

8-2018

Restoration of an ancestral temple in Guangzhou, China: re-imagining history and traditions through devotion to art and creation

Ling MA

Orlando WOODS

Singapore Management University, orlandowoods@smu.edu.sg

Zhu HONG

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474018796649>

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Citation

MA, Ling, WOODS, Orlando, & HONG, Zhu. (2018). Restoration of an ancestral temple in Guangzhou, China: re-imagining history and traditions through devotion to art and creation. *cultural geographies*, , 1-9.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research/2676

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email libIR@smu.edu.sg.

Restoration of an ancestral temple in Guangzhou, China: re-imagining history and traditions through devotion to art and creation

Ling Ma

School of Geographical Sciences, Center for Human Geography and Urban Development in Southern China, Guangzhou University, China

Orlando Woods

Singapore Management University, Singapore

Hong Zhu

School of Geographical Sciences, Center for Human Geography and Urban Development in Southern China, Guangzhou University, China

Abstract

Rapid modernization has brought about massive changes in the urban and rural landscapes of China. While many old places and ancient buildings have been pulled down and replaced with more modern alternatives, others have been protected and restored. These include ancient ancestral temples, an important cultural space in China. Previous research has shown how different level governments and rural communities work together to restore ancient temples, but didn't bring to light artistic and non-government financed and patronized cases of restoration projects. This article adopts a bottom-up perspective to examine a case in Guangzhou how an individual artist transforms an ancient ancestral temple into a new cultural space. Through an ethnographic-style exploration of the practice of restoration, we unfold the interconnections between an individual's social memory of the past, their love of place, and their enthusiasm for restoration work. Differing from the government's 'standardized' and functionalist restoration of ancestral temples, this case study shows an individual's emotional and material devotion to transforming a neglected ancestral temple into an eclectic cultural space where the art works are a result of freedom of creative expression.

Keywords

ancestral temple, restoration, devotion, social memory, Guangzhou

Introduction

Acts of cultural restoration have been the subject of recent attention among geographers.¹ Growing recognition of cultural restoration practices have been intercut with other disciplinary concerns, such as those related to materiality, emotion and work. As DeLyser and Greenstein² define it, restoration is a culturally and geographically situated skilled practice that links material agency to labor of love and devotion. In Western contexts, the history of restoration can be traced back to the classical Greek practice of restoring ancient buildings, temples, and sculptures.³ In China, there is also a long tradition of repairing old things, rooted in values of thrift and the preservation of the built environment and material culture. However, the sentiment underpinning the preservation of material culture has changed dramatically over the last decades of the 20th century, in response to China's rapid political transformation, economic reform and socio-cultural modernization.

In less than 70 years, China has witnessed very different courses of political ideology and socio-economic development. Both the political transformations on which the socialist republic was founded in 1949, and the economic reforms gradually opening up since 1978 have accelerated the process of China's modernization. Processes of construction and reconstruction have been closely associated with an era of modernization, many old buildings having been rebuilt to serve a new purpose, or demolished to make space for newer developments. Amidst these shifts and transformations, the conversion of once sacred spaces such as the ancestral temple, a symbol of the changing political, cultural and social landscape of China, is worthy of closer attention and analysis.⁴

Taking one of the ancient ancestral temples as the case, the article first summarizes the changing role of the ancestral temple in the context of the modernization of China. The second explores how an artist and former architect – Fengwen Li – independently restored an ancestral temple in Guangzhou. Given that the majority of ancestor temples are either repaired by a local government (and financed by a public foundation) or by the village committee (and financed by donations from its village members), the self-funded partial restoration and reinvention of a temple by an individual is both unique and instructive. It demonstrates how history, culture and social memory is deeply embedded within one person, and interact to materialize recent layerings of Chinese history within the built fabric of the ancestral temple. It also showcases one person's engagement with the multiple – and sometimes conflicting – histories of an ancestral temple, and how, by restoring and reinterpreting them, she is able to give the space new meaning, purpose and resonance. The third section demonstrates how these practices of restoration and reinterpretation are not just technical processes of reconstruction, but are also acts of emotional investment that can cause one's memory of the past to manifest and link to one's creative expression on her quest and mission of passing the spirit of the place to the future generations.

The changing role of ancient ancestral temples in modernizing China

Ancestral temples – also referred to as 'lineage temples' – are dedicated to the veneration and worship of deceased ancestors in China. They are places of practice that are closely linked to both Chinese traditional religion, and to Confucian culture and values (such as filial piety). Originating from the aristocracy of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256BC) and flourishing in the Ming and Qing dynasty's (1368–1912 AD),⁵ the ancestral temple and its cultural associations are integral to the memorialization of traditional China. However, the discourse of lineage culture was greatly undermined since the founding of people's republic of China in 1949. Mao Zedong identified lineage as 'one of four types of political authority oppressing peasants in traditional China'.⁶ In light of this, the cultural places and practices of lineage – including ancestral temples, ritual performance and

family trees – were considered ‘feudal’ remnants and ‘superstition’⁷ and were therefore either forbidden or destroyed.

Alongside the shift in political discourse, the role and function of the ancestral temple in society also changed. Once sacred places where people would worship their ancestors and maintain clan-based activities⁸ were subsequently converted into gathering places where daily agricultural production work would be managed, and where both production teams and political brigades would assemble. Ancestral temples were also converted into places where people sang and danced to ‘red songs’⁹ during their spare time. The radical political reform during Mao’s era thus converted the ancestral temple from a sacred place for clan people to a public gathering place for everyday production activities and political activation.

After the economic reforms of 1978, the spatial use and meaning of ancestral temples changed again. The political use of the temples was gradually replaced with more pragmatic, economically motivated uses. With the emergence of a free-market economy, many ancestral temples were converted into small village factories. During this time, many temples fell into a state of disrepair, and their interior and exterior facades were compromised. Many entered a period of structural and aesthetic deterioration. In the past 10–20 years, as a result of an improvement in the living standards of rural people, and a commitment by the central government to protect traditional Chinese culture, local governments and village committees have made various attempts to rebuild lineage culture and restore ancestral temples. In Guangdong Province alone, for example, there are over 10,000 ancestral temples, and the provincial government is committed to the restoration of 1500 ancestral temples by 2020.¹⁰

Restoration of an ancestral temple in Guangzhou

Built in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368 AD), Liang ancestral temple is an ancient temple located in Beiting village within Guangzhou University Town in Guangdong Province. Guangzhou University Town is located within Guangzhou – a modern and cosmopolitan city in southern China. Built since the year 2000, the University Town is located on an island in the middle of the Pearl River, and includes the campuses of 10 universities. While the island used to contain rural villages, only four remain, one of which is Beiting village. The history of Beiting village dates back around 1000 years, and is home to many ancestral temples.

When Fengwen found Liang ancestral temple 12 years ago, it was in a state of disrepair. She explained how, ‘the two-sided buildings are both collapsed. On the floor, there was pig skin and cow skin because village people used it as animal breeding places and the sanitation of the temple was not maintained’. Both local government and the village committee were not willing to restore it, because they thought that it was not feasible to invest the time, money and resources needed for repairs. At the time, Fengwen was looking for a warehouse for her architectural materials, and chose the temple because the rent was affordable.

Her interest in the temple was aroused by the images of Chairman Mao that had been painted onto the walls. At first sight, Fengwen was shocked and attracted by the images; they were painted in the 1960s and 1970s, during the Cultural Revolution, and clearly portray images of Mao during the different stages of his life (see Figures 1, below). The vividness of the paintings aroused Fengwen’s memory of the past and her own childhood. She described how she does not care whether Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution are seen in either a positive or negative light; in her mind, he was a great leader. During her childhood, Fengwen was in the first batch of the Little Red Guard, and was a meritorious student. Her memory of the time is one of great enthusiasm towards both the Communist Party and China. Not only that, but the gray bricks from which the temple is constructed reminded Fengwen of the courtyard where she used to live with her



Figures 1. Images of Chairman Mao on the wall of Liang ancient temple.¹¹

parents and grandparents in northern China during her youth. All of these fond memories stirred feelings of nostalgia for the past, and inspired her to commit to her later restoration and transformation of the temple.

Fengwen considered the relatively complete images of Chairman Mao to be the most valuable part of the temple, and, in recognition of their latent cultural value, she felt that she had a duty to preserve them for the benefit of future generations. However, when she called the Guangzhou cultural heritage bureau for support in restoring the temple, she was told that there were several ancestral temples in Beiting village, and that, for financial reasons, the government was not planning to restore all of them. Before becoming an artist, Fengwen was an architect, and had made enough money from China's real estate market to independently support her restoration work.

Before she started, she found the elder of Liang clan, Naiheng Liang, in the village and asked for his support to restore the temple. This was necessary, because according to Chinese tradition, ancestral temples should be maintained by the clan of the same surname. Fengwen is neither a village native, nor is she from the Liang clan. For a non-clan member like her, it would have been forbidden for her to enter the temple in the past, let alone to restore it. Luckily, however, she obtained the support from the clan leader, who admired her sincerity and strong commitment to preserving the clan's heritage. Naiheng Liang, the clan leader who is now 90 years old, said that there were several people who wanted to rent the temple for other uses before, but he felt that Fengwen was the only one who showed respect for the place, and would therefore restore it in a sensitive way.

The Liang clan leader was right in his assessment of Fengwen's commitment to the restoration of the temple. Throughout the restoration, Fengwen used her specialist architectural knowledge of old buildings to ensure the restoration was structurally robust, and also researched the history of the temple so that she could reveal its original features. She hired a construction team from another province that had expertise in historic building preservation. In order to make the temple more closely resemble its original form, Fengwen collected thousands of old gray bricks and flagstones from Beiting village and other neighboring villages, and also some carved wooden windows to improve the credibility of her restoration. In addition, she renovated the floor in the yard, and rebuilt the two side halls of the temple (Figure 2 & Figure 3).



Figure 2. Right side hall of the Liang ancestral temple.



Figure 3. Restoration of stone painting and carvings.

Besides the restoration of the building structure itself, Fengwen also tried hard to reveal the calligraphy carved in the stones and decoration on the roof and tiles. While the clan's name – Liang – was carved at the front entrance of the temple, it was not visible after being covered by layers of cement. Nonetheless, Fengwen asked the construction workers to carefully remove the cement and thus reveal the name. She also repainted the stone-carved animals and plants on the roof of the temple in order to make them look like new. While restoring such carvings according to tradition is demanding work, Fengwen believed that doing so was necessary to retain the temple's original appearance. For the images of Mao on the wall, she did not change or repaint them, but covered them with long red velvet curtains. The curtains serve a dual function: to keep the prints dry from the humid weather of Guangzhou, but also to show Fengwen's reverence and deep respect towards Chairman Mao.

Creating new cultural spaces and meanings for modern uses

Fengwen treated every aspect of the restoration with care. ‘Object love’ is a profound and agentic process that shapes people, places and things.¹² Through restoration, Fengwen demonstrated her emotional attachment to her memory of the past, and her understanding of – and appreciation for – the historical aesthetics of place. As DeLyser and Greenstein¹³ observe, some professionals endeavor to earn a living from restoration, while enthusiasts restore objects for pleasure. As such, enthusiasts often invest their own time and money into the restoration as a means of demonstrating their love for the object being restored, and/or for the process of restoration itself. For Fengwen, this enthusiasm is the spirit of craftsmanship that she observed from her parents’ generation. She told us that her mother used to be a very good tailor when she was younger, and that she was brought up in an environment where people made things using their hands instead of machines. In turn, she recognizes that she has been deeply influenced by the emotional labor that is often invested in the practices of craftsmanship. Thus, Fengwen’s restoration of the Liang ancestral temple turned to be more than a functionally oriented plan with specific goals and timetables, but rather a spiritual and aesthetic journey of passion and inspiration to breathe life into a place long forgotten and emotionally neglected.

Restoration not only reflects Fengwen’s connection to the past, but also enabled her to establish a presence as an artist, and to provide a blueprint for future restoration projects. During the restoration period, she added some new functions to the temple. She built a modern terrace garden to be used for leisure activities at the top of the main hall. The garden is not big, but it is thoughtfully designed and executed. She incorporated several micro landscapes to symbolize her understanding of the symbiotic inter-relationships between objects, nature and culture. For example, she constructed a small waterfall at the corner of the garden against a backdrop of abalone¹⁴ shells. When the sun shines, the shells refract light around the garden. Fengwen prefers to use all natural materials to create her art, in doing so she seeks to reflect the Chinese cultural tradition of the union of nature and culture. She also used abalone shells to build a ‘mountain’ at the right side of the temple, the reason being that the neighbor on the left side of temple built a 4-story-high new house, and the mountain was needed to create a degree of balance according to the principles of *fengshui*.¹⁵ Fengwen creates this small mountain to make it a modern landscape with traditional meaning.

A turning point came in 2014, when Fengwen decided to inhabit the temple. She began the process of converting the temple from a static cultural space, to a more flexible-use, and liveable cultural space. Within the temple, she designed a study room, a meeting room, a reception/tea room, and an exhibition hall for her art work. The two ancestral halls on either side of the building became art galleries, where Fengwen could display her own artwork. The temple has thus been converted from a place of ancestral worship and reverence, to one of more modern cultural production and display.¹⁶ The juxtaposition of an old building and new furniture, of ancient carvings and new artworks, of authentic political prints and modern micro-landscapes provide a constant reminder of what the temple once was, and what it has become. In doing so, the reconciliation of past, present and future within a project of partial restoration and reinvention has enabled Fengwen to materialize her memories, and to bring new life to an otherwise abandoned cultural space (Figures 4 and 5).

Conclusion

Buildings adopt new meanings with the passing of time. Such meanings do not negate what came before, but augment them, creating layers of understanding, interpretation and usage that are



Figure 4. Fengwen's art work and art gallery.



Figures 5. Modern terrace garden.

unique to the time and space in which they are imparted. Through Fengwen, an artist's practice of restoration of an ancestral temple, we see how she interprets and blends different historical periods through which the temple was imprinted with different meanings and uses. With strong commitment and spirit of devotion, she restored the exterior of the temple according to its history and canonic traditions, carefully kept all the prints of Mao's figure during the Cultural Revolution, and subsequently introduced new cultural and more pragmatic functions to reimagine how the temple could be used in the contemporary world.

This case study provides an example of a bottom-up, artist-initiated restoration project. While such projects are becoming more commonplace in China, each one is unique in how it reinterprets the past in the creation of something new. The individual-financed artistic restoration links their

understanding and social memory of different pasts, creative expression of the present, and expectation for the future. The combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ makes the place authentic through an unusual blend of restoration and art creation, which in turn can lead to a unique cultural experience for visitors, and a deeper and more nuanced understanding of place. The creative and sustainable use of such old cultural place in modernizing China is worthy further and closer attention by academics and planners, and policymakers alike.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: Funding for this research comes from Foundation of Ministry of Education of China (No. 16YJC63008) and National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 41630635; No. 41671146).

Notes

1. See N.Gregson, A.Metcalf and L.Crewe, ‘Practices of Object Maintenance and Repair: How Consumers Attend to Consumer Objects Within the Home’, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 9(2), 2009, pp. 248–72; also D.Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
2. D.DeLyser and P.Greenstein, ‘The Devotions of Restoration: Materiality, Enthusiasm, and Making Three “Indian Motorcycles” Like New’, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 107(6), 2017, pp. 1461–78.
3. M.Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation, Antiquity to Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).
4. O.Woods, ‘The Geographies of Religious Conversion’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(4), 2012, pp. 440–56.
5. E.Feng, *The Chinese History of Lineage* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2009).
6. Zheng, cited in N.Chen, ‘Governing Rural Culture: Agency, Space and the Re-Production of Ancestral Temples in Contemporary China’, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 47, 2016, pp. 141–52.
7. Knapp and Shen, cited in Chen.
8. Chinese clan refers to a patrilineal and patrilocal group of related Chinese people with a common surname sharing a common ancestor. Clan-based activities are usually held at the ancestral temple or shrine to honor ancestral clan members. ‘Clan-based’ society/community represents one of the key features of social structure in traditional China.
9. ‘Red Song’ refers to revolutionary and patriotic songs which were very popular during the cultural revolution period in China during the 1960s and 1970s.
10. See: <http://news.dayoo.com/guangdong/201704/20/139996_51142803.htm>
11. The left picture shows different life stages of Chairman Mao in his 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s with different places in China as background.
12. H.Geoghegan and A.Hess, ‘Object-Love at the Science Museum: cultural geographies of Museum Storerooms’, *cultural geographies*, 22(3), 2015, pp. 445–65.
13. DeLyser and Greenstein, ‘The Devotions of Restoration’, p. 1461.
14. Abalone is commonly known as *bao yu* in Chinese, and it is considered as a luxury food item in Chinese sea food restaurants. Fengwen collected abalone shells from different restaurants in Guangzhou.
15. According to Chinese *fengshui*, people use the metaphor of *Left Dragon and Right white tiger* to stand for the balance of the two door-gods. Here, Fengwen built a ‘fake mountain’ to stand for traditional ‘right white tiger’ to balance the left side new building.
16. Woods, ‘Conversion’.

Author biographies

Ling Ma is an associate professor of School of Geographical Sciences at Guangzhou University, China. Her research interests are socio-cultural change, urban development and tourism development during the transformation period of China.

Orlando Woods is an assistant professor of Humanities at Singapore Management University. His research interests span the intersections of religion, urban environments and digital technologies in South and Southeast Asia.

Hong Zhu is professor of School of Geographical Sciences at Guangzhou University, China. His research field mainly focus on population migration and social construction of nature in post-reform era of China.