Jintang Temple

**A Historic Town: Soolangh**

In 1623, Adam Verhult, a clerk in the Dutch East India Company, visited Soolangh, a Siraya settlement in what is now Jiali District, Tainan City. Verhult wrote an account of his visit, “Descriptie van de stadt Soolangh” (“Description of the town of Soolangh”), in which he stated, “The town is quite large. In my opinion, its size makes it comparable to any of the Netherlands’ largest cities.” Even before Verhult’s visit, Chinese merchants and farmers had already crossed the Taiwan Strait to settle in Soolangh. These early settlers built a thatched shrine called Dongan Temple to enshrine the deities they brought from their hometowns. This shrine was the predecessor of Jintang Temple.

In 1661, Zheng Chenggong (also known as Koxinga, a major Chinese general, warlord, and defender of the Ming Dynasty who was the first to claim Taiwan for China) expelled the Dutch and occupied Taiwan. He enacted a program in which soldiers were bestowed land grants to work as farmers and cultivate the land. These soldiers established settlements throughout the region. One plot of land located in Soolangh was assigned to a local garrison commander named Lin Kedong.

In 1698, Lin donated this land to build a new temple, which was called Hubi Temple. All of the deities of the local Chinese settlers were moved to the new temple. A market was built in front of the temple, and behind it, a school was established. A temple inscription board with the words “Hong Wen Qiu Mo” was hung inside the temple. This phrase comes from the “Major Odes” section of the *Classic of Poetry*; its meaning translates to “enriching culture and education, seeking for someone to give settlement to the people.” These words were a prayer to help believers avoid calamities and protect village residents. This plaque, which hangs over the shrine, is the third oldest of its kind in Taiwan.

**Taiwan’s First Palace of the Gods: Jintang Temple**

To defend the town and protect its residents, the Soolangh townspeople learned the Songjiang Battle Array, a form of martial arts. During the Lin Shuangwen Rebellion of 1787, Soolangh residents heroically resisted the rebels, provided Qing troops with safe quarters, and sent townspeople to assist the troops in encircling and eliminating the rebel army. In recognition of their outstanding military service, the Qianlong Emperor bestowed the name “Jintang Dian” or “Golden Palace” on the temple. This was the first temple in Taiwan to be conferred the title of Palace through imperial order. The emperor also bestowed the right to use the imperial five-clawed dragon and to hang a horizontal inscription board with the words “Jing Yi” (which loosely translates to “righteous ones”) within the temple. A stone stele with the words “Jing Yi” was also carved to serve as a record and placed in front of the temple. Inside the temple, the shrine was surrounded with golden curtains, a symbol of the imperial family. Every morning at 4:30 a.m. (much earlier than most temples), drums and bells were sounded to signal the opening of the temple doors, and water basins were prepared for the daily ablutions of the deities. Once these formalities were completed, morning court was in session (the imperial decree granted imperial status to the gods of the temple, who therefore “held court” with their petitioners—the worshippers—each day).

**A Beautiful Historic Temple**

In 1855, Yang Cheng-mei commissioned the well-known Chiayi craftsman Ye Wang to rebuild Jintang Temple and Sanbao Temple (a well-known temple just behind Jintang Temple belonging to the Longhua sect of Zhaijiao Buddhism). The resulting appearance and architecture of the temple remain preserved to this day.

In 1928, Huang Shen-yuan commissioned renowned Guangdong temple artist Ho Jin-long to replace all of the temple’s deteriorating Koji pottery decoration with Jiannian (cut-and-paste) mosaic works. Ho brilliantly applied his superb skills, painting gilded designs on bowl fragments, applying feathering and decorations to frosted glass, and piecing together porcelain fragments to form delicate lines and facial expressions. The resulting works, which can be found throughout the temple, are an extraordinary display of his mastery of plastic arts and spatial configuration. Each one of the friezes Ho created depicts a scene from a famous Chinese historical story or legend. Examples include “Executing His Own Son,” which tells the story of Mu Guiying and Yang Zongbao; “Hitting the Princess While Drunk,” which shows Guo Ziyi begging the emperor for forgiveness in the palace; “The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea, Each Showing His Magic Power”; Guanyin tasking the Golden Cicada to go to the Western Paradise to acquire holy scriptures; famed Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai responding to a letter written in a foreign language; Empress Dowager Di visiting her in-laws; Liu Bei recruiting relatives at Ganlu Temple; and Di Qing waging war against Wang Tianhua. There are also friezes portraying a 1920s night club complete with musicians and dancing girls and the folk story of Li Menhuan obtaining gold pieces, as well as the first visual representations of Sun Yat-sen, father of the nation, ever made in Taiwan.

In 1945, the temple underwent a new round of renovations. Tainan native Pan Chun-yuan painted the door gods; the stone dragon pillars were the work of Lukang craftsman Shi Tian-fu. Temple door couplets as well as Taiwan’s largest Baroque-style washstone relief sculpture (which can be seen on the back wall of the temple) were presented by former Judicial Yuan President Wang Ch’unghui, former Examination Yuan President Chia Ching-teh, and former Legislative Speaker Huang Guo-shu.

In 1985, the Ministry of the Interior designated Jintang Temple as a Level III historic site.

**The Xiaolong Pilgrimage Procession and King Boat Festival**

Jintang Temple’s primary deities are the three plague kings Lords Zhu, Lei, and Yin, as well as the Guanyin Buddha. The temple holds its Xiaolong Pilgrimage Procession and King Boat Festival, a major religious event involving the plague kings, on a triennial basis. During the festival, believers beseech the plague kings to descend from heaven and sweep away all natural disasters and pestilence in the region, and pray for peace and for the gods’ protection. The major rites are:

1. The construction of a King Boat (an actual traditional Chinese wooden junk) to serve as a means of transportation for the plague kings to carry away all disease and demonic influences within their jurisdiction.
2. The holding of the King Boat sacrificial ceremony and chanting of liturgies to pray to the plague kings to eliminate pestilence and disasters and bestow their blessings on the common people.
3. The construction of a temporary imperial residence to serve as a venue where the plague kings can conduct official business, rest, and receive visiting deities.
4. The appointment of a flag officer to serve as the clerical spokesperson for the Heavenly Vanguard Patrol Troop, assist the Plague Kings during their night patrols, and check up on the deities.
5. The performance of the centipede troupe, which represents the Heavenly Spirits and Earthly Fiends, and whose goal is to expel natural disasters, pestilence, and demonic influences. Centipede temple performance troupes are unique to the historic Zengwen River region.
6. The conducting of temple processions, known as inspection tours, leading visiting deities in inspecting and repelling illnesses afflicting the people and harmonizing yin and yang within the administrative district.

The Xiaolong Pilgrimage Procession and King Boat Festival can be traced back to the year 1720, as recorded in the *Local Chronicles of Taiwan County*. The ancient rituals of this traditional sacrificial ceremony are still followed to this day, and it has gained renown both domestically and abroad. The administrators of the festival have accepted invitations from temples all around Taiwan to assist in their rites, and have traveled to Samut Prakan, Thailand and Malacca on international cultural exchanges. These exchanges are carried out on a voluntary basis, and have been well received.