

## Light on the Lotus Hill

By Chan Chow Wah

*Inside the main hall of the Shuang Lin Monastery, 1925*

In 1917, a Buddhist monk was appointed the tenth abbot of the Shuang Lin Monastery, also known as Lian Shan Shuang Lin Si or Twin Grove Monastery on the Lotus Hill (莲山双林寺). The new abbot's *dharma* (Buddha's teachings) name was Pu Liang (普亮法师), which means 'pervasive light'. Just as light represents wisdom in Buddhist symbolism, so was the abbot a light of wisdom shining on the Lotus Hill. Sadly this light was extinguished in 1942, when Pu Liang was executed by the Japanese after the fall of Singapore. In the years that followed, the compelling story of his life and death slowly faded from public memory. But the courage of Pu Liang and his ties to historical movements – from the Sino-Japanese War and the China Relief Fund to the Nanyang Volunteers and the fall of Singapore – make his story worth remembering.

On 7 July 1937, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident marked the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War, when the people of Wanping Town southwest of Beijing refused to allow the Japanese to search for a missing soldier. This defiance escalated hostilities, with the Chinese increasing their resistance to Japanese expansion in China. Boasting they could conquer China within three months, the Japanese captured city after city, inflicting great suffering upon the civilian population, including the bloody Nanjing Massacre.

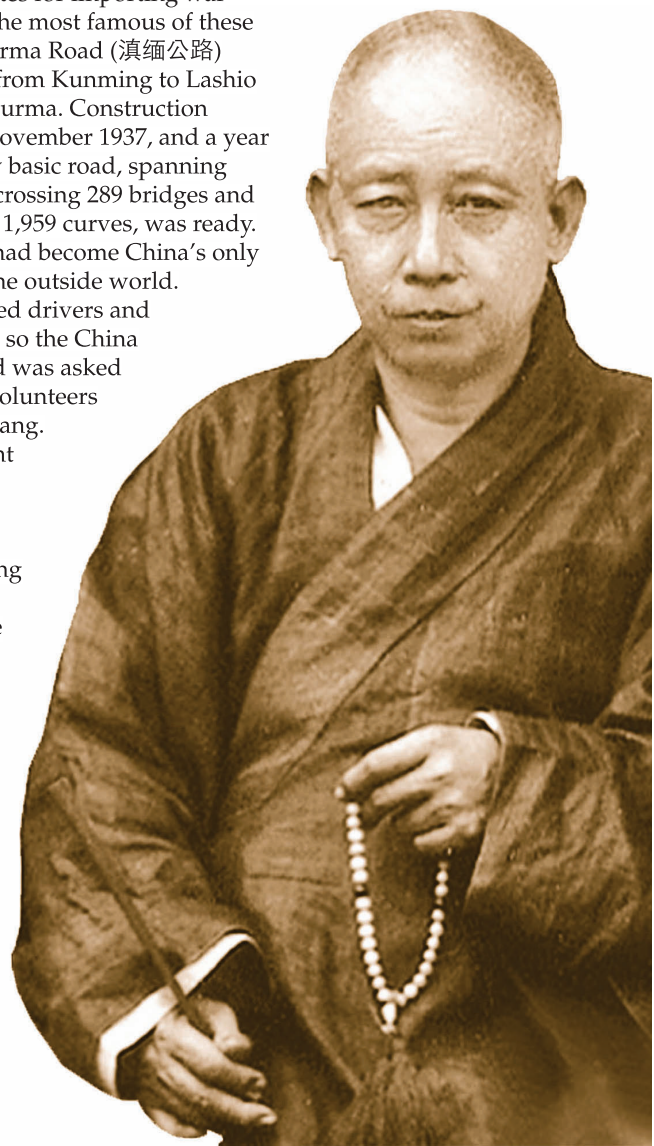
The Sino-Japanese War was closely monitored by the overseas Chinese, who began exploring ways to help their homeland. In Nanyang, today's Southeast Asia, Chinese leaders founded the China Relief Fund (南洋华侨筹赈祖国难民总会, 筹赈会) in 1938 to raise awareness of the war and raise money for China. Headquartered in the Ee Hoe Hean Club in Singapore's Chinatown, it was the nerve centre of a wide network of local offices spread all over Nanyang. Uniting 80 million Nanyang Chinese, this was the first regional Chinese organisation to transcend different dialect groups and places of origin. At the time, Venerable Pu Liang was raising money for the monastery's restoration, but decided to postpone this project and help raise money for the China Relief Fund instead. His 1939 Vesak Day fund-raising event garnered more than \$10,000 in a single day.

As the war continued, the abbot became involved in

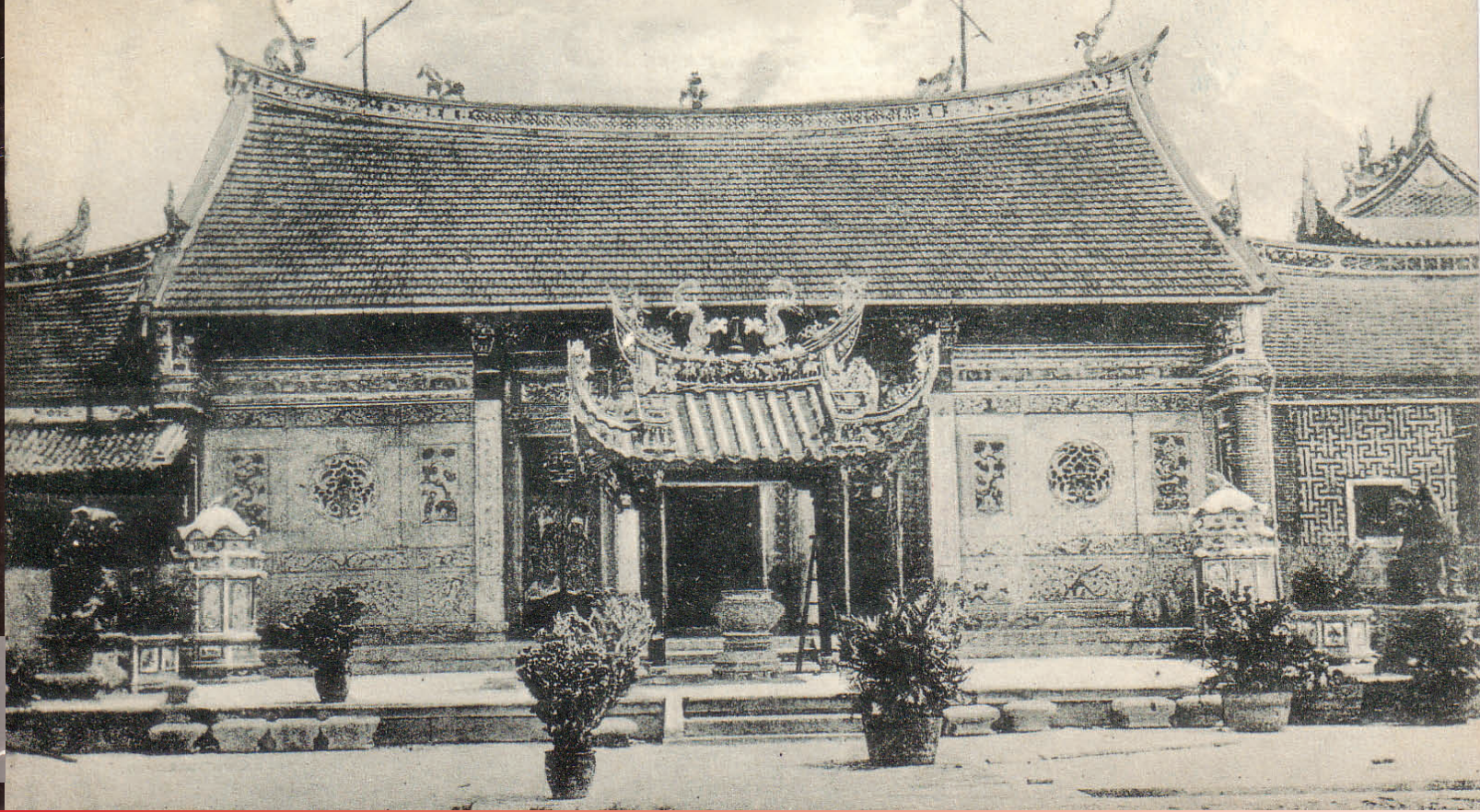
another important event, the recruitment of Nanyang Volunteers (南侨技工) for service on the Burma Road. As Japanese forces advanced southwards, the Chinese government became concerned about a possible sea blockade, so they began exploring alternative supply routes for importing war matériel. The most famous of these was the Burma Road (滇缅公路) stretching from Kunming to Lashio in British Burma. Construction began in November 1937, and a year later a very basic road, spanning 717 miles, crossing 289 bridges and navigating 1,959 curves, was ready. By 1941 it had become China's only link with the outside world.

China lacked drivers and mechanics, so the China Relief Fund was asked to recruit volunteers from Nanyang.

Recruitment began in February 1939, but after sending several groups, the Singapore



Venerable  
Pu Liang



Shuang Lin Monastery circa 1925

organisation decided it had to improve the driving skills of its volunteers. To establish a driving school, they needed a large area with training facilities and accommodation facilities and a trustworthy person to prevent Japanese infiltration. That person was Venerable Pu Liang, who agreed to let the volunteers train in the monastery grounds. From February to September 1939, 3,200 of these trained volunteers left for service in China. Nearly half perished. After the war, many of the survivors returned to Nanyang; those who remained in China were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.



Shuang Lin Monastery today

The Nanyang Chinese who supported the China Relief Fund probably never imagined that in a few years' time, the war would arrive at their doorstep, and indeed many would suffer the consequences of supporting the fund. In Europe, WWII was raging and the Japanese Pearl Harbour attack on 7 December 1941 brought the Americans into the fight. To the Chinese, however, World War II was simply a new chapter in the Sino-Japanese War, which had been raging since 1937. To the Singapore Chinese the first Japanese air-raid marked the arrival of the Sino-Japanese War in Nanyang at about 4 am on 8 December 1941. Two months later, the Japanese arrived in Johor ready to invade Singapore, the 'Gibraltar of the East'. When the invasion began, many houses were destroyed and villagers were forced to flee. Venerable Pu Liang invited the terrified and homeless refugees into the monastery and provided them with three vegetarian meals a day. When the fighting escalated, the abbot locked the monastery door to protect the civilians.

Unknown to them, the British had surrendered and the *Sook Ching* (massacre) had begun. Mechanical components left behind by the Nanyang Volunteers had been found, so a group of Japanese soldiers was dispatched to the monastery to arrest Venerable Pu Liang. The abbot and two disciples were taken to the Jalan Besar Stadium and finally to Changi Beach, where they were executed.

The Buddhist community's post-war tribute to Venerable Pu Liang stated that he gave his life in defence of the *dharma* and died without fear or regret. While we will never know the abbot's final thoughts, we do know that he cared very deeply for his community and placed society's interests ahead of the monastery's and his own. Today, the recently restored Shuang Lin Monastery is open to the public, and its light once again shines on Lotus Hill.

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**Chan Chow Wah**, an anthropologist and writer, is the author of *Light on the Lotus Hill*. The book is in libraries around the world and Mr Chan hopes the light will never be extinguished again.

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*Photos courtesy of the author*

**On 7th October there will be a Friday Evening Lecture given by Mr Chan Chow Wah, on the research that went into writing *Light on the Lotus Hill*, in the auditorium at the ACM.**