

# ***Behind the Temple: A Study of the Social Network of the Tua Peh Kong Temple in Skudai, Malaysia (1892-1970)***

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**Abstract:** The Tua Peh Kong Temple in Skudai is a century-old temple located in Skudai Town, Johor, Malaysia. This paper primarily employs literature research and field investigations to outline the social networks and development strategies of the temple during different historical periods. It first analyzes the founding time and process of the Skudai Tua Peh Kong Temple, followed by an examination of its social networks during the early establishment phase, as well as before, during, and after World War II. Academic research on Malaysian Tua Peh Kong temples has largely focused on prominent temples, with an emphasis on identity and cultural recognition. In the context of Johor and the study of Chinese temples in Johor Bahru, scholars have mostly concentrated on ancient temples and the shaping of political power; their research on the regional history of Skudai has been limited to data collection. Therefore, this paper aims to extend the research on Malaysian Tua Peh Kong temples, the study of century-old temples in Johor, and the regional history of Johor Bahru.

## **1. Introduction**

The Tua Pek Kong Temple in Skudai is located in Skudai Town, Johor. Once an "unremarkable" ancient temple, it has managed to thrive through chaotic periods such as World War II and the "Emergency" to become one of the most significant Chinese temples in southern Malaysia today. Its historical development path and the social networks at different times are worthy of study. Within the boundaries of Skudai, unlike other temples that primarily operate based on specific dialect groups, the Tua Pek Kong Temple, although closely related to dialect groups in its early development, has gradually diminished its dialectal characteristics over time, evolving into a temple that transcends dialect groups, regions, and is popular among the general public. The driving forces behind this transformation merit in-depth exploration. Furthermore, as a century-old temple, it has witnessed the growth and development of Skudai Town. By examining the social networks of the Tua Pek Kong Temple, one can gain insights into the historical development of the Skudai region.

## 2. Founding and Rooting: The Social Network in the Early Years of Tua Pek Kong Temple (1892-1920)

### 2.1 The Port Master System in Skudai

The "port master system" refers to the system established by the Temenggong of Johor to appoint Chinese representatives to manage the Chinese community and engage in agricultural production.<sup>[1]</sup> "Port masters" are Chinese representatives who establish contractual relationships with the Temenggong and lead agricultural activities in specific colonial areas. The areas under their jurisdiction are often located near navigable rivers, referred to in Teochew as "Kangkar".<sup>[2]</sup>

In 1844, with the issuance of the port contracts (Surat Sungai), the port master system officially commenced in Johor, specifically in Skudai. According to information compiled by Trocki regarding port contracts, there were 34 ports in the Johor region between 1844 and 1855. The first port contract was for the Skudai River, with the port masters being Ah Chun and Ban Sang, indicating that the Skudai River was officially opened to navigation in 1844. By the time the port master system was abolished in 1916, there were at least 15 port contracts associated with the Skudai River. While we do not know the exact locations of the major ports, based on Bai Weiquan's discussions in geography regarding settlements, early ports mostly developed in the middle to lower reaches of rivers for ease of transportation and cultivation. Skudai is indeed situated in the middle to lower reaches of the Skudai River, just 10 miles away from the river's mouth. Furthermore, based on estimates from the staff at the Johor Bahru Northwest District Liaison Committee, the initial ports along the Skudai River were generally located near the Kwang Hwa Primary School in Skudai.<sup>[3]</sup>

### 2.2 Social Networks of the Tua Pek Kong Temple from 1892 to 1920

#### 2.2.1 Social Networks during the Altar Period

In special issues published by the Tua Pek Kong Temple in 2007 and 2022, it is stated that the temple was established in 1892. However, there are currently no definitive primary historical records documenting when the Temple was founded. The only basis for this claim comes from the recollections of the late board members Fu Zilong, Liu Guangxi, and Ye Yabing, the grandson of the "founder of the temple".<sup>[4,5]</sup>

"This temple was established 8 years before 1900, originally as a simple structure.

-Fu Zilong (The Tua Pek Kong Temple Management Committee 2007:179)

This temple was founded by a Hakka individual named Ye Huosheng, and the incense was brought from Singapore. Legend has it that three deities appeared in dreams to Ye Huosheng multiple times, with each dream being the same, revealing that the statues were found on a ship by the coast.

-Liu Guangxi (Sikula Tianhou Temple Management Committee 2007:179)

My grandfather found three boxes by the coast, each containing a statue. He then brought the statues home for worship. Initially, a simple small temple was built to house the golden statues.

-Ye Yabing (The Tua Pek Kong Temple Management Committee 2007:180)"

This article argues that the above opinion is open to debate. According to the election records from the "1951 Skudai Resettlement Area Village Committee" held by the Johor Archives, Ye Huosheng was already 72 years old at that time. In other words, he was born in 1879, and Ye Huosheng was only 13 years old at the time of the "temple construction". Although the possibility of him being a child prodigy cannot be ruled out, it seems quite difficult for a teenager to have found three deities on a ship from Singapore and subsequently established a temple in Skudai. The aforementioned statement appears more like a legend formed based on the bronze bell. A more reasonable situation would be that there were already others who had laid the foundation for the altar before Ye Huosheng.

The author speculates that before Ye Huosheng established the Tua Pek Kong Temple in Skudai, there were already people who had begun to create a shrine after the opening of Skudai First, let's examine the relationship between the "Tua Pek Kong Temple" and the main deity. The bronze bell awarded to the Tua Pek Kong Temple in 1900 ranked Pu'an Patriarch as the foremost deity, followed by Xuantian Shangdi, with even the name of the Heavenly Mother absent (See Figure 1). Furthermore, from 1901 onwards, Ye Runlin, a full-time medium who served the Tua Pek Kong Temple for nearly 80 years, primarily invoked Pu'an Patriarch, having been trained by Ye Shiliu, who is a relative of Ye Huosheng, a Hakka. Thirdly, there are still legends circulating about Pu'an Patriarch manifesting during the Japanese occupation. Finally, since 1975, various councils have recognized that prior to the arrival of medium Liao Deguang at the Tua Pek Kong Temple in 1980, Pu'an Patriarch had always been the main deity.



Figure 1: Bronze bell artifact from 1900 (Inscription: Presented to the Tua Pek Kong Temple, Pu'an Patriarch, and Zhenwu Xuantian Emperor by the British Singapore Shengbanlan and others.)

This phenomenon is worth discussing-named "Tua Pek Kong Temple", yet its main deity is Puyan Patriarch. After searching through special publications, newspapers, and archival materials without success, I consulted Mr. Xiao Kaifu and Mr. Liu Tiancai, an elder who once served on the board of the Tua Pek Kong Temple. They both believe that "this is a tradition, but the reason is unknown". In response to this phenomenon, I have two speculations.

The first is that when Tua Pek Kong Temple was still a shrine, it primarily worshipped Puyan Patriarch. However, due to its Hakka characteristics, it could not attract a broad audience. To expand its following, it was named "Tua Pek Kong Temple", indicating to worshippers that the temple features the cross-dialect deity Tua Pek Kong Shengmu available for worship. From the perspective of its religious function, Puyan Patriarch's role mainly involves managing water-related disasters and blessing followers with good health. As mentioned earlier, the Tua Pek Kong Temple is located next to Gangjiao, and Puyan Patriarch can protect the land from floods. Additionally, given the low level of medical care at the time and the harsh environment, seeking healing from Pu'an aligns with the faith needs of the worshippers. Third, from the point of view of the uniqueness of God. According to the local Chronicles of the Skudai, the Skudai came to worship the Queen of Heaven except for the Tua Pek Kong Temple before 1980, other temples did not worship. Before 1970, there were no temples in Xinshan that regarded Tua Pek Kong as the main deity, or if there were, they were not

well-known. It wasn't until 1970 that the Danbei Tua Pek Kong Temple was established in Xinshan, primarily worshipping Tua Pek Kong.

The second speculation is that before Ye Huosheng founded the temple, the shrine primarily worshipped Holy Mother of God, and the name "Tua Pek Kong Temple" corresponded with the main deity. From the perspective of religious function, Tua Pek Kong Temple is established next to "Liucuo Port", and during the port master system period, Yixing Company led the Chinese to travel from Singapore to Shigu Lai for colonization. Since Tianhou has the function of protecting navigation, it also meets the needs of the worshippers. Looking at the social structure of Skudai, this seems plausible. According to Huang Yanyi's investigation of the local Yishan Leshan Pavilion in Skudai, 45% of ancestors who passed away between 1900 and 1929 were Hakka, 40% were Fujianese, and 15% were Teochew. It can be seen that before 1900, Skudai had three major dialect groups developing together, rather than each dialect group developing separately. This aligns with the cross-dialect characteristics of Holy Mother of God. However, after Ye Huosheng took over the shrine, the focus shifted to worshipping Puyan Patriarch. Although we do not know much about the early temple situation, it is clear that by the early 20th century, the Ye family, represented by Ye Huosheng, had already dominated the temple, and their rise in influence was closely related to Puyan Patriarch.

### 2.2.2 The Hakka Dialect Group Network and the Yip Family Network

Continuing from the previous discussion, the author believes that by 1900 at the latest, Hakka person Ye Huosheng had already constructed a small temple for the spirit altar. Strong evidence for this is the bronze bell from 1900. Secondly, according to the inscriptions on the bell and oral histories, the Tua Pek Kong Temple worships Pu'an Patriarch, the Holy Mother, and Xuantian Emperor, while also cultivating the Yip family's mediums to serve Pu'an Patriarch. Thirdly, archival data and municipal planning maps indicate that the Tua Pek Kong Temple expanded its temple in the 1920s, with Ye Yasheng as the person in charge. These three phenomena are related to the social networks of this period-the Hakka dialect group and the Yip clan lineage. They also respond to the reasons noted in the oral histories shared by the three elders from the Tua Pek Kong Temple.

Firstly, in the social backdrop of the late 19th century to early 20th century, the "port owner system" was in decline, leading to the rise of non-Chaozhou groups, including the Hakka. According to the conclusion of An Huan Ran's field investigation, "in the 1920s, Hakka people were migrating en masse to Johor". Secondly, data from the Mian-Yuting graveyard indicates that the Johor Hakka ancestral grave was established in 1888, and the percentage of Hakka people increased from 5.1% to 10.2% from 1900 to 1942, with Hakka merchants being particularly active throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, the graveyard at Skudai Leshan Ting shows comparable results: from 1900 to 1939, the number of Hakka people rose and their presence expanded. Furthermore, looking at the establishment of Leshan Ting and the local Chinese primary school, the social influence of Hakka people in Skudai was significant in the early 20th century. Leshan Ting was founded by Hakka Ye Yasheng in 1921 after applying for land from the Land and Mineral Office. In addition, the Fushi Chinese Primary School was established by Hakka Huang Defu in 1922.

It can be seen that from both the perspective of the immigration history of Johor Bahru and the social structure of Skudai, the scale and social influence of Hakka immigrants were thriving at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Additionally, a statistical report from 1957 on the dialect groups of Chinese in Skudai also indirectly confirms the situation of the Chinese dialect groups in the 20th century: the Hakka made up the majority, followed by the Hokkien and Teochew groups (See Figure 2). The author speculate that the expansion of the Hakka dialect group in Skudai is closely related to the Hokkien Temple's development during this time, where the main deity, the temple founders, and the spirit mediums all had Hakka connections. A significant portion of them constituted the followers of the Pu'an Patriarch and the disciples of the Ye

family spirit mediums. Without considering the followers as a primary factor, it would not have been easy for the Hokkien Temple to expand its facilities in the 1920s. This also supports what the three elders of the Hokkien Temple emphasized earlier: the establishment of the temple as a testament for the Hakka people.[6]

[illegible]

Figure 2: Census of Johor Local Council 1957 (Source: CAJ57/52 II).

The influence of the Ye family was quite strong during the initial establishment of the Tianhou Temple. First, Ye Huosheng was recognized as the founder of the temple, and the original medium of the Tua Pek Kong Temple was Ye Shiliu. After 1902, the medium was Ye Huosheng's nephew, Ye Runlin. Additionally, in 1900, the majority of donors listed on the bronze bell were from the Ye family. By the 1920s, archival records showed that "Ye Yasheng" was the person in charge of affairs at the Tua Pek Kong Temple. At that time, the temple was in a state of expansion. Although there are no records documenting it, it can be inferred that the number of believers at that time was sufficient to support their expansion of the temple, even exceeding the scope of municipal construction. Moreover, in 1923, the Tua Pek Kong Temple received a couplet from the Qiu family, which can indirectly confirm that prior to this, there had been actions to expand and renovate the temple. This further confirms that at that time, the temple was under the control of the Ye family, allowing it to thrive.

For the increasingly powerful Hakka dialect community, it is rational to recognize the Ye family as the "pioneers of temple founding". First, the Ye family is part of the Hakka dialect group, and their social participation was relatively high; for example, Ye Yasheng led the establishment of Leshan Pavilion, and Ye Huosheng served as an investigator for Leshan Pavilion. In the subsequent 1957 elections for the municipal council of Sigulai, Ye Huosheng also actively participated. It can be inferred that the Ye family's social influence at that time was considerable. Additionally, the Ye family's choice of Pumen Ancestor as the main deity aligns with the development trends of the Hakka dialect community at that time.

### 3. Adaptation and Expansion: The Social Network of the Mazu Temple Before and After World War II (1920-1970)

### 3.1 The Initial Establishment of the Cross-Dialect Social Network Before World War II

According to the records on cultural copper plates, the Tua Pek Kong Temple was relocated in the 20th year of the Republic of China (1931) due to government planning that occupied the original temple site. Consequently, Ye Huosheng and Chen Shijiu were tasked with acquiring the current temple site, and they formed a small group to raise funds for the temple construction. Among the land buyers, Ye Huosheng and Chen Shijiu were Hakka people, and the Prime Minister

of the funding group, Ye Sanji, was also Hakka and a relative of Ye Huosheng. In terms of religious affairs, Ye Runlin served as a full-time medium.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Vice Prime Minister, Ji Shoushan, was Teochew, and the accountant, Fu Yangji, was from Fujian. In the early stages, they were assisted in purchasing the land by Liu Lenghou, a leader from the Fujian dialect group. They ultimately completed the temple reconstruction project in 1935, which established the location of the present-day Tua Pek Kong Temple. It is evident that during this period, the Ye family held significant influence both in religious matters and in the overall affairs of the temple. However, it is important to note that under their leadership, members from the Teochew and Fujian dialect groups were already involved in managing the Tua Pek Kong Temple.

According to the records in the special issue, the main devotees of the Tua Pek Kong Temple during this period were rubber and pineapple plantation workers from the Skudai area. Based on interview data, the temple stated that the cultivation of rubber and pineapples was extremely important for its incense offerings at that time. The author believe this is reasonable for several reasons. First, after 1900, the rubber and pineapple industries developed in the Skudai Tua Pek Kong Temple area. By 1936 at the latest, the renowned Fujian scholar Li Guangqian established the Nanyi Pineapple Factory and Nanyi Rubber Factory in the Skudai area, specifically at the eight-and-a-half-mile mark (see Figure 3). In the 1930s, the prominent Cantonese scholar Zhuo Yacai also set up a rubber plantation to the west of the Tua Pek Kong Temple. Famous Fujian rubber merchants Zheng Jinglun and Zheng Jingzhao established the Malaysian United Pineapple Factory seven-and-a-half miles away. All of these establishments were located near the Tianhou Temple at the nine-and-a-half-mile mark.

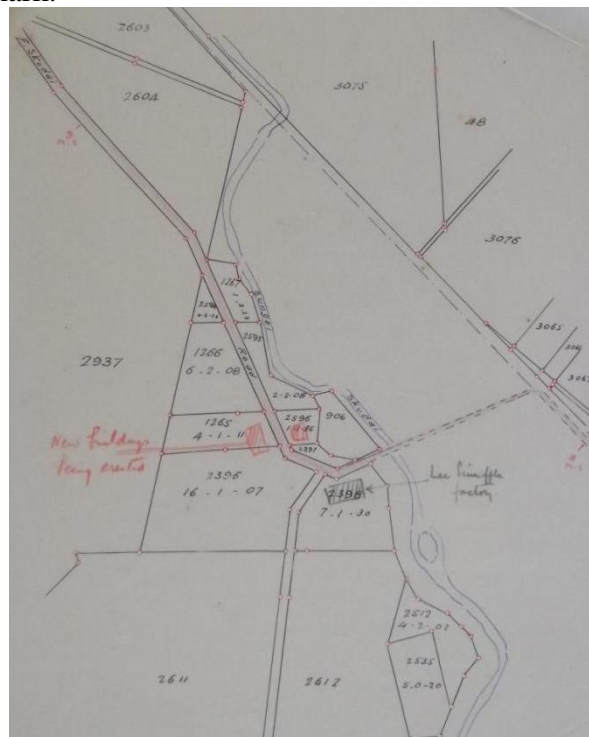


Figure 3: Land and Minerals Division map showing the location of the Nam Yick Yellow Pear Factory in 1936.

Second, although during this period, pineapple and rubber plantation workers established small temples near the factories, the Tianhou Temple was the earliest temple built in Skudai, with a longer history than the newly created temples and a larger scale than the smaller ones. At this time, although not luxurious, the Tua Pek Kong Temple, having undergone a reconstruction, had already

developed into a temple of considerable size. Furthermore, the deities worshipped at this temple-Tianhou, Puan Zushi, and Xuantian Shangdi-were not found in other temples during this period. From the perspective of religious function, these three deities provided some level of flood and drought protection and water management, which was relevant given the frequent flooding due to the meandering rivers near Skudai during this period. For the pineapple and rubber plantation workers, it was reasonable to worship these three deities.

Third, the "Long Street" near the Skudai Tua Pek Kong Temple was the commercial center of Skudai at the time, and residents from the eight-and-a-half-mile village and Fu Zilong village would come to Long Street for shopping and leisure. We believe this increased the visibility of the Tua Pek Kong Temple to some extent. In summary, I find the assertion that the temple's devotees during this period mainly came from the rubber and pineapple plantation workers to be credible.

Moreover, a deeper exploration of the dialectal group structure among the workers allows us to infer why the leadership of the Tua Pek Kong Temple during this period included managers from the Teochew and Fujian dialect groups under the leadership of the Ye family and Hakka people. The Nanyi Pineapple Factory, founded by the renowned Fujian scholar Li Guangqian, mainly employed a large number of Fujianese, with a sizable number of Teochew workers as well. Zhuo Yawen, a Cantonese person, primarily employed Cantonese workers in his rubber plantation. The Zheng brothers mentioned earlier, hailing from Fujian Yongchun, mainly hired workers from Fujian Yongchun, along with workers from other counties and cities in Fujian. Combining the viewpoints discussed above, the author speculate that the devotees of the Tua Pek Kong Temple during this period had a cross-dialectal character, which influenced the leadership to some extent.

### **3.2 Development of Localized and Cross-Regional Social Networks After World War II**

#### **3.2.1 Consolidation of Localized Social Networks During the New Village Period**

After Japan's surrender in 1945, Skudai entered a period of peaceful respite. However, this was short-lived; in 1948, the British government established "Skudai New Village", centered around Skudai to control the growing influence of the Malayan near Johor Bahru. This new area covered 151 acres, approximately twice the previous size, and nearby residents were relocated here for unified management. Prior to the New Village period, Skudai had 140 households, but by the time of the New Village, about 120 households had moved to the newly established area, resulting in an increase of over 600 people. Although the personal freedoms of villagers were somewhat limited, they faced little restriction in their religious practices, which were mainly managed by the Skudai Village Committee. As a result, the Tua Pek Kong Temple could develop normally. According to special publications and interviews, the congregation during this period was primarily made up of residents of Skudai New Village. In 1956, the Tua Pek Kong Temple underwent a renovation, leaving behind a copper plate as a record.

#### **3.2.2 Construction of cross-regional social networks after the lifting of the "state of emergency"**

After the lifting of the "state of emergency" in the new village in 1960, the number of believers in Tua Pek Kong Temple further increased. And there was a phenomenon of cross-regional worship of God, the newspaper shows: the Buddhist nun is a prosperous place, at that time, the Buddhist nun came to the Heavenly Queen Palace for the most famous. Every good day, men and women from the new mountain, Gulai, Benzhen, Zhenlin Mountain near to the Shi Gu to burn incense to worship Buddha, the crowd is very crowded, incense is very strong. Because of this, organizations such as the Sassu Youth Association will also hold a charity sale near the Tianhou Palace to expand their funds during the thank God activity. The author speculates that this is mainly due to the

development of transportation, the accumulation of believers in the early stage and the magic power of shamans. It can be seen from the newspaper that at that time, more believers from other cities came to the temple to worship the gods. The traffic is the first problem to be solved, the data show that by 1963 at the latest, there were "Zhenlinshan station", "Xinshan Bus Center station" and "New Sandoz bus Center station" along the Shigu Lai New Village (Figure 4). And according to the memory of the old man He Guoguang: there are an endless stream of cars driving on the street." This makes it extremely convenient for residents of nearby cities to travel to Shigu by car. The station is very close to the Shigu Heavenly Queen Palace, about a 4-minute walk. Secondly, Tua Pek Kong Temple had already accumulated some followers during the World War II and Xincun periods. After the "state of emergency" was lifted, the new village population moved to the field, to a certain extent, "do the endorsement" for the Tua Pek Kong Temple. According to the old woman's memory, "After the new village, many young people will go to the new Mountain and Zhenlin Mountain to look for work". For example, Workers who used to work in the Malay Union Yellow Pear Factory went to work in Jinlim Mountain to find more job opportunities after the lifting of the state of emergency". To some extent, this confirms the author's speculation. Because of the shops on the side of Shigu Street near Tianhou Palace, nearby city residents will also shop here, which also increases the exposure of Shigu Tianhou Palace to a certain extent. Moreover, according to the author's interview, since the legend of Puan's spiritual appearance was told to all the villagers through Ye Runlin shamans, his personal divine power also attracted believers from outside towns to ask questions in Tianhou Palace during this period. Its inquiries range from seeking medical advice to promotion to wealth, a wide range.

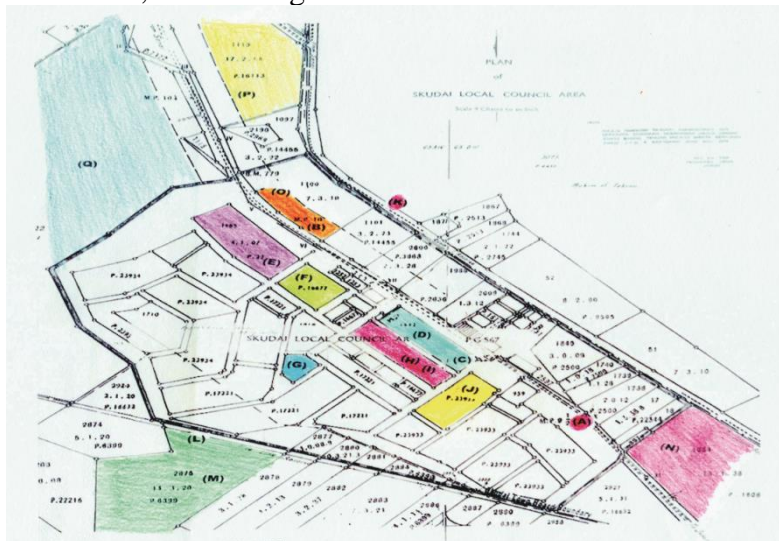


Figure 4: Tua Pek Kong Temple as opposed to the station.

#### 4. Changes in mediumship networks before the 1970s

Mediums are important to Chinese temples as a means of attracting and retaining followers. They promote the development of the temple by "appearing" to the gods and by jumping from one to another and asking questions. It can be said that the power of a temple's divine affairs rests in the hands of the mediums. Before the establishment of the Council in 1975, the mediums of the Tin Hau Temple in Sze Ku Lai were all controlled by the Ye family. However, at different times in history, they expressed different development strategies to attract followers.

First of all, from the "inheritance" of Ye XVI to Ye Runlin, we can see that in the early days, the Ye family controlled or even monopolized the "leadership of the sacred affairs" of Tin Hau Kung.

Secondly, from the fact that he mainly jumped to Pu'an Patriarch, it can be seen that between 1900 and 1980, Pu'an Patriarch was the main deity for a reasonable reason. The consolidation of the status of the Hakka people required the control of divine power, and the divine power of a temple lay in the mediums and the gods that the mediums danced to. In the case of Tin Hau Kung, the combination of Ye Run Lin and Pu'an Patriarch is manifested. They are the "spiritual power of Tin Hau Kung" and the "source of spiritual power" respectively. Before World War II, the Ye family's control of the mediumship business of the main deity, Pu'an, can be interpreted as the "consolidation of the Hakka's leadership", which was complemented by the fact that the leadership was mainly controlled by the Hakka, so that even though the leadership was joined by the helmsman of the other dialect groups, the Hakka's power was still relatively strong. By the time of the Second World War, the Puan ancestor's ascension to the body and the reminder to the villagers to protect themselves against the Japanese bombing could be regarded as a "reform" of the nature of Ye Runlin's mediumship as well as of the nature of the temple. This is also in line with the change in identity and temple orientation described above: from dialect group identity to localized identity. But this is actually the "wisdom of compromise" of the Ye family under the trend of cross-dialect grouping. Because only by de-Hakkaizing and localizing the ancestor Pu'an can we better meet the needs of social development. The Ye family can maintain its competitiveness in the face of increasing cross-dialectal coloration - controlling the theocracy. However, it should be acknowledged that this strategy not only enabled the Ye family to remain in control of the discourse in Tien Hau Kung, but also enabled the localization of Tien Hau Kung to be further strengthened in the Xincun period, and was generally accepted by the Xincun community. In the period after the lifting of the "state of emergency," the Ye family and Pu'an Patriarch furthered their service to the cross-border believers, which is the same as the strategy and purpose mentioned above.

To sum up, although it seems that shamans go through three stages -- consolidating the power of the Hakka, benefiting the whole village, and asking the people of the whole region to ask the gods, they actually consolidate the power of the Ye family through Puan's leading in the deity system and Ye's control and reform of the divine power. However, this strategy is also consistent with the development of Tianhou Palace from Hakka to cross-dialect group and then cross-regional development. This continuity attracted more and more followers to the palace, and laid a strong foundation for the "popular reform" carried out by Liao Deguang's later arrival.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, the development stage of the Tua Peh Kong Temple in Skudai and the social network and development strategy in different periods are sorted out in two stages. During the period of the Hong Kong master system, the temple had already been created, in response to the legend held by the temple that "the Hakka people only created the temple in 1892", and made two speculations on the construction of the altar. First, the Hakka built temples, but in order to attract believers and the Lord worshipped the Goddess of heaven. Second, it is not clear what dialect group built the temple, but the Lord worshipped the Virgin Mary. From the late 19th century to the 1920s, Tua Peh Kong Temple was managed by members of the Hakka and Ye families. It reflects the relatively strong color of dialect group and blood relationship, which is the social network of this period.

Tua Peh Kong Temple witnessed the development of scholars in the wind and rain. In the process of combing and analyzing the development context of Tua Peh Kong Temple, this paper responded to the social network behind her, and tried to take care of the writing of regional social history with individual cases. Limited by the length, this paper does not mention the social network after the 1970s, and does not touch on the power transfer of the leadership behind the "power struggle" of the

shaming. These are the shortcomings of this paper.

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