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PERCEPTIONS OF CHINESE TEMPLES THROUGH SOUNDSCAPE AND SMELLSCAPE: A CASE STUDY AT WONG TAI SIN

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ABSTRACT

Most Chinese temples in Hong Kong were built long before the city's modern economic transformation in the 1950s. Consequently, many of these temples are located in densely populated areas surrounded by residential, commercial, and industrial buildings. Some key elements of Chinese temples include music playing, the sound of rituals, and the direct burning of incense. Established by existing literature, observation, and interviews, some of these practices can create nuisance and adverse health effects on individuals. All these bring us to the question: are there any conflicts between preserving the sounds and smells of temples and the comfort of nearby residents, specifically in Hong Kong? Through conducting semi-structured and unstructured interviews at Wong Tai Sin Temple, one of the largest and most representative establishments of such kind in Hong Kong, we attempt to understand the perspectives of different groups of people (e.g., local residents/visitors, foreign tourists, staff, etc.) within the setting of a temple. This is further supplemented by reviewing the public discourse via popular sources (e.g., popular media, social media, online forums, etc.) to mediate the potential bias from a single-site field study.

Keywords: *soundscape, smellscape, sensory heritage, Chinese temples, Hong Kong*

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese temples (or Chinese temple architectures, if specifically referring to the physical structure of the temple) refer to places of worship for Chinese religions. This usually includes Chinese folk religion, as well as Buddhism, Taoism (Daoism), and Confucianism of Chinese influence [1]. In the Hong Kong context, the term is legally defined in the Chinese Temples Ordinance (Cap. 153) as “all Miu (廟, temples), Tsz (寺, Buddhist monasteries), Kun and To Yuen (觀及道院, Taoist monasteries) and Om (庵, nunneries)” [2]. Most Chinese temples in Hong Kong were built before the 1950s (i.e., before Hong Kong's economic transformation), and hence, most of them are surrounded by residential, commercial, and industrial buildings [1,3]. Typical elements of Chinese temples in regard to sounds and smells include the playing of music, the sounds (and smells) of rituals, and the burning of incense. Whilst these activities assemble an integral part of the cultural value of these temples, it has been established by existing literature (including our previous study) and further confirmed by our observation and interviewees that some of these practices can bring nuisance or even negative health impacts (such as respiratory diseases) to individuals [1,3-7].

Wong Tai Sin Temple is one of the most well-known establishments of this kind in Hong Kong, and it has grown to become a tourist attraction. As such, different groups of people in relation to the temple co-exist within the establishment, and we hope to understand the perspectives of different stakeholders through Wong Tai Sin as a case study. By interviewing different stakeholders (e.g., local residents/visitors, tourists, worshippers, staff members, merchants, etc.), we hope to understand their perspectives regarding the sounds and smells of Chinese temples, especially in regard to any potential conflicting views among the stakeholders. This paper aims to deliver our

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preliminary findings from a series of unstructured and semi-structured interviews of different stakeholders conducted in or around Wong Tai Sin Temple. To better understand the perspectives of a broader public audience, as well as to mediate any potential bias from our interviews due to several external factors (e.g., time, season, period of a year, weather, etc.), we also incorporate online comments regarding Wong Tai Sin Temple into this paper.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative data collection. We have conducted a series of interviews (n=57) with (n=65) interviewees. The difference between the number of interviews conducted and the number of interviewees is because some interviews were conducted with multiple interviewees who appeared as a pair or as a group. The interviews were conducted either inside Wong Tai Sin Temple or in the immediate surrounding area in a semi-structured or unstructured format. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, English, and Mandarin Chinese, with one particular interview in French. In addition, Google Maps reviews and TripAdvisor comments about the temple are extracted. By incorporating the frequently adopted literal descriptors associated with *sound* and *smell* by our interviewees, we have searched the comments for four terms (*noise*, *calm*, *smoky*, and *fragrant*) extracting the comments that capture the sensorial experience upon the temple visited. Based on the online comments (n=24) about sound and smell, there is a split of positive and negative sentiments, with an inclining positive about the novel experience which could be explained by self-selection bias (largely expressed by tourists). Despite that, the access to online data at various temporal points has diversified our dataset and analysed our field results. We are currently at the stage of performing a thorough content analysis of the interview transcripts.

3. RESULTS

Based on a preliminary review of the transcripts, we have identified different perspectives regarding the sounds and smells of Wong Tai Sin temple. The following sessions include some of the perspectives that we are able to identify (see 3.1 and 3.2).

3.1 Soundscape

Our interviewees expressed fewer concerns regarding the sounds of temples when compared to their smells (see 3.2). Apart from music and bells, some of our interviewees were

also able to identify other sources of sound such as water features (presumably from *Good Wish Garden*, an area built next to the altars), traffic (from the surrounding areas), and crowds. There seems to not be a single dominating source of sound.

3.1.1 Pleasure from music and bells

“I think it's the bells. I think the sound of the bells makes me feel most comfortable and relaxed.” (PML.1.26)

“You can hear some drums and some cool music which is nice for the atmosphere.” (QX.7.14)

Some interviewees expressed that they enjoy the music and sounds of bells in the temple, reasoning that they can get comfort and relaxation from listening to such sounds. Interviewee PML.1 is a regular visitor, and interviewee QX.7 is a first-time visitor. Yet, both interviewees offered similar perspectives on the music and bells of Wong Tai Sin Temple. Based on what our interviewees expressed, such kinds of comfort are not necessarily related to religious factors.

“I think human voices and music can mix naturally. That's why this place feels special—because like you said, the musical instruments and people's voices mix here. It creates a “third sound.” The first sound is the instrument. The second is people's voices. When combined, they create something new. It becomes a unique sound, something entirely different.” (YR.4.20)

“The music, chanting, incense and lanterns all add to the scene.” (Online, no. 24)

In particular, an interviewee (YR.4) from Korea also suggested that a “third sound” is created from the mix of music and people's voices. An online comment (no. 24) that we identified also expressed that the mix of music and chanting (along with incense and lanterns) all “add to the scene.” Interpreting from what this interviewee and the online commenter said, the interaction of different sources of sound may potentially create a soundscape (and possibly a sensescape; when combined with the smell of incense) that is unique to Wong Tai Sin Temple, creating a whole new experience. However, it is also important to note that some other interviewees have expressed negative perceptions of human-related sounds (see 3.1.2).





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3.1.2 Annoyance from surrounding noises

“Definitely, yeah. Look at the traffic flow! The cars... in just one minute, so many cars have passed by.” (YR.2.40; when asked if the traffic was noisy)

“Nowadays, there are more tourists and distractions, so it feels noisier and less solemn. It’s become more commercialized, and it’s not as pure as it used to be.” (YUI.13.20)

Some interviewees (particularly those who had prior experience with Wong Tai Sin Temple) expressed negative perceptions of the surrounding noises. Most of them did not explicitly refer to the sounds from the temple itself (i.e., music, bells, and sounds from rituals), but rather sounds from the external environment (e.g., traffic or crowds). For example, both interviewees, YR.2 and YUI.13, expressed such opinions (see the above quotes). Interviewee YR.2 is a hawker who sells incense, and interviewee YUI.13 is a former resident of the area. As such, both of them have much experience with Wong Tai Sin Temple, and it is presumed that they are drawing comparisons from their previous experience.

3.2 Smellscape

When asked smell-related questions, most interviewees made direct references to incense by default. Only a minority of them mentioned other sources of sound. According to our interviewees, it seems that the smell of incense is the dominating smell in the temple.

3.2.1 Pleasure from incense

“Yes, yes. That one. Yeah. I think that [the incense] will make me feel relaxed, because when I was a kid, my grandparents liked to light it up.” (PML.1.59)

A handful of interviewees expressed that they felt pleasure from smelling the incense. For example, interviewee PML.1 claimed that the incense makes him feel relaxed. However, comparatively, fewer interviewees expressed pleasure from smells than sounds in the temple.

3.2.2 Smelling incense as a spiritual experience

“I think it evokes a certain feeling within you when you’re smelling it (incense) because it’s so part of the experience, isn’t it? So that the spirituality of it, it’s invoking a sort of sense of the feeling, and it’s bringing in elements like fire,

smoke, and air, fusing them into the gutter, and I actually think I really like that part.” (YR.6.18)

“It feels like the incense cleanses your spirit. It refreshes you. I don’t think the incense smells bad. It smells different from incense in Korea.” (YR.4.24)

Some interviewees claimed that they feel spiritual just from the smell of incense. Such a point of view is not necessarily religious, as many visitors of temples do not necessarily see such visitation as a religious activity, but often as a traditional practice or a cultural experience [1,8]. Moreover, many of the interviewees who expressed such a point of view are tourists, and it is largely assumed that they are not necessarily affiliated with the main religion of Wong Tai Sin Temple (i.e., Taoism). Some of them even draw direct comparisons from other types of incense they had experiences with (e.g., incense of their home country). For example, interviewee YR.4 is a Korean tourist; he also expressed that he did not like “Korean incense”, suggesting that it “smells like burnt toast and lacks depth.”

3.2.3 Health and environmental concerns regarding incense burning

“If you’re exposed to it too much, you might worry about its impact on your health. Too much incense smoke might not be good... If the smoke is too strong, it’s not ideal for your body. I’m also concerned that the incense might not be pure” (YUI.14.8/YUI.14.10)

Existing studies have established that incense burning can bring adverse health impacts (e.g., increase in respiratory mortality) to surrounding individuals from the release of PM 2.5 [3-6]. In line with our previous study, some interviewees expressed their health-related concerns about smelling the smoke released from incense burning [1]. Other interviewees also cited environmental concerns because of the smoke released.

“It’s best if everyone uses smokeless incense here.” (YR.7.24)

“Yes, I’d recommend using eco-friendly smokeless incense whenever possible. It’s better for both the environment and our health.” (YUI.14.18)

“Try burning less incense or use smaller sticks... For these kinds of incense, I feel they are too big; they should be smaller or maybe half... that would be better for the environment here.” (RL.4.3)





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A number of local interviewees suggested that more eco-friendly or “smokeless” incense should be used; others also suggested that the length or size of incense should be reduced. Presumably, these people are regular visitors or work in close proximity to the temple.

“Personally, I’m fine with it (incense burning). I’m not especially sensitive to the smell of incense. I think burning incense is more of a cultural and religious habit rather than just an environmental issue” (YUI.8.4)

In contrast, a Shanghai tourist who is a student expressed that incense burning should be viewed as a cultural and religious habit rather than merely an environmental issue (see the above quote). This quote also leads us to the fundamental question of this topic: how do we balance the need for sensory heritage and other concerns?

3.2.4 Other smells

“I can also smell flowers and plants, like grass seeds, if that makes sense. It has a kind of earthy, moody smell.” (YUI.12.10)

Based on our interviewees, other sources of smells seem to be dominated over by the smells from burning incense. An interviewee mentioned some other smells (presumably from Good Wish Garden) he could identify. However, he did not comment further on his perceptions of these smells.

3.3 Hong Kong cultural and religious practice

Sound and *smell* are constituent parts of the environment and are perceived as an overall experience in Wong Tai Sin Temple. Difficult to bypass, these perceptions are greater in scope and interpreted in parallel with the cultural and religious aspects of temple practice in Hong Kong. For example, this view is observed by a tourist who finds the experience new and undefinable. The music of the environment mentioned is distinctively *Chinese* and comes as a refreshing experience.

“I actually like the music too. I don’t really like the loud noise, but the music is very nice. The music is also very unique and beautiful. It’s very Chinese. It’s actually hard to describe. It’s my first time experiencing this. It’s all very new and amazing. I’ve never experienced anything like this before. But everything is so beautiful and new to me.” (YR.1.19)

Further, the expressive quotes that contain both positively and negatively charged terms are less obvious when pinpointing the sentiments of the temple. The relieving character of the experience serves as an integral part of the city, not only as a tourist attraction but also as public good; it also transcends meanings where visitors’ experiences are reflected upon the temple.

“In the center of the city, there is this oasis of sacrality you can find peace and meditation away from the traffic noise and crowds of the millions of people that populate Hong Kong.” (Online, no. 17)

These expressions are related to the religious function of Wong Tai Sin Temple. As expressed by the locals, “*I go there when I need peace, or when things aren’t going well. It’s a place for spiritual renewal.*” (YR.10.35). This view is widely perceived and practiced by locals of Hong Kong. During Chinese New Year, Wong Tai Sin “*has the most incense smoke on the first day of the Lunar New Year, when (people) come to offer the ‘first’ incense. Personally, I’ve been to Wong Tai Sin [Temple] less than five times. My understanding of Wong Tai Sin [Temple] is that my parents’ generation would come here to draw divination sticks and pray for good fortune in the coming year.*” (RL.1.13)

Being a place of such significant socio-cultural value to Hong Kong, Wong Tai Sin Temple as a symbolic site is discussed in relation to culture and religion of Hong Kong. For example, the quality of Hong Kong as a metropolitan city that represents a multicultural identity. As pointed out, “*Hong Kong is a place where people from everywhere gather. All kinds of people.*” (YR.2.6)

3.3.1 Representing Hong Kong’s cultural identity

During site visits, we notice a full sense of lived experiences in Wong Tai Sin Temple. Despite being a sacred place, the different responses we received show a cultural character that is intimately merged with ideas and structures of the social order of Hong Kong. The strong religious colours of Wong Tai Sin Temple, cast by smell and sounds, are inscribed with nuances that reflect Hong Kong’s identity.

“I don’t strictly follow any one faith. But I respect various beliefs, like Buddhism and Taoism. For example, I’m not specifically devoted to Wong Tai Sin, but I respect his teachings. Wong Tai Sin is a Taoist deity, but the temple also incorporates aspects of Buddhism.” (YR.3.14)





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It is treated by the interviewee that there is a certain philosophical quality mediated through the environment and site. At the same time, this view is challenged by others who describe Wong Tai Sin Temple as having lost its intended role as a religious site.

“It’s like the commercialization of everything—people chose to make it a business. Some places seem to have turned into business hubs, losing their pure religious atmosphere.” (YUI.5.16)

Our interactions with participants naturally yield to the spatial qualities of the temple, as it has frequently shown in the interviews where the dimensions of an abstract physical environment are perceived, felt and experienced. As suggested by Tuan (1977, p.4), the place is a “centre of felt value” that provides meaning through the faculty of human experience [9]. These interviews have shown a varied perception of the site - an explicit recognition of the environment: mixing sound, smell, culture, and religion that compose a built place.

4. CONCLUSION

Through a series of interviews with diverse stakeholders, this paper identifies and summarizes some varying perspectives on the sensory experiences associated with Wong Tai Sin Temple or with Chinese temples broadly. Our preliminary findings suggest that while the sounds and smells of Chinese temples may be valuable to some, there are also notable concerns regarding noise and air pollution. Moreover, there can also be conflicting perspectives regarding which type of sounds or smells to preserve (e.g., some may perceive noise from traffic and crowds as “polluting” the sanctity of the sound of bell-ringing). More research needs to be done on different stakeholders’ diverging perspectives to seek the right balance in the use of space [10]. Potentially, Hong Kong may consider developing a framework that preserves the sensory aspect of intangible cultural heritage [11].

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank to all those who participated or assisted in the data collection process. We particularly thank Qianxi Jiang, PhD Student, School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, for conducting some of the interviews as presented in this paper. The work presented in this paper was partially supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region,

China to the fourth author (GRF #11605622 – CityU project #9043455).

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