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Research on The Decorative Art and Cultural Connotation of Angsila Bontok-Kong Temple in Chonburi Province, Thailand

Yang Fan¹

Abstract

Chaozhou Chinese migrated to Thailand several times and their inherited Chaozhou traditional culture collided and merged with Thai local culture over the long years. This gradually presented new artistic forms and evolved into new cultural forms, which is directly reflected in the decorative art of Chaozhou Chinese religious spaces.

Keywords: *Chaozhou chinese, bontok-kong temple, decorative art, cultural connotation.*

Decoration is a spiritual production that humans engage in according to the "laws of beauty" and is a product of ideology. It emphasizes formal aesthetics through orderliness, formalization, and idealization, thereby becoming a materialized form of expressing human aesthetic feelings and tastes. [Cao Lin. The Source of Decorative Art. Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House, 2006. p.1] Decoration is a product of human creation methods and cultural systems. It is also a form of materialized art with unique artistic, cultural connotations, and meanings.

Chaozhou people are the largest group of Chinese immigrants in Thailand. During the two immigration waves of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, a large number of Chaozhou people came to Southeast Asia to make a living and landed in the coastal areas of central and eastern Thailand. According to historical records, Ang Sila in Chonburi Province was one of the ports where Chaozhou red-headed boats stopped during their migration. The Chaozhou native culture brought by immigrants collided and merged with the local Thai culture over the long years, gradually presenting new artistic forms and cultural forms. This constantly changing and evolving cultural form is also directly reflected in the decorative art of Chaozhou Chinese religious spaces.

The Construction History and Functional Evolution of the Bontok-Kong Temple in Ang Sila

Ang Sila is located on the southern coast of Chonburi Province, Thailand, and is a typical seaside fishing community. According to the data statistics of the provincial administrative office in 2018, the community has a settled population of approximately 31,000 residents, of which about 70% are descendants of Chaozhou immigrants.

The term "Bontok-Kong" refers to the local earth god. According to Mr. Duan Lisheng's book "Chinese-style temples in Thailand", "Bontok-Kong" means "local god", which refers to the earth god. The

¹ Baise University, China. Email: 37316711@qq.com

Teochew people read "Ben Tu Gong" as "Bontok-Kong". Bontok-Kong is a deity widely worshipped by Teochew immigrants in various parts of Thailand, and the Bontok-Kong temple is an important spatial carrier of this belief. The Ang Sila Bontok-Kong Temple is located at the center of the community and is the earliest Chinese-style temple built in the community. According to the handwritten temple records and oral accounts of the villagers, the temple was built with funding from Chaozhou Chinese immigrants. According to legend, Zengde came to Thailand and engaged in maritime trade. One night, the local deity "Bontok-Kong" appeared to him in a dream, urging him to donate money to build a temple in honor of the deity in return for his protection. So, in the year 2376 of the Thai Buddhist calendar (1833 AD), Zengde followed the deity's request and built the "Old Bontok-Kong Temple" facing the sea in a place near a stone bridge in the village of Angsila. From then on, the local area of Ang Sila had a space for worship belonging to the Chaozhou people. Subsequently, waves of Chaozhou immigrants built homes and settled around the temple, gradually forming a community layout centered around the temple. Due to years of disrepair, the "Old Bon Toh Gong Temple" underwent reconstruction in the year 2500 of the Thai Buddhist era (1957 AD). Chen Maoyi, a Chaozhou Chinese businessman dealing in building materials, rallied local villagers to raise funds to expand the temple on the original site, and a new plaque with the name "Hong Xing Ancient Temple" was hung.

The main gate of Angsila Bontok-Kong Temple in Chonburi, Thailand (Photo by Yang Fan, 2020).



The Bontok-Kong Temple in Angsila adopts the typical "four-point gold" architectural form of the Chaoshan region. The temple is approximately 12 meters wide, 15 meters deep, and 5 meters high. The entire building is a two-entry courtyard, adhering to a symmetrical layout. The space is organized around the Bento Gong statue enshrined in the main hall, forming a compact and flexible spatial form. In order to facilitate worship, the temple halls are connected front and back, with a courtyard of approximately 5 square meters on each side, mainly used for lighting and ventilation. Angsila is located in the coastal area of the Gulf of Siam, where the air humidity is high. The courtyard, serving as a lighting and ventilation system, plays a significant role in the temple. It is an essential and indispensable part of the entire building.

The Bontok-Kong Temple is a sacred public space for collective worship ceremonies and cultural activities for the Chaoshan immigrants in the Angsila community. Important festivals for worship include the Spring Festival, Nine Emperor Gods Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Hungry Ghost Festival.

The grand and distinctive Chaozhou-style parade of the gods is also performed during these festivals. With the exchange and integration of Thai and Chinese cultures, the beliefs of the Chaozhou Chinese in Angsila have gradually become more diverse. In addition to the main deity Bontok-Kong, the temple also enshrines Buddha statues, Guanyin, bodhisattvas, and various Taoist gods. Therefore, Buddhist and Taoist-related teachings, activities, and worship ceremonies are also held in the temple. The Bontok-Kong Temple is also a space for consolidating clans and uniting relatives, as well as providing social functions such as promoting fellowship among fellow townspeople, offering welfare services, and hosting funeral ceremonies. The temple is closely related to the community residents' decision-making, weddings, funerals, and other life events. As you approach the entrance of the Bontok-Kong Temple, you will see two stone steles erected, on which are clearly recorded detailed lists of the Chaoshan immigrants' donations of silver to repair the temple during the reigns of Emperor Daoguang and Emperor Guangxu of the Qing Dynasty. In addition, the Bontok-Kong Temple also serves as a cultural communication platform, and Chaoshan folk art forms have been widely spread through the temple. For example, Chaoshan opera is a special theatrical form that Chaoshan immigrants enjoy watching. Its script is rich in content, and its performance style is lively. There is a platform about three feet high in front of the Bontok-Kong Temple entrance used as a stage for Chaoshan opera performances. In recent years, the community residents have built a new hall opposite to the Bontok-Kong Temple that can accommodate hundreds of people, which is specifically used for festival performances. During the traditional Chinese Spring Festival in recent years, the Angsila community has invited professional performance groups to perform Chaozhou opera and local dramas in the hall of the Bontok-Kong Temple for three days.

Decorative Art Characteristics of Angsila Bontok-Kong Temple

Three-Dimensional and Vivid Form

The architectural structure of the Angsila Bontok-Kong Temple consists of four parts: the main hall, the sky and earth pavilion, the dragon pillar, and the paper burning pagoda. The decorative arts of the entire temple are concentrated in the core part of the main hall. The temple roof is in the shape of a double-eaved roof with upturned corners, and it is decorated with the typical Chaozhou inlaid porcelain technique. The art of inlaid ceramics is a folk art in the Chaoshan region, in which craftsmen skillfully utilize discarded ceramic fragments to cut out different shapes of ceramic tiles according to the design needs. Based on the clay modeling, the technique uses flat inlay, raised inlay, and circular inlay to piece together and decorate the object of decoration. The Chaozhou-Shantou ceramic inlay craft was listed on the national intangible cultural heritage protection list in 2007.

The ridges of the Bontok-Kong Temple are sculpted using the vivid and intricate Chaozhou ceramic inlay technique, depicting the image of two dragons playing with a pearl amidst the waves. The two dragons face each other symmetrically on the ridge, with well-proportioned and coordinated shapes, smooth and flowing dynamics, and natural transitions between them. The lower part of the ridge beam is decorated with mainly peonies and double phoenixes. The phoenixes spread their wings as if to take flight, while the petals of the peonies are neatly stacked, highlighting a sense of elegance and luxury. On both sides of the ridge beam, scroll patterns serve as the base with overlapping peony flower shapes, which naturally curve upwards after extending horizontally, enhancing the roof's graceful and flowing lines. The pendant ridge is mainly decorated with famous characters from Chaoju opera stories. After being shaped in gray mud, the four drama characters are placed on the two sides of the ridge with the

round-inlay technique. They are dressed in armor, holding weapons and carrying flags, with natural and vivid movements and expressions. In order to facilitate the viewers, the craftsmen also appropriately tilted the angles of the sculpted figures forward to satisfy the viewers' visual experience of looking up. Additionally, the walls of the courtyards on both sides of the temple hall are also decorated with artistic techniques of relief and inlaid porcelain, creating two sets of guardian lions, with a green dragon on the left and a white tiger on the right. The gable walls of the temple also embody the traditional Chaoshan architectural decorative style. The gable walls refer to the horizontal outer walls at the ends of the building, and the main beam of the building is generally placed under the gable walls, which not only bears the weight but also serves the functions of separating from adjacent houses and fire prevention. Based on the traditional principle of the five elements generating and restraining each other, the mountain walls of Chaoshan architecture are generally decorated with symbolic shapes related to the five elements of gold, wood, water, fire, and earth. Angsana Bontok-Kong Temple in Angsana is a typical water-type mountain wall, closely related to the coastal geographical characteristics of its location. It also metaphorically represents the hardships of the Chaozhou-Shantou immigrants in Angsana who left their hometown and established roots in a foreign land across the sea.

Flat Division Composition

The interior and exterior walls of Bontok-Kong Temple are covered with exquisite Chinese traditional-style paintings, characterized by elegant lines, delicate style, and high taste. The painting themes are mainly divided into several categories, including religious stories, theatrical characters, flowers and plants, auspicious birds and beasts, and so on. With the "Hong Xing Ancient Temple" plaque on the entrance as the axis, the three walls around the entrance of the temple are decorated with paintings following strict symmetry and a structure of plane division. The wall from top to bottom is divided into four sections for block surface segmentation, with each block surface corresponding to a mural. The top and bottom sections feature themes of flowers, plants, auspicious birds, and animals. The middle two sections depict Taoist figures, with "Heavenly Officials Bestow Blessings" and "Earthly Officials Bestow Fortune" on the left and right sides of the plaque, respectively. Above the plaque is a long scroll of the "Eight Immortals". It is worth mentioning that in these three paintings, the faces of the figures such as the Eight Immortals, the heavenly official, the earthly official, and the Taoist boy are all depicted using the art of round carving for decoration, breaking the rigidity of flat painting and making the expressions of the figures vivid and lifelike.

The inner walls of the temple, as well as the beams and pillars, are also divided into sections based on the structure, and decorated with paintings according to different themes. The floor's zoning and layout are also very carefully considered, with a height difference designed between the main hall and the entrance hall, highlighting the sacred and solemn atmosphere of the main hall. In addition, different colored floor tiles are used to divide the temple into zones, distinguishing the main deity worship area from the area for worshipping lesser gods. The paper burning pagoda at the entrance of Bontok-Kong Temple is also divided into sections based on the five layers and six sides, with each side featuring an independent painting. The painting themes include the twelve zodiac animals, flowers and plants, and Taoist instruments. The decorative art of planar segmentation creates a sense of spatial scale, rhythm, and order in the Angsila Bontok-Kong Temple, and also subtly influences people's perception and experience of psychological space.

Assigning Color to Objects Based on Their Shape.

The application of high-purity colors and strong color contrasts is the color tone of Bontok-Kong

Temple. The craftsmen use the techniques of porcelain inlay coloring and three-dimensional coloring to decorate the colors, applying them according to the structural relationships of the architecture and sculptures. At the same time, high-purity and high-brightness color blocks or lines are used to embellish and supplement details. High-contrast complementary color contrasts such as red-green, blue-yellow are widely used in the color decoration of Bontok-Kong Temple.

The color decoration art of Bontok-Kong Temple mainly consists of two parts: architectural color and decorative structural color. The color of the temple building itself is white walls and gray tiles, with red paint on the beams and pillars, and the color application has a high purity, presenting an overall elegant and simple color tone. However, the structural decoration colors on the ridges of the temple, dragon pillars, and above the heaven and earth pavilion use high-purity color combinations, emphasizing the contrast of colors to create a gorgeous and eye-catching visual effect. The double dragons on the roof ridge of the temple are green, standing on top of blue water ripples, while the two phoenixes and peony flowers below are in greenish-brown. The decorative components of the roof ridge present an overall cool color tone, which contrasts with the vermilion red of the roof corners, forming a distinct warm-cool color contrast. The double dragons on the top of the Tian Di Ting (Pavilion of Heaven and Earth) are in orange-red color, which distinguishes them from the double dragons on the roof. The dragon column is about 10 meters high, with a large red body and two intertwined dragons wrapping around the column, with the top dragon holding a bright lamp in its mouth. Craftsmen used inlaid porcelain techniques to finely carve and polish the surface of the dragon, and then cut golden porcelain tiles into pieces to serve as dragon scales, which were then embedded on the dragon body according to its dynamic shape. Meanwhile, colorful auspicious clouds were used to embellish the column and dragon, with appropriate spacing and density. Under the sunlight, the golden dragon shines brightly, showcasing its magnificent beauty.

Architectural decorative art of Angsilah Bun Tau Kung Temple, Chonburi, Thailand (Photo by Yang Fan, 2020).



The Decorative Cultural Connotation of Angsila Bontok-Kong Temple

The Craft Decoration Inherits the Historical and Cultural Heritage of China.

The craft decoration of Bontok-Kong Temple mainly reflects on the gray sculpture and inlaid porcelain craft, which is the most outstanding part of the entire temple. As mentioned earlier, the decorative elements on the ridge of the roof of Bontok-Kong Temple are made of gray sculpture and inlaid porcelain. These figures are derived from traditional Chinese theater and depict the scene of the Three Heroes Battling Against Lü Bu in the Romance of Three Kingdoms. On the left side of the ridge, there are figures of Liu Bei and Zhang Fei holding weapons and glaring, while on the right side, there are figures of Guan Yu and Lü Bu engaged in fierce combat. The scene conveys a strong historical and cultural connotation, with detailed depictions that reflect the personalities of the characters. The loyalty, bravery, and valor of the three sworn brothers and the power and might of Lü Bu are vividly expressed. By reproducing historical and cultural stories, and reshaping the personality traits of historical figures, the artistic decoration of the Bontok-Kong Temple reflects the love of outstanding Chinese historical culture and the ideological sentiments of loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness among the Chaoshan immigrants in Angsila.

Environmental Decoration Highlights the Integration of Chinese and Thai Cultures.

The artistic decoration of the environment in the Bontok-Kong Temple reflects the cultural integration of Chinese and Thai traditions, which was influenced by the local Thai culture and deeply rooted in the Chaozhou-Shantou immigrant community in Ang Sila. The main hall altar of Bontok-Kong Temple is decorated with a background of qilin, and in the center is the statue of the main deity, Bontok-Kong. In addition to the traditional Chinese Taoist symbol of Bagua, various Buddhist amulets and local spiritual symbols are also displayed on the altar. Above the altar in the main hall of the Bontok-Kong Temple, there is a background cloth with a qilin design, and the statue of the main deity Bontok-Kong is enshrined in the center. In addition to the traditional Chinese Taoist symbol of the Eight Trigrams, various types of Buddhist amulets and local spiritual symbols are also affixed to the shrine. Above the shrine hangs a plaque that reads "神威远播 (God's mighty power can travel far)", which showcases the divine power of Bontok-Kong. On either side of the plaque hang two puffer fish, which are believed by Thai residents in the Ang Sila area to have the power to ward off evil. On both sides of the shrine are Buddhist statues, with Guanyin Bodhisattva enshrined on the left side and various Taoist immortals on the right side. The clear positioning of the main and subordinate gods and the obvious hierarchy of worship reflect the polytheistic beliefs of the Chaoshan Chinese and the integration of multiple religions and cultures such as Buddhism, Taoism, and folk beliefs. Outside the temple gate, there are paper pagodas with many paintings, including some depicting local marine creatures such as tropical fish, horseshoe crabs, and prawns, which also reflect the locality of the decorative culture.

Interior view of Angsila Bontok-Kong Temple, Chonburi, Thailand (Photo by Yang Fan, 2020).



Ritual Decoration Reflects the Religious Concept of Sacred Space.

The Ang Sila Bontok-Kong Temple in Ang Sila is composed of the temple, the Tian Di Ting (Pavilion of Heaven and Earth), the dragon columns, and the paper pagodas. These components are functionally independent yet interrelated, and play different roles in religious ceremonies, each with their own functions. Following the ritual procedures, the community residents' worship process is as follows: firstly, light up the oil lamp on the dragon's mouth at the top of the dragon pillar, then worship the Heavenly Parents at the Heaven and Earth Pavilion, then enter the temple to worship the gods, and finally burn joss paper, gold ingots, and other offerings at the paper burning tower. Therefore, the temple, Heaven and Earth Pavilion, dragon pillar, and paper burning tower are distributed according to a reasonable path. According to an 83-year-old woman named Chen, who is a third-generation Chinese, the predecessor of the dragon pillar was a bamboo pole with an oil lamp hanging from it. Before the ceremony, the lamp had to be lit and the pole placed in front of the temple. The lamp could not be extinguished during the ceremony. Later, during the reconstruction, it evolved into the current dragon pillar, which was endowed with new cultural connotations. The dragon pillar stands tall and straight towards the sky and is the medium through which the Jade Emperor communicates with heaven and earth. In addition, during the reconstruction of the temple, it was discovered through divination that the original location of the paper pagoda, which was placed on the right side of the temple entrance, had unfavorable geomancy. As a result, it was moved to the left side of the entrance. Since then, the temple has continuously attracted worshippers and protected the Ang Sela community from epidemic diseases. The three realms universe concept of the Chaoshan immigrants is symbolically corresponding to the temple space.

The Painted Decorations Convey the Spirit of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

The decorative paintings in the Bontok-Kong Temple reflect the typical forms and language of traditional Chinese painting. They were reportedly painted by Chinese artist Wang Bin and others at the end of the last century. The themes can be classified into the following categories: the first is religious scenes or stories of historical figures. The second category includes plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum, auspicious birds and beasts, etc. From a technical perspective, the painters inherit the traditional Chinese painting techniques, with ink as the main medium and color as the auxiliary. Based on ink lines, they depict the contours, light and shadow, and texture of the objects, and then use light colors to highlight the theme. The painting style emphasizes proper balance of ink and color, wetness and dryness, and virtual and real elements, as well as an elegant artistic conception. In terms of genre and form, the temple paintings are mostly single-frame narratives, choosing the most crucial or exciting scene from the story as the creative theme, and delicately depicting the story's setting and the inner workings of the characters. This is also one of the typical narrative techniques of traditional Chinese painting. From the perspective of aesthetics, the decorative paintings in the Bontok-Kong temple with auspicious themes express a desire for good fortune and convey a sense of affinity and beauty. In addition, when analyzing the religious or historical paintings in the context of the temple, one can clearly feel the propagating of the moral concept of good and evil, which is the spiritual expression of the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in Chinese religious beliefs, advocating people to do good and refrain from evil.

Conclusion

After settling in Thailand, the Chaoshan Chinese built temples to worship their gods and seek blessings for their health and well-being, imitating the architectural styles of their homeland. These religious beliefs

stem from their historical traditions of ancestor worship, prayer for blessings, and avoidance of misfortune, embodying the collective consciousness, cultural psychology, and cultural foundation of the Chaoshan immigrant community. The Ang Sila Bontok-Kong temple references the architectural form of traditional Chaoshan residences, featuring a unique overall design, complete functionality, and exquisite decoration, especially the gorgeous gray sculpture and porcelain inlays, which reflect the long-standing tradition of Chaoshan architectural and decorative arts. These traditions were formed over a long period of time in a specific cultural environment and are related to the specific customs and social psychology of the Chaoshan ethnic group. The study of the architectural and decorative arts of the Bontok-Kong temple not only helps to explore the traditional Chaoshan art but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the localization of Thai Chinese traditional culture and the paths of cross-cultural assimilation and mutual learning between China and Thailand.

Authors

Asst. Prof. YANG FAN, Ph.D., is dean of the Fine Arts and Design, Baise University, China. He works in folk craft design research.

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