Culture | Where to Discover One Hundred Years of Nostalgia?

--A Chronicle of the Conservation of the Lin Dexun Ancestral Hall in Danzao, Jiangmen, China

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On a winter day in early December, I came to the ancient village of Danzao in the street of Huanshi, Pengjiang District, in the light of fine rain. The Lin Dexun Ancestral Hall is the only one in Jiangmen with a blue glazed tile roof, reflecting the architectural characteristics of the combination of Chinese and Western cultures in the Wuyi area.

Pushing open the heavy wooden door is like pushing open a door to history. Crossing the threshold, the mortise-and-tenon structure of the flower screen comes into view, and the symmetrical pattern on both sides shows the elegance of ancient Chinese architecture; the carvings and paintings on the roof are intricate and exquisite; the mottled walls reveal the marks of the years, and the traces of plant growth can still be found on a closer look.

Last year, the place was still overgrown with weeds and strewn with broken window panes. Today, the ancestral hall's appearance has changed, and the blue glazed tiles have re-emitted their light, once again showing the hall's unique culture and value to the world.

After 11 years, Tan Jinhua, a professor of Wuyi University and an expert in architectural heritage preservation, the initiator of the "Cangdong Project", has once again led a team to revitalize the old buildings of overseas Chinese, and the Dexun Lin Ancestral Hall has become the second base under the concept of the "Cangdong Project", and a place for the centuries-old nostalgia of Lin Zizhao's family.

The restored Dexun Lin Ancestral Hall has a new look.

Honor the traditional, embrace the West Wind

The Lin Dexun Ancestral Hall was built in 1935 as a family shrine by Mr. Lam Tee Chew (Lin Zizhao), a famous banker and an overseas Chinese living in Malaysia, to commemorate his father, Mr. Lam Tak Choon (Dexun Lin). It was mainly used for ancestor veneration and family gatherings, and had also been used as a school. Later, as all the descendants of Mr. Lin Zizhao settled overseas, the ancestral hall was neglected, repeatedly vandalized and almost deserted.

In 2020, Mr. Lin Zizhao's granddaughter, Lin Aiying, found Tan Jinhua on the Stanford University website. Recognizing the concept of the Cangdong Project and understanding how it operates, the Lin family decided to entrust the Lin Dexun Ancestral Hall to the management of the Cangdong Heritage Education Center in the hope of revitalizing the ancestral hall using the concept of the Cangdong Project and rejuvenating the significance of this historical building. As a result, the hall has become the second base under the Cangdong Heritage Education Center Project.

Why did you choose the Lin Dexun Ancestral Hall? Tan Jinhua said, "'Cangdong Project' is a bottom-up model, I did not choose the Lin Dexun Ancestral Hall, but the owner of the hall agreed with the concept of Cangdong and chose us. At the same time, this century-old overseas Chinese family shrine has its own unique heritage value, which is worth preserving."

Covering an area of more than 600 square meters, the Lin Dexun Ancestral Hall belongs to the traditional Guangfu ancestral hall form, which contains all the architectural crafts of modern Lingnan architecture, and at the same time has elements of Nanyang (Southeast Asian) and architecture. It is a living teaching material with high reference value for in-depth study of the architectural skills and overseas Chinese thinking in the overseas Chinese townships of Wuyi during the Republic of China period. In 2019, the Lin Dexun Ancestral Hall was designated as a historical building by the Jiangmen Municipal Government.

"This ancestral hall is a typical combination of Chinese and Western cultures, very ornate and deeply considered, profoundly reflecting Mr. Lin Zizhao's experience of living in the areas off the South China Sea and his ideological outlook – honoring the traditional as well as embracing the Western style." Tan Jinhua said Lin Zizhao's emphasis on the traditional layout of the interior and the choice of the blue glazed tile roof not only adhere to the traditional reverence for gods and ancestors, but also shows his faith in traditional culture and his extraordinary wealth. In general public perception, only the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Guangzhou, and the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum in Nanjing could afford to use such remarkable blue glazed tile roofs. Lin Zizhao's use of trip windows and western columns, on the other hand, is a play on the concept of foreign for Chinese in the architecture of the ancestral hall.

The blue glazed tile roof of Dexun Lin Ancestral Hall is unique in the Wuyi area.

When the Ancestral Hall exists, the roots remain

In December 2022, the restoration of the Lin Dexun Ancestral Hall was officially launched. It was an extremely difficult restoration process, with a large volume of sections, severe damage, and a variety of architectural decorative techniques, with the ceramic ridges in particular at risk. Tan Jinhua led the team to work in accordance with international cultural heritage restoration standards, fully respecting the authenticity and integrity of the ancestral hall.

According to Tan Jinhua, the restoration of an ancestral hall is the beginning of community building. During the restoration process, the craftsmen gradually realized the importance of traditional skills. The traditional cultural beliefs of the community were considered with the restoration of the building, as well as the feelings of overseas descendants towards their hometown. Their knowledge of cultural heritage was strengthened and their sense of identity towards their hometowns deepened through the restoration of the ancestral hall.

During the restoration process, Tan Jinhua's team emphasized both the protection of architectural heritage and cultural inheritance.

There was a pair of couplets in the ancestral hall that had been damaged historically, and the handwriting was blurred. They asked a calligrapher to recognize the meaning of the characters--to promote education and cultivate talents, to plant flowers and bamboo, and to spend the rest in one's leisure time. This is the only remaining text of the couplet in the ancestral hall. Tan Jinhua believes that the couplet has extraordinary significance from a heritage perspective, and that it can be used to understand the owner's thinking at the time and the purpose of the ancestral hall.

For this reason, Tan Jinhua asked the calligrapher, Mr. Zhao Yihan, to write and redo the brick couplet on the wall directly opposite the original site using the original technique and brick material, so that future generations can see the traces of history and feel the heart of the owner at that time through the old and new couplets. Tan Jinhua made a horizontal inscription "for the good" for this couplet, which is taken from the traditional cultural thought of "for the good is the most joyful", which was not only the philosophy of life of Mr. Lin Zizhao, but also the reflection of the feelings of patriotism and love of home of the overseas Chinese.

At present, the Dexun Lin Ancestral Hall restoration project has been basically completed, and the internal decoration is being perfected. This overseas Chinese ancestral hall is gradually brushing off the dust of history and seeing new vitality. Tan Jinhua's team hopes to rely on the strength of all parties to turn the ancestral hall into a center for root-searching and cultural exchange.

Tan Jinhua believes that for overseas descendants, the ancestral hall is the home of their ancestors and the roots of overseas Chinese. When the ancestral hall exists there, the roots remain. Here, by exchanging and sharing relevant achievements and conducting cross-border cultural exchange activities, we help overseas Chinese understand the history and culture of

their own ethnic group, thereby building the identity of the Chinese overseas community. At the same time, we also enable people living in overseas Chinese hometowns to see the world and enhance understanding and identification between China and people from various countries around the world.

Before restoration, the Dexun Lin Ancestral Hall was in a state of disrepair.

The "Hero" Behind the Scenes

When the restored Dexun Lin Ancestral Hall presented in front of her eyes, Tan Jinhua was overwhelmed with emotion, finding it "a bit unbelievable". Looking back on the journey, she expressed her sincere admiration for the contractor, Mr. Chen Weiyang, saying that he was the "hero" behind the restoration project, and that he had a deep affection for traditional culture and architectural preservation.

"The Cangdong Project, a non-profit social enterprise, could not afford the huge expenses of the restoration project of the Dexun Lin Ancestral Hall. At this critical moment, Chen Weiyang from Xinhui took the initiative to participate in the project, and out of his own feelings for architectural heritage and recognition of the heritage preservation work done by the Cangdong Project, he advanced funds for the restoration of the Dexun Lin Ancestral Hall. Chen Weiyang said that although he didn't make any money doing this project, he was happy that the whole process was characterized by negotiation, mutual respect, and the pursuit of excellence.

"This shows me the power of community building and the charm of the spirit of traditional culture. I can't imagine that in this day and age, there can still be the kind of trust that existed a century ago in a traditional society of acquaintances." Tan Jinhua said.

Tan Jinhua commented that the path of heritage conservation is difficult at the beginning, but as time goes by, more and more people will be found to be on the same path. "There may be no path in the world, but when more people walk on it, it becomes a road. Although the path is still not so well trod, and there is still a sense of loneliness, I am grateful that we are in an era of love for heritage."