

# The He Hua Temple, Amsterdam

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues

In the heart of Amsterdam's bustling Chinatown, sandwiched between typical Dutch buildings on the Zeedijk, lies a rather interesting sight – the He Hua Buddhist Temple, with its traditional Chinese architecture and its bright pastel-coloured walls. Founded by the Fo Guang Shan order of Taiwan, this temple is the first and the largest temple in Europe to be built in the traditional Chinese palace style.



The three-arched entrance to the He Hua Temple

*He hua* is Mandarin for 'lotus', a flower of great significance in both Chinese and Buddhist symbolism. Like a lotus that radiates purity while rooted in muck, the He Hua Temple is said to have reshaped the neighbourhood, once a favourite hangout of drug dealers and junkies.

The history of the Chinese in Amsterdam is a long and colourful one: from the steamship coal stokers of the early 1900s, to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century owners of gambling houses and opium dens, to the restaurateurs and businessmen of today. In 1994, a few businessmen of Chinese origin sought the permission of the Amsterdam City Council to build a temple in the playground at the Zeedijk. Dutch architect Fred Greven was hired to design a temple complex based on the temples of China yet retaining some of the Dutch aesthetic of the neighbourhood. This fusion design is reflected in the ancillary buildings on either side of the temple, one of which serves as the nuns' residence and the other as a library. The



Volunteers place fruit offerings before Guanyin, during Chinese New Year 2018



Traditional figurines on the roof of the temple

construction of the temple complex took nearly two years, with characteristic elements such as the exterior granite stairway, the balustrades, the roof tiles and the traditional ornamentation all sourced from China. Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands inaugurated the temple on 15 September 2000.

The Fo Guang Shan order and the He Hua Temple focus on Humanistic Buddhism, which seeks to make Buddhist practices relevant to modern life. This modern branch of Buddhism has six core tenets: humanity, emphasis on daily life, altruism, joyfulness, timeliness and universality. The temple's main shrine is dedicated to Guanyin (the Goddess of Mercy) and she is represented as the 'Thousand-Hand Guanyin'. According to Buddhist legend, Guanyin was blessed with a thousand arms to enable her to help all those in need. Interestingly, the Guanyin statue in this temple is unique as it is made out of bronze, hence bears a dark coloration, as opposed to the more prevalent white porcelain statues of the goddess. This intricate and detailed statue was sculpted by Taiwanese master craftsman, Fa Cheng Xian.

The guardians of Buddhist monasteries and teachings, Qie-Lan and Wei Tuo, flank the Guanyin statue. On the outside, the roofs of the three entry archways are decorated with animals from the Chinese zodiac.

The temple not only serves as a religious centre for the Chinese Buddhists of Amsterdam, it also plays an important role in making Buddhism accessible to the Dutch and people from other backgrounds. During the Lunar New Year, in addition to the more solemn New Year's Day blessings and offerings, celebrations include a festive parade, a Lion Dance and fireworks, which are popular with locals and tourists alike. I too, am looking forward to welcoming the 'Year of the Pig' with my new friends at the He Hua Temple.

Heartfelt thanks to Venerable Miaoyi, Director of the He Hua Temple, for sharing her knowledge and time.

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