

More than a ritual

A trip to a lavish Taoist temple is akin to visiting an ancient dynasty

In Hong Kong's Wong Tai Sin district lies a traditional Taoist temple where the practice of time-honoured rituals and ancient religious beliefs reveals a fascinating other side to a city often more preoccupied with the trappings and technologies of the 21st century.

On first entering the main courtyard, visitors might easily imagine they have travelled back to a long-distant dynastic era. Before them stand the red pillars, tiered roof, golden tiles and uptilted eaves of the classical style of Chinese temple architecture, set off in lavish style with ornate carvings and latticework, blue-tinted friezes and masterful calligraphy.

All around, jostling crowds press forward with lighted sticks of incense, the smoke and perfume of which wafts in thick clouds towards the heavens.

Finding a suitable spot, those who have come to worship take their turn to kneel or bow before the altar. Their purpose is to ask the tutelary deity to grant a special personal wish or perhaps, with an offering of flowers, fruit or a roast suckling pig, to give thanks for a favour already bestowed.

The ostensible object of all this attention is a portrait of Wong Tai Sin, or "Great Immortal Wong", himself. Legend tells that he was born in humble circumstances in the late third or early fourth century AD, where he spent his early years as a simple shepherd before being inspired at the age of 15 to dedicate himself to the study of Taoism.

After 40 years of intense practice, he achieved enlightenment and came to be regarded as an immortal reputedly able to cure all illnesses. As such, his fame spread and, in later centuries, he was revered as a deity with the power not only to heal physical ailments, but also to help with relationships, business arrangements and, eventually, to grant whatever wish was made.

Main picture: Fortune sticks or *chim*.

Right from top: A fortune teller interprets the *chim* for worshippers; burning incense; and auspicious pendants.

右：籤條。右上至下：解籤人正為善信闡釋；燒香；吉祥吊墜。





However, it was only in 1915 that his reputation became more widely known in Hong Kong. In that year, the portrait was brought to the territory, and the current site was chosen for the construction of a temple, which after many extensions and refurbishments, took on its present form in 1973. It continues to draw millions of worshippers and interested visitors from around the world.

The crowds, though, are especially intense on the eve of every Lunar New Year. From before midnight, thousands will line up in the belief that being among the first to light some incense and offer up a prayer in this sacred spot is the best guarantee of good health and prosperity in the year ahead.

Amidst the perpetual hum of activity, one particular sound stands out. It is the noise of chim, or fortune sticks, being shaken together in slim bamboo containers, until one falls to the ground. Chim are broadly classified as superior, medium, or inferior, and the number on each stick corresponds to a slip of paper with a short and rather obscure sentence, interpretation of which is left to one of the temple's many revered fortune tellers.

These experts, practising the ancient arts of divination, are to be found in the dozens of small booths ranged along one side of the compound. Some read chim messages, coins, palms or faces; others specialise in astrological charts, fung shui or the traditional Chinese almanac.

All of them are there to enlighten anyone willing to set aside hi-tech gadgetry for an hour or two and turn instead to an older form of wisdom to discover their prospects for love, parenthood, new business ventures, or even a good day at the races during the Year of the Rat.

The temple, and everything that happens there, may convey a sense of timelessness, but the surrounding district is undergoing something of a transformation. A clear sign of this is the burgeoning interest in upscale apartments and retail opportunities, exemplified by a new Kerry Properties residential development, which will add a distinctive modern counterpoint to an area steeped in tradition.

道貌以外

香港是個多元化的都會，城市發展緊貼21世紀科技潮流，但仍留存著很多傳統中國特色，在黃大仙區有座歷史悠久的道教廟宇，穿過大門，眼前盡是，紅牆綠瓦、金磚重簷、樑枋交錯、雕樑畫柱，還掛上名家墨寶，彷彿時光倒流，回到古代。丹墀上放着香案，香爐，人聲鼎沸，肩摩接踵，善眾備來酬神乳豬，鮮花和水果，拜揖祈福之聲，隨着嫋嫋香煙，直裊穹蒼。



廟宇供奉的神是黃初平大仙，相傳生於三世紀末至四世紀初，家境清貧，當牧羊童謀生，15歲受熏陶而潛心修道。歷四十載而得道，法力無邊，有求必應，能治百病、善修人倫、指點商賈。自此聲名遠播，後來更被封為神。1915年大仙盛名傳至香港，神像被請來供奉於現址，及後經多番修建，至1973年時才一統現貌，招徠世界各地以百萬計的遊人善信，絡繹參拜。

農曆新年的頭注香最為鼎盛，在午夜前一刻，動輒排上數千上香人士，冀求頭注香能帶來健康好運。廟內最矚目的活動，是縈繞不停的「索索」求籤聲響，信眾不停搖着竹籤筒，直至掉出首枝籤條，籤上編號對應獨立籤文，籤文分上、中、下三等，內容深澀，需由解籤人闡釋。

廟宇周緣網羅中外神算專家，有占問卦、睇掌論相、或以銀幣、星座卜前程，還有看風水及流年運程等，各適其式。這些玩藝確有其吸引之處，遊人樂於耽上一兩小時，用古老的智慧來解讀鼠年運程、愛情、家宅、生意、甚至預測當日的賽馬馬士等。

儘管廟內循環着古老而恆久的活藝，但附近的環境卻不斷地改變，嘉里建設將在這裏興建高級的住宅和商舖，為傳統地區加添新元素。

Clockwise from top left: Classical details of Chinese temple architecture; the slips of paper that correspond with the fortune sticks. Below: The temple is in the heart of an urban area. 左順時鐘：中國傳統廟宇之建築特色；對應獨立籤文的籤紙。下：黃大仙廟位於市區心臟地帶。

