

WHAT'S UP

Temple in China built by Indian traders

Modern air transport has made it pretty common for people from China and India to visit one another's countries. But, did you know that these two great Asian civilisations have been connected for centuries? NG YI-SHENG reports.



[Photo: Risha Lee]

In the year 1281, a Hindu temple was built in the Chinese city of Quanzhou. It was made of stone, with beautifully carved columns. One of the walls was marked with words in both Chinese and Tamil. Inside, people prayed to Shiva, the god of destruction and rebirth. Sadly, this temple no longer exists. However, Risha Lee is still fascinated by its history. She is an American art historian who is trying to find out more about the Tamil merchants who sailed across the sea and built it. “The **medieval** Indian Ocean was a dynamic and multicultural place,” she says. “Exchanges between different countries were very common.” For her, the temple is evidence that the world has been closely interconnected from the early times.

The Chola Empire

The story of the temple begins with the Chola Empire. This was a mighty empire that ruled over southern India from the years 848 to 1279. Its people wrote splendid works of Tamil poetry, and built magnificent temples. They were also famous

warriors. They would fight battles riding wild elephants, sometimes with knives tied to their trunks. The greatest of the Chola kings, Raja Raja I, was also an unstoppable conqueror. He invaded and colonised many lands, including Sri Lanka, the Maldives, parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, and the island of Singapore.

Merchants sailed their ships all over this empire, trading their goods. Many of them were members of big associations. One of the largest merchant associations was the Ainnurruvar, which roughly means “the five hundred”. When they wanted to be formal, they called themselves “the five hundred who come from the one thousand directions and the four corners of the earth”. The Ainnurruvar were especially strong because they travelled with their own armies. Their soldiers fought battles to make it easier for them to trade in distant lands. All over India and Southeast Asia, you can still see the “merchant stones” that the guild set up, honouring the heroes who died in these battles. (Some of them were very fierce. One of them, Revana, was said to run after his enemies and drink their blood!)

The merchants also built temples in the towns where they traded. They preferred to build in a style of temple architecture called Tamil Dravida, which has close ties to the Tamil region. Dr Lee thinks this helped the merchants feel at home wherever they travelled.

Over the past year, she has studied the writing that appears in the temples and on the merchant stones. Often, it uses the same kind of poetic Tamil that the king used. Images associated with royalty, like horses, fish and tigers, are also common. Perhaps the Ainnurruvar believed they were just as great as the Chola kings.



Indians in Quanzhou

In 1281, Quanzhou was the biggest port city in the world. Around 200,000 people lived there, including many foreigners such as Armenians, Italians, Syrians, Southeast Asians and, of course, Indians.

Tamil merchants did good business there. The Chinese liked to buy their cloth and pepper, while they purchased camphor: a waxy substance made from trees that can be used in medicine, perfume and cooking. Sometimes, they would also sell horses, which they had transported in their ships from Arabia.

Naturally, Hindu Tamils living in Quanzhou would have wanted a place to worship. But, it couldn't have been easy to build a temple for them. Dr Lee has studied the ruins of the building, and she says some carvings look more Chinese than Indian, while others look like they were done by skilled specialists.

She thinks that Indian craftsmen must have been brought in to work with Chinese builders, training them to create Tamil Dravida architecture. After the Chola Empire fell, Tamil merchants went on trading with China and Southeast Asia. But, they were no longer as strong as before. They could not stop the temple from being torn down in the late 14th century. The Ming Dynasty was beginning, and the new Chinese government was no longer so welcoming of foreigners.

Luckily, many parts of the temple survived. Some of them are on show at the Quanzhou Maritime Museum. Other sections became part of the Kaiyuan Temple, the biggest Buddhist temple in Fujian province. If you visit, you would see carvings of the Hindu gods Shiva and Krishna right next to statues of the Buddha.

This mix of Chinese and Indian symbols might seem a little strange to us. But, Dr Lee says it is typical of the way the world works. "It is very difficult to say what 'Chinese' and 'Indian' identities really mean, either then or now," she says. "People of diverse cultures have always been interacting. Our histories are completely interwoven."

Confused by the names?

- **India** is the name of a country and civilisation.
- Many different languages are spoken in India. **Tamil** is one such language. Most Indian Singaporeans are Tamils.
- **Hinduism** is the main religion in India. India is a multi-religious country. In addition to Hindus, there are Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and people of other faiths.

VOCABULARY

medieval (say "midi-i-vel"; adjective.) = belonging to the Middle Ages, around 1500 to 500 years ago.

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