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# The city of immortals

The southern Chinese metropolis of Guangzhou plays host to a pantheon of deities in its many temples

By ERIK NILSSON

erik\_nilsson@chinadaily.com.cn

**G**uangzhou, the capital of South China's Guangdong province, is home to a heavenly host of divinities housed in terrific temples. It is a city of the gods — to the point that there is even a god of the city.

The places where these indigenous deities dwell are places for the pious — and the merely curious — to explore to understand this spirited metropolis' spiritual side.

Guangxiao is a happy place — by design.

Visitors are greeted by a statue of the 'smiling Buddha', or *mile*, at the gate.

The grinning deity is meant to remind worshippers to seek inner joy through Buddhism when faced with the suffering and change that comes with life.

The Buddha is a rendering of the legendary Budai, or Cloth Sack — a monk who wandered with his belongings in a bag, making friends and spreading joy.

It is said he wrote a poem on his deathbed that reads: "I made many friends in the temporal world. Now, I'm going away."

Another Buddha honored at the temple preached with few words but often just grinned, suggesting spirit is sometimes more important than words when sermonizing.

A Buddha with a childlike face occupies the other side of the wall housing the *mile*.

The statue honors a monk who decided to guide his 999 elder brothers to become Buddhas. He became one, too, upon succeeding.

Temple visitors officially enter through the Gate of Emptiness. But the compound inside is full — of ideas, stories and relics — intended to help us live more happily.

One of the halls is dedicated to Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) monk Huineng, who sought contentment through Zen.

It is said the illiterate genius encountered two monks at the temple, who were debating whether the wind caused a banner to flutter or if the banner's fluttering caused the wind. Huineng interjected — it was neither. Rather, people's perceptions created the illusions of a banner, its flapping and the wind.

In other words, the world doesn't exist beyond illusory subjective experience.

Huineng's lack of scholarly train-



**Clockwise from top:** Actors perform an ancient ceremony to honor the five immortals who founded Guangzhou, the capital of South China's Guangdong province; Deities worshipped at City God Temple; Statues of monks at Guangxiao Temple. PHOTOS BY ERIK NILSSON / CHINA DAILY

ing turned out to be a boon rather than a bane. He spoke in ways ordinary people could understand, which is largely why Guangxiao's philosophy spread regionally and even internationally.

Its jovial message even extends to the afterlife.

The chimes from an ancient bell tower regulate monks' daily activities, such as chanting.

It is said that when the bell rings 108 times in succession, the reverberations soothe the souls of those in the afterworld.

Guangxiao is indeed a happy place — in every sense — in this life and even the next.

Once upon a time, five immortals rode upon clutches of rice stalks in their mouths to found Guangzhou.

Hence, the metropolis is called the

city of rice, the city of rams and the city of immortals.

That is a lot of nicknames hailing from one legendary event, the essence of which is captured by the Five Immortals Temple.

The site stages costumed performances replicating ancient scholars' sacrificial ceremonies honoring the deities.

The temple also hosts Guangdong's largest bell. The 3-meter-high, 5-ton bell was forged in 1378 and is known as the "forbidden bell" since it was to be struck only during emergencies like fire.

The Dragon King's fourth son, Pulao, is perched atop the bell, since he is known to possess a thunderous voice.

Guangzhou is ruled by the underworld — not the criminal kind but, rather, the immortal variety.

At least that is the traditional belief behind the 640-year-old Guangzhou Du City God Temple that enshrines three deities: Liu Yan, Yang Jisheng and Hai Rui.

The Taoist holy site's primary divinity is the *chenghuangshen* —

literally, the god of the moat and walls — who is believed to govern the corporeal city from the spirit realm.

Monks honor his birthday with rituals and prayers. They also pass out longevity noodles and provide free clinical care to worshippers during the festival.

Given the city's vibrancy, it seems they have succeeded in appeasing its protector and ruler.

The envoy stayed too long. He literally missed the boat. He was stranded.

So goes the legend of a diplomatic official from the Pala Empire, who overstayed while worshipping at the South China Sea God Temple.

He was struck by the holy site's magnificence and lost track of time. He had also planted two pineapples he had brought from his homeland as tribute.

Upon realizing he had lingered too long, he rushed to the port to discover his ship had left without him. So, he stood, gazing at the shore, hoping the vessel would return, for the rest of his life.

He was given a grand funeral and posthumously granted the Chinese title of Lord of Daxi. A stone statue of him dressed as a local official was erected.

And his pineapples continued to grow after his passing — hence, the place is sometimes colloquially called the Pineapple Temple.

The 1,400-year-old holy site is the only remaining one of China's four ancient sea-god temples.

The temple also played a major role as a Maritime Silk Road port.

Ships left from here for such far-away destinations as the Persian Gulf, Africa and western Asia.

It was also the terminus of a trade route that opened with Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1731.

But the *Gotheborg* trade ship struck a reef and sank 900 meters off Sweden's coast while returning from its third voyage in 1745.

A replica set sail for Guangzhou in 2005 upon the decree of King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia.

The royals and then Chinese president Hu Jintao, plus a crowd of thousands, attended the ship's ceremonial arrival.

The monarchs visited the temple to make sacrifices to the ocean, and pray for peace and prosperity for both nations — and safe seafaring for all.

Indeed, it suggests Guangzhou's heavenly hosts' power extends beyond the city to many lands — and even oceans — throughout the country and to the world.