Exploring the Approach to the Conservation and Restoration of Taiwan’s Traditional Temple Artifacts

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Abstract

Cultural heritage in Taiwan requires different treatment procedures than their European equivalent. This paper aims to show through case studies the current situation in Taiwan with regard to the role played by those involved conservation of temple paintings. The interaction between local craftsmen, foreign experts and locally trained conservators is examined. Various case studies undertaken in Taiwan are used to analyze, review, and reflect on factors that cause conservation projects to fail or succeed. The results of the case studies are used to present recommendations for the conservation and restoration of Taiwan’s traditional color painting and murals.

Keywords

traditional color painting, traditional craftsmen, traditional temples, cultural heritage, professional conservation/restoration

Introduction

As a spiritual sanctum for believers, much like the churches in the West, Taiwan’s temples are adorned with polychromy on the beams, columns and walls of the temple architecture. The dazzlingly decorative colors and moving stories, incorporating religion, art, humanity, and history lift people’s hearts, making them an important cultural asset in Taiwan. With the recent emergence of the conservation profession in Taiwan it is generally agreed that preserving the cultural heritage of traditional temples is vitally important. However, for a variety of reasons the colorful temple paintings are not being properly conserved.
Taiwan’s temple paintings are included in the country’s architectural cultural heritage. Conservation building projects tend to include both the preservation of the building and the interior, but are led by architects who are more focused on the building structure than the painted interior. Often the architect delegates to a contractor who then hires traditional local craftsmen to carry out the work on the painted surface. These craftsmen may have little or no conservation training, which then can result in damage to the historical artifacts. Moreover, due to declining numbers of master craftsmen and jobs, younger craftsmen often lack experience and are unable to build up a good set of skills. In situations where foreign conservators guide projects, communication can be complex or lacking, thus exacerbating the problem. However, with proper training, there is no reason not to include traditional craftsmen in these projects.

Policies for the conservation of temples in Taiwan are determined by the competent heritage authority, the Council for Cultural Affairs, which works within the framework defined by the Cultural Heritage Preservation Act (CHPA) [1]. This council categorizes the cultural significance of monuments and heritage sites according to predetermined criteria. There are some sixty-one curriculums related to conservation theory offered by Taiwan’s universities, but only the Graduate Institute of Conservation of Cultural Heritage at Tainan National University of Art [2] has practical conservation courses [3].

Conservation and restoration of temple paintings in Taiwan

The techniques and materials used in temple paintings differ greatly from those used for Western oil paintings. Consequently, the concepts and materials for their conservation should be carefully evaluated before use. Conservators should adapt their methodologies accordingly. Although the expertise of foreign experts is not negated, often the treatment of temple artifacts is delegated to traditional craftsmen. In order to save Taiwan’s temple heritage, current practice has been to (re)train traditional craftsmen in restoration techniques. In fact, the treatment of these artifacts is better carried out by conservation trained students or graduates who have a broader understanding of the construction and degradation processes involved.

The classification of Taiwan’s temples as heritage sites has led to an increase in the conservation of these monuments. However, the interior painted surfaces are often not seen individually but as inextricably linked to the building structure. Moreover, in the past, interior decoration was renewed rather than restored. Projects are usually spearheaded by an architect who delegates aspects of the work to contractors, regardless of whether it is historical architecture or traditional temples. Both parties, being unfamiliar with conservation practices and policies, frequently turn to traditional craftsmen for the implementation of the work. These craftsmen, paid little despite fierce competition, re-sketch and repaint the interior decorations, rather than restore the original. This cycle of renewal has resulted in the loss of many valuable cultural assets. Using the advice of conservation experts will help to ensure that inadvertent damage to the object is avoided and original layers are preserved. Nonetheless, even when the conservation of the painted interior is guided by conservators, the actual work is carried out by local craftsmen, often resulting in damage to original layers.

This situation needs to be reviewed and, as such the following case studies aim to give a better insight and hope to offer recommendations for future implementation. By drawing attention to successful conservation projects both the public and non-conservation professionals within the field can be educated to accept the change in appearance before and after interventive treatment.
Problems encountered conserving traditional painted interiors in Taiwan’s temples

Case study 1. The conservation and restoration of the color painting on the lateral beams in the main hall of Taichung City’s Le-Cheng-Gong Temple

During the conservation of the Le-Cheng-Gong Temple in 2004, the consulting architect assigned the conservation of the main hall’s painted interior to conservation experts and the other interior spaces to traditional craftsmen. However, while onsite, conservators discovered that large passages of the painting in the main hall had been repainted. Figure 1 clearly shows new calligraphy painted over the original. Lacunae in the main hall’s lateral beams had been filled with clay, over which the outline was redrawn in preparation for the retouching phase (Figure 2). Work was suspended in order to preserve the original painting. The necessary removal of these reworkings took considerable time and effort before the original painted decoration was revealed and restoration work could resume.

Figure 1: The color painting in the main hall of Le-Cheng-Gong has been re-drawn
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Figure 2: The main hall’s lateral beans have been clay over filled, resketched, prepared for repainting.

Figure 3: Through extended conservation and restoration, the original color painting has been preserved.
The conservation project entailed initial evaluation of the condition of the painted surfaces using a combination of non-destructive techniques and sampling. The painted surfaces were examined using ultraviolet and infrared radiation. Cross-sections revealed the stratigraphic build up of preparatory and color layers. An effective cleaning system was devised and an efficient means of consolidating the fragile flaking paint was established. Subsequently lacunae were filled and retouched. The extensive restoration of the painted interior has ensured the preservation of the original design and color (Figure 3) [Tung and Lin. 2008].

During this project a variety of problems were encountered, which are illustrative of the wider situation in Taiwan and should be addressed in the future. It became apparent that the traditional craftsmen erroneously believed that in creatively repainting the objects they were preserving them. To avoid this situation from occurring in the future, it is essential that a conservation professional is involved in the project from its conception.

**Case study 2.** The conservation training program for craftsmen working at Lung-Shang Temple in Lu-Kang, Changhwa County.

In 2004 the planning office of the National Center for Research and Preservation of Cultural Properties (NCRPCP) staged a training seminar for traditional craftsmen working on the Lung-Shang Temple in Lu-Kang. The project admitted 13 trainees, who underwent approximately 25 hours of training over a five-day period, with Japanese experts on hand to provide guidance [NCRPCP 2004]. However, this program was short-lived due to the varied education levels among the trainees and their lack of hands-on experience.

Reviewing the seminar it became obvious that the short nature of the program could not by any means provide a systematic introduction to all of the individual stages necessary for this specific conservation project. It was impossible for the trainees to gain hands-on experience for each required treatment. The superficial nature of the program meant that a comprehensive overview of conservation and restoration theory was lacking. Thus, it was impossible to successfully educate the trainees to the required level. Furthermore, lecturers found that it was difficult to convey a standard level of content to the trainees because of their varied backgrounds.

**Case study 3.** The consolidation of the painting in the main hall of Lung-Shang Temple in Lu-Kang, Changhwa County

Following a major earthquake on the 21st of September 1999, the severely damaged Lung-Shang Temple complex required major work to ensure its structural integrity. Delaminating and flaking paint layers needed attention. The contractor employed craftsmen to consolidate the flaking paint layers [Zhuang Xue-Qi, 2004]. Without sufficient professional guidance the craftsmen used inappropriate tools and techniques. The consistency of the adhesive used, combined with the manner in which it was applied, has resulted in the adhesive being left smeared on the surface (Figure 4) In this case, the contractor mistakenly assumed the consolidation of the flaking paint layers to be his responsibility. Although the craftsmen had participated a few training seminars, their knowledge was insufficient to carry out the task to the high professional standards required.
Case study 4. The conservation the Chen Yu-fong murals at the Bengang Shui-Xian-Gong Temple in Hsingang Township, Yunlin County

The NCRPCP collaborated with the Bavarian State Conservation Office (Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege) in a joint conservation project to treat the Chen Yu-fong murals (circa 1948) at Bengang Shui-Xian-Gong Temple Hsingang Township, Yunlin County. This involved an initial training program followed by the treatment of the murals. The first year of the program [NCRPCP 2001] provided theoretical and practical aspects, which gave the students a rudimentary knowledge of the materials and construction of mural paintings. Selected students were allowed to participate in the conservation and restoration of the murals, specifically in the cleaning phase under the guidance of the instructor [NCRPCP. 2002] (Figure 5).
This project can be seen as a successful example of collaborative cooperation. The results of the project can be evaluated in Figures 6 and 7. Figure 6 shows the condition before treatment in which water stains, discoloration, mildew, and damages are evident. Figure 7 shows the successfully restored murals. The key element here was the continual guidance of the students throughout the project; Jurgen Pursche said “there is potential crisis when no one experienced is on hand to provide the guidance” [Pursche, 2002].

There are a number of reasons why the project is viewed as a success. Firstly, all stakeholders were involved from the beginning of the project, which had the temple management’s full cooperation and support. The professor leading the project was able to communicate clearly with the Bavarian State Conservation Office, Germany (Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege). Moreover, the professor was assisted by local teaching assistants who not only had knowledge of the cultural background but also a general conservation training. Lastly, the government liaison, trained in Italy in the field of mural painting conservation, had the linguistic ability and professionalism to fully communicate and coordinate with other experts (Figure 8). Consequently the students were offered consistent supervision, which ensured that a high standard of work was carried out even after the foreign experts had left Taiwan.
Figure 6: Before Cleaning: Chen Yu-fong murals of the Bengang Shui-Xian-Gong Temple

Figure 7: After Cleaning: Chen Yu-fong murals of the Bengang Shui-Xian-Gong Temple
Reflection on the problems encountered

As explained, the conservation of Taiwan’s cultural heritage, specifically temple paintings, was traditionally supervised by architects in charge of the larger building project. The interior was not seen as separate, which has often led to the damage or loss of entire original interiors. Craftsmen employed in the treatment of the interior either repainted or overpainted original decorations, leaving a great disparity between the historical architecture and the freshly renovated interior. Thus, it is essential that the conservation of cultural heritage conservation is multidisciplinary [Tung Kuo-King, 2002]. Review boards involved in the certification of conservation projects currently include Western experts. However, care must be taken that these members do not to impose Western customs and values to the treatment of Taiwan’s cultural heritage, as this can also lead to inadvertent damage.

Furthermore, Taiwan’s temples include a plethora of artistic endeavor; murals, color painting, woodcarving, stonemasonry and etching are found in abundance. Each type of artifact and artistic technique calls for specific treatment. Conservators should be trained accordingly. But good communication between conservators of different backgrounds is also paramount in order to have a holistic approach, thus ensuring a proper professional attitude to all aspects of conservation.

A professor of conservation once said “Training traditional artisans is not the only way of creating professional restorers” [Zu Ming-Fu, 2004]. The crafts tradition involves a mentoring system whereby the master craftsman passes on manual skills to his apprentices. The master will only entrust work to his apprentice once a certain level of expertise has been acquired. Because of the manual aspects of the work,
restoration work is often carried out by craftsmen, who tend to renew, instead of preserve original structures. Unless craftsmen undergo retraining, it is unlikely that they will ever become professional conservators. It is essential that professional conservators, in addition to the hands-on skills, have theoretical and practical training. A balance between material science including aspects of biology, chemistry and physics, conservation ethics, and manual skills is necessary. Unfortunately, as Taiwan’s conservation and restoration training program has not been designed by conservation experts, it lacks sophistication in content. The training program needs to redesigned so that it delivers proficient students who have a craftsman’s knowledge of their cultural artifacts balanced with Western conservation ethics.

Despite the fact that certain people advocate against foreign conservators participating in conservation projects, they are often asked to help because of the knowledge gap existing in Taiwan. Unfortunately, continuity of practice may be lacking because foreign experts are only involved in projects temporarily, often leaving before the work is completed. Although these experts are well grounded in conservation ethics and practices, their application to Taiwan’s cultural heritage may not be entirely successful. Though able to change their methodologies once arriving on site, this tends to be a spontaneous adaptation which does not promote communication or proficiency. It is essential that there is liaison between the foreign professional conservator and those carrying out the work. This is vitally important so that continuity of treatment can be ensured when the foreign professionals have left. Otherwise, a lack of technical expertise or understanding could lead to project failure. In the future Taiwan should not rely on foreign (trained) experts for conservation work, instead investment should be made in redeveloping the pre-existing conservation program to produce fully trained conservators who can treat Taiwan’s wealth of cultural artifacts. This would be a better use of resources than the ad hoc retraining of craftsmen to do conservators jobs.

The use of seminars should not be for developing professional conservators. As Antoine Wilmering [4] once said, “Professional artifact preservation and conservation has not been a ready-made product that can be imported, or can be poured instantly when needed. The preservation and conservation of cultural assets is not something that can be achieved through the yearly seminars or indefinite discussions” [Wilmering, A. 2001]. However, as Taiwan spends handsomely on staging the training seminars, they can still have a useful role to play promoting the profession as well as raising awareness on certain key topics.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the conservation of traditional temple artifacts and historical architecture should be approached separately and independently. The collaboration and good communication of all parties involved in conservation projects is essential, as miscommunication between parties can lead to problems. It is essential that policies and treatments are decided by the appropriate bodies and professionally trained conservators, although under the right guidance local craftsmen will still make a valuable contribution. In the short term future it is imperative that Taiwan invests in its own national heritage bodies to streamline professional talent into the professional conservation education system.
Endnotes

[1] In 1981, Taiwan, in response to the evolving movement worldwide for the conservation of cultural assets, founded the Council for Cultural Affairs, and, in 1982, it passed the Cultural Heritage Preservation Act (CHPA). This was revised on February 9, 2005 and took effect on November 1. The CHPA categorizes monuments and antiquities according to location and rarity. http://english.cca.gov.tw/mp.asp?mp=1 (accessed: 12/03/2010)


[3] Courses are given in the conservation of wood, paper and books, and Chinese painting.

[4] Antoine Wilmering was the professor of the Graduate Institute of Conservation of Cultural Relics at Tainan National University of the Arts 2002.

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