin cloths with golden trim and beads adorn the figures of each god, placed on individual altars with intricately carved canopies, positioned along the walls. Red fabric, lanterns, and tall candles lend a visual vibrancy to the scene. Supplicants can appeal to the individual gods for peace, health, prosperity, or good fortune. It is customary to enter the temple, pay homage to Guandi first and then to each of the gods by bowing, kneeling, or offering incense.

As an expression of gratitude to the American people, Charles Ngo intentionally developed a multi-cultural temple. From Thailand came the golden, four-faced Buddha (actually a representation of Lord Brahma). Standing on an altar adorned with flowers and beaded objects, this statue reflects the strong connection of Thai Buddhism with Indian culture. Also from Thailand is the golden representation of Buddha on the temple's back wall. Thanyaphong Sombat, the temple's resident Buddhist monk, came from Thailand ten years ago. Carolyn and Charles Ngo intended for everyone to be welcomed at the temple, including Taoists, Buddhists, and anyone else seeking respite, meditation, or counsel.

Many gods represented in the temple arise from Taoist tradition and Chinese culture. However, towering on the back wall is an immense golden representation of Buddha seated on a lotus flower in a meditative pose with a pastel aura encircled by tiny flickering lights. It is difficult to contemplate this vision of Buddha and not feel a sense of transcendence over the vicissitudes of everyday life. With the music and incense, one feels transported to another reality. The magnificent and mesmerizing presence of Buddha

causes the uninitiated to think of the temple as Buddhist. A stone statue at the east corner of the courtyard, posed in an Indian meditative posture, represents one of the original Buddha's teachers.

In contrast to Buddha's contemplative presence, Guandi is a powerful figure in the Taoist pantheon and Chinese tradition. Guandi's importance resonates throughout the Texas Guandi Temple in its name, the representations on the front doors, Guandi's position at the entrance, and the multiple representations of Guandi throughout the temple. Life in the United States has neither weakened nor diluted devotion to Guandi for the Ngo family. In fact, they credit Guandi for the life they have built in Houston.

As the temple's volunteer manager, Ming Shui Huang stands daily at the feet of Guandi, sharing the Ngo family's devotion. Ming's role is reflective of the wonders of human experience and the diversity of Houston's culture. Carolyn and Charles Ngo saw the temple as a gift to all who enter, but it is Ming Shui Huang who welcomes visitors and worshippers on a daily basis. Ming manages the temple as he works and studies with the temple monk to perform religious rituals and instruction.

Ming's intriguing coming-to-Houston story dates to the Second World War when his father worked in the United States and joined the U.S. Army to fight in the war. Listed as Boon F. Wang on his military records, Ming's father returned to China after the war, where Chinese government officials judged him disloyal and destroyed all records of Boon Wang's association with the United States. As an



Thanyaphong Sombat, the temple's resident monk, stands with the walking stick he made from Thai clay, golden amulets, and stones.



Ming Shui Huang prepares incense for temple visitors.

adult, Ming became curious about his father's sojourn in the United States and the military. He received a grant for seven days' research and traveled to San Francisco, where he collected records about his father including a Certificate of Military Service, but after the seven days he had no more funds and nowhere to go. Ming contacted the Hainam Association because its members had connections to the area in China where Ming's family had lived. The Association invited Ming to Houston and offered him a place at the Texas Guandi Temple in 2000, where he continues as the temple's volunteer manager.³

Ming's situation is similar to that of the monk's; both live on the generosity of others. Like the monk, Ming lives at the temple, but their presence supports the temple and makes it a community within a community. In small beds around the temple, Ming's wife grows vegetables; she cooks for the monk and for temple celebrations. Troubled by robberies, they have a dog who roams at night among the statues of temple dogs. Ming opens the iron fence and temple doors in welcome at ten each morning and closes them to the public at six in the evening. His belief in Taoism is deep and his dedication to Guandi an elemental aspect of his belief.

Ming tells his own story of Guandi's power. In 2004 a fire erupting from a faulty electrical connection devastated the interior of the temple. Statues and altars throughout the temple were burned, but the statue of Guandi remained untouched. When insurance investigators evaluated the fire damage, they inquired how the one statue remained untouched. Ming relates with humor how the investigators seemed to relish the idea of a powerful protector who could ward off destruction. For Ming, the deliverance of the Guandi figure evidenced the god's power as a protector.

Texas Guandi Temple is a Taoist temple, which raises the question of the relationship between Buddhism and Taoism, both in history and in the conceptualization of the Texas Guandi Temple. It is a complicated topic and a complex relationship. Guandi's role as both the guardian and namesake of the temple offers a fascinating view of the intersections between Buddhism and Taoism and ancient Chinese culture. Buddhism is the older belief system. Ming Shui Huang suggested that Buddhism is at least five thousand years old. It arose in India where it is believed Gautama Buddha or Siddhartha Gautama lived and taught between

the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. To explain the representations of Buddha and Guandi in the temple, Ming said that in Indian Buddhism, Buddha is revered as an actual living being who taught, followed a path toward enlightenment, and achieved deification. As Buddhism filtered into China, Buddha was revered solely as a deity. Guandi, on the other hand, was a person in China whose earthly history figures into his transition to the status of a saint or god. Guandi as a deity in Taoist belief goes back about four thousand years. In the Texas Guandi Temple, Buddha's representation is larger than any other. The figure of Guandi stands at the temple's entrance to protect the temple and receive reverence, but also to protect and honor Buddha, positioned directly behind and above the statue of Guandi.⁴

In China, the intermingling of Buddhist and Taoist philosophies and Chinese tradition extends back at least 2,500 years. A lifetime of study could be devoted to the similarities and differences over time, across regions, and through interpretations of ancient texts. In a separate, nearby Taoist temple, many of the same gods appear throughout various rooms, but the representation of Buddha is a smaller statue, perhaps two-and-a-half feet high, positioned in an alcove. In that temple, Guandi's horse is a nearly life-size likeness. Such differences highlight unique combinations of belief and reverence that shape each temple's purpose.

At the Texas Guandi Temple, Buddha is clearly a commanding figure even in repose. Ming and my translator Fangyi Lu suggested a simple example of difference: a petitioner might appeal to a Taoist god for help with finding a job, succeeding in business, improving health, or seeking protection for a journey. The same supplicant might appeal to Buddha for help with learning along the path to enlightenment or insight into a better way of life. Most visitors to the temple appear to pay reverence to Guandi and Buddha as well as the other gods. In the absence of doctrinal specificity, a visitor to the temple is free to recognize, contemplate, or meditate along personal inclinations, or simply to enjoy sensory overload from color, sound, smell, texture, and light.⁵

Although the Texas Guandi Temple reveals a complicated relationship between Buddhism and Taoism, another value of the temple and its inhabitants lies in the lessons of cultural enlightenment that a visit can offer. When the temple gates are closed, the temple is like a walled city. When my students and I visited the temple one Saturday, we found the iron gates inexplicably closed. A woman



An image of the Happy Buddha greets visitors as they mount the steps to the temple.

came out and spoke to us through the gates, but she did not speak English, and I did not speak Vietnamese. One of my students became agitated, declaring, “I cannot understand her if she doesn’t speak English.” This offered a wonderful opportunity to point out that inside the gates was another world where language and customs operated independently of the larger world outside.

When the gates are open and the doors swing wide in welcome, the temple is a community where people live, work, celebrate, worship, and most of all share. With no air



Exterior of the Texas Guandi Temple. Photo courtesy of Erik Otuomagie.

conditioning and only fans in summer, the fusion between exterior Houston and interior temple is profound. A lesson from Buddhism, that all spaces, places, and things are sacred as well as profane, becomes obvious and tangible. In the same sense, worshippers move about the temple, expressing reverence according to their beliefs or need, as Ming reads his Chinese newspaper or welcomes visitors, sometimes answering questions about etiquette or practices. The temple’s monk may lead chants for supplicants or confer with visitors, or just walk easily through the temple, with a glowing smile.

A visit to the temple can lead to deep philosophical investigation into the complexities of ancient and interwoven religious traditions or a visit to a wondrous place of sights, sounds, smells, and welcome. Pinning down a linear relationship in the religious, philosophical, or cultural traditions that inform the Taoist pantheon and its relationship to Buddhism can be challenging. History and fiction intermingle. Stories re-told and rituals practiced for thousands of years take on multiple manifestations over time and place. It could be satisfying to suspend disbelief and transcend pursuit of experiential stimuli. At the Texas Guandi Temple, Asian histories and cultural traditions mingle with personal experiences, allowing individual interpretations.

Teresa (Terry) Tomkins-Walsh, Ph.D., manages the Houston History Archives and teaches anthropology courses at the University of Houston. She writes on culture and Houston’s environmental action.

New books from Texas A&M

HOUSTON COUGARS IN THE 1960s

Death Threats, the Veer Offense, and the Game of the Century
Robert D. Jacobus

Forewords by Wade Phillips and James Kirby Martin

Jacobus features the first-person accounts of the players, the coaches, and others involved in the integration of college athletics in Houston, telling the gripping story of the visionary coaches, courageous athletes, and committed supporters who blazed a trail not only for athletic success but also for racial equality in 1960s Houston.

272 pp. 24 b&w photos. Bib. Index. \$29.95 cloth

NEW IN PAPER

FAIR WAYS

How Six Black Golfers Won Civil Rights in Beaumont, Texas

Robert J. Robertson

\$19.95 paper



THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ENGAGEMENT

Conflict and Revolution in the United States

Edited by Dana L. Pertermann and Holly K. Norton

Pertermann and Norton have assembled a collection exploring what archaeology can teach about the humans involved in conflict: their social mores and cultural assumptions; their use and understanding of power. The San Jacinto Battlefield is used as a case study of one of America’s most storied—and heavily trafficked—battle sites.

256 pp. 11 color, 1 b&w photos. 31 maps. 8 line art. 14 figs. 2 tables. Bib. Index. \$50.00 hardcover

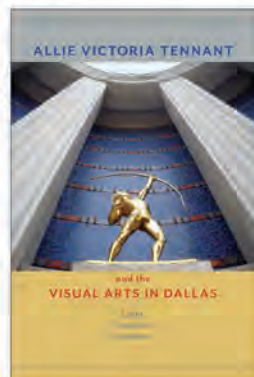
Introducing the new Women in Texas History series . . .

ALLIE VICTORIA TENNANT AND THE VISUAL ARTS IN DALLAS

Light Townsend Cummins

Cummins follows Tennant’s public career from the 1920s to the 1960s, both as an artist and as a culture-bearer, as she advanced cultural endeavors, including the arts.

384 pp. 9 color, 15 b&w photos. Bib. Index. \$35.00 cloth



A TEXAS SUFFRAGIST

Diaries and Writings of Jane Y. McCallum

Edited by Janet G. Humphrey

Humphrey supplements suffragist McCallum’s diaries with a selection of her letters, autobiographical fragments, and sketches that help round out the story of her personal and public life through 1919.

Ellen C. Temple Classics in the Women in Texas History Series

178 pp. \$22.95 paper

CITIZENS AT LAST

The Woman Suffrage Movement in Texas

General Editor Ellen C. Temple

Edited by Ruthe Winegarten

and Judith N. McArthur

Foreword by Anne Firor Scott

Richly illustrated and featuring over thirty primary documents, *Citizens at Last* reveals what it took to win the vote.

Ellen C. Temple Classics in the Women in Texas History Series

256 pp. Index. \$24.95 paper

“Houston’s University Press”



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY PRESS

www.tamupress.com • 800-826-8911