

In Search of Cultural Identity: Roof Decorations on Vernacular Architecture in Hong Kong

So-mui Ma
Hong Kong Institute of Education

Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of the cultural identity of Hong Kong through studying the characteristics of roof decorations and making comparisons with those from neighbouring regions. Three major types of roof decorations are identified. It is discovered that their formal qualities are related to their functions. The influence of traditions from Mainland China is apparent but slight modification is recognized. Most of the historical buildings have some unity of style. They were built before Hong Kong became a British Colony. Those built under the period of British Government have developed some individual qualities according to the interest and philosophies of the institution. Approaches such as transformation or replacement of existing images, adjustment of order of hierarchy and retrieval of high ancient culture have been adopted rather than being one of mere assimilation. Integration of the Chinese and Western cultures could be found in some buildings that were built in the early colonial years.

INTRODUCTION

The remarks from students in connection with my last piece of research have led me to consider issues relating to cultural identity. Some of the responses queried the necessity of knowing anything about traditional Chinese architecture thought to be irrelevant to their daily life experience. Others expressed preference in studying Western architecture instead of the Chinese ones. They seemed to be disconnected from the past world or the present world of Chinese artifacts in their existing environment. Temples, clan halls and village houses became invisible, foreign objects, while the genuine 'foreign' objects adopted from Western culture have successfully

conquered their minds. To the students, these heritage houses are objects from the 'older generation' and from the 'villagers', and as they see themselves as 'civilized' urban people in the modern world, these artifacts belong to an 'other' culture. This impression is also common among other local people. It seems that under the colonial influence of the British rule in the past, people of this generation in Hong Kong have lost sight of their cultural origin and their own identity. No wonder why Mr Pei, the American Chinese architect remarked "*[Hong Kong] will be modernized to such an extent that it will be no longer distinguishable as 'Chinese' and the Chinese personality will lose out in this process.*"^{1a} In this case it conforms to the comment of Mercer who stressed that "*it is only when identity is in crisis, that it becomes an issue.*"² In analyzing the relationship of the self and the society, Mead emphasizes that the self is dependent on the social group to which it belongs.³ Larrain explains the relationship of personal identity and cultural identity, "*On the one hand culture is assumed to be one of the main determinants of personal identity. But on the other hand culture usually entails such a great variety of ways of life, such a rich diversity of social relations that one can speak of its continuity, unity and self-awareness only by analogy with personal identity.*"⁴ He distinguishes two types of cultural identity - one essentialist, narrow and closed; the other historical, encompassing and open. The former thinks of cultural identity as an already accomplished fact, as an already constituted essence as '*a collective true self*' with a shared history and ancestry held in common. The latter thinks of cultural identity as something which is being produced, always in process, never fully completed.⁵ It is clear that the current local culture has developed to such an extent that young people do not share the same value and identity as their ancestors in the past. Stuart Hall further explains the conception of cultural identity as "*a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being', It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous*

'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."⁶ This concept is widely accepted in the present day.

Tsui³⁶ reminded us that *"The identification with traditional Chinese culture is both an advantage and a burden. The advantage is to profit from the emotional attachment a larger number of Chinese have for their own culture. The burden is that many assumptions in that culture are out of date and the culture itself needs modifications."*

In discussing the cultural identity of Hong Kong, Hung, Ho-fung¹⁶ concluded that most scholars define this culture and identity as one merging the Chinese and Western cultures, and see them as a product of the consumerism and popular culture having developed since the late 1960s. He criticized that *"[f]irst, they fail to inform us how the cultural elements of 'East' and 'West', and those of 'modernity' and 'tradition' are articulated into a unitary cultural formation... Secondly, they shed no light on whether and how different social groups-defined by class, ethnicity, gender, whatever-experience, practice and identify with the 'Hong Kong culture' differently. What they refer to, as the carrier of this culture is an undifferentiated Hong Kong population. Finally, they are all incapable of mapping the historical context and actual process of the emergence of this cultural identity."* Besides, it also brings about the queries of the culture before 1960s and prior to the British rule.

In discussing the concept of heritage, Brisbane and Wood²³ stated that [heritage means] all those things which give a culture its identity. It provides evidence of past creativity and development of modern aesthetic ideas. *"For most of us, the heritage provides landmarks we can identify with, that give us a sense of belonging and a sense of our place in time and space.... [Heritage often] conveys a sense of pride, of something we might wish to associate with"* People's

values to their and others' heritage may create conceptual threats to heritage conservation. The attitude of rejection, manipulation, neglect and ignorance are some of these threats he identified. Therefore interpretation is necessary. This study is done in response to this need.

'Architecture' is among the many aspects Brisbane and Wood described as part of our heritage. The interest in cultural heritage, especially about traditional Chinese architecture, does not have a profound history in Chinese society at large. It was only during early twentieth century that a systematic study of Chinese architecture began. After the establishment of the Institute for Research in Chinese Architecture in 1929, Beijing, Liang, Sicheng and Liu, Dunzhen started researching traditional Chinese architectures by focusing on technical investigation and textual study. The activity was soon suspended due to the out break of war and was revived from the 1950s to 1960s with other researchers joining in.^{7a} In Hong Kong much research on local vernacular houses has been done by the Architectural Department of the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. Scholars Like Lung Ping Yi, Solomon Bard and many others have made invaluable contributions to the field. Recently, the Antiquities and Monuments Office and the Tourist Association also published a lot of informational pamphlets for our reference. The focus of these studies and information booklets are generally on the structure and overall appearance of the architecture and its historical background. Many writers agreed that the roof, which is a significant part of the structure of traditional Chinese buildings, is worth studying.^{7b 8a} Patricia Lim, who has written the book *Discovering Hong Kong's Cultural Heritage*, has always reminded visitors to look at the beautiful roof before entering the heritage houses.^{9a} So far I have only come across one paper written by Tang Hoi Chiu^{10a} in 1989 focusing on local roof decoration. The title is '*Roof Decoration of Temples on Hong Kong Island*'. His study was mainly about the Shiwan type of figurine decorations on temples. Recently, Tanaka Tan has presented a paper on "*The symbolism of the roof in Chinese architecture.*"³³ It is a general study on roof in Chinese architecture.

Until now, literature on the significant differences and characteristics of roof decorations in Hong Kong as a whole is slim.

THE STUDY

Since there are a tremendous number of temples and old houses in Hong Kong, with the limited resources available, this study is confined to the ‘declared monuments’ and ‘deemed monuments’ according to information given by the Antiquities and Monuments Office; buildings mentioned in the promotion pamphlets published by the Tourist Association and books from the University of Hong Kong; temples that are well known in Hong Kong and those around the three school districts where I conducted my educational research study. Forty-three buildings were chosen. They are all existing buildings and most of them are in good condition. Some of them have been renovated many times. This indicates that some of them may not be in their original state. They include the most recently built Chi Ling Nunnery (1998) and the oldest Tang Ancestral Hall in Ping Shan (built in 1273¹¹ or 1550¹²). All the clan halls, study halls and old temples were built before the extension of the New Territories to British rule in 1898, with the few exceptional ones mentioned in Table Three being built under the period of British government. Two samples are drawn from the ‘*Missionary Architecture*’^{13a} as illustration of stylistic modification. The study is mainly based on the data I gathered during fieldwork in 1999-2000, and is also supplemented by other secondary sources.

THE ROOF DECORATIONS

The large tiled-roof bears the essential function of protecting the interior wooden structure and walls from damage by rain or bad weather. The ridge is an integral part of a roof where two slopes meet. This is the weakest part of the whole roof as far as water prevention is concerned^{14a} and therefore is significant to the construction of the structure. The Department of Architecture, Tsinghua University has given a clear account of how they function:

“The half-cylinder shaped tiles used in halls are placed from bottom to top, one overlapping the other to keep them from slipping, and

nails were used to secure the tiles at the bottom to the eave. To keep the rain from getting into these nail holes and rotting the wood structure, it was necessary to put a covering on top of the nail. In the hands of the master carpenter, these coverings were made into various small animals. At the two ends of the main ridge of the roof where several ridges come together, the structure requires a large nail through them to hold them together. The piece of tile or glaze protecting this nail apparently had to be larger than in other places."^{8b}

The decorations are actually necessary components of the structure, and a consequence of natural development to the treatment of these larger parts. With the passage of time, the tiles gradually developed to be more decorative, reaching a high level of ingenious achievement combining aesthetic and utility requirements.^{14b} The decorations also carry some symbolic meanings, which reflect the consciousness and ideology of the times^{8b} and also create some sense of mystery inviting us to investigate.

Roof decorations have been developed alongside the existence of vernacular buildings for a long period. It may imply an assumption that with the 'young' history of Hong Kong there could not be anything 'new' found in the roof decorations. In fact many people do have the impression that we are only 'following' the tradition of Guangdong and there is an absence of our own characteristics. Do we have our own identity of culture in Hong Kong? Are the values reflected from the local heritage different from those of Guangdong? Is there any difference according to historical development?

ROOF DECORATIONS IN HONG KONG

Writers on local architecture often associate architecture in Hong Kong with that from Guangdong or those in the Southern Regions. In describing the characteristics of roof decoration in these regions, most scholars concluded that they are '*elaborate and exquisite*',¹⁷^{18a} with '*baroque flamboyance characteristics*'^{19a}, '*favour using silver, gold, red on black colours*' and [*have*] *a combination of rich varieties of decorative items*.²⁰ Boerschmann associated these

characteristics with “*the people’s joy of living and the reality.*”^{21a}

According to Bard, the local Hakka originated from Fujian and Kiangsi Provinces^{26a} and to David Lung, the root of the local people could be traced back to Guangdong. Mr Lung stated that the early immigrants had modified the domestic architecture they brought with them from the mainland to accommodate differences in Hong Kong and “*The Hong Kong vernacular house form is essentially a simple, more compact and less decorative variant of the Guangdong courtyard house.*”²² I think perhaps the lack of skill labours in building traditional Chinese houses and an industry for architectural ceramics in Hong Kong also account for the expected influence from Mainland China.

MAJOR TYPES OF ROOF DECORATION IN HONG KONG

The samples referred to in this section are all the ‘old’ houses which are built prior to the British Colonial Government. In general common vernacular dwellings are usually plain and simple. Only houses for communal purposes have much decorations on their roof. Most of these roofs are the ‘Flush Gables Roof’ 硬山 (also called ‘Ying Shan Ding / Ngang Shan / Firm mountain roof’).²⁴ Major decorations are on the main ridge 正脊 and side ridge (Shui Ji 垂脊). Three distinguished styles can be identified: (1) Main ridge with elevated-ends; (2) Leveled main ridge with “geometric” (bogu 博古)²⁵ or “stylized-dragon” (kuilong 夔龍) ends^{18b}; and (3) Main ridge with Shiwan 石灣 ceramic figurines.

(1) Main ridge with elevated-ends

Most scholars agreed that as early as the Han Dynasty the buildings have adopted the form of ridge with their ends elevated and sweeping upwards to resemble an impression of a rising profile and hence induced a lightened outlook to the building.^{18c} Frequently, this kind of ridge is compared to the spread wings of flying birds or hidden dragons flying up to the heaven.³³ The feature of elevated ridge and corners of the roof is believed to be the result of the aesthetic philosophy of the Chinese who favour using curved lines, and also resemble the tradition of the Song

Dynasty.^{18d}

The queries about ‘swallow tails’:

Lim describes the main ridge as “boat-shaped roof ridges curving upwards at both ends.”^{9b} The term “boat-shaped”^{26b} is also used by some other writers on heritage houses in Hong Kong. There are a variety of terms used in describing the decoration on the ends of this type of ridge. Tang describes it as ‘Wave Scroll’ 卷浪;^{10b} others as “curling-end ridge 卷尾”¹²^{26b}; Lim⁹, Morris³² and Knapp¹⁹ describe it as “swallow-tails”. Supplemented by an illustration^{19c}²³, Knapp stated that “*A treatment common in Southern Zhejiang 浙江 where it is known as “swallow-tail style” (Yan Wei Xing[燕尾形]). A striking symmetrical silhouette is formed when the ridge line is elevated above the slope of the roof and distanced from the flush gables of the end walls.*”^{19b} In both cases, Knapp and Morris refer to the upswing shape of the ‘side ridge’ as ‘swallow tail’.

Regarding ‘swallow tail’, Lim mentioned the following belief:

These are said to represent the tails of swallows. Since the return of the swallows to nest under the eaves was welcomed as an omen of approaching success, villagers believed that living under the tail of a swallow would bring success to all who lived in that house.^{9b} Yet the example of ‘swallowtail’ roof style given by Lim is entirely different from those in Fujian and Taiwan. Both Lim and Ko²⁸ from Taiwan refer the ‘swallowtail’ style as the treatment of the end of the Main Ridge. Illustrations of residences in Fujian^{27a} and Taiwan show that the main-ridges of these dwellings joint and project beyond the gable-wall, with the symmetric split of the tail laying horizontally apart, pointing outwards. This is very different from the so-called ‘swallow-tails’ examples collected by Lim^{9c}. For these ridges, the end split on the side, with a larger one on top and a smaller one below. These local samples are quite rare. Unlike those from Fujian, the elevated ridge-ends in Hong Kong do not meet the gable walls.

Further information on the types of ridge found in other regions are given by other scholars.^{1b 31a} None of them match exactly with the samples in Hong Kong. The structure of the local main ridge conforms to the ‘elevated ends’ classified by Huang, Hanmin, yet the treatment of the ends is not so. He has used the term ‘*swallowtail*’ in two different contexts: as a treatment at the ridge ends and as a nickname for ‘*upward compass* 翹規’.^{31b} In other words, the “*Yanweixing (swallow tail)*” may be a general term for elevated ridge and there are various ways of decorating the ends of these ridges, which include ‘swallow tail’ ends’.

Characteristics of the local elevated ends:

The ‘elevated-ends’ type of ridge is mostly used in clan halls, (It applies to all Tang Ancestral Halls in this sample) and occasionally used in study halls, (for example in So Lau Yuen) mansion and gate tower, but never used in temples. Few samples were found with alternate use of the ‘elevated-ends’ ridge and leveled-ridge with ‘geometric/stylized dragon’ ends for the halls in the same buildings such as Liu Man Shek Tong Ancestral Hall.

The main ridge of the elevated-ends is made from mortar, painted black as the background, with white foliage scroll relief on either side. The middle panel is decorated by auspicious plants or animals in multi-chrome colours. Bright colours are restricted to auspicious elements within the panel. A pair of dragon-fish is often placed on top of the ridge. No pearl is placed in the middle in contrasted to those for temples.

The “foliage or wave design” are the most common ridge-ends in Hong Kong. They usually curl upwards and inwards with a convergent point and have curling-ends branching-out in opposite directions (e.g. Man Lun Fung Ancestral Hall). Sometimes they are in the shape of leaves (e.g. Tang Ching Lok Ancestral Hall), and in the case of the Tai Fu Tai Mansion the profile of a dragon, with a head, a zig-zag spine and a tail, can be recognized. The Yuyinshanfang 餘蔭山房 in Panyu County 番禺,

Guangdong, built in the same period (Tongzhi reign 1862-1874) is a comparable sample of this type. This dragon design became popular since then. The curling-ends of the main ridge in Yuyinshanfang, do not rise up beyond the tip of the gable walls and the ridge corner is extended longer and higher, and with a deeper curvature.

Underneath the ‘curling-end’ there is usually a bat, peach, cloud, vase or geometric pattern modeled in relief. Most of them are red in colour. They are used to fill up the gap between the ridge and the gable wall. The little spot of red here is quite sharp in this black and white surrounding, yet it does not distract the viewers’ attention but actually adds life to the roof complex as a whole. The side ridges are usually plain with single-fold curling-ends, sometimes with pair of unicorns placed in front. In spite of the fact that there are a lot of elements involved, the whole structure is symmetric and balanced, harmonized in the flowing curved lines of the ridges and the streamline of the dragon fish. The overall shape induces a calm, stable and peaceful atmosphere. This is how a clan hall should be - a place for family gatherings, for meetings, discussions and settling disputes, for celebrations and ceremonies. It is a visible symbol for village unity. The requirement is different for a temple, and this is reflected in the exterior appearance of the hall.

The dragon fish:

Evidence has been found that some of the dragon-fish were added during the renovation stage, as in the case of Ping Shan Tang Ancestral Hall²⁹, which demonstrates the growing popularity of the dragon-fish. A dragon fish has a dragon head and a fish body. The head lies on the ridge facing sideways towards the center with scales and fins, and uplifted tail. This creature carries multiple meanings: it symbolizes perseverance in hardship (referring to the struggle for transformation); success (successful transformation from a fish to a dragon); passing examinations with distinction or winning championship; abundant wealth (according to linguistic suggestions or word

puns) and also spiritual liberalism as in Buddhism.^{9d} Interpretation of images and symbolic associations are up to the interpretation of the viewers and there could be multiple answers.^{15d} Who could resist the temptation of winning a thousand blessings from such a single investment? Despite the popularity of the Dragon fish for clan halls and temples, study halls do not have such a favourite. Certainly the value of the clans and the philosophy of the schools are different.

The unicorns:

The unicorns are believed to be able to drive away devils. Most of those in Hong Kong are in a squatting posture, green in colour, and in their mouths, they carry a piece of ribbon with coins or flowers. They all seem humble servants, sitting very patiently, guarding the house and bringing fortune to the house owner.^{9e} The ones found in the Ancestral Temple in Fushan, Guangdong and other samples from Guangxi are brown/red in colour modeled in a running posture and are full of vitality. Unicorns from both regions have their bodies facing outwards but twisting their heads, looking towards the center. (The same treatment is also applied to the phoenix for ridges with Shiwan figurines.) They seem to pay pilgrimage to the center of the house where the ancestral tablets are placed, that is, a conformance to ancestral worship.

The boundary of techniques cannot limit people's thought and imaginations. The customers in Hong Kong have their choice in determining their traditions.

(2) Leveled main ridge with “geometric” (bogu 博古) or “stylized-dragon” (kuilong 夔龍) ends

This is the most common type of roof decoration in Hong Kong. Many small temples, study halls and some clan halls have incorporated this type of decoration with variations in great diversity, ranging from simple application of the motif such as the Fan Sin Kung, to a complex integration of various decorative

elements such as the Liu Man Shek Tong Ancestral Hall.

The term ‘geometric’^{26a} or ‘Bogu’ 博古²⁵ ridge-end refers to a pattern created by a combination of overlapping rectangles in different sizes. Some are in a solid mass while others are perforated. Some of them have clouds, thunder or recurve wave relief on the surface.³⁴ One of the most elegant examples of the ‘geometric’ type of ridge-end can be found on the main ridge of the Kun Tin Study Hall in Ping Shan. The beautifully designed motif is perforated, showing a linear pattern of overlapping rectangles similar to the ‘endless in loop’³⁴. The negative space has made an allowance for the introduction of auspicious motifs, such as peaches and other plants in between. Peaches represents pupils or students, therefore they are common among study halls. The centre part of the main ridge is treated similarly to the elevated ends. In between the panels usually there is a hollowed framework where the motif of a vase filled with flowers or fruit is placed in the middle. The image of a vase symbolizes ‘peace’, ‘safety’, immortality or prosperity.^{9d}

Ridley identified Chinese decorative art it as formal, symbolic and conservative. He explained that Chinese motifs tend to be metamorphic and [the symbolic meanings tend to] change according to circumstances. Geometric stylization of animals and plants are common and cannot always be easily identified. To him, Chinese art is ‘conservative’ because *“the identity has been retained over many centuries...Everything new is simply assimilated and added to the old.”*^{15a}

An example of modification of the foliage design into a dragon can be found on a building in Shawan, Punyu. On this ground, it is believed that a variation of the ‘geometric’ motif into the stylized ‘kuilong’ decoration is formed. This ‘kuilong’ ridge has a profile of an apparently taller cluster of rectangles located nearer to the center of the ridge and a longer horizontal piece approaching the end of the ridge that resembles the appearance of ‘kuilong 夔龍’ with a horn (head) and a tail laying horizontally facing the center. ‘Kuilong’ is a type of dragon, a

motif often found in bronze ware in ancient China. Solomon called this type of decoration on the main ridge “stylized-lion”.²⁶
³⁵ In the opinion of the writer, the symbol of a dragon such as the ‘dragon mouth’ is widely used on ridges among Chinese vernacular architecture. The image of the lion is seldom used in this location. In another occasion, Morris used the term “*kuei lung tze*” (Dragon ridge) to describe the ridge with animal figurines.³² It further suggests the domination of using ‘dragon’ motif on the ridge. Therefore it should be classified as the “stylized-dragon”. In Chinese philosophy, images are simplified to allow space for the imagination. The rhythm of the profile of the ‘dragon’ has brought life to the rigid outlook of the ridge. Simplification ^{27b}, abstraction ^{15c} and distortion of form were practiced as early as the Bronze Age in China.

(3) Main ridge with Shiwan 石灣 ceramic figurines.

Owing to the complexity of the composition of this type of ridge, the labour and cost involved, only large and popular temples could afford to have this type of roof decoration. This kind of decoration is seldom used in residential houses in Hong Kong, with the elegant Tai Fu Tai Mansion being an exception. The Chen Ancestral Hall (built in 1890) and the Ancestral Temple (built in Song Dynasty, renovated in 1372) in Guangdong are two famous buildings of this kind. Despite the scale of these large buildings, their general structure on the ridge is rather similar to those in Hong Kong. The absence of pair dragons and the realistic ‘carp’ rather than the familiar look of ‘dragon fish’ could be recognized in the Ancestral Temple. The general structure of the ridge comprises ‘geometric’ ridge ends, phoenixes (apparently taller, twisting its head towards the centre), name plaques of the manufacturer and year of production at either side, ceramic figurines with houses separating them into sections, and on top of them a pair of dragon fish, and/or a pair of dragons and a fiery pearl (sometimes a relief block showing the Yu’s Gateway)^{10c} in the middle, occasionally includes another layer below, with painted or plaster moulded auspicious motifs. Stylised-dragon’ on the side ridge with unicorns in front

is common. The Man Mo Temple at Central District is a good example. The ceramic figurines are crucial to this kind of ridge. These figurines are arranged in the setting of Chinese Opera, telling stories of how people should behave. The ‘performance’ of this Opera is to demonstrate people’s gratitude to the deities of the temple for their blessing. Other than praying, the temple is also a place for festivals and many other community events. Like a carnival in the West, it is associated with joy and happiness. They are meant to be crowded and busy. The ‘richly decorated’ roof complex is reflected in this context. This exterior impression could also attract more followers.^{10d} Tang’s paper has given more details in this aspect.

The pair dragons, dragon fish and fiery pearl are common among other temples in general. Identical image of running dragons are found in the two newly renovated temples: the Tin Hau Temple in Tai Po, and Tam Kung Temple in Shaukeiwan.

EXCEPTIONAL TYPES OF ROOF DECORATIONS

The Chi Lin Nunnery: the return to classical ideologies

Architectures discussed in this section were all built within the period of British Colonial Government or among the latest developed ones. The Chi Lin Nunnery was built in 1998. It is classified as exceptional not because it has pushed the boundary of modern technology nor has it produced an astonishingly new outlook. On the contrary, it is built in the traditional wooden structure in simple, natural and harmonious form and colour that resembles the characteristics of ancient historical architecture in the Tang Dynasty. It has created an impression of a calm and peaceful atmosphere, and has reached a sense of ‘purity’ as the name of the temple suggests. ‘Simplicity’ is classified in the ‘Yigai’ (General Principles of Art) by Lui Xizai, as the upper most priority in Chinese aesthetics.^{27b} Buddhism achieved its highest level of development in the Tang Dynasty, during which, art, literature and other aspects of civilization reached its apex. It is the architect’s courage and aspirations, which have resulted in the retrieval of the old traditions and resistance of the mainstream trend dominated by popular culture

of other temples in Hong Kong. Just like the Renaissance in the West, the Tang architecture is a classical image to be followed. Hence, the tradition of the ‘Owl Tail’ (Chi-wei)³⁷ ridge end found in the Nan Chan Monastery (built 782AD), the earliest timber structure in existence, and its later development of ‘Owl mouth’ (Chi-wen) ridge end are preserved on the roof of the two halls of the temple. Compared with the architecture on the Ming City Wall in Xian, the design of the hip of the Chi Lin is similar, while the motif of ‘face of animal’ on the eave tiles has been replaced by the religious symbol of a ‘lotus’. To modify and recreate is a general approach in design. The case of the Chi Lin has been critical in the selection of source of reference, which has resulted in getting away from the dominant culture of previous examples. How are we going to judge whether it is ‘conservative’? The question of evaluation in these circumstances becomes problematic.

The Wong Tai Sin Temple: following or breaking traditions?

Information from the temple told us that the ‘Nine Dragon Wall’ in the temple is a replica of the one from the Former Imperial Palace. The general structure of all the other buildings in the temple also gives us an impression of imitation of this ‘great idol’. The temple was built in 1921 and expanded in 1972 after the fall of the Qing Empire. Dating from the Song Dynasty, it had a long tradition in Imperial China for official regulations on vernacular dwellings. Bounded by these rules, the ‘yellow’ imperial colour, and ‘dragon’ motif, etc., are strictly prohibited.^{30 38} The yellow tiles used on the main halls is a sign of release from this regulations. The colour used here is to create a sense of importance among the other buildings with green tiles. The system of roof decorations also resembles the Former Imperial Palace to a great extent. The availability of ‘Zheng Wen’ on the end of the main ridge; ‘Xian Ren’ (fairy) with ‘Dun Shou’ (squatting animals) and ‘Qiang Shou’ (decorative animal) on the hips are some typical examples of this. Yet the image and arrangement may not be acceptable in the previous regulation. The ‘Zheng Wen’ which is supposed to be a dragon with wide open mouth biting the ridge and upward tail, punched by a sword (to stop it from getting away) on the top, is here substituted by the more

realistic form of an unicorn without the sword. On the roof of the Clinic, the ‘Chui Shou’, which is usually a dragon head with two horns, is replaced by the realistic image of a carp with pairs of dragon legs-this realistic representation of the image of the dragon fish captured during the transformation process is seldom found. Modifications of the image of Qiang Shou/Shui Shou are also found in other buildings. According to old practices, an odd numbers of ‘Dun Shou’ (squatting animals), which represent the ‘male’, should be used.^{21b 30} Even numbers represent ‘female’, but in this context, the Taoist’s dual principle of Yin and Yang ^{14b} may be the dominant factor to this change. For the Former Imperial Palace, the order of these ‘Dun Shou’ was strictly hierarchical. The dragon is supposed to be the first one after the fairy, yet the variety of positioning of ‘Dun Shou’ on the buildings reflected that the established symbolic hierarchy in the past is dissolved. A pair of phoenix is allocated on the center of the main ridge instead of dragons. This is quite rare among other buildings. The shift of emphasis in this temple signifies their liberal desire to symbolize their beliefs and philosophies. The transformation from tradition is apparent. Superficial analysis from the surface appearance cannot reflect the truth.

Holy Trinity Church: the missionary architecture

The term ‘*missionary architecture*’ is used by Chang to describe ‘*the western missionaries’ attempt to lower their profile by putting a Chinese roof on their hospitals, schools and in institutions in a superficially Chinese style since 1918.*’^{1c} The Holy Trinity Church was built in 1936 in Hong Kong. I do not know to what extent Chang’s observation could be related. A few more samples of Western buildings in a similar period could be found but the movement ceased due to the outbreak of war. The Chinese architectural style of Tai Po Railway Station (built in 1913) might be built as a product under similar intention. In the case of the Holy Trinity Church, images from the West have been adopted and original design of the figurines has also been transformed and rearranged. This includes using the Western image of the pigeon to replace the species of ‘Dun Shou’ (squatting animals) on the hip. The ‘Shui Shou’ behind the pigeons is replaced by the image of

‘Zheng Wen’ (dragon mouth). The original ‘Shui Shou’ should be larger and taller than the ‘Dun Shou’, i.e. the pigeons here. In order to avoid distracting people’s attention from the essential figures of the pigeons, the size of the ‘Shui Shou’ is reduced and embedded in the streamline of the hip. The former heroic dragon now seems timidly hiding in the hip. On the other hand, a large vase (symbolized peace) is allocated at a significant corner between the hip and the wall of the building. In traditional practices, vases are usually small, placed in hollow frames in between two decorative panels of the main ridge or sometimes they are placed at the apex of the gable wall. The impact of change under Western influence is explicit.

CONCLUSION

Due to the long history of traditional vernacular architecture, design and decoration is inevitably constrained by technical, functional and political restrictions, as well as by customs and belief inherited from our ancestors. There is little space for creativity. The early settlers in Hong Kong had maintained a living style of their own. As a continuation of their experience from Mainland China, they built houses of similar structure, with minor modifications. They adopted the tradition of making their wishes explicit outside the building. Through the decorations they told the God of Heaven, their younger generations and outsiders about their necessities: safety and security, overcoming hardship and enjoying success, harmony and peace, resisting evils and the bad; about their feelings: their contentment in life, enjoyment in beauty and gratitude to god. Under the past colonial influence, there is a gradual change in the minds of local people. The ever-lasting tradition has now reached the verge of extinction. The once beautiful and idealistic home has become unbearable^{9f} and alien to the contemporary life of people in this generation. The concentric characteristics of the family system within the protected walls of this type of building have been demolished. People no longer treasure the need to communicate with heaven, to be in harmony with nature, or to make their wishes known to one another. The models set up by our ancestors have become inappropriate. The consciousness of interrelationship with

members in the family and man with nature has been shifted to individualism and the focus on an electronic world. The impact of modernism has diverted people's thoughts, beliefs and style of living. Mario Botta warned about this faith in an International Style of architecture, "*Man must look for his roots and his condition of being within his own cultural and historical domain, in his own country-One must recreate the sense of being tied to a particular place.*"^{1a} After the reunification with China we begin to realize that we should have our own roots in the past, yet at this juncture we are still at a loss as to who we are and who we were in the complex network of Chinese culture. This study about roof decorations in the local culture may provide a glimpse for people to understand the role of culture in our past. I hope it will stimulate more studies to other aspects of our cultural life both in the past and present.

Endnote:

^{1a} Chang, Chao-kang (1987). *China: tao in architecture*. Boston: Werner Blaser-Basel, p.210-211.

^{1b} Ibid., p106.

Chang identified the following types of ridge found in Shaoxing and Shanghai:

The sugar cane ridge (ganzheji 甘蔗脊) is straight with single thunder pattern at the end;,

The fret ridge (wentouji 紋頭脊) is straight with several thunder or cloud pattern at the end;

The hen ridge (bujiji 哺雞脊) is with facing outward head of chicken and a distinguish strand of line above;

The dragon ridge (bulongji 哺龍脊) has a dragon head facing outward at the end; and

The female bird feather ridge (cimaoji 雌毛脊) is curved and has an end which suddenly turns upward.

The list mentioned above is also presented in the book written by Chen, Lixian (1992) *Art and Architecture in Suzhou Gardens*. Jiangsu: Yilin Press, p55, figure 62, with the additions of two extra samples: the fish-lipped ridge and the dragon-lipped ridge.

^{1c} Ibid., p208.

² Mercer, K. 'Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in

Postmodern Politics’, in Rutherford, J. (ed.). (1990). *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, p.43.

³ Mead, G. H. (1974). *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p1.

⁴ Larrain, J. (1994). *Ideology & Cultural Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p143.

⁵ Ibid., pp157-158.

⁶ Hall, S. ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in Rutherford, J. (ed.), (1990). *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, p224.

^{7a} Guo, Qinghua (1999). *The Structure of Chinese Timber Architecture*. London: Minerva Press, p22.

^{7b} Ibid., p223.

^{8a} The Department of Architecture, Tsinghua University (1990). *Historic Chinese Architecture*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press.

^{8b} Ibid., p8.

^{9a} Lim, P. (1997). *Discovering Hong Kong’s Cultural Heritage*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, p79.

^{9b} Ibid., p17.

^{9c} Ibid., Colour plate between pp34-35.

^{9d} Ibid.

Carp persistence, success in examinations, martial prowess

Cloud blessings, happiness

Fish money (sound similar to *yu* meaning ‘abundance’), success, a wish come true

Rooster protection against evil, success

Peach spring, immortality

Plum winter, endurance, and purity (p20)

Vase immortality

Fish spiritual liberalism (p66)

These [dragon fish] are sturgeon who succeeded in making the ascent of the Yellow River and overleaping the fearsome rapids of Lung-men whereupon they were thought to transform into dragons. They are admired for their struggles in overcoming obstacles and symbolize perseverance. The dragon fish also

represents literary eminence and passing examinations with distinction. (p40)

Also refer to White, J. and Bunker, E. (1994). *Adornment for Eternity*. Seattle: Denver Art Museum in association with the Woods Publishing Co., p158.

The dragon-fish: being a mythological animal, the dragon takes many different forms, one form, according to the Qian Que Lei Shu, by Chen Renxi, is called a zhi wen, and its image is carved on the roofs of buildings and beams of bridges. The zhiwen is said to have a fondness for water and is depicted as a fish with uplifted tails. (C.A. S. Williams. Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives, p137) (Kaogu, 1960, 2 pl. 3.no 4)

The pronunciation of the word yu, fish, is similar to that of the word for abundance, making the image of a fish a rebus for wealth... However, literary references and word puns do make up symbolic imagery in other art forms including painting as early as the Song dynasty.

^{9e} Same as ^{9a} pp19-20.

The Unicorn is the fourth of the great mythical animals and first appeared to Fu Xi bearing the mythical map from which Chinese calligraphy is said to have evolved. Its characteristics are gentleness and benevolence. Unicorn symbolized wisdom.

^{9f} Ibid., p.17.

^{10a} Tang Hoi Chiu, (1989). 'Roof Decoration of temples in Hong Kong Island', in *China Antiquity*. Hong Kong: Art Promotion Centre. Vol. 43, Issue 4, pp136-160.

^{10b} Ibid., p136.

^{10c} Ibid., pp142-144.

^{10d} Ibid., p138.

¹¹ Fung, Chi Ming (1996). *Yuen Long Historical Relics and Monuments*. Hong Kong: Yuen Long District Board.

¹² Hong Kong Government Information Service (1979). *Rural Architectural in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Information Service.

^{13a} The termed 'Missionary Architecture' is described by Chang, Chao-kang (1987). *China: tao in architecture*. Boston: Werner

- Blaser-Basel, p208.
- ^{13b} Ibid., p143.
Also refer to Rawson, J. (1984). *Chinese Ornament-the lotus and the dragon*. London: the Trustees of the British Museum, p91.
- ^{14a} Institute of the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences (1986). *History and Development of Ancient Chinese Architecture*. Beijing: Science Press, p192.
- ^{14b} Ibid., p190.
Also refer to Chang, Chao-kang (1987). *China: tao in architecture*. Boston: Werner Blaser-Basel, p143.
- ^{15a} Ridley, M. (1977). *Style, Motif and Design in Chinese Art*. Dorset: Blandford Press, pp5-6.
- ^{15b} Ibid., p74.
- ^{15c} Ibid., p73.
In describing an example of Kui derivatives from ancient China, the representation of the dragon form is “*almost abstract with geometric and curvilinear overtones.*” Many other examples were also given by the author.
- ^{15d} Ibid., p5.
“*Classification of elements is not absolute, designs and motifs tend to be metamorphic, changing from one to another, or themselves formed by other elements.*”
- ¹⁶ Hung, Ho-fung (1998). *Rethinking the Hong Kong Cultural Identity: the case of rural ethnicities*. Hong Kong: the Chinese University of Hong Kong, pp1-2.
- ¹⁷ Steinhardt, N. S. (1984). *Chinese Traditional Architecture*. New York: China Institute in America China House Gallery.
- ^{18a} Institute of the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences (1986). *History and Development of Ancient Chinese Architecture*. Beijing: Science Press, p193.
From the Ming and Qing times, ridge decoration for buildings in the southern provinces, particularly in the coastal areas such as Fujian and Guangdong, tended to be more and more elaborate. Fairies, animals, flowers, birds, fish and insects and occasionally even human figures from folklore were constructed with mortar, small tiles and porcelain chips on roof ridges. While these things fulfilled the desire of the rich to flaunt their wealth,

they also mirrored the technological achievements scored at that time.

^{18b} Ibid.

^{18c} Ibid., p192.

also mentioned in Wang Lou Min 王魯民 (1997). *Origin of Classical Chinese Architectural Culture*. (Zhong Guo Gu Dian Jian Zhu Wen Hua Tan Yuan) 《中國古典建築文化探源》，上海，同濟大學出版社。

^{18d} Ibid., p137.

^{19a} Knapp, R. (1989). *China's Vernacular Architecture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

^{19b} Ibid., p101.

^{19c} Knapp, R. (1986). *China's traditional rural architecture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, p80.

Figure 3.51 Details of the eaves and ridge lines of dwellings with a yanweixing (“swallowtail”) roof profile. The sample shown in the middle resembles much similarity with the foliage ridge-ends found in Hong Kong.

An example of the sort could be found at Ouyuan Garden, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province from the book written by Cheng, Liyao (1999). *Ancient Chinese Architecture: Private Gardens*. New York: Springer-Verlag/Wien, plate 27: Shan Shuijian (Pavillion, Hills and Water) Ouyuan Garden, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province.

²⁰ Deng, Fuxing “Vernacular Dwellings”, in Chen, Shouxiang. (1993). *Chinese Folk Art*. Ji Nan: Shangdong Educational Press, p250.

^{21a} Boerschmann, E. (1912). *Chinese Architecture and its relations to Chinese Culture*. Washington: Washington Government Printing Office, p559.

“The power of the Chinese line, which however is dissolved into endless details and carvings, due to their joy of living and the reality. It is the rhythm of the imposing ideal corresponding to the elaboration of the details, the harmony of the macrocosm and microcosm, elaborately decorated.”

^{21b} Ibid., p548.

²² Lung, P.Y. (1999). *Living heritage: vernacular environment in China*. Hong Kong: Yungmingtang, pp205-207.

- ²³ Brisbane, M. & Wood, J. (1995). *A Future for our past*. London: English Heritage, pp4, 13, 27.
- ²⁴ Guo, Qinghua (1999). *The structure of Chinese Timber Architecture*. London: Minerva Press, p223.
He classified the roof into 4 types
Hanging Gable Roof or Xuan Shan 懸山: This is a two-sloped roof with its eaves projecting beyond the gable wall at two sides, for buildings of the mansion and ordinary house types.
Pyramidal Roof or Zuanjian 攢尖: This is used for pavilions in a symmetrical plan, either circular, rectangular [or polygonal].
Hip and Gable Roof or Xieshan 歇山: This is a hip roof with a vertical triangular portion at each gable side, called 'nine hip roof', employed in buildings of the mansion, palace or pavilion types.
Hip Roof or Wudian 廡殿: This slopes upwards from all four sides of a building, requiring a hip rafter at each corner. It was called five hip rafter in the Song Dynasty. The hip roof is used for the palace or mansions type buildings.
 Also refer to Knapp, R. (1989). *China's Vernacular Architecture*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp100-101.
- ²⁵ 程萬里，(1991)，《中國傳統建築》，香港，萬里書店及中國建築工業出版社。
 樓慶西，(1997)，《中國建築形態與文化》，台北，藝術家出版社。
- ^{26a} Bard, S. (1988). *In Search of the Past: A guide to the antiquities of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: The Urban Council, p17.
- ^{26b} Ibid., p102.
- ^{26c} Ibid., plate 15, p30.
- ^{27a} Wang, Qijun, Mo (Translated by Runxian and Zhang, Mintai). (2000). *Ancient Chinese Architecture: Vernacular Dwellings*. New York: Springer Wien, plate 52: Residences in Nan'an County, Fujian 南安.
- ^{27b} Ibid., p138.

“In his ‘Yigai’ (General Principles of Art) Lui Xizai wrote that baiben (plain ben) occupies the upper most line of the ben diagram, meaning that the supreme pattern is precisely the original form. Baiben means a reversion from magnificence to plainness. In undergoing such a development, architecture reaches its goal, namely the beauty of simplicity.”

²⁸ 高燦榮，(1989)，《燕尾、馬背、瓦鎮》*Yan wei (swallow-tail), Ma Bei (horse back) and Wa Zhen* 台北，台北南天書局。

In the analysis of the ‘Swallow-tail’, the author identified its origin from Fujian, China and concluded that it is a style typically used in Taiwan vernacular buildings. In his description, “Swallow-tail” refers to ‘those ridge with both ends elevated and split like a swallow’s tail.’

²⁹ Absence of dragon-fish is found in the picture from the book written by Bard, S. (1988). *In search of the past: a guide to the antiquities of Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: The Urban Council Hong Kong, plate 15, p30, and Government Information Services (1979) *Rural Architecture in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Government Information Services, p65, plate no. 2.

³⁰ Liang, Ssu-cheng and Liu, Chih-ping (1936). *Chien-chu she-chi tsan-kao tu-chi History of Chinese Architecture, vol 6*. 梁思成，劉致平 (1936) 《建築設計參考圖集，第六集：琉璃瓦》，北平，中國營造學社。

P3 regulations on the use of colours

P5 regulations on hierarchy of positioning of tsun shou and use of odd numbers of squatting beasts

Similar notion is also mentioned in Boyd, A. (1962). *Chinese Architecture and town planning*. London: Alec Tiranti Ltd., p46. *And building was not only an oral tradition of craftsmen but also rather rigidly limited by custom, convention and even law (sumptuary law, for instance, which laid down grades and distinctions among private buildings and between private and official buildings).*

^{31a} Huang, Hanming 黃漢民 “*Fu Jian Min Ju De Chuan Tong Te Se Ye Di Qu Feng Ge*” (*Traditional Characteristics and Regional Style of Vernacular Architecture in Fujian*) 福建民居的傳統特

色與地方風格, in (1984) *Architect*. 《建築師》. Vol. 19, pp178-203 and (1985) *Architect*. Vol. 21, pp82-134.

The classifications are: ‘qiaojiao’ (elevated ends) 翹角脊, ‘Wuji’ 武脊, ‘wenji’ 文脊, ‘jianji’ 尖脊 and ‘yuanji’ 圓脊. The ‘swallow tail’ ends is classified as ‘jianji’.

^{31b} Huang, Hanming (translated by Wang, Tao) (1994). *Traditional Chinese Dwellings of Fujian*. Jiangsu: Jiangsu Art Press, pp38, 47-48.

Huang Hanmin, uses the term “swallow tail” in two different contexts:

“As to ‘the big ridge head’, it is in the shape of ‘round compass’ or ‘upward compass’, or nicknamed ‘horseback’ or ‘swallowtail’ respectively, abundant in style.” Here he refers to the shape of the hip or side ridge. pp47-48

“The fifth section of the ridge which matches the fifth section of the tiled roof sticks upwards alongside; the vertical ridges stretch up from bottom to top, forming an inverted peg ending instead of a ‘swallow tail’ one locally called ‘Wen ridge’, which looks lighter and slimmer than ‘Ma Ridge’ in the South of Fujian.” Here the use of the term ‘swallow tail’ refers to the treatment of the ends of main ridge. P38

³² Morris, E. (1983). *The Gardens of China: history, art and meanings*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, p194.

Morris described the [roof] corners of houses in the Yangtse River Valley as “flared quite high” and as a comparison, he discovered that “the flare in the north is more restrained.” Here the term “flying swallow” was used.

³³ Tan, Tanaka. The symbolism of the roof in Chinese architecture, in *International conference on Chinese architectural history*, August 7-10, 1995, vol 1 pp 63-74.

³⁴ Dye, D. (1937). *A Grammar of Chinese Lattice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Geometric patterns with illustrations in the following styles are identified: endless in loop, paired meanders, recurving wave, U-scroll/cloud-band, S-scroll/thunder scroll, etc.

³⁵ Also mentioned in the Institute of the History of Natural

Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences (1986). *History and Development of Ancient Chinese Architecture*. Beijing: Science Press, p266.

...many were inherited from the previous dynasties, such as 'Kui Long' 夔龍 and Kui Feng 夔鳳 (geometric patterns of dragon and phoenix) 'Song Brocade', 'Floating Clouds' and 'Rare Animals'.

³⁶ Tsui, PM (1991). *Taoist Tradition and Change*. Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture.

³⁷ Institute of the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences (1986). *History and Development of Ancient Chinese Architecture*. Beijing, Science Press, p192

The roof ridges of the Han Dynasty... the main ridge curved slightly upward at either end, forming a shape similar to what was known as the owl tail (an ornamental piece) at a later time. It is assumed that in the beginning there was a practical purpose to serve by applying more mud to the ridge ends to make them thicker than elsewhere-most likely for the protection of the wood framework. But as time went by, ever greater stress was laid on decoration, making these parts of the ridge gradually develop into such ornamental pieces as Chi Wei Chi Wei (鷓尾 owl tail), Zheng Weng (正吻 animal mouth) etc.

Also refer to: The Dept. of Architecture, Tsinghua University (1990). *Historic Chinese Architecture*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, p9.

³⁸ Institute of the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences (1986). *History and Development of Ancient Chinese Architecture*. Beijing: Science Press, pp138, 193.

According to 'Treatise on Architectural Methods', there were many other ornamental pieces for roof ridges in addition to owl tails in the Song Dynasty. Among others, there were Pin Jia (嬪伽 bird with the head of a woman), Dun Shou (蹲獸 squatting animal), and Huo zhu (火珠 fiery pearl). During the Ming and the Qing Dynasties these things were further improved and came to be called Zheng Wen (正吻), Qiang Shou (戩獸 decorative animal), Xian Ren (仙人 fairy) and Zou Shou (走獸 walking

animal).

My acknowledgements to Pamela Meecham and Fiona Doloughan for their valuable advice.