Fifth European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS) Conference

TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE ON TAIWAN

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April 5, 2008

For many authors, the conservative, motionless mode typifies Chinese architecture, construction of which has always been based on architrave, and the layout has been very much the same: a compound enclosed by inward facing houses on four sides, composed symmetrically and oriented to the South. However, the style and the form of structures are not uniform, and this is especially valid of vernacular architecture in various regions, which reflect different climate, different conditions, and different concepts of life or ways of living. Even official buildings, which adhered to the models and regulations set by the capital, adopted regional styles, the more so, the more distant their location. Next, the inborn desire to embellish houses, expressed by Du Fu 杜甫 in his verse shanchuan fu xiubu, ri yue jin diaoliang 山川扶緞戸 日月近雕梁, albeit restrained by Confucian rules and frugal sentiments, could express itself fully on ceremonial buildings which served the purposes of ritual. Hence, the tendency toward distinctness and embellishment, coupled with the regional factor, brought remarkable results in the realm of vernacular architecture, vividly different from the rigid imperial model. This is, indeed, the case of the flamboyant architectural tradition in Fujian and Guangdong (Min 閩 and Yue 粵, or Lingnan 嶺南), where Taiwanese architecture also belongs. In this paper, I shall point out some of these distinctions, and show the phenomena which

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2 Quoted from ZHANG Daoyi, p 1.
can be seen as typically Taiwanese. Limited in time by the length of the presentation, I decided to focus mainly, but not fully on architectural decoration. The bulk of material and examples was gathered from temples, which share many features with rich residences; temples are, after all, regarded as earthly residences of gods, with the basic layout of palaces. I had to restrict the topic of ordinary living houses, which do not serve my purpose that well: my paper does not scrutinize the unexceptional, but the outstanding.

As soon as Chinese migrants from the continent to Taiwan managed to secure for themselves stable conditions, they start building temples to express their gratitude for the prosperity they had achieved. One of the most popular deities was Mazu 媽祖 (originally Lin Moniang 林默娘 from Putian 莆田 who lived in Song dynasty), the protector of sailors, and so her temples were quite common along the Taiwanese Strait. Coincidentally, during the war between Ming forces and Manchus, Mazu was repeatedly endowed with high honorable titles, such as Tianshang shengmu 天上聖母 (‘The Holy Mother on Heaven’) in 1680, or Tianhou 天后 (‘Celestial Empress’) in 1684, and many more places of her worship were constructed, usually on the sea shore. Also the temple in Meizhou 湄洲, founded in early 15th century, was reconstructed and enlarged in early Qing, under the imperial sponsorship. Taiwanese regard this temple as the home temple (literally the ‘ancestral’ temple: Meizhou zumiao 湄洲祖廟) of the Goddess. From here, a statue of Mazu was sent in 1694 to Beigang 北港 where the locals had a temple built to shelter the statue: Chaotian gong 朝天宮 is Taiwan’s oldest and largest, covering the area of 37.9 x 55.5 meters. Later, it was damaged by earthquake, and rebuilt in 1911. (XIAO Mo, pp 685-686). Also among Taiwan’s oldest are Tianhou gong 天后宮 in Lugang 鹿港, Tianhou gong 天后宮 in Tainan 台南, and Long Feng gong 龍鳳宮 in Zhunan 竹南, and each houses a statue from Meizhou too. (WU Yuxian, pp 20, 21.)

Taiwanese temples of Mazu are not necessarily near the sea. They usually have a gate shanmen 山門, a stage xitai 戲臺, bell & drum towers zhonggu lou 鐘鼓樓, the main worship hall zhengdian 正殿, the rear hall houdian 後殿, galleries langwu 廊廡, the shuazhuang lou 梳妝樓, etc. The stage is a peculiar but an obligatory member, since it was

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3 The names and terms throughout this article are transcribed into the Modern Standard Chinese, although some would deserve transcription into Taiwanese, at least the phenomena which represent Taiwanese culture, and have Taiwanese denomination only.
unthinkable to celebrate the Goddess without offering for her enjoyment long and fine performances. The stage is a square open pavilion built on a high platform, always facing the main worship hall, so that the statue of Mazu can ‘watch’ the play. In big temples, it may be flanked by *xianglou* —buildings with an upper storey for spectators—on both sides of the courtyard. (Wu Yuxian, pp 98, 99.) The custom to build a stage in temples is old, recorded already under the Tang from northern China; during the Qing dynasty, however, the construction of stages in temples of folk worship flourished in Lingnan. Taiwan was no exception to the rule. Another building of architectural interest is the triple gate Sanchuan men 三川門, or Sanchuan dian 三川殿, found in Chaotian gong in Beigang and elsewhere. It is composed from the central main entrance, joined to a Dragon Gate, Longmen 龍門 on the East and a Tiger Gate, Humen 虎門 on the West. As an entrance, this building is somewhat particular, but it embodies the character of Taiwanese architectural complexes which seem to stretch into width, and have a symmetrically widened frontal row, as if pulling out from the sides of the central building two smaller houses.

Han people who had settled on Taiwan also brought over from their ancestral homes in Fujian and Guangdong the construction and aesthetic concepts for the building of their new homes. This is especially true of representative residences and temples, even though they could have made a choice, they rather followed the ancient model. And so, Hakka / Kejia 客家 people continued the tradition of their lone dwellings in Guangdong, introducing on Taiwan the so called *weilong wu* 围龍屋, the complex which is not enclosed in a rectangular wall, but ‘encircled by dragon’, or ‘encircled by ridge’. The structures too have ‘oval, semicircular, pentagonal, octagonal, horseshoe, and even half-moon shapes, are mixed with round, square and arcuate’ (Knapp, p 200). When an important construction went on and the builders could afford them, they invited over artisans from the continent, e.g. carpenters, *mujiang* 木匠, from Quanzhou 泉州, and plaster-craftsmen from Zhangzhou 漳州. There is no extant building from the early period to allow examination, however, several written records testify to it. For example, in his *Tai hai shi cha lu* 台海 使槎錄, Huang Shujing 黃淑

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4 Such housing complexes can be still seen in Hong Kong rural areas and in the area across the border in Guangdong, but also and in the Nan’gan region of Jiangxi province. For more see Knapp, pp 192-201.
敬 wrote, ‘In the 54th year of the Kangxi reign (1715), the merchants from Quanzhou and Zhangzhou initiated the construction of Shuixian gong 水仙宮 (the Water Deity Temple). Roof ridges in this temple were carved with figures and plants of exquisite quality, and all the masters came from Chaozhou 潮州.’ (Quoted from CHEN Guanxun, p 25). In the course of the Qing dynasty, the conceptual idea of Taiwanese traditional architecture has not much changed. In practice, however, the houses of ordinary people, made from local material by local masters born on Taiwan, began to nourish some distinct stylistic elements, as became more and more apparent toward the end of the dynasty. During the second half of the nineteenth century, these masters began to build temples as well, applying the same stylistic elements. After 1895, the contacts with China became severed, and the artisans became even more independent than before (CHEN Guanxuan, p 26). Most of the historic buildings extant date from this period or even later.5

Turning to the aesthetic side of the matter, it seems that the beauty of a structure is measured by its decorative detail, both in terms of quantity and quality. When the Taiwan gazetteer, published in 1752, referred to the above mentioned Water Deity Temple as to the most beautiful and the most elaborate shrine on the island, the author probably had this very aspect on mind. Especially the temples overflow with ornament—next are the tombs, which are not part of this paper. Applied decorations of temple buildings are possibly the most striking, and certainly a very characteristic feature of Taiwanese architecture; they too have been taken over from, and are shared with, the vernacular architecture in Guangdong and Fujian. Colourful statues on the roofs, frontal pillars carved with crawling bodies of dragons, wooden gate-leaves painted (lacquered) with door guardians in colourful armour, carved and gilded horizontal and vertical wooden members, murals carved in relief or painted—they all serve decorative, rather than functional purposes. The decorative beauty is not there for its own sake, however, but to please the deities and spirits who congregate around a temple.

5 During the Japanese colonization, builders of residences were turning over to Japanese houses for inspiration; elements such as the sliding door, pavement (tōngpū 通鋪), or closet (bichu 壁橱) were adopted; besides, there were buildings built in pure Japanese style, including numerous representative residences in major cities. Not many have survived, however. Shintō shrines were pulled down in 1945; residential villas have occasionally survived, but often in a poor condition. (CHEN Guanxuan, p 26).
The aesthetic appeal lies in the abundance of detail and richness, which should be at its best placed above, on the roof. We may note in passing that the original function of the roof is to protect and shelter, thereby roof also enhances protective symbolism and may have an important decorative function. In Chinese architecture, the housetop occupies a substantial part of the whole structure. It is prominent by its size and emphasized with curved profile, which increases the elegant or even majestic air of the whole building. The material, profile and degree of slope of the roof are determined by weather conditions. On Taiwan, ridge roof, covered with ceramic tiles, is the common profile. It can be seen in three basic variations: the ‘horse-back’ (mabei 馬背) or ‘saddle’ style with concave ridge-line, the ‘swallow-tail’ style with each end of the ridge rising upward and extending beyond the wall;\(^6\) and the ‘tile-weighing’ style, built by the Hakka (KNAPP, p. 48). The third profile style has the top of the gable wall shaped in one of five different ways, each representing one of the five basic elements: fire, wood, earth, metal and water. Within residential or temple complexes, any of these roof profiles can be used and combined, depending on the prominence of a particular building. The main hall usually has a curved ridgeline, accentuated with ornaments all along (daji du 大脊堵). In spite of the rainy climate, most houses on Taiwan, and Fujian, do not have overhanging eaves, because they would not withstand strong winds accompanying seasonal typhoons.

The tendency to emphasize the roof with embellishment, and to concentrate the essence of decoration on its ridge (zhengji 正脊), the ridge lines (qiangji 戟脊, ‘broken-off’ lines, which lead to the four corners of the roof), and the areas surrounding the four corners, has always been striking and eye-catching in official and vernacular, religious and residential architecture alike. The more prominent the building, the more embellishment it carries. As mentioned, human and animal figures, auspicious emblems and inscriptions hardly serve other practical purposes than to accommodate the gods: they are said to have magical powers to protect the building and secure happiness of its inhabitants. Most importantly, they have an undisputable decorative function. The ornaments have diverse forms, but are by dominated by

\(^6\) The so called swallow-tails, yanwei ji 燕尾脊, usually ‘were given shape with bricks cantilevered out from the ridge and supported by a metal rod, but today are more likely to be molded from reinforced concrete.’ KNAPP, p. 48.
three-dimensional creations: either minute sculptures, or scenes made in relief. Painted ornaments are not as common.

Depending on technique of fabrication, Taiwanese roof sculpture can be further grouped into three distinct types, 1. *huisu* 灰塑, 2. *jiannian* 剪黏, and 3. *jiaozhi* 交趾. Three-dimensional figures can be also produced by carving *diaoke* 雕刻, but this technique does not convene roofs, stone being too heavy for housetops, and wood too vulnerable to be exposed outside. Carving is common on pillars, and decorative wooden planches attached to pillars and beams, nonload-bearing curtain-walls, furniture etc., whatever is under the roof, protected. First, *huisu* 灰塑 refers to ornaments or figures modeled from plaster, reinforced by an iron rod inside. This technique recalls, in principle, European *stucco*. The figures maybe painted with colours. Quite popular all over southern China, the technique was also introduced to Taiwan. There its dominant position has been gradually taken over by the *jiannian* technique. *Jiannian* means applying coloured ceramic slices onto an earthen model, figural or floral —forming them into various shapes—and fixing them with plaster or some other glue; nowadays the slices are rather made of glass or plast. *Jiaozhi*, also *jiaozhitao* 交趾陶 or *jiaozhishao* 交趾燒 originated in Guangdong. First, ceramic figures are fired or dried, then covered with coloured glaze and fired again. The technology of *jiaozhi* products is much more complicated and demanding than that of the other techniques mentioned. The process requires multiple steps, the final one being the firing of ceramic glaze in the heat of 850 to 900º Celsius (Chen Guanxun, pp 28-30; Li Qianlang, p 56). The artisans on Taiwan usually can produce all three techniques (Chen Guanxun, p 31), besides, products of any of these techniques are sometimes combined on one building. Of the three, *jiannian* can achieve best colour effects, and is the most durable—while *jiaozhi* can be placed in the middle, and *huisu* does not last very long (Chen Guanxun, p 32); *jinanian* is also the technique which is specifically Taiwanese.

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7 Of the following four techniques, none is restricted to Taiwan. *Jiannian* and *jiaozhitao* may be regarded as characteristic of Taiwan.

8 Chinese recognize three carving techniques, *sandiao* 三雕, following the material, into wood *mudiao* 木雕, into brick *zhuandiao* 砖雕 and in stone *shidiao* 石雕.
The ridge of the main building, as a rule, would have ‘swallow-tails’ which tilt up diagonally beyond the walls. The curve of the ridge does not need anything else to emphasize its rising, the acroteria zhengwen 正吻 (fish or dragons with tails curled upward), common in many regions of China and in state architecture, may be omitted. Rather, the central point of the ridge, zhongdun 中墩 or yaohua 腰花 (in colloquial term) is emphasized, with a towering burning pearl, bouquet or pagoda, while two dragons keep crawling to it from both sides—such scenes are called shuang long qiang zhu 雙龍搶珠, shuang long hu ta 雙龍護塔 etc. Since dragon is a creature linked to waters, it can, as it is believed, protect the wooden building from fire. We should note once again that these beasts are no longer at the edges of the ridge, but that they have moved closer to the center. So, the arrangement of figures on the ridge has been changed, compared to that on the continent. Roof embellishment is not only fixed on the top of the ridge and the curve of the corner eave, but more figures can be seen along the ridge, the volume of which may rise above the roof; this kind of leveled ridge is called Xi Shi ji 西施脊. Its shape alone is decorative, moreover its flat sides, possess the same format as a horizontal scroll, and are often adorned with figural or geometric embellishment. The up-turned roof corners of important structures on Taiwan are sometimes embellished with patterns called recao 惹草 (i.e., ‘to toy with grass’), or fish yu tu shui 魚吐水. Their symbolic meaning, once again, is to protect the place against fire, and so, their colour is blue or green.

We may note that as one moves from the capital further to the south of China, roof embellishment gets gaudier and gaudier. In fact, in Guangdong, Fujian and Taiwan, roofs of some temples, e.g. the ancestral hall in Foshan 佛山, seem overcrowded with figures. The official buildings look rigid by comparison, although restrictions regarding embellishment of any kind (their dressing, housing, spending) were imposed on commoners. The reasons why folk architecture on Taiwan and elsewhere in the distant South overshadows official buildings, are not quite clear, and there are only hypothetical explanations. First, it is said that the nature in the south is prettier and more varied, and so it must have influenced the appearance of architecture. The second reasoning seeks economy. In the south, there was more prosperity and will to spend on pretty, even useless things. Third, being so far away from the emperor and the imperial power, it was possible to disobey prohibitions concerning
commoners, and use embellishment without much fear of being reprimanded. Be it as may, compared to the rigid and constant forms of northern decorations, the southern decorations are far more sticking out, far more plentiful, far more varied both formally and topically. It is actually surprising that so little has been written about them, perhaps caused by an academic hindrance of vulgarity.

As to the subject matter, whatever the representation, the idea always aims at supporting the morals and expectations of the traditional society, in a manner accommodating with folk habits and customs—as typical of folk art in general. The decorations represent symbolic birds and beasts (some mythical, other natural), historic figures revived in theatrical scenes, auspicious patterns including stylized script—in other words anything auspicious, what can bring luck and peace. Many are based on homophony. For example, a panel was carved with two figures, one holding a drapery (qi旗), the other a ball (qiu球). This combined makes qiqiu祈求, ‘earnestly hope, pray for,’ as should come to the viewer’s mind. For the same homophonic reason, peonies stand for wealth and nobility, fu gui福貴; flowers and plants on the whole occupy an important place within the realm of Chinese symbols. Some natural animals also became part of the supply, as long as their name sounds the same as something auspicious, e.g. the bat, whose rendering in the Lin 林 family garden, built in 1888 at Banqiao 板橋, is not only exquisite, but also relatively unique in Chinese architecture—pierced windows in walls rather take shapes of fruits. A message of well-wishing can be passed on in writing, with the help of calligraphic character, characters as shou寿(longevity, high age) have been long stylized into a pattern. A window in a passage along the Lin ancestral hall in Taizhong, 1919, was stylized into the character lu禄 (career, success), made of two dragons chīhu螭虎, the material is brick (KANG Nuoxi 2007, p 117). The allusion refers to five expressions of fortune, including the two above: fú shòu lù xī cái福寿禄喜財. This set appears through symbols in folk art, whereas the set of zhong xiao ren yì忠孝仁義 appears through symbols on official architecture (ZHANG Daoyi, p 1); however, any elements of the two sets can be seen side by side or even mixed together.

9 Seen in Nankun, carved in 1923, 78x80 cm.
Next, there are the mythical creatures, equally symbols of propitious omen. Dragon is the most popular, since he is believed to have inexhaustible magical power. As mentioned above, he adorns the roofs of residences and temples, because he supposedly protects the place against fire, among other things. In some temples, he climbs around pillars in front of the main shrine, he is also carved on furniture. The other magical beast, whose prominence in architecture rivals that of dragon, is not quite Chinese nor quite mythical—the lion. The notion of lions arrived with Buddhism, and lion assimilated himself well in all spheres of Chinese culture, folk and official (imperial). Lion is the king of all beasts, and therefore may have the character wang 王 on his forehead. He symbolizes good luck, bravery and power. He is commonly placed in front of the main entrance to guard against evil, the male on the left and the female on the right side, with a movable ‘luminous pearl’ yeming zhu 夜明珠 in his muzzle. Next, lion is quite often carved on the beams of the roof construction, attached to the mortise-tenon joinery in an upside down posture, playing with a ball (wan xiuqiu 玩绣球). Elsewhere, the beam proper is carved into the shape of lion, or another zoomorphic shape, e.g. elephant. A specific Taiwanese mascot, born of popular beliefs, is ‘Lion with Sword,’ jianshi 劍獅. A flat frontal mask, with the character wang on the forehead, and a miraculous sword in his muzzle, is hung above the doorway of many houses in Anping 安平. The mask is made of various materials and according techniques, and supposedly eliminates evil and attracts fortune. His sword, qixing baojian 七星寶劍, is sure to defeat demons. Other Taiwanese variations of lion, e.g. the pillar called ‘protective spirit’ shouhu shen 守護神, will not be discussed, as they are not—strictly speaking—members of a house. Of the other mythical beasts, phoenix, auspicious symbol of peace and good government, is also, but much less than dragon, seen on temple roofs on Taiwan. Phoenix often appears together with other mascots, or in figural scenes serving as ‘a cart’ carrying immortals. The other zoomorphic mythical beasts such as qilin 麒麟, the symbol of many descendents, or tortoise, the symbol of health, longevity and wisdom, are not common architectural design, unless we count on the tortoise carrying a stele.
To the same principles, i.e. fú shòu lù xī cái 福壽祿喜財, refer the figures of gods and humans which embellish architecture. After all, the first three—fú shòu lù—form a popular personified trio, a fact that speaks for itself and invites the comment that rather than pleasing the gods, the builder had on mind his own well-being. Many other figures, too, illustrate sayings and phrases which are said for the sake of worshippers, not gods, e.g. Goddess Magu and the Star of Longevity, Magu xian shou 麻姑獻壽. The Eight Immortals, ba xian 八仙, form yet another established group of supernatural figures, popular in the folk art all over China; on Taiwanese houses, they are often represented ‘crossing the ocean,’ ba xian guohai 八仙過海. Specifically Taiwanese is the equestrian Conqueror of Stormy Winds, seen at the central point of a ridge on a dwelling. Many, if not most figures and figural scenes centered on temples seemingly have nothing to do with religious worship at all, for their subject matters are nourished from Chinese history and classical fiction, rendered in the form of theatrical performance, hence the general name for sculptural roof decoration, ‘theatrical plays, or scenes’ chutou 齣頭. This reveals an amazing degree of secular infiltration, or religious indifference; and even if one interprets the scenes as a complimentary amusement for the gods, what the gods are being offered, is amusement fit for humans. Most scenes are taken from the literary classics such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms or Journey to the West, but also from historic tales of chivalry written in Records of a Historian or elsewhere, folk tales such as Mulan 木蘭 and tales of filial piety, and well-known anecdotes about well-known figures such as the poet Li Bo 李白. In other words, the topics do not try to reach beyond the general cultural notion of an average person. Some of the figural scenes serve secondary role, assisting or replenishing the symbols mentioned above. For example the ancient tale of the artist who hesitated to add eyes to the dragon he had painted, hualong dianjing 畫龍點睛, is simply developing the dragon motif, carved in stone relief on a temple wall.

To conclude and recapitulate, this paper tried to show that traditional houses of Han people on Taiwan follow the conventional social and structural principles shared all over China. Builders of temples, often artisans who had been invited over, copied models from Meizhou in Guangdong, or Zhangzhou and Quanzhou in Fujian; the adherence to the ancestral models was very strong especially among Hakka people. The decoration of a house, made by various symbols which are believed to protect
and stabilize the house and its inhabitants, also does not—be it for a few exceptions—use local Taiwanese mascots, or produce a cultural flow independent of the Han-Chinese mainstream. This has to do with the insistence on traditional forms, and the strength of conservative feeling which are characteristics of folk-art as such; folk-art, charming in appearance, rarely opens door to independent and creative development in terms of motifs and substance.

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