



## *Shantang*

### Charitable Temples in China, Singapore, and Malaysia

This article is based on ethnographic and documentary research that concerns *shantangs*, Chinese charitable temples, in Southeast Asia and in the Chao-Shan region of Guangdong in China. Unlike the *shantangs* as benevolent societies in late Ming and Qing China, the *shantangs* described in this article not only emphasize charitable activities, they are also temples that honor Song Dafeng as a deity. I show that the religious nature of these *shantangs* account for their resilience, while the tradition of charity helps to promote their secular and benevolent image, especially when there is a need to emphasize their existence as non-superstitious organizations. I also describe the agency of the local elite—and especially merchants—in the development of *shantangs* in Southeast Asia and China.

KEYWORDS: *shantangs*—Chinese benevolent societies—Chinese charitable temples—religion in China—Chinese religion in Southeast Asia

**S**HANTANG, translated into English as “benevolent society” or “philanthropic association,” or literally “charitable hall,” is a kind of Chinese organization that focuses on charity. This article describes the *shantangs* in Chao-Shan and Southeast Asia, which are saint-based charitable temples organized around the worship of one or more saints or deities. My first encounter with such organizations was in Malaysia in 1981–1983 when I was researching a “syncretic” religious organization called Dejiao or “Moral Uplifting Society.”<sup>1</sup> When I visited Dejiao temples throughout Malaysia and Singapore I also took the opportunity to visit a number of *shantangs*. Dejiao actually began as a *shantang* in the Chao-Shan region in Guangdong in China.<sup>2</sup> In Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, Dejiao had developed into a distinct Chinese religious group whose teachings were characterized by a reorganization of Chinese religion and moral teachings as well as a claim to some form of syncretism of the “five religions,” namely Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, and Islam. It is based on the *sanjiao* or “three religions/three teachings” of Confucius, Buddha, and Laozi, and the incorporation of Jesus and Mohammad as saints (*shizun*) (TAN 1985; FORMOSO 2010; YOSHIHARA 1987). Dejiao is an institutional religion with its own sacred text called *Dejiao Xindian* and it has basic creeds and rules for followers.<sup>3</sup> Dejiao also reorganized the Chinese pantheon, with Guan Sheng Dijun 关圣帝君 (Guandi Ye in Chinese religion) as head of the divine society Dedeshe 德德社. The founders of the “five religions” and other Chinese deities are part of this Chinese pantheon. The deities include those that are important to Dejiao, such as Fuyou Dadi 孚佑大帝, Jigong Huofo 济公活佛, Yang Junsong 杨筠松, Liu Chunfang 柳春芳, and Song Dafeng 宋大峯 (TAN 1985, 5–14).

Both the *shantang* and Dejiao temples emphasize charitable activities. The *shantangs* that I encountered in Malaysia and Singapore are types of religious institutions. Each of them provides a venue for worshipping Song Dafeng and other deities, facilities for conducting funerals, and the installation of ancestral tablets and urns. Aside from *shantangs*, in China there is a long history of charitable societies called *shanshe* 善社 or *shanhui* 善会. CHEN (1996, 197) points out that unlike *shanhuais*, which were mostly temporary and without a definite office or headquarters, *shantangs* were more permanent, and were also professionally managed. The *shan-*

*tangs* in imperial China as described by historians were generally “secular” charitable organizations.<sup>4</sup>

I wrote briefly about *shantangs* in my study of Dejiao (TAN 1985, 50–52), but I was not the first to note the presence of saint-based *shantangs* in Malaysia. In his study of the Chinese in Muar, Li Yih-Yuan described the Dejiao there and also referred to two *shantangs*, Baode Shantang and Xiude Shantang, as *jiaohui* (a church or religious organization) established by the Teochius. These were based on the worship of Song Dafeng (LI 1970, 238). Since the 1980s, there have been a few studies of such *shantangs* in Southeast Asia (FORMOSO 1996; LEE 2005; LIN Wushu 1996; 2000; ZHENG 2000) and in China (CHEN 2007). In this article I will describe *shantangs* in the context of the roles of overseas Chinese, and Chaozhou business people in particular, in their development in Southeast Asia, and in the Chao-Shan region in China. Both the charitable tradition and the religious component are crucial for the success and continuous existence of saint-based *shantangs*. In times of the Chinese state’s hostility towards Chinese religion, these *shantangs* emphasize their charitable tradition. Devotees who wish to present a cosmopolitan, non-superstitious image of *shantangs* also emphasize the charity component. At the same time the religious nature of the *shantangs* account for their resilience and dynamic existence. The continuing demand for post-death services in modern cities, which the *shantangs* are in a good position to provide, also accounts for the thriving existence of *shantangs* among the Chinese in Southeast Asia and in the Chao-Shan region in China. By studying the *shantangs* in three diverse political settings—Chao-Shan, Singapore, and Malaysia—I am able to give a better picture of the nature of the saint-based *shantangs* and how they have adjusted to the state and local communities. I will also demonstrate that the associations of *shantangs* with the overseas Chinese of Chao-Shan origin has led to the local governments in Chao-Shan capitalizing on this religious capital to attract overseas Chinese investment and to support local development. While *shantangs* in Southeast Asia originated from Chao-Shan, they in turn influence not only the development of *shantangs* in Chao-Shan but also the attitude of the local Chinese authorities on *shantangs*. The *shantang* tradition of charitable activities enables the communist authorities to emphasize the charity rhetoric over the religious (officially “superstitious”) nature of the saint-based *shantangs* in their support of projects related to the worship of Song Dafeng.

For convenience, I shall refer to Chinese religious beliefs and practices as “Chinese religion.” This study is about *shantangs* as charitable temples and is not about religious philanthropy (LALIBERTÉ, PALMER, and WU 2011), of which there are many examples. There are also other Chinese institutions that provide charity; in Southeast Asia, Chinese associations called *huiguan*, for instance, have always provided various kinds of charity (SERIZAWA 2006). Somewhat similar to the establishment of *shantang* institutions in imperial China was the establishment of Po Leung Kuk (保良局), or the “Society for the Protection of Innocents” in Singapore in 1885 and in Penang in 1888. Established by local Chinese businesses and modeled after European charitable organizations, this Anglo-Chinese welfare organiza-

tion aimed at “providing refuge and rehabilitation for the victims of the trafficking of Chinese women and girls” (KHOR and KHOO 2004).<sup>5</sup> These are “secular” Chinese charitable organizations that are different from the saint-based *shantangs* described in this article.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES IN CHINA

Before discussing the charitable temples, I shall briefly describe the historical development of *shantangs* in China, paying particular attention to aspects that are relevant to understanding some of the charitable traditions today. There are major studies of *shantangs* in China by CHEN (1996), FUMA (2005), LEUNG (1997), and SMITH (1987; 2009). These historians began their careers at approximately the same time, and their publications have contributed greatly to our knowledge of benevolent societies in China. In addition, a recent paper by SHUE (2006) considers the Guangren Tang (Hall for Spreading Benevolence) in Tianjin, which was established in 1878 for housing chaste widows and orphans. Collectively taken, this considerable body of research shows that before the establishment of *shantangs* towards the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), imperial governments had provided various means of offering charity for widows, orphans, the handicapped, and the poor. Yangji Yuan (养济院), for instance, is a well-known example of a government-sponsored charitable organization (FUMA 2005, 66). Buddhist temples of the Tang dynasty were long involved in providing various kinds of charity work before the establishment of charitable organizations by local elites (LEUNG 1997, 17). As mentioned above, and as Rowe points out, *shantangs* in the form of benevolent halls were “a momentous social innovation of the late Ch’ing” (ROWE 1989, 105). *Shantangs* had several antecedents, including in quasi-official poorhouses and orphanages and in the charitable activities of Buddhist temples.

An example of an early *minjian* (non-governmental) charitable organization is Tong Shan Hui (同善会), which was established at the end of the Ming dynasty. Historians have tried to understand the emergence of *shantangs* in late Ming China. SMITH (2009, 248) points out that the late Ming charity endeavors shared a common rhetoric of “the importance of doing good, the just distribution of resources, and the urgency of saving lives.” While Buddhism contributed to the development of organizing charity in local societies, both LEUNG (1997, 69) and FUMA (2005) attribute the emergence of *minjian* charitable organizations as being mainly inspired by Confucian thinking that regarded morality as essential for maintaining social order. As FUMA (2005, 110) notes, charity was aimed at filial sons and moral women (widows who conformed to Confucian norms). This can be seen in the kinds of charitable organizations that were established towards the end of the Ming dynasty and early Qing. These include *fangsheng hui* (放生会) or *fangsheng she* (放生社), or societies for freeing captive animals, *yange hui* (掩骼会) or skeleton burial societies, *shiguan hui* (施棺会) or coffin donation societies, *xuli hui* (恤嫠会) or widows’ relief societies, and *yuyingtang* (育婴堂) or founding societies (FUMA 2005, 126–62; CHEN 1996, 192–96).



Map of Chao-Shan, Guangdong, China (map courtesy of Ms. Luo Jiting).

The societies for freeing captive animals may appear to be very Buddhist, but the Confucian elite promoted these on the grounds of compassion for animals extended to benevolence for humans (爱物而仁民) (FUMA 2005, 135). And the skeleton burial societies were not just for burying human bones, but animal skeletons as well.<sup>6</sup> Fuma Susumu and Angela Leung's studies show that charitable societies emerged mainly in Beijing and Eastern China—for example, in Nanjing and Suzhou. FUMA (2005, 162) further points out that these were urban phenomena. Foundling societies, however, appeared all over China. While some charitable associations had some forms of official support, the *minjian*-organized charitable associations emphasized the spirit of offering charity, unlike the official approach of pity and treating recipients with disdain. Contrasting the official Yangji Tang and the *minjian* Puji Tang (普济堂), the former helped only local victims while the latter also helped non-local migrant workers (FUMA 2005, 142).

LEUNG (1997, 80–81) points out that *shantang*s in the Qing dynasty were managed either by members in charge on a rotating basis, by a board of trustees or directors. Equally significant was the involvement of both merchants and gentry in the historical founding and organization of *shantang*s (SMITH 1987, 330; LEUNG 2005, 151). For example, Guanren Tang, which was established in Tianjing in 1878 in response to the suffering caused by the Great North China Famine, involved Governor-General Li Hongzang and the urban elite, including those of various *huiguans* (SHUE 2006, 416). The involvement of both serving or retired officials and merchants continued to be important in the formation of charitable societies

in the pre-Communist Republican period. Shijie Hongwangzi Hui or the Universal Red Swastika Society, for instance, was established in 1921 by former Qing officials and Republican military officers in Beijing and Tianjing and was actually the welfare section of a religious sect called Daoyuan that was established in 1916 in Shandong (CHAN 1953, 164; SONG 2001, 5–7). In his study of *shantangs* in Shanghai, LEUNG (2005) mentions that by the end of the nineteenth century more business people became involved in the leadership of *shantangs*, especially those who migrated to Shanghai.

As we shall see, the involvement of business people and the local elite is still important in the development of *shantangs* in Chao-Shan and in Southeast Asia today. The mention of burial societies and coffin donation societies suggests that the practice of charitable societies in Southeast Asia that help to manage funeral matters have antecedents in Chinese *shantang* traditions, and the brief account of the historical development of *shantangs* in China helps to put this in perspective.

#### SHANTANGS IN CHAO-SHAN

This study of *shantangs* in Malaysia and Singapore implies that they are closely linked to the worship of Song Dafeng, a monk with the title of Dafeng (“High Mountain Peak”) of the Song dynasty.<sup>7</sup> *Shantang* literature (mainly souvenir magazines) in Southeast Asia all carry descriptions of Song Dafeng, and these are derived from the records at the *shantang* called Heping Baode Gutang (和平报德古堂) in Chaoyang, Guangdong. The *shantang* versions all mention the monk as being from Fujian, born in 1039. They also indicate that his secular name was Lin Ling’e (林灵噩). After becoming a monk, he was known for doing good deeds. His wandering brought him to Chaoyang (in Chao-Shan) where he was widely known for building a stone bridge at Heping. He died there in 1127. A hall known as Baode Tang (literally “hall of requiting kindness”) was then built in his honor. Stories of him appearing in dreams must have contributed to his deification around the early Qing dynasty (LIN Juncong 1996, 16), and he eventually became the religious focus of *shantangs* in Chao-Shan. Lin Wushu has comprehensively studied the records on Song Dafeng, especially the *Baode Tang Ji* (Baode Hall Record) of the Song dynasty. While he found errors in two dates, he accepted the year 1127 as the year the monk died, and that the *Baode Tang Ji* was written by Xu Lai (徐来) two hundred and twenty years after the death of Song Dafeng (LIN Wushu 1996, 3). The bridge known as Heping Qiao (和平桥) or Heping Bridge is still in use today.<sup>8</sup> However, Song Dafeng died before the bridge was completed. During his lifetime, Heping was called Haodun (壕墩), and so he could not have named the bridge Heping (LIN Wushu 1996, 11). Nevertheless, *shantang* devotees generally credit Song Dafeng with building this bridge.

There is no comprehensive study of the many *shantangs* in Chao-Shan yet. Their development has been closely linked to the worship of Song Dafeng as patron saint (*zushi* 祖师). While all of them honor Song Dafeng, some *shantangs* honor other deities. For example, Pan’an Shantang Fulihui (磐安善堂福利会) in

Xiangqiao Qu (湘桥区) in Chaozhou City honors Guanyin as its patron deity, with a statue of Song Dafeng installed at the altar. The altar to the right has a number of statues of deities, including Xuantian Shangdi (玄天上帝), Huatuo (华佗), and the Earth God.<sup>9</sup> In Xiangqiao Qu, there is another charitable hall called Nianxin Tang Fulishe (念心堂福利社), founded in 1785. While it honors Song Dafeng, its main deity is Yanguang Dadi (炎光大帝). At Xingyuan Fulishe (杏苑福利社) at Longhu in Chao'an County, which I visited on 26 July 2008, the patron deity is the Goddess of Mercy (Cibei Niangniang 慈悲娘娘), flanked on her right by the statue of Dizang Pusa (地藏菩萨). To the right of this deity is Songfeng Zushi, who is none other than Song Dafeng. At the altar table, there are two tablets, the bigger one honoring Song Dafeng's parents, and the smaller one being for Song Dafeng and his wife.<sup>10</sup> Next to the main hall is the building containing an ancestral hall and a funeral home. This temple was Xingyuan Shantang when it was established in 1933, and was known for collecting corpses from the Hanjiang River of those who died either in accidents or during wartime. With government approval in 1995, this *shantang* has since been revived and is well known in Chao-Shan.

Song Dafeng is honored at Ji'an Shantang (集安善堂) in Chaozhou, but the patron deity is Milefo (Maitreya), whose statue is flanked by Guanyin and Dashizhi (Mahasthama), both of whom are also Buddhist deities. Beside this main altar to the left is the statue of Song Dafeng, and to the right the famed Chinese physician Huatuo. The *shantang* was established in 1886, and according to the president<sup>11</sup> of Ji'an Shantang, this was the largest and among the oldest *shantangs* in Chaozhou.<sup>12</sup> After 1949, the Communist government used this venue for various purposes, including the establishment of a bank in the 1980s. Recently, with the support of a prominent Chaozhou tycoon from Hong Kong, the *shantang* purchased a piece of land, and the local government gave approval for a health center to be built there.

Temple records often mention disasters caused by floods and fires. The record at Nianxin Tang Fulishe in Chaozhou, for example, mentions a devastating flood in 1871, and the record at Guangji Shantang (广济善堂) in Chaozhou also mentions a flood in 1896.<sup>13</sup> Generally, in the Chao-yang region, where the worship of Song Dafeng first took place, the *shantangs* honor Song Dafeng as the patron saint. In Chaozhou City, the main deities honored may be those other than Song Dafeng, although there are usually statues of him too. Some temples provided aid to victims of disasters, while the legend of Song Dafeng inspired the formation of charitable temples. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the establishment of temples with an emphasis on charity brought about the existence of deity-based *shantangs* common in Chao-Shan, and migrants from these regions introduced these kinds of *shantangs* to Southeast Asia. The well-developed *shantangs* in Southeast Asia and successful Chaozhou business people contributed to the development of *shantangs* in Chao-Shan. The influence of Chinese migrants in the development of *shantangs* in Chao-Shan is important, and CHEN (2007) considers the spread of the worship of Song Dafeng to be mainly due to the efforts of overseas Chinese.

The cult of Song Dafeng developed from Chaoyang County, so the *shantangs* with Song Dafeng as patron saint are mainly found in this region and nearby counties. These are Chaoyang (for example, Baode Shantang 报德善堂), Chao'an (for example, Xiude Shantang 修德善堂, Caide Shantang 彩德善堂, Taihe Shantang 太和善堂), Jieyang (Jueshi Shantang 觉世善堂, Tongjing Shantang 同敬善堂), and Shantou (Cunxin Shantang 存心善堂, Chengjing Shantang 诚敬善堂, Yanshou Shantang 延寿善堂). A number of these, being the origin of “incense fire,” have branches in Southeast Asia.<sup>14</sup> According to LIN Juncong (1996, 15), there were more than 161 *shantangs* in Chao-Shan during the Republican period, most of which were in the counties of Chaoyang (54), Chao'an (42), Huilai (38), and Chenghai (14). It is thus not surprising that the *shantangs* in Southeast Asia generally trace their roots to these counties.

During the Republican period, urban *shantangs* not only provided charity for the poor and disaster victims, they also provided other essential public services. Both Nianxin Tang Fulishe in Chaozhou and Cunxin Shantang in Shantou, for example, had fire brigades. In fact, before 1949 around twenty *shantangs* in Chaozhou City had fire brigades (WENG and XU 1996, 11). After 1949, *shantangs* in Chao-Shan were seen to be promoting superstition and were suppressed—*shantangs* today have been revived at various times from the 1990s onwards. For example, Baode Shantang, which is still in a rural area, was allowed to operate again in 1994, while Cunxin Shantang in Shantou, being in a city where the local government is more sensitive to “superstitious” matters, was allowed to operate again only in 2003.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Cunxin Shantang buildings had been occupied by various government departments until 11 June 2008.<sup>16</sup> Before 1949, Cunxin Shantang ran a primary school that provided free education for children of poor families. Established in 1942,<sup>17</sup> the school, called Cunxin Xiaoxue (Cunxin Primary School), had more than seven hundred students in 1949 (LIN Juncong 1996, 18). Today this school is run by the local government. According to an epigraphic record at the temple, Cunxin Shantang also established an orphanage (儿童教养院) in 1943. Cunxin Shantang also established a hospital in 1929, and in 1945 it joined four other *shantangs* in Shantou—Chengxin Shantang (诚心善堂), Chengjing Shantang (诚敬善堂), Ci'ai Shantang (慈爱善堂), and Yanshou Shantang (延寿善堂)—to establish a bigger hospital called the Five Shantangs Hospital (五善堂医院) (SHENGPING WENSHI 1996, 25).

The earliest *shantang* in Shantou City was Tongqing Shantang (同庆善堂), established in 1888 (SHENGPING WENSHI 1996, 21). However, the most well-known *shantang* in Shantou today is Cunxin Shantang, established in 1899. According to LIN Juncong (1996, 17), the wooden statue of Song Dafeng installed for the establishment of the new *shantang* was “invited” from Mian'an Shantang (棉安善堂) in Chaoyang, which was also established in the same year. Thus, Cunxin Shantang must have been established soon after Mian'an Shantang. Construction began on the building in 1901 and it was completed in 1904.<sup>18</sup> Today Cunxin Shantang is large, with a spacious building at Wailu and a complex of buildings in an older part of the city called Oogio, or Black bridge, in the Shantou dialect (*Wuqiao* 乌桥



in Mandarin). At the Black Bridge complex there is a two-storey senior citizen's home, which faces a big cinerarium. There is even a basketball court and a free barber shop. Another important building is the deities' hall, which was rebuilt in 1995, according to a plaque there. Other than Song Dafeng there are statues of other Buddhist deities including the historical Buddha, the Buddha of Medicine, Maitreya, Guanyin, and the bodhisattva named Dizang.

At the Wailu site, there is a big statue of Song Dafeng in the main hall. The *shantang* provides three daily meals termed *aixin mianfei kuaican* ("free quick meals of love"). There is a hospital opposite the *shantang* that provides a free meal service for the poor. When I visited on 25 July 2008, the dinner included rice, a portion of meat, and a portion of vegetables. There were approximately fifteen people who came for the food. Free rice and flour are distributed to the poor, one package (the rice weighs twenty *jins* or ten kilograms) per household. There are four vans running between the two *shantang* sites and they are used for distributing aid. Two of these were donated by a businessman from Hong Kong. Aside than local charity, the *shantang* also donated to earthquake victims in Sichuan and Gansu in 2008. Now that Cunxin Shantang is able to run its own affairs, it also organizes religious celebrations, including the birthday of Song Dafeng, which is celebrated on the 29th day of the 10th moon. The Pudu or Zhongyuan festival is now observed on the 29th of the 7th moon.

During the Republican period, when most *shantangs* in Chao-Shan were formed or were active, they were targets of government suppression when the civil administration bureau ordered a crackdown of *mixin* or superstition in 1928.<sup>19</sup> Fifty-six *shantangs* appealed against this suppression and by emphasizing their charitable activities they managed to avoid being viewed as *yinci* or "evil cult temples" (CHEN 2007, 86). Although they were again seen as promoting superstition after 1949, they managed to counter the accusations to become active again from the 1990s onward. The *shantang* leaders are now careful to emphasize their charitable nature in public discourse. Officially they are *charitable* societies only, as indicated in the use of the name *fulishe* or welfare society. Since the 1980s, the *shantangs* in Southeast Asia have renewed contact with those in China, and vice-versa. We shall now describe the *shantangs* in Singapore and Malaysia to highlight their development in Southeast Asia, the nature of these charitable temples, and their transnational networks.

#### SHANTANGS IN SINGAPORE

The first *shantang* in Singapore was Seu Teck Sean Tong Yian Sin Sia or in Mandarin, Xiude Shantang Yangxin She (修德善堂养心社), established in 1916. Its Chinese-style building at Bedok North Avenue was built in 1982.<sup>20</sup> This *shantang* traces its origin to the parent temple called Dawu Xiude Shantang Yangxin She (大吴修德善堂养心社) in Chao'an County (潮安县浮洋镇大吴村), which was established in 1902. Xiude Shantang or "Hall of Cultivating Virtue" is thus the main name adopted by the *shantangs* that trace their origins to this one in Chao'an in



FIGURE 1. Heping Bridge in Chaoyang. Photographs on this page and the next were taken by the author in July 2008.



FIGURE 2. Cunxin Shantang in Shantou.



FIGURE 3. The Song Dafeng altar at Pude Shantang of Dahao in Chao-Shan.

Guangdong. In Singapore, the “incense fire” spread from Seu Teck Sean Tong Yian Sin Sia to Toa Payoh with the establishment of Toa Payoh Seu Teck Sean Tong (Dabayao Xiude Shantang 大巴窑修德善堂) in 1942. The formation of a new temple via the spread of “incense fire” mainly involves installing a new statue that has been blessed in a parent temple. In the case of the *shantang* discussed here, this means installing an altar of the patron saint Song Dafeng. The “incense fire” also spread to Malaysia, with the establishment of the Malacca branch in 1956 (修德善堂马六甲分堂), the Muar branch in 1961 (修德善堂麻坡分堂), the Pontian branch in 1964 (修德善堂笨珍分堂), and the Kampung Selamat branch in 1990 (修德善堂平安村分堂). Both Muar and Pontian are in the state of Johor while Kampung Selamat is in Province Wellesley. In Singapore a Xiude Shantang was also established in Bukit Timah in 1959, called Bukit Timah Seu Teck Sean Tong (武吉知马修德善堂).

The formation of Xiude Shantang in Singapore in 1916 was followed by Pujiu Shantang (普救善堂) in 1929 and Nanyang Tongfeng Shantang (南洋同奉善堂) in 1937. All these *shantangs* honor Song Dafeng as the patron saint. During the Second World War, the need to help the war victims and to bury the dead led to the formation of more *shantangs*, which apparently was welcomed by the Japanese authorities. After the formation of the Xiude Shantang branch in Toa Payoh in 1942, Tongjing Shantang (同静善堂) was established in 1943, and was followed

by Nan'an Shantang (南安善堂) in 1944. In response to the suffering of war and the Japanese occupation, the various *shantangs* formed a federal body to better coordinate charitable work and gain the approval of the Japanese authorities. The federal body called Zhonghua Shantang Lanshi Jiuji Zonghui (中华善堂蓝十救济总会) or Blue Cross Charitable Institution was established to this end in 1942. Teams of people from this federal body of *shantangs* were in charge of collecting corpses and burying them. They wore conical bamboo hats emblazoned with a symbol of a black cross. In the context of funerals, black is associated with death and mourning within the Chinese communities of the region. Those in charge of relief and charity wore hats with a red cross, no doubt fashioned by the symbol made famous by the Red Cross. The blue cross (*lanshi*) was adopted to symbolize providing both kinds of charity under the flags of the red cross and the black cross. The Blue Cross Charitable Institution continues to be the federal body of *shantangs* in Singapore to this day, and the membership includes the *shantangs* which were formed after the Second World War, namely, Tongde Shantang (同德善堂) established in 1950, Baode Shantang (报德善堂) established in 1959, Nanfeng Shantang (南凤善堂) established in 1961, Zhonghong Shantang (众弘善堂) established in 1974, and Chongfeng Shantang (崇峰善堂) established in 1977.<sup>21</sup>

Each *shantang* began as a small organization, generally without its own building. Dabayao Xiude Shantang was at first located in a businessman's shop, and when it established its own temple in 1946, then called Xiude Shantang Hechunyuanyuan Fentang (修德善堂合春园分堂), it was a small building with a thatched roof. In May 2009 when I visited, this temple, which was rebuilt in 2002, included a large and magnificent building. Aside from the main temple, there is also a large ancestral hall called Guide Lou (归德楼) which was built in 1992. Like other well-established *shantangs*, there is a medical department, and when I visited, there were eight doctors of Chinese medicine. In addition, this *shantang* established a dialysis center in 1995 at Yishun housing estate where patients now need to pay only a small fee for what would normally be expensive medical services. The *tangshi gu* (堂事股) or Temple Affairs Department is in charge of planchette (*fujī*)<sup>22</sup> matters and other religious work, including taking care of the altars and providing religious books (mainly Buddhist) for free distribution. There is also the department of scripture and music (*jingye gu* 经乐股), which is in charge of teaching Buddhist chants, scriptures, and traditional music such as the *suona* (唢呐), the Chinese cornet, for conducting funerals and performing on other occasions.

While the *shantangs* are open to all Chinese irrespective of where they are from, they were established and continue to be led by Teochiu businessmen. For example, the prominent leader of Xiude Shantang, Teo Soo Chuan (张泗川), was a well-known businessman in Singapore and Malaysia. He was born in Chaoyang in 1918. His father Teo Han Sam (张汉三) migrated to Kuala Lumpur in 1930, and he joined him at age fifteen. In 1939 he and his father established the famous firm See Hoy Chan (四海栈). After the war in 1945 he moved to Singapore where he became a "sugar king" and a prominent merchant in the rice marketing business. He passed away in October 2008. A prominent leader of Chinese associations, including

the Teochiu Association, Teo donated generously to *shantangs* in Singapore and Malaysia.

Of the *shantangs* I visited, Xiude Shantang at Toa Payoh and Tongde Shantang on Boon Teck Road are impressive, with their large buildings constructed in the traditional Chinese architectural style. While they vary in size (although none are small), all of them share some similar *shantang* aspects. We can gain a sense of this by describing the major departments within the temple organizations. First is the department of temple affairs, *tangshi gu* (堂事股), which is in charge of religious affairs. All the *shantangs* in Singapore have Song Dafeng as the focus of religious worship. His altar, together with those of other deities, is in the main hall or main building (if the *shantang* has more than one building). However, Tongde Shantang Nianxin She (同德善堂念心社), established in 1950, traced its “incense fire” to that of Yunjie Pusa or the bodhisattva Yunjie (运杰菩萨). According to the temple’s description, the secular name of Yunjie was Zhang Shouyu (张守愚), who was born in Puning County in Guangdong in 1881. As a monk he is said to have performed many good deeds, including burying the dead. In 1907 he renovated the Song Dafeng temple in Chao’an called Xiude Shantang Yangxin She, which was built in 1883. In addition he founded Jueshi Shantang (觉世善堂) in 1914, and Juezhen Shantang (觉真善堂) in 1922. He passed away in 1926 (TONGDE SHANTANG NIANXIN SHE, 1999, 16, 388). In the main hall of Singapore Tongde Shantang Nianxin She, three saints are honored, namely Lüzu, Song Dafeng, and the bodhisattva Yunjie, with the Taoist deity Lüzu in the center flanked by the two Buddhist sages (Song Dafeng being on his left). Since both Xiude Shantang and Tongde Shantang originated from Dawu Township in Chao-Shan, and during his lifetime Yunjie had looked after the Xiude Shantang in China, Xiude Shantang and Tongde Shantang in Singapore see themselves as related. In 1989, Xiude Shantang Yangxin She and all the Xiude branches in Singapore and Malaysia also installed the statue of Yunjie (TONGDE SHANTANG NIANXIN SHE 1999, 380–82).

Other than attending to the altars for the devotees, the religious affairs department is also in charge of the important religious activity common to all the *shantangs*, namely conducting *fuji* or planchette divination. Depending on the questions asked, the messages range from personal matters, medical prescriptions, moral advice, and unsolicited messages from a particular deity. In *shantangs*, *fuji* is the major religious activity that attracts devotees. The Toa Payoh Xiude Shantang, for example, has a pool of more than twenty planchette diviners, and there are *fuji* sessions on the first day and 15th (sometimes on the 16th) day of each Chinese month in the evening from around 7 pm.<sup>23</sup> Special sessions are held, for instance, on the eve of the Chinese New Year, attract many more people.

*Fuji* is also important for the legitimacy and even the running of the *shantangs* whose names and those of other major buildings connected to them were generally given by a deity (usually the patron saint) via divination. For example, the ancestor hall of the Singapore Toa Payoh Seu Teck Sean Tong, which was officially opened in 1992, was named Guide Lou (归德楼, Embracing Virtue Pavilion) through *fuji* revelation by the patron saint Song Dafeng. Similarly, the ancestor hall at Xiude

Shantang Yangxin She, Chongde Tang (崇德堂, Honoring Virtue Hall), was also named by the patron deity. The ancestor hall at Tongde Shantang Nianxin She called Gongde Tang (功德堂, Hall of Merit), was built as a result of instructions received from the bodhisattva Yunjie.

Deities' birthdays are important occasions for special worship. At Tonde Shantang Nianxin She, the "birthdays" of the most important deities have been fixed, namely that of Lüzu on the 14th of the 4th moon,<sup>24</sup> that of Song Dafeng on the 29th of the 10th moon, and that of the bodhisattva Yunjie on the 15th of the 11th moon.<sup>25</sup> In addition, all the deities are celebrated on the temple's anniversary on the 27th and 28th of the 4th moon. The birthday of Song Dafeng is obviously an important celebration. Xiude Shantang Yangxin She, for instance, begins the celebration annually on the 28th and so the celebration actually lasts two days. Nanfeng Shantang holds such a celebration on the 29th and the 30th, and different *shantangs* avoid celebrating Song Dafeng's birthday on the same day. Tongjing Shantang, for example, celebrates this on the 26th of the 11th moon.<sup>26</sup> Temple leaders participating in the ceremony may dress in "traditional" Chinese costume. Those at Tongjing Shantang, for example, wear white gowns and black jackets (长袍马褂) and put on black skull hats (瓜皮缨帽) (TONGJING SHANTANG 1993, 109). Devotees come to the *shantang* not only to participate in the various ceremonies and celebrations but also to fulfill their religious needs. For example, Tongde Shantang Nianxin She has a service that allows children to be adopted by the patron saint Yunjie. Such adopted children, called *huazai* (花仔), are believed to be protected by the patron saint. On the patron saint's birthday, these ritually adopted children offer rice and sweets or longevity buns and noodles.

There are also various other festivities, such as the spring and autumn or summer and winter public worship of ancestors. Although the four seasons do not exist in tropical Southeast Asia, these refer to worship conducted during the particular seasons in China. For example, Tongde Shantang Nianxin She holds its annual summer worship on the 27th of the 4th moon (around early May), and winter worship on the 16th of the 11th moon (around the end of November).

An important annual religious activity is the organization of Zhongyuan worship on the 7th moon. This is in fact a major Chinese festivity often referred to in English as the Hungry Ghost Festival, when the deceased are believed to be allowed to leave purgatory for the living world. This is an important festival that is commonly known as *pudu* (普渡) in Chinese popular religion and *yulan penhui* (盂兰盆会) in Chinese Buddhism. It is associated with the famous story of Mulian giving offerings to feed his deceased mother. Given Buddhist inclinations and the roles of *shantangs* in providing funeral services, this is obviously a very important festival for all the *shantangs*, whether in Southeast Asia or in Chao-Shan. Different *shantangs* fix different dates during the month to hold the festival, which involves public worship of the deceased and wondering ghosts. Nanfeng Shantang, for example, holds the Zhongyuan festival on the 25th and 26th of the 7th moon. In addition, *shantangs* may organize a major Buddhist rite called *shuilu*

*fahui* (水陆法会, literally water and land Buddhist ceremony) for the deceased and for all beings.<sup>27</sup>

A department of scripture and music is an essential part of a well-organized *shantang*. This section trains members in chanting Buddhist scriptures and playing traditional Chinese music. Given its Chao-Shan origins, the music is derived from the Chaozhou tradition of Buddhist music that involves the use of musical instruments such as *muyu* (木鱼, a percussion instrument for beating rhythms), *qing* (磬, an inverted bell), *bo* (钹, cymbals), *tangggu* (堂鼓, Chinese opera drum), and various kinds of wind instruments including the *suona*.<sup>28</sup> It is obvious that this department's services are required for conducting major rites and ceremonies. This section also plays the role of passing down traditional Chaozhou music and it attracts young people interested in such music and Buddhist chanting, some of whom will play significant future roles within the *shantangs*.

An important service of a *shantang* is *fuli* (福利 welfare), which is usually organized as soon as a *shantang* is established. This includes *fuli* for members (including their family) and for the public. Although *fuli* literally means "welfare," for members this often refers to mutual help in funeral matters, which includes the section that provides chanting and funeral music. A common aspect of welfare services for both members and the public is helping the poor and the old, including the donation of coffins to those who cannot afford to bury their deceased relatives; and in the case of the deceased who have no relatives or whose bodies are not claimed, the *shantangs* not only donate coffins but also arrange burial (*shiguan zengzang* 施棺赠葬). On Chinese New Year and on occasions of major *shantang* celebrations (such as the major patron saints' birthdays), monetary gifts (*hongbao*) are distributed to the aged and the needy.

Certain kinds of welfare work complement the modern welfare services that the government provides and therefore there is cooperation between the state and *shantangs* in providing these services, with the former providing the land or some financial assistance. For example, Thong Kheng Charitable Institution (Tongjing Shantang Chengshan She 同敬善堂诚善社) has a home for the handicapped called Blue Cross Thong Kheng Home. It accommodates both full-time residents and daycare clients who are charged fees based on affordability. The *shantang* also has a center for students called Thong Kheng Student Care Center. The Thong Kheng Welfare Services Society, the welfare arm of the Thong Kheng Charitable Institution, also has two activity centers for senior citizens (called the Thong Kheng Seniors Activity Centre) at Queenstown and Radin Mas. Since its establishment in 1943 just prior to the Japanese occupation, this *shantang* has been active in relief and charity work. In its earlier days it even established a primary school called Thong Kheng School, which was founded in 1946 at Kallang Road. It was eventually moved to the Geylang area where it was finally closed in 1981 when the government moved the residents away for urban redevelopment. The *shantang* also organized the Thong Kheng Basketball Team in 1954, which was rather unique for a Chinese temple, and the team had quite a long history, eventually disbanding



FIGURE 4. Xiude Shantang in Singapore. Photographs on this page and the next were taken by the author in May 2009.



FIGURE 5. Tongjing Shantang, Singapore.





FIGURE 6. Urns at the ancestral hall in Nan'an Shantang, Singapore.

in 1975. The *shantang* pioneered the provision of free Western medical services in cooperation with St. Anthony's Convent (TONGJING SHANTANG 1993, 66–67).

Well-established *shantangs* also provide senior citizen's homes. Tongde Shantang Nianxin She has a modern senior citizen's home called the Thong Teck Home for Senior Citizens (同德安老院), which was built in 1997 and was officially opened in December 1999. It has one hundred and eighty rooms that are open to needy senior citizens irrespective of ethnicity and religion. The government welfare department approached Tongde Shantang Nianxin She in 1991 to build a home for senior citizens. A piece of land was subsequently allocated for this purpose (TONGDE SHANTANG NIANXIN SHE 1999, 240). This is an example of cooperation between the government and *shantangs* in establishing welfare facilities. Other than *fuli*, there is *jiuji* (救济), which provides relief and charity for the victims of disasters. While relief efforts are usually aimed at local residents, they may also extend to victims of major disasters overseas. The Xiude *shantangs* in Singapore and Malaysia, for example, made donations to the victims of the tsunami in 2004 (XIUDE SHANTANG YANGXIN SHE 2006, 74). According to Mr. Huang Yonghe, president of Blue Cross Charitable Institution, the *shantangs* in Singapore provided relief aid for earthquake victims in Sichuan and flood victims in Burma.<sup>29</sup> In Singapore even a medium size *shantang* provides a number of important welfare services to the public. Tongjing Shantang, for instance, has a kindergarten, a senior citizen's home, and a center for those with mental illnesses that receives some financial support from the government.<sup>30</sup>

A well-known aspect of *shantang* charity in Southeast Asia is the provision of free medical consultations (usually Chinese medicine) as well as free medicine. Such free services are handled by the medical department of the *shantang*. The Toa Payoh Xiude Shantang, for instance, had eight full-time doctors of Chinese medicine and two part-time doctors providing medical services in May 2009.<sup>31</sup> This Chinese medical center was established in 1958. As a *shantang* becomes more established, it also expands and modernizes its medical services. Nanfeng Shantang, for example, officially opened its new medical center (Nanfeng Shantang Yiyao Zhongxin) in 2001. Both Toa Payoh Xiude Shantang and Tongde Shantang Nianxin She have dialysis centers.

The *shantangs* in Singapore are unlike ordinary Chinese temples as they are formally organized with a focus on performing charity while also providing religious services. *Shantangs* in Singapore and Malaysia are similar although there are some differences arising from the different multiethnic state societies in which they exist. We shall return to this after describing some examples from Malaysia.

#### SHANTANGS IN MALAYSIA

As mentioned earlier, Xiude Shantang, which was established in Singapore, has branches in Malaysia. In 1981 I visited a number of *shantangs* in southern and northern Malaysia. Those in southern Malaysia included Xiude Shantang of Malacca (Malacca Seu Teck Sean Tong Malacca), and in the state of Johor, Xiude Shantang of Muar (Seu Teck Sean Tong, Muar Branch), Baode Shantang of Muar, Roufo Chengjing Shantang (柔佛诚敬善堂; Johore Seng Keng Sian T'ng) in Batu Pahat, and Nanyang Tongfeng Shantang (南洋同奉善堂) in Johor Baru. Most members are Teochius, and all of them honor Song Dafeng, although each temple also honors a number of other deities. The Xiude Shantang of Malacca, which I revisited in July 1997, honors Song Dafeng (center), Daoji Fozu 道济佛祖 (stage right), and Huatuo Xianshi (stage left) at the three main altars. Daoji Fozu is popularly known as Jigong while Huatuo was a famous Han dynasty Chinese physician.<sup>32</sup> Other than the usual free medical consultation, funeral services, and relief work, these *shantangs* also provide donations to local Chinese-schools, given the importance of Chinese education in Malaysia.

At least one *shantang* can be found in virtually every town and city in Malaysia, while some have branches in different towns. For example, in northern Malaysia, Mingyue Shanshe (Beng Guat Sean Seah 明月善社) in Bagan Serai is the source of “incense fire” for Mingxiu Shanshe (Beng Siew Sean Siah 明修善社) of Sungai Petani, Kedah, Ming'an Shanshe (明安善社) of Teluk Anson, Perak, and Mingde Shanshe (Man Tak San Seah 明德善社) of Sungai Siput, Perak, and Mingfu Shanshe (明福善社) in Kampung Selamat in Province Wellesley.<sup>33</sup> These *shantangs*, which may be referred to as the Ming Group, honor not only the patron saint Song Dafeng, but also Song Chan Zushi (宋禅祖师) or Song Chan Saint, whose secular name was Song Chaoyue (宋超月). Each temple also honors a number of other deities. At the altar in the main hall of Mingxiu Shanshe, for example, there is a

big statue of Song Dafeng and a small statue of Song Chan Zushi. The association's publications mention Song Chan as a monk of the Ming dynasty from Chaozhou. Like Song Dafeng, he undertook a lot of charitable work during his lifetime. Both this Ming group of *shantangs* and Zhen group (which had joined Dejiao) honor Song Dafeng and Song Chan (TAN 1985, 50). Of the Ming group, Mingxiu Shanshe is a very active and large *shantang*. I first visited Mingxiu Shanshe on 23 November 1981, and revisited it on 30 August 2009.

Beng Siew Sean Siah or Mingxiu Shanshe in Sungai Petani was established in 1959. It has since continued to expand, with the building of the main hall in 1965, a multi-purpose hall in 1979, an impressive Chinese-style three-storey cinerarium called Letian Ci (乐天祠) in 1999, and a dialysis center in 2006. Like other charitable associations, there are various religious activities that occur there on a regular basis. There are spring and winter worship services held respectively in the 3rd moon and the 11th moon. There is a regular *fuji* service, and there is Zhongyuan worship. The association provides various kinds of charitable work including giving donations to the residents at the government-run senior citizen's home in Sungai Petani and nearby towns. In 2008 it donated money to victims of the Sichuan earthquake and Burma's flood. Like a number of major Chinese temples or religious organizations in Malaysia, Mingxiu Shanshe is an officially-recognized center for marriage registration. On predetermined days, an official from the marriage registry comes to the charitable associations to conduct marriage registration. Indeed, this particular charitable association is also an important Chinese cultural center where cultural activities such as calligraphy competitions are organized around the time of the Chinese New Year.

Early *shantangs* in Singapore played a crucial role in spreading a number of well-known *shantangs* in Malaysia, which are distributed in different towns in West Malaysia. While there are not so many *shantangs* in East Malaysia, the Sarawak Hun Nam Siang Tng (Sarawak Yunnan Shantang 砂撈越云南善堂) is a large, well-established *shantang* in Kuching, Sarawak. The founder was a *zhaigu* (斋姑)<sup>34</sup> called Dian Wenxiang (佃文香) who in her youth was already a devotee of Song Dafeng at Yunlong Shantang (云隆善堂) at Fuping (浮萍) town in Chao'an in Guangdong. She migrated to Singapore and in 1947 she brought the "incense fire" of Song Dafeng from Nan'an Shantang in Singapore to Kuching. With the divine instruction of Song Dafeng, Yunnan Shantang was established in 1951. The name derives from the first character of Yunlong Shantang and Nan'an Shantang, hence Yunnan or Hun Nam in Chaozhou and Hokkien languages. The *shantang* donated coffins and helped the poor as well as providing various kinds of charity. However, Sarawak Hun Nam Siang Tng was only officially registered in 1958. In the same year, a statue of Song Dafeng was brought from Taihe Shantang (太和善堂) in Chao-Shan, Guangdong.

Teochiu business people were very much involved in the establishment of the Sarawak Hun Nam Siang Tng, and the meeting to discuss the construction of a building was held at the headquarters of the Teochiu Association in November 1956, where an organizing committee was formed. The local Teochiu businessman Guo Xifeng (郭锡逢), whose ancestors were from Chao'an in the Chao-Shan



FIGURE 7. The Song Dafeng altar at Mingxiu Shanshe in Sungai Petani, Malaysia. Photograph taken by the author in August 2009.



FIGURE 8. Song Dafeng pavilion in the Song Dafeng Scenic Park in Chaoyang. Photograph taken by the author in July 2008.

region of Guangdong, donated the land for building the *shantang* headquarters and the senior citizen's home, which was built in 1961 (SARAWAK HUN NAM SIANG TNG 1985, 12–15). Like other well-established *shantangs*, Sarawak Hun Nam Siang Tng has various departments to carry out its activities, and most important for charity purposes are the medical department, the welfare department, and the funeral department (carrying the name “blue cross,” the emblem of the *shantang*). There is also a recreation department whose funeral band is in great demand, an education department that donates to Chinese schools, and a religious department that takes care of religious matters. Like other *shantangs* and Dejiao organizations, Sarawak Hun Nam Siang Tng provides relief assistance to the poor irrespective of ethnicity and religion. In Kuching, for example, some Iban and other indigenous peoples also receive aid from this *shantang*.

The extension of charitable and social services to non-Chinese is a notable feature of *shantangs* in Singapore and Malaysia. This is even more evident in Malaysia where there are more diverse ethnic groups with different religious and cultural backgrounds, as seen in the case of Sarawak. Overall, *shantangs* in Malaysia and Singapore provide important religious and social functions. Other than charity, relief work, and religious services such as planchette divination, the provision of cinerariums has become increasingly important as cremation gradually becomes accepted by urban Chinese, especially in Singapore. *Shantangs* have adapted to these modern demands very well, reinforcing their relevance in modern Singapore and Malaysia. At the same time we see *shantangs* supporting and promoting various cultural activities seen as important to the Chinese, such as donating to education and promoting calligraphy. For the Teochius, *shantangs* contribute to perpetuating aspects of Teochiu culture, such as Teochiu music and opera.

A notable difference between Malaysia and Singapore is that in Singapore the *shantangs* developed a federal organization out of necessity when there was a dire need to coordinate the treatment of war victims in the city during the Second World War, which required cooperation with the occupying Japanese authorities. In addition, the Singapore Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports has a Charity Council which promotes “self-regulation and increases public confidence in the charity sector.”<sup>35</sup> It oversees good governance of the charity sector. Like all registered societies, *shantangs* are subject to the laws that control accountability and check corruption because they receive donations. Perhaps to ensure good governance, major *shantangs* in Singapore set up a separate welfare society to handle major charity projects, whereas in Malaysia it has not been necessary for the *shantangs* to set up a separate registered charity society for the management of fundraising and charitable work.

#### TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS AND IMPACT IN CHAO-SHAN

I have elaborated upon the spread of *shantangs* in Southeast Asia and the roles of Chaozhou business people as contributing factors to the establishment and development of similar institutions in pre-1949 China during the latter half of the

nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century. With the relative ease of renewed contact between Southeast Asia and China after 1978, the more established *shantangs* in Southeast Asia once again began contributing significantly to the development of *shantangs* in China. Pan'an Shantang Fulihui in Chaozhou, as we have seen, received large financial contributions from Nan'an Shantang in Singapore. Given the Chinese government's sensitivity to treating *shantangs* as religious organizations, this is handled with care in the transnational networking process, especially by those in China. The use of the name *fulihui* or welfare society may be seen as a way of dealing with government sensitivity. There is also no interest, and indeed there is no need, to discuss whether *shantangs* are religious or not, and if discussed it is often politically correct to stress the charitable aspect.<sup>36</sup> It has only been from the 1990s onwards that the local communist governments have become more relaxed about controlling Chinese popular religion, including *shantangs*. We have seen that Cunxin Shantang in Shantou has been active since the 1990s, not only with organizing more charitable activities but also more religious activities. Even though it does not have "sister associations" in Malaysia and Singapore, representatives from major *shantangs* in Singapore and Malaysia have visited it, and it has invited others from some *shantangs* in Southeast Asia to attend its major religious activities, especially the celebration of Song Dafeng's birthday which is observed in this *shantang* on the 29th of the 10th moon.

There have been mutual visits between the *shantangs* in Southeast Asia and related *shantangs* in Chao-Shan, although it is those in Southeast Asia that organize the trips more frequently as in general they are financially more established. Furthermore, Chao-Shan is the original *shantang* homeland of those in Southeast Asia, so there is great interest among Southeast Asian *shantang* members to organize trips to Chao-Shan for both pilgrimage (*jinxiang* 进香) and tourism on occasions such as major temple celebrations. For instance, Xiude Shantang Yangxin She in Singapore, together with Xiude branches in Singapore and Malaysia, organized a visit to Chao-Shan in 2002 to attend the one hundredth anniversary celebration of the original Xiude Temple in Dawu Township in Chao'an, which included visits to some other *shantangs*. These transnational relations involve visits and donations to support various *shantang* activities in Chao-Shan. In 1991 Singapore's Tongde Shantang Nianxin She contributed to the building of Yunjie Secondary School in Chaozhou (TONGDE SHANTANG NIANXIN SHE 1999, 388). The school was named after the bodhisattva Yunjie.

The realization that *shantangs* in Southeast Asia are organizations that have influential business people with links to Chao-Shan who are willing to donate charitable funds to be used in their ancestral homeland, has contributed to the local governments in Chao-Shan relaxing their control of purported superstitions associated with the *shantangs*. In fact the local government in Chaoyang even established a huge complex called Song Dafeng Fengjingqu or Song Dafeng Scenic Park, which has an area of 2.62 square kilometers.<sup>37</sup> The reason for this was that the government came to understand the significance of Song Dafeng to the *shantangs* and their followers overseas. *Shantangs* outside mainland China, South-

east Asia in particular, contributed generously to the establishment of the park, which is today a tourist site. The site is visited by overseas Chinese, especially those who are involved in *shantangs* in their respective hometowns. Even the memorial museum of Song Dafeng (Dafeng Zushi Jinian Guan) was built in 1996 with donations from Southeast Asia, primarily from Huaqiao Baode Shantang located in Thailand. The displays, however, are noticeably government-controlled in terms of the underlying ideological messages being sent. The emphasis is on “overseas Chinese donations, loving care from the Party [华侨捐献, 党政关怀].”

The focus and most important aspect of the park is Dafeng Zushi Ting or Saint Dafeng Pavilion, which is supported by sixteen tall stone pillars within which a twenty-eight-meter tall white marble statue of Song Dafeng is housed. Above the impressive pillars are many plaques that list the *shantangs* that have offered donations; these include Zhonghua Shantang Lanshi Jiuji Zonghui and individual *shantangs* from Singapore, as well as *shantangs* from Malaysia and Thailand. Behind the pavilion is the grave of Song Dafeng (*zushi mu*). To the right of the grave is a two-storey building called Baode Lou, built with donations from the local and overseas *shantangs*. There is an office of Heping Baode Gutang, with a room for dispensing free medicine. As mentioned previously, Heping in Chaoyang County is the original home of the Baode Shantang, so *shantangs* in Southeast Asia which carry the name Baode contributed generously to the establishment of Song Dafeng Park.

The Song Dafeng Scenic Park displays the official involvement in tourist development that capitalizes on not only the local but also the overseas Chinese worship of Song Dafeng. It therefore provides an additional focus on the transnational *shantang* networks between Southeast Asia and Chao-Shan, while devotees from Southeast Asia also visit and worship at the *shantang* that has the closest network with their own *shantang* in their homeland.

## CONCLUSION

From the above description it is clear that *shantangs* in Southeast Asia and in the Chaoyang and Shantou regions are organized mainly around the worship of Song Dafeng. While they have a strong Buddhist orientation in terms of the deities honored and the rites observed, the Taoist component is visible in the practice of *fujī*. At the same time, however, providing charity conforms to Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist teachings. But, unlike Dejiào, these *shantangs* are not organized into “churches,” or pan-Chinese religious organizations. Each *shantang* is a separate temple that has its local and transnational connections with other *shantangs*. Because of their common origins stemming from charitable temples, some of them are sister organizations and have close networks. In general, *shantangs* as charitable temples are not mere *luantangs* (“phoenix halls”) or the “*fujī*-centered sectarian group[s]” (JORDAN and OVERMYER 1986, 79) that became popular in late Qing China (TAKEUCHI 1996). By the twentieth century, *fujī* had become the main type of divination in many Chinese temples and especially among organized religious groups. It is more appropriate to treat these as distinct religious organi-

zations rather than to focus on them solely as the spirit writing centers known as *luantang*.

My ethnographic description shows that the *shantangs* in Chao-Shan and in Southeast Asia are distinct from the largely non-deity-based *shantangs* that the majority of scholars have studied. Like most other non-state sanctioned temples in the anti-superstition campaigns during the Republican and Maoist periods in China, they were targeted for their religious orientation. One can argue that it is precisely their religious nature that accounts for their resilience. The charity and management of the public good can be taken over by the modern state, but as religious organizations, *shantangs* cannot be replaced by the state. Today, in view of the significance of *shantangs* to the Chinese overseas and the economic benefits that transnational *shantang* networks bring, local governments in Chao-Shan have liberalized their control of *shantangs* and capitalized on overseas Chinese networks to aid development in their respective regions. The charitable aspect allows the state to emphasize the developmental dimension in its administration of *shantangs*, which in turn have adjusted to this new situation that has allowed for their resurgence in China today.

This argument suggests that when the *shantangs* in Chao-Shan deal with the state, they present the charitable dimension of their work for official acceptance while conducting religious activities at the same time, which includes organizing the worship of the dead and the wandering souls during the Hungry Ghost Festival. In Singapore and Malaysia there are no government restrictions on conducting religious activities, but the charitable dimension is useful for those devotees who wish to emphasize a less “superstitious” image of the *shantangs*. Such a strategy allows for the temple to provide various kinds of religious services, including spirit writing, while at the same time conducting secular charitable activities. The *shantangs* have also adjusted to such multiethnic societies by providing charity for all people irrespective of ethnicity and religious affiliation. They also respond to the cultural needs of local Chinese communities, hence making them relevant to the diasporic Chinese population of Southeast Asia. For example, traditional Chinese education is very much associated with Chinese identity in Southeast Asia. With this in mind, *shantangs*, especially those in Malaysia where there are Chinese schools, generally provide donations to support Chinese education.

Today *shantangs* in Southeast Asia are registered bodies with modern management. They were established by Chaozhou business people and are still led by them, having connections with both the state and business sector. These Chaozhou business people in turn promoted and contributed to the development of *shantangs* in Chao-Shan. Other than the crucial involvement of merchants, the involvement of Chinese-educated intelligentsia (such as school teachers and clerks) is also important. In Singapore, for example, I noted that the volunteer and salaried staff of *shantangs* are generally people who have received at least some Chinese education. They include a number of people who graduated from Nanyang University in Singapore. While *shantangs* in Southeast Asia were established by migrants from Chao-Shan and are still closely associated with the Teochiu, they have increasingly



become pan-Chinese institutions as more non-Teochius are involved. In fact, in the Hokkien majority area, for instance, most devotees may be Hokkiens, for even the leaders include a number of non-Chaozhou people.

The historical background on the development of *shantangs* in China in general, as we have seen, is relevant to our understanding of *shantangs* as charitable temples. During the late Ming period the development of *shantangs* had to do with the emergence of a business class cooperating with the local elite and the government. I have noted this is also generally true today, even in Southeast Asia. Of more significance is the performance of charity. Burying the unclaimed dead and donating coffins have long been part of *shantang* tradition, whether they are secular or saint-focused. The practice of donating coffins, for instance, has a long history in China, and funeral societies (*zanghui* 葬会) were common during the Qing dynasty (LEUNG 1997, 218–19). It is thus not surprising that donating coffins and assisting at funerals were important services provided by *shantangs* in Southeast Asia, and continue to be so. During times of war, *shantangs* played a crucial role in burying the dead and helping war victims, as they did for instance during the Second World War.<sup>38</sup>

In Southeast Asia, we find that *shantangs* have played important roles among Chinese migrants. Instead of being replaced by the modern state, or “becoming an extinct institution” as KUAH-PEARCE (2008, 512) has assumed, *shantangs* in Singapore remain important. The Singaporean state has also used the presence of *shantangs* to ensure the provision of services for the public good, such as encouraging a *shantang* to establish a home for senior citizens. Instead of being phased out by the state, therefore, some *shantangs* in Singapore now manage larger projects than they handled previously. Increased economic growth and the level of civil involvement has obviously enhanced the status of *shantangs* as institutions. *Shantangs*, like other temples in Singapore, may have to make way for urban renewal, but they have been able to find new sites and build even larger temples successfully.

What we notice in each of the three diverse political settings discussed here (China, Singapore and Malaysia), is that *shantangs* have negotiated with the state in their respective ways to allow for smoother functioning. In China, where the issue of superstition is still sensitive to the state, the *shantangs* have compromised and emphasized the charitable dimension, even adopting the name *fulishe* or welfare society. In Singapore, where superstition is not an issue for the state and where *shantangs* can practice freely as part of Chinese traditional religion, the *shantangs* cooperate with the state to provide modern welfare services, and in the process make themselves relevant. In Malaysia, where Chinese can also practice their traditional religion freely despite the Malay-led government, which emphasizes Islam and Malay nationalism, the *shantangs* not only provide charitable and religious services, but they also remain actively involved in local Chinese cultural activities and the promotion of Chinese education.

All the major *shantangs* in Chao-Shan and Southeast Asia also extend charity to places beyond local arenas, such as contributing donations to aid the 2008 earthquake victims in Sichuan. Those in Singapore and Malaysia have a global

reach as they also give donations to victims of major disasters in other parts of the world. Thus, in catering to the social and religious needs of Chinese devotees and by providing charity to the local population, *shantang* temples have continuously recreated themselves to be relevant to modern Chinese communities throughout the transnational region. Occasional global donations help widen their vision and enhance their local standing. The translocal and transnational networks among the *shantangs* of Southeast Asia and Chao-Shan strengthen their connection, cooperation, and common ritual focus on Song Dafeng. As religious organizations, *shantangs* have been, and are likely to remain, incredibly resilient.

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#### NOTES

\*A version of this article was presented at the Joint Conference of the Association for Asian Studies and the International Convention of Asian Scholars, 31 March–3 April 2011, Honolulu, Hawai‘i, in the panel “From the ‘Small-Self’ to the ‘Big-Self’: Religion and Giving in Chinese Societies,” organized by Dr. Keping Wu and Professor Robert Weller. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments. I am grateful to Professor Huang Ting of Shantou University for his assistance in my field investigation in Chao-Shan. I also thank Dr. Ding Yuling for introducing Prof. Huang Ting to me and for her assistance in my field research in Chao-Shan. My field investigation in Chaozhou, arranged by Professor Huang, was assisted by Mr. Chen Lijiang of Hanshan Normal University. My research in Singapore was assisted by Mr. Teo Seng Yeong, Vice president of Singapore Hui Ann Association, who accompanied me to the various *shantangs* in Singapore in May 2009. I am grateful to him for taking out his time to drive me to the various *shantangs*. In this article, Chinese words are transliterated in Mandarin (Putonghua) using the standard pinyin system, except personal names and where otherwise indicated.

1. Syncretic here does not refer to the merging of elements from different religious traditions neatly into a unitary whole. In my study of Dejiao I define syncretism as “selective borrowing and reinterpretation of symbols of various religions, and incorporating them into a certain religious tradition so that a new religious identity is created” (TAN 1985, 71). For a discussion of syncretism in the study of Chinese religion, see BROOK 1993.

2. Chao-Shan refers to Chaozhou, Jieyang, Shantou, and Shanwei, the homeland of the Teochiu (Chaozhou) migrants in Guangdong. In Southeast Asia, Teochiu (Chaozhou) refers not only to migrants from Chaozhou but also to the whole Chao-Shan region.

3. C. K. YANG (1961, 295) distinguishes institutional religion, which “functions independently as a separate system,” from diffused religion, which “functions as a part of the secular social institutions.” He includes Buddhism, Taoism, and sectarian societies as institutional religions. There are seven items of the basic creed, the first of which is that the concept of *de* (virtue) must not be separated from Dejiao, nor should one lack *de*. There are also ten virtues and eight rules (*shizhang baze*) that Dejiao followers should observe. The ten virtues comprise Confucian values such as filial piety, brotherly love, faithfulness; the eight rules are what followers must refrain from, such as not cheating, not being hypocritical, and so on. For a full description see TAN 1985, 9.

4. Nevertheless, the *shantangs* may have been influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism. Further research may reveal the existence of more benevolent associations in imperial China that may have been organized around the worship of one or more deities, as in the case of Chao-Shan.

5. Po Leung Kuk was established in Hong Kong in 1878 and it has expanded its functions to take care of destitute women, orphans, and the elderly, irrespective of ethnicity and religion. However, the Penang Po Leung Kuk was closed in 1977 and was taken over by the

government welfare department. Similarly, the government took over the welfare function of Po Leung Kuk in Singapore after the Second World War although the Po Leung Kuk Fund was dissolved only in 1993 (KHOR and KHOO 2004, 165).

6. Both LEUNG (1997, 71–101) and FUMA (2005) have very good descriptions of infanticide and *yuyingtang*, which is the focus of Fuma’s study.

7. My description of the *shantangs* in Chao-Shan is based on a field trip I conducted in July 2008.

8. I visited the bridge and the nearby Baode Gutang on 25 July 2008. The bridge was last renovated in 1992 with support from Baode Gutang.

9. I visited this site on 26 July 2008. Established in 1900 and suppressed during the Maoist leftist period, this *shantang* was revived in 1995. The two-storey building comprises the main hall downstairs and a meeting room upstairs. A free medical service is provided every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. This *shantang* has close connections with the Singapore Nanyang Shantang, with five of its leaders serving as the *shantang*’s honorary advisors. It also receives a financial contribution from the Singapore *shantang*. The Taoist deity Xuantian Shangdi is popularly worshipped in many Chinese temples in Malaysia and Singapore. The deified Huatuo was a famous Chinese physician of the early second century (d. 208 CE).

10. The Chinese characters on Song Dafeng’s tablet are *Song Dafeng zushi/furen lingpai* 宋大峰祖师/夫人灵牌 (tablet of Song Dafeng and his wife). The characters on his parents’ tablet read *gaotang Song Laotaiigong/Laofuren lingpai* 高堂宋老太公/老太夫人灵牌 (tablet of the parents of Song Dafeng). This is the only temple I have seen where Song Dafeng is honored together with his wife. I can find no information on his wife, such as whether they were married before he became a monk or whether it was a posthumous marriage.

11. There are various terms for a president of a *shantang*, and here it is *shezhang* (literally “head of an organization”). In the case of the *shantangs* in Singapore and Malaysia, the president is referred to as *zhuxi* (literally “chairman”) or *shezhang*. In Southeast Asia it is common, when speaking English, to use the English term “president” to refer to the head or chairman of a Chinese organization.

Each *shantang* today has a board of directors (*dongshi*) led by a president and vice-president, and many other positions: a secretary for general affairs (*zongwu*), a Chinese secretary, an English secretary, and secretaries for finance, medicine, public relations, welfare, entertainment, temple affairs, scripture and music, and an auditor—plus each position has a deputy. Aside from the Chinese and English secretaries and a few retired teachers and professionals who generally serve in the position of secretary for general affairs, most members are business people. The board of directors is generally all men.

12. According to WENG and XU (1996, 7), Yongde Shantang (永德善堂) was established in 1867, before Ji’an Shantang. It appears the deity-based *shantangs* in Chaozhou City emerged after the mid-nineteenth century, and there were thirty-eight of them by the 1930s (WENG and XU 1996, 6).

13. I visited this *shantang* on 16 July 2008. It does not honor Song Dafeng, and the deities worshipped are Taoist and Buddhist, especially Lü Chuyang and Guanyin respectively. There is a separate altar which honors the monk Guanji, who is attributed as the builder of the Guanji Bridge in the twelfth century.

14. “Incense fire” is the literal transliteration of the Chinese term *xianghuo* 香火, which refers to the burning of joss sticks, which are essential for worshipping deities and ancestors. A branch temple is established when a deity’s statue from an original temple is installed in a new temple, or when a new statue is brought to the original temple. Joss sticks are burnt, thus obtaining the incense fire for the new temple, or the incense ash from the original temple is obtained for installing in the incense pot of a new temple. The branching off of temples through spreading the incense fire is called *fenxiang* or “dividing incense.” For a discussion of

establishing temples through the link of incense fire, see for instance SANGREN (1987, 213) and HUANG (1994, 100–108).

15. Attempts to revive *shantang*s had begun in the 1980s although it was only after 1990 that most could operate more freely. Devotees at Baode Shantang established Baode Gutang Fulihui (报德古堂福利会) in 1981 using the name *fulihui* (welfare society) instead of *shantang*, and this has been seen as part of the effort in their revival (LIN Juncong 1996, 16). The official sensitivity toward reviving *shantang*s because of their “superstitious” backgrounds is also apparent in the case of Chengxin Shantang in Shantou, which was established in 1932. A few people tried to revive the *shantang* in 1981 but they were soon forced by the local government to give up. It was only in 1993 with the addition of the term “welfare society” to its name as Chengxin Shantang Fulihui that it finally received official approval (SHENGPING WENSHI 1996, 128).

16. Interview with the president of Cunxin Shantang, Mr. Cai, on 25 July 2008.

17. There is an epigraphic record dated 1942 concerning the completion of the school building (SHENGPING WENSHI 1996, 113–14).

18. There is an epigraphic record dated 1901 which was the official announcement of the site allocated for the building of the *shantang* (SHENGPING WENSHI 1996, 109).

19. Shuk-Wah Poon points out that the eradication of superstition did not become official policy until after the 1911 revolution. The campaign intensified after the central government was established in Nanjing in 1928 (POON 2008; 2011).

20. The souvenir magazine of this *shantang* has a brief description of its history and the spread of Xiude Shantang. See XIUDE SHANTANG YANGXIN SHE (2006, 49–65).

21. The information on the Blue Cross Charitable Institution is based on an interview with its current president Mr. Huang Yonghe at Baode Shantang’s office on 29 May 2009, as well as a description in the souvenir magazine of NANFENG SHANTANG (2007).

22. *Fuji*, often translated as planchette writing, is a form of Chinese divination which involves a deity revealing his or her messages through spirit writing. This is a popular Taoist divination which involves one or more mediums holding a planchette stick and traditionally writing on a tray of sand while one person interprets the characters written and another records the messages. Today in some temples the writing is also done on a surface without any sand.

23. I learned of this when visiting the temple on 30 May 2009.

24. Lüzu is a famous Taoist deity who originated from a Tang Taoist priest called Lü Dongbin. Also known as Lü Chunyang, he is one of the eight immortals. He is a popular Taoist deity in Dejiào where he is often known by his title Fuyou Dadi 孚佑大帝 or Fuyou Dizun 孚佑帝尊. His birthday is believed to be on the 14th of the 4th moon, although different temples may celebrate the birthday on different dates.

25. The celebrations of the birthday of Bodhisattva Yunjie on the 15th and 16th of the 11th moon include conducting the rites of *xizi* (惜字; “cherishing written words”), releasing captive animals (such as birds and turtles), and giving charity to the poor. The rites of *xizi* and *fangsheng* (releasing captive animals) are conducted during this celebration because during his lifetime, Bodhisattva Yunjie is said to have carried baskets with him to collect waste paper and animal remains. The association of *xizi* with charity can be traced to *xizihui* or “cherish written paper” societies which first appeared in early Qing. These societies organized the collection of written waste paper, burned them, and released the ashes into a river or the sea. They promoted the idea of respect for characters written on paper and essentially treated written words as sacred. They discouraged people from using paper with written words to wrap things. In addition, these societies were involved in various kinds of charity work (LEUNG 1997, 132–55).

26. Interview with the Secretary for General Affairs Mr. Ng Thee Kok at the temple on 30 May 2009.

27. For a description of *shuilu fahui*, see TONGDE SHANTANG NIANXIN SHE (1999, 174).

28. For a description of Chaozhou “temple music,” see JONES (1995, 342–44). Interestingly Jones mentions that the “charitable halls” (*shantang*) are also called *nian fo she* or “societies for reciting the [name of] Buddhas,” indicating the religious aspect of the *shantang*.

29. Interview conducted with Mr. Hunag Yonghe at Baode Shantang on 29 May 2009.

30. Interview with the Secretary for General Affairs, Mr. Ng Thee Kok, at the temple on 30 May 2009.

31. Interview with the former and present General Secretaries, Mr. Zheng and Mr. Cai, on 30 May 2009, in the medical consultation room of the *shantang*.

32. Like Lüzu this is a popular deity in *fujī* or planchette divination. He is also the patron deity of a Dejiao group that TAN (1985) has classified as the Ji group.

33. Except for Mingfu Shanshe, I visited all these *shantangs* in 1981.

34. A *zhaigu*, literally “vegetarian aunty,” is not a formally trained Buddhist nun, but she is usually an unmarried woman who devotes her life to Buddhism, lives like a nun, and observes vegetarianism, hence the term *zhai* for “vegetarian.” TOPLEY (1956, 71) describes *zhaigu* as lay nuns who do not shave their heads. According to records of the Yunnan Shangtang, Dian Wenxiang was possessed by Song Dafeng in 1949 and devoted her life to Buddhism, setting up the altar of Song Dafeng for people to worship. In this way Yunnan Shantang was established in 1951 with the planchette instructions from Song Dafeng (SARAWAK HUN NAM SIANG TNG 1985, 152).

35. For more information, see <http://www.charitycouncil.org.sg>.

36. The suppression of *shantang* during the Republican period was part of the campaign against superstition, and most temples—including *shantangs*—were included in this campaign. During the Maoist period the campaign against superstitions included all forms of Chinese popular religion, and during the Cultural Revolution, all forms of religion were suppressed. I do not foresee China returning to these kinds of campaigns, even though Chinese popular religion is still not officially recognized, given the socialist view of religion as covering only such institutional religions like Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.

37. There is another religion-based theme park in Chao-Shan, namely the Dahao Qingyuan Fengjingqu (达濠青云岩风景区) in Dahao, which is not far from Shantou City. There are a few temples in this park, one of which is Dafeng Gumiao or Dafeng Temple. In Dahao there is a well-known *shantang* called Pude Shantang (普德善堂), which I visited on 8 July 2008. Established in 1902, this *shantang* was known for its pills for curing dog bites. When Professor Huang Ting, Dr. Ding Yuling, and I visited the temple on 8 July 2008, an old man there proudly showed us the bag that was used in the Republican period to carry medicine as well as the “dog bite pills” and *lausai wan*, pills for curing diarrhea. Some residents in the area hang a picture of Song Dafeng above the main entrances of their houses.

38. In the case of the Nanjing massacre, the Universal Red Swastika Society, which had established a branch in Nanjing in 1923, obtained permission from the Japanese authorities to collect corpses under its flag in 1937 (SUN 1995, 313).

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