

# Religious Refuges or Cultural Nodes

## Isolation and Inclusion at the 'Untraditional' Chinese Temples in the United Kingdom

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Isolation and Inclusion at the 'Untraditional' Chinese Temples in the United Kingdom

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Chinese temples, including Buddhist Mahayana temples, Taoist shrines and venues for hybrid religions such as I-Kuan-Tao, have been established in the United Kingdom since the second half of the 20th century to satisfy the growing spiritual needs of the ethnic Chinese community.<sup>1</sup> Compared with their counterparts in other English-speaking countries, Chinese temples in the UK are unique in several ways: they are often small in scale, featuring adaptive reuse of existing buildings; they are located far away from Chinatowns or areas with a large Chinese population; and they sometimes include spaces for secular functions such as meditation, Kungfu or Taichi teaching.<sup>2</sup> Based on mapping of Chinese temples across the UK and case studies of two representative temples – Qingliang Buddhist Temple in London and Tiancheng Shrine in Manchester – this paper analyses how the spatial organisation and architectural design of Chinese temples in the UK were shaped through the intertwining, if not conflicting intentions, of isolation and inclusion, in response to the unique financial, political, and cultural challenges faced by the ethnic Chinese in British society.

different attitudes towards their multiple roles as religious facilities for an ethnic minority and potential cultural centres for the inclusion of a wider community. Qingliang Buddhist Temple, located in southeast London, was constructed through adaptive reuse of an abandoned community church, representing the financial struggle and sometimes weak political position of the ethnic Chinese in land acquisition and negotiation. To express its religious identity, the temple carefully adapted the original church building to the requirements of Buddhism in terms of spatial arrangement and decoration, yet such attempts were largely compromised and interiorised by the strict local planning regulations as well as the intention of the temple abbot to keep a low profile in the building exterior, avoiding the Buddhist temple being considered culturally “aggressive” by the local community.<sup>3</sup> While this made the temple an isolated religious refuge, it enhanced the role of the temple as a spiritual Elysium, where people can go to escape from the hustle and bustle of the secular world, attracting and connecting ethnic Chinese people from different parts of the city.

1.

Caroline Starkey, “Opening the Door to Heaven: Localization and London’s Fo Guang Shan Temple,” *Architecture and Culture* 11, no. 1 (2023): 1–28.

2.

For Chinese temples in Australia, see Hu Jin Kok, *Chinese Temples in Australia*, I–VIII (Bendigo, Vic.: Golden Dragon Museum, 2005–2011). For Chinese temples in North America, see Chuimei Ho and Bennet Bronson, *Chinese Traditional Religion and Temples in North America, 1849–1920: California* (Seattle: Chinese in Northwest America Research Committee, 2022).

3.

Master Kuan Guang (abbot of Qingliang Buddhist Temple), interviewed by the author, London, April 2, 2024

Analysis of the two case studies in this paper highlight Chinese temples’

Other temples, such as the Tiancheng Shrine in Manchester, actively extended



Figure 1:  
Tiancheng Shrine, Little Hulton, Manchester.  
(Photograph by Yinrui Xie, 2024)

their target users beyond the ethnic Chinese to better situate themselves in the local community as cultural nodes, allowing them to break cultural isolation and increase income. Tiancheng Shrine, which was created from the reuse of a former social club in northwest Manchester, was established by I-Kuan-Tao – a hybrid religion that combines the doctrines of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Through devoting space to meditation, sound bath and Chinese vegetarian food service, Tiancheng Shrine transformed the building of a former social club, which the local community had considered noisy, into a quiet and calming religious space. They also nurtured growing cultural ties between the ethnic Chinese and other ethnic groups. To achieve this, the kitchen and dining hall of the original building were renovated and expanded for community events in which local people – most of who are not ethnic Chinese – are invited to taste and learn how to cook Chinese vegetarian food. In addition to rearrangement and redecoration of the interior spaces, Tiancheng Shrine also modified the entrance of the original building according to Chinese feng-shui principles, and erected a Chinese-style portico with a curved roof and gilded columns to attract potential clients from the local community (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Such

purposeful display of Chinese elements – sometimes through self-orientalisation – formed a sharp comparison with the humble appearance of Qingliang Buddhist Temple.

Both religious refuges and cultural nodes, these temples demonstrate how Chinese temples in the UK have skilfully situated themselves in British society economically, culturally, and architecturally.

4.

Lay Kuan Gan (abbot of Tiancheng Shrine), interviewed by the author, Manchester, July 26, 2024.