

The Combined Chinese Temple in Singapore Diasporic Heritage Communities

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Abstract

Singapore's population is made up of about 75% overseas Chinese ethnic groups that have migrated there since the 19th century. Over time, Chinese communities brought over folk deities and practices that were manifested as hundreds of village temples dotted across the island's original landscape – in the 1960s, these farms adjacent to these villages supplied half of the island's vegetable needs.

Singapore's reputation as a present-day global city is also premised on transforming the same land. As the island-city-state implemented its post-war UN-advised masterplan to develop the city and infrastructure, the villages and farms were redeveloped and their former residents rehoused in high-rise public housing, where 80% of the island's population now live.

The long-established villages and communities precipitated a problem: religious buildings and communal structures constructed within the old villages were not similarly relocated by the government. Unlike city temple complexes, these less elaborate community temples often include other medical, spiritual and martial arts practices besides the syncretic mix of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

Several temple committees with different pantheons eventually leased government land to jointly build their temples within a shared compound, but with clearly demarcated spaces, in 1972. Such a form was unprecedented, and was later dubbed a "Combined Temple." In time, the Urban Redevelopment Authority permitted this new temple typology and even encouraged temples facing this same conundrum to consider combining with other temples. Between 1974 and 2012, 65 Combined Temples were re-established as amalgams from hundreds that once scattered across Singapore.

This paper discusses the Combined Temple as a new architectural hybrid whose resilience, twice moved (from Southern China and from their original locales) had emerged despite state efforts to simplify religious landscapes. Distanced from their previous congregations and now competing with adjacent neighbors, they activated new spatial and programmatic strategies to address these new challenges.