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The Preservation of Door Gods in Traditional Taiwanese Temples

Wanyu Wu, José Manuel Barros García

This paper focuses on the study and conservation of the gods painted on the doors of traditional temples in Taiwan. These paintings are continually exposed to poor environmental conditions (especially sunlight, rain and pollution) and human factors, such as continuous ritual activities. After reviewing the technical characteristics of these paintings and their origins, traditional views and contemporary criteria followed in the restoration of temples are also exposed. Since preventive conservation is a key issue in the preservation of cultural heritage, some solutions that have already been carried out, as well as suggestions for others that could be put into practice in order to improve the situation and expand the *life expectancy* of these paintings, are considered. Finally, while it is inevitable to try to preserve some of the most relevant pieces, the possibility of considering these works as ephemeral is contemplated. This may seem contradictory, but it is, in fact, a relatively common situation when addressing the conservation of religious heritage in use. Undoubtedly, the preservation of this heritage still raises many questions and exposes a number of contradictions.

Keywords: Taiwan; painting; door; conservation; sacred; temple

Introduction

In the traditional temples of Taiwan, Buddhism, Taoism and popular religion are combined. A temple is not just a place of worship for the Taiwanese, it is also a place for social gathering, for cultural development as well as a shelter during natural disasters. In short, a traditional Taiwanese temple is a multi-purpose space which is deeply rooted in daily life.

Painted images are a very important element of the temples, and in particular, those of the door gods. The painted doors are the entrance to a cultural space whilst also constituting symbolical protection for the temple itself (Figure 1).

As the structure of Taiwanese temples is, generally, partly open, the paintings are continually exposed to environmental conditions (particularly, heat and a high level of relative humidity), in addition to natural disasters. Moreover, the continuous religious activity is another factor to be taken into account regarding the deterioration of the temples and, especially, the paintings (Tang 2006).

Modern day conservation and restoration criteria are gradually being introduced in Taiwan, thereby causing temple paintings to become more highly valued, not just as products of religious beliefs, but also as works of art and cultural heritage.

This paper deals with the problems posed by the conservation of the door gods. Materials and techniques used both in the past and present are explained, as are the main dangers the paintings are exposed to, together with suggestions for solutions to improve their conservation. The paper also considers whether it would be feasible to apply some kind of preventive conservation policy or if it would be more reasonable to consider the paintings as ephemeral works.

This research is based on numerous visits to temples in Taiwan as well as first hand interviews with traditional painters. More than forty temples were visited in order to assess their state and condition as accurately as possible. Of the painters interviewed,

a number were still active, thus enabling invaluable data concerning painting techniques as well as information regarding these painters' activity as art restorers to be obtained. The 2009 interviews of Chen Shou-Yi (1934-2012), his son Chen Wen-Chin (1963-) and Lin Chuan-Zhi are especially noteworthy. In 2014, Chen Ping-Sheng (1946-) was interviewed during the restoration of the Wufeng Lin Family Mansion and Garden (Taichung City). At the time of the interviews, all of them were collaborating on conservation and restoration projects, which allowed the opportunity to better know and understand their working conditions. Another particularly revealing interview was carried out in 2014 on Cai Guo-Wei (1952-), regarding his father, Cai Cao-Ru (1919-2007), one of the most important painters in Taiwan (Wu 2016).

The temples and the painted door gods

Usually, the structure of a Taiwanese temple is divided into the following parts: main gate (*shan-men*), fore hall (*san-chuan-dian*), courtyard (*tiān jǐng*), main hall (*zhèng diàn*), rear hall (*hòu diàn*) and side rooms (*xiāng láng*). Between the front doors and the space dedicated to the worship of the main deity, there is a courtyard where a great incense burner (Figure 2) can be found. This type of structure means that even the paintings in the interior are exposed to the effects of sunlight and rain (especially when there is heavy rain-fall and strong winds, as in the typhoon season) and, above all, to smoke from the offerings (Li and Yu 1999).

The main gate is the entrance to the sacred world (Figure 3). The fore hall or *hall of three doors*, has a minimum of three double doors (five or seven doors in the bigger temples): a main door in the centre, for exclusive use by the deity, and subsidiary doors on either side for visitors and pilgrims to go in and out (the entrance is always on the left, from the main deity's point of view). Represented on the doors of the fore hall are the door gods, the temple's most important paintings, and whose purpose it is to prevent

evil spirits from entering (Figures 4-5) (Xie 2002).

In general, the main hall is the largest and highest space in the temple, and it is the place where the deities are worshipped. The temple is usually dedicated to one, main deity, which receives greater veneration and from which the temple gets its name. An image of this deity is always found in the centre of the main hall.

In the rear hall, other deities, of lesser rank than the main one, are worshipped. Sometimes, this space is used for carrying out other activities of an administrative nature or rituals. Only the larger temples have side rooms, which serve the same purpose as the rear hall.

Although it has been pointed out that the paintings of the gods are found in the fore hall, sometimes they can be found in other halls, if the temple is big enough and has sufficient resources.

According to some studies (Ruan 1990; Tang 1997), in China, during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, it was customary to paint a tiger on the doors. During the Han dynasty, Shen shu and Yu lü, were represented, the most ancient deities to be found in this type of composition. From the Tang dynasty onwards, and due to Buddhist influence, the themes painted on doors began to diversify and female deities also started to appear (Kang 2013).

Powerful characters are usually represented on the doors, although these vary according to the different regions of Asia. Together with Taiwan, the custom to paint gods on doors can also be found in countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, among others.

The door gods: techniques and materials

The great number of pictorial projects on offer in the temples has, since the mid-twentieth century, provoked changes both in the labour market and in the way the

painters actually work. The field of traditional painting had been functioning in a somewhat closed off milieu, with a limited number of masters and apprentices who worked in a fairly stable manner. However, after World War II, new temples were built and existing ones, damaged by the war, were rebuilt. A consequence of this new situation was the incorporation of people who had no training in traditional painting. As a result of this competition, traditional painters reduced their wages and sought more commissions (Xu and Hsiao 2001), provoking a clear deterioration in the quality of the paintings, which were carried out more carelessly and using cheap, unstable materials, thus creating even greater conservation problems.

Support

In the past, in order to build palaces and temples in Taiwan, materials were usually imported from China, for example *Cunninghamia lanceolata*, *Phoebe zhennan*, or *Cinnamomum camphora* wood. However, for more modest constructions, timber from local species of trees, such as *Chamaecyparis taiwanensis* Masam. & Suzuki and *Chamaecyparis formosensis* Matsum, were used (Li 1996; Hong and Hong 1992).

For a door of about three metres in height, the average thickness of the panels would be about 5.5-6.5 cm. The boards which formed the panels were joined together with adhesives prepared with tung oil and pig blood, and reinforced with wooden crossbars (Figure 6). Today, the adhesives used are synthetic such as, for example, polyvinyl acetate emulsion (Xu and Hsiao 2001; Li 2003).

Any unevenness or holes are filled in with filler mixtures or pieces of bamboo or wood. Traditional fillers were made from pig blood mixed with lime or, to a lesser extent, cooked tung oil mixed with inert pigments, although information concerning use of the latter is contradictory, as pointed out by Cai Fei-Wen (2014).

There is greater consensus regarding the use of traditional fillers made from pig

blood and lime. Some of its advantages include: easy application, flexibility, low cost, good resistance to biological agents (Cai 2014), quick drying and easy to sand. However, it must be taken into account that it is quite complicated to prepare, so, in fact, today, most traditional painters substitute these fillers for synthetic ones, such as, for example, those used for car bodywork or epoxy resins mixed with sawdust (Xu and Hsiao 2001; Kang 2013).

Ground layers

Sometimes, in the traditional technique, animal glue or fermented pig blood diluted with water were applied as sizing layers (Li, Zheng, and Cai 2008). Nowadays, some diluted commercial white paint is usually applied.

The ground layers were traditionally made of pig blood and lime or cooked tung oil with filler pigments. However, today hardly any painter uses these techniques anymore. From the 1970s on, all kinds of synthetic binders, such as polyvinyl acetate emulsions, are used. In recent years, only the painter Chen Ying-Pai and his apprentices seem to be using pig blood in the ground layers (Cai 2014). On top of a first ground layer, a linen or cotton cloth would be applied. In this case too, synthetic materials have come to prevail, for example, nylon.

A second ground layer would be applied onto the cloth which would then be sanded down (Figure 7). For the last layer, sometimes calcium carbonate with animal glue would be used or just the same materials as in previous layers. The main advantage of ground layers made from pig blood and lime is that they enable a very good adherence of the pictorial layers. In the case of ground layers with cooked tung oil, the main advantages are: easier application, greater flexibility and resistance to humidity. However, this technique is more expensive and the ground provides less adherence for the pictorial layer (Li 2004). Today, painters have moved on to using oil-based white

paint, as used in construction, to which some add filler pigments such as lithopone (Pan 2004).

Under-drawing and gilding

Usually the figures are drawn on paper and, sometimes, this drawing is traced onto the ground. More experienced painters draw directly onto the ground with charcoal or chalk. The drawing is finished off with Indian ink. Synthetic ultramarine (*Fo Qing*) and an aqueous binder, applied with a brush, can also be used as a drawing technique.

When the drawing is finished, but before gilding, the background colour is applied (usually red but sometimes black is used). Before painting, a thin layer of cooked tung oil (with lead oxide) is applied as an adhesive for the gold leaf which is adhered with the help of a soft-bristled brush. Depending on the project's budget, gold, copper or alloys are used (Xu and Hsiao 2001). In a sample taken from a painted door god attributed to Cai Cao-Ru (c. 1970), the presence of gold, with silver and copper impurities (Ferrazza and Juanes Barber 2014), was identified through Scanning Electron Microscopy - Energy Dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (SEM-EDX).

Different decorating techniques are used, for example, application of *pastiglia*: lines in relief, which, in the majority of cases are gilded (a technique known as *lifan* in Chinese) (Figure 8). Traditionally, filler pigments mixed with an animal glue binder were used. Today, the use of synthetic binders such as, for example, polyvinyl acetate emulsion with lithopone, is much more common (Boyuan 1988; Xu and Hsiao 2001; Li 2003; Jiang and Ma 2005).

Pictorial layers

The main binder used in the past was cooked tung oil, to which manganese or lead salts were added during cooking (Cai 2014). Nowadays, painters prefer to buy pre-cooked

tung oil as its elaboration is a very toxic and contaminating process as well as a fire hazard. The use of all kinds of commercial paints is also widespread, sometimes mixed with linseed oil. Some researchers have pointed out that many painters often use low quality paints, not designed for artistic purposes (Xu 2003; Cai 2014). According to Wang and Kung (2017) the most frequently used binders during the twentieth century in traditional paintings of Taiwanese temples have been tung oil, linseed oil and mixes of these two oils.

According to Xue Qin (1997), the main pigments traditionally used in Taiwanese painting are red mercuric sulphide (vermillion), realgar, malachite, azurite, lapis lazuli, chalk, kaolin, carbon black, lead white, red lead, zinc white and yellow ochre. To these we must add the lacquers obtained from *Rubia cordifolia* and *Carthamus tinctorius*. A study carried out on door gods painted on two panels considered to be by Cai Cao-Ru (c. 1970), showed that chalk and lithopone had been used both in pictorial and ground layers. Other pigments such as chrome green, red lead, chrome yellow, ultramarine blue and red ochre were also identified by means of SEM-EDX (Ferrazza and Barber 2014).

Due to the lines in Indian ink being covered by pictorial layers, the painter must go over the lines again with ink afterwards. In order to apply it onto the paint, the juice of sapindus fruits used to be added to the ink as a surfactant, although nowadays a detergent is usually used instead (Xu and Hsiao 2001; Kang 2013).

In the past, when the paint had dried, cooked tung oil was applied to the surface (Tseng et al. 2014), although some painters did not apply any protective coating at all. Since the 1960s, the tendency is to use synthetic varnishes, although in many cases they are not commercialized for artistic purposes, such as, for example, cellulose nitrate.

A cellulose nitrate varnish was identified (by means of Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy) on several samples taken from a painted door god (attributed to

Cai Cao-Ru, *c.* 1970), although it is not the original varnish as it covers layers of fillers, overpaints and dirt. In this work an older varnish was also found, but it was impossible to identify (Ferrazza and Barber 2014; Wu 2016).

Restoration criteria concerning temple paintings in Taiwan

Today, the idea of preserving temple paintings is becoming more habitual among the Taiwanese, especially regarding works carried out by the more prestigious painters. The painters' change of status, from traditional artisan to officially recognized artist (it is becoming more frequent today that painters actually sign their work) has been a **determining factor influencing** that change in attitude.

Furthermore, since the 1990s, there is a growing interest in Taiwan towards the conservation of cultural heritage. The creation of institutions whose job it is to ensure correct conservation, to form professional conservator-restorers and to apply international standards in restoration processes has brought about an enormous change within the management of the conservation of national architectural and pictorial heritage. Policies for the conservation of temples are determined by the Council for Cultural Affairs within the framework defined by the Cultural Heritage Preservation Act (Tung and Hsieh 2010).

The traditional way of tackling the restoration of a temple involves its reconstruction, and in the case of paintings, implies a complete repainting or the substitution of damaged works for new ones. But it must be understood that these traditional criteria are not plainly and simply the consequences of not knowing about the conservation-restoration theories and practices carried out in western countries.

The concepts of construction and reconstruction adhered to in Taiwan have their origins in the traditional beliefs of southern China. Buildings are considered in similar terms as human beings, in that they have a limited lifespan, with birth, sickness, old age

and finally, death. After death, *rebirth* takes place in a continuous cycle. Continuity of the spirit and the wisdom of ancestors are considered to be more important than the simple conservation of physical structures (Tang 2006), so buildings are not expected to last forever. Because timber is the main material used in **construction** and due to climatic conditions and natural disasters, traditional architectural structures in Taiwan have quite a short lifespan and it is very difficult to plan their conservation in the long term (Liang 1989; Liang 2001).

Chiou Bo-Shun (2001) has pointed out the importance of not seeking to preserve material heritage at any price, but to be able to accept its disappearance. He has even suggested that this could be considered a criterion specific to Taiwan, as part of its culture. This would be authenticity in Taiwanese heritage conservation. It must be remembered that *authenticity*, as defined in the *Nara Document* (1994), cannot be defined as a universal norm, but must correspond to how it is made specific by different cultures and their belief systems (Labadi 2013).

Traditional concepts of conservation and restoration of Taiwanese temples are very much determined by the religiousness of the parishioners. Believers want to present the best offerings to the gods, so it is important that temples always appear *new* and properly decorated, especially those which receive a greater influx of visitors (and consequently, more donations) (Tang 2006). Keeping the temple as new as possible is a way of honouring the deity and emphasizing its importance **within** the community.

Repainting or substituting old paintings in a bad state of conservation has always been the prevailing criterion in Taiwan. In the most extreme cases, and due to the widely spread belief that paintings are just part of the temple, if a temple were restored or reconstructed, the paintings would disappear.

It is quite usual to find the problem of criteria posed as a conflict between

local/national and international/western criteria. The most widespread criterion followed locally is that of conserving artefacts as elements of a constantly renovated ritual, as opposed to the physical conservation of artefacts which would be chiefly of a historical-documentary value. It is a struggle between the everyday and religious use of a place, and the material conservation of fabric, a struggle which becomes apparent in many national and international charters, such as, for example, the *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter* (2013).

Today, in Taiwan, there is no completely unified criterion accepted by all stakeholders. In the case of a temple which forms part of the inventory of one of the categories recognized by Taiwanese legislation, the degree of protection can be quite high. Here, any intervention must be approved by the corresponding administrative organs. However, this does not apply to the rest of the temples. Tung and Hsieh (2010, 2) discuss the problem:

Conservation building projects tend to include both the preservation of the building and the interior, but are led by architects who are more focused on the building structure than the painted interior. Often the architect delegates to a contractor who then hires traditional local craftsmen to carry out the work on the painted surface. These craftsmen may have little or no conservation training, which then can result in damage to the historical artefacts. Moreover, due to declining numbers of master craftsmen and jobs, younger craftsmen often lack experience and are unable to build up a good set of skills. In situations where foreign conservators guide projects, communication can be complex or lacking, thus exacerbating the problem. However, with proper training, there is no reason not to include traditional craftsmen in these projects.

In such cases, interventions and their scope depend solely on those responsible for the temple and the company under contract to carry out the intervention.

Conservation of door god paintings

The door gods of traditional Taiwanese temples are not painted just for decorative reasons. They are images which, in a sense, are considered to be *alive*: the deities live in these doors and protect the temple so that evil spirits do not get in. As in other belief systems, they are also linked to the worship of ancestors and therefore serve to beseech their protection. On the other hand, it is a kind of protection which goes beyond the temple and reaches the community itself (Clart and Jones 2003).

The religious purpose of these paintings is what makes them meaningful, but it also provokes the greater part of the problems related to their conservation: damage caused through handling the doors, accumulation of soot, adhered pieces of paper, etc. It is indeed a complex situation, but one frequently found in living religious heritage (Stovel, Stanley-Price, and Killick 2005).

Regarding the conservation of this kind of paintings, they cannot be treated in the same way as works of art kept in a museum. When exhibited in a museum, artefacts originating in liturgy take on other, different values, more closely linked to aesthetic enjoyment and historical or anthropological aspects, depending on the type of museum and how the pieces are exhibited.

Some door gods are exhibited in museums after dismantling a temple, as a way of preserving a relic, an object that no longer fulfils its religious purpose but still maintains some value (aesthetic, historic, etc.). Several works are conserved in various museums in Taiwan such as, for example, the National Museum of Taiwan History, Kaohsiung Museum of History, and the National Centre for Traditional Arts.

In the case of paintings which form part of a private collection, a museum or which are musealized in the temple itself, the restoration criteria adhered to usually correspond to international conservation-restoration standards (see Appendix). However, problems arise concerning works which are still *alive*. In Taiwan, the criteria to follow

regarding this type of works is not at all clear, although this is generally a problem when dealing with heritage which still possesses a strong social and religious vitality.

In the case of an intervention project to be carried out on a protected monument, the recommendations and evaluations of a revision committee must be followed. In other cases, it is a matter of opinion, including perhaps even the opinion of the temple's own deity. Traditional painter Lin Chuan-Zhi pointed out that (personal communication), for example, when the restoration of a deity's sculpture is finished, that deity must be asked, by means of the Jiaobei blocks ritual, if it approves, or not, of the final result of the intervention. In some cases, it is also necessary to carry out a ritual in order to *expel* the deity, so that it is not present in the sculpture during the restoration. This is due to the belief that touching the deity's body (the sculpture itself) is a lack of respect.

Clearly, all the above implies that the restoration of artefacts which are sacred for a community cannot be put forward as a mere technical or scientific problem. It carries a significant dimension inherently linked to the beliefs that have led to the existence of the work itself, its values and the use a particular community makes of it.

The challenges of preventive conservation

Causes of deterioration

The conservation of Taiwanese temples is subject to many challenges: natural disasters such as floods, typhoons, or earthquakes make it very difficult to preserve these wooden buildings. Besides, there are other problems, especially rituals and how the temples are used, which cause a rapid deterioration of the painted doors.

Taiwan's climate is characterized, above all, by intense heat and high relative humidity throughout the year, which help deteriorate the painted doors. Furthermore, the door gods are not usually found in a context which offers optimum conditions for

their long-term preservation, as they are practically completely exposed to the elements (Figure 9).

It is important not to underestimate the influence of the wet season (Meiyu) during the months of May and June, together with typhoons which can occur at any time but tend to be more frequent during July, August and September. On the other hand, Taiwan is found in the Pacific Ring of Fire, which means it is subject to intense seismic activity.

On the other hand, the Taiwanese have deeply rooted religious rituals, some of which are directly related to the **paintings' conservation problems**. Among these rituals, the burning of incense during prayer is especially noteworthy. The soot produced is deposited on the surface of the paintings causing them to be covered in a brown, almost black, layer and consequently distorting (or even completely hiding) the picture. Sometimes, the use of fireworks near the doors can also produce stains and damage (Figure 10): **resulting in the accumulation of diverse chemical compounds, such as, for example, aluminium and potassium silicates (Ferrazza and Juanes Barber 2014)**.

During some rituals or special festivities, the main deity of the temple is believed to return to heaven. To prevent evil spirits from entering the temple, the doors are shut and pieces of paper with inscriptions are adhered to the doors (with synthetic adhesives). This ritual is carried out at least once a year. When the deity returns to the temple, **the pieces of paper are eliminated: they are just torn off, without any kind of precaution, which causes the paint to come off also, and any remaining scraps of paper are left adhered to the surface (Figure 11)**.

Diverse activities in the temple mean that the doors are handled daily. In addition, the great many people who go through the doors, inevitably, cause frequent blows, scrapes or erosions (Figure 12).

The wood-boring insects which usually cause most damage in Taiwan are termites, particularly *Coptotermes formosanus* and *Coptotermes gestroi*. Besides, possible damages caused by beetles of the *Bostrichidae*, *Lyctidae*, *Anobiidae* and *Cerambycidae* families must also be taken into account (Li 2012).

Defective restorations are another problem as they can accelerate the deterioration of a work due to the accumulation of overpaints, fillers and very thick layers of varnish. In many cases, the painters themselves also contribute to deterioration, by using inadequate painting techniques and materials of a poor quality. On the other hand, some pictorial compositions have been carried out on top of previous ones, causing, in many cases, the more recent layers of paint to peel off (Figure 13).

Preventive conservation: strategies

Environmental conditions, natural disasters and the ritualistic functions of the temple paintings make long term preservation of the works a difficult task. Nonetheless, different proposals have been put forward, and in some cases put into practice, in order to improve the possibilities of preserving these paintings.

Protective systems

Sometimes the paintings are protected by some kind of transparent plastic film. In other instances, a sheet of transparent acrylic material or a kind of *showcase* with holes to help ventilate are placed over the surface. However, due to humidity, whitish stains and damage caused by mould tend to appear when there are no ventilation holes.

In addition to problems caused by the condensation of humidity, plastics can end up wrinkled, although, generally, the main issue here is one of aesthetics. These materials alter the paintings' appearance considerably, usually in a negative way, often creating a *mirror* effect (Figure 14). In the case of doors with painted bas-reliefs, these

are usually protected by some kind of transparent structure.

Reproductions of the paintings

Doors can be taken from their original site to a museum for their conservation (or to another location, provided that it is more **suitable** from the point of view of preservation), and substituted by copies. As a rule, these solutions are not very well accepted. This is due to the fact that the temples' function is to carry out religious rites, not exhibit works of art, and also that it is not always easy to have copies made with an **acceptable** degree of quality.

When it is a matter of very fragile paintings or **works** of great historical, technical and/or aesthetic value, it is possible to consider dismantling the doors and to re-locate them elsewhere in the temple, in a more sheltered spot, but still accessible to the public. However, even in these cases it is not always easy to make a decision as there is no unified criterion (Wu 2016).

Quality of materials and changes in techniques

As has already been discussed above, some of the paintings' conservation problems are the results of using materials of a poor quality which do not help promote long term conservation. A more adequate choice of materials and techniques would imply a better conservation of the paintings. All too often, the timber used in temple projects is of very poor quality (not strong enough or not completely dry). The painter Chen Ying-Pai recommended the government buy good quality wood and store it for future use in restoration projects (Cai 2014).

One of the problems related to the materials used by painters, given their variety, is the difficulty in identifying the exact materials used in a particular work. It would be extremely useful to keep a record of the materials and techniques used by painters, so

that, if necessary, a conservation strategy could be designed much more easily.

Changes in rituals

Another way of approaching conservation is through some changes in the rituals carried out in the temples. Nowadays in Taiwan there is an increasing concern about contaminated air, so little by little some temples are starting to reduce the amount of incense and joss paper (decorated sheets of paper used as offerings) burned daily. Although this is happening very gradually, it is helping reduce the amount of soot deposited on the paintings. For example, in the temple of Xingtian (Taipei), these rituals have not been carried out since the end of August, 2014. The ritual of praying is simply carried out by means of a flower offering. Despite opposition on behalf of believers, incense and joss paper sellers, the temple committee insisted on the need to make these changes.

In other temples, these rituals have not been eliminated, but the amount of incense burned has been significantly reduced. It is a matter open to debate, with many and diverse opinions, *even including the head* on opposition of some communities regarding any modification *in* rituals (Wu 2016).

Insurance policies

In Taiwan, restoration projects for traditional paintings are usually guaranteed for 1 to 3 years, particularly when they are projects financed by the public administration. It is impossible to offer guarantees for longer periods of time as it is extremely difficult to avoid the deterioration of these paintings, given their conditions of conservation and use.

One possibility could be to introduce an insurance policy which would enable any problem related to the temple's conservation to be dealt with economically. This option could be made available to those temples catalogued and protected under

national legislation. The remaining temples would be subject to the decisions made by those responsible for each temple (Wu 2016). Obviously guarantees and insurance policies do not constitute preventive conservation, but they can contribute to planning ahead and provide funds for any necessary action in order to safeguard a work (or the whole temple). Many problems are not adequately solved simply because there is not enough money.

Between the ephemeral and the preserved

Previous sections have dealt with different solutions which have been carried out (or which could be carried out) in order to improve the conservation of traditional Taiwanese temple painted doors. Here, a completely different approach will be considered: the idea of accepting the door gods as an ephemeral creative expression. This idea has been mentioned several times throughout this paper, in relation to traditional Taiwanese criteria which accept the fact that paintings (just like any other constructions made by man), have a limited life span.

Many creative manifestations are not made to last but to fulfil a specific ritualistic function, in a certain context and during a limited period of time. For the community, the door gods are painted to protect the temples, they are guardians who live in the doors. The images are not considered to be a representation but rather temporary bodies which allow the deities to be present and favour temple and believers. When a body deteriorates, it is considered necessary to replace it with a new one so the deity can be present again with all its power. This continuous regeneration enables the deity's power to remain active, while, at the same time, it is a demonstration of the parishioners' devotion, of their concern regarding the temple's decorum and the deities' power.

For these reasons, one possibility would be to consider the door gods as

ephemeral paintings and, consequently, to accept the inevitable end of a work's existence, of the doors reaching the end of their life-cycle. However, even if we concede that the doors will last a limited amount of time, this does not mean that no efforts should be made to prolong their life span.

It may seem contradictory to defend the conservation of certain works whilst, at the same time, accepting their disappearance. The contemporary theory of conservation (Muñoz Viñas 2005) puts forward, among other important matters, that conservation processes should be negotiated among those involved in the use of a given artefact. It is impossible to establish general criteria based only on scientific and technical concepts.

It is a case of implementing a series of strategies (such as those presented in the previous section) which would promote the works' longer lifespan (for example, by using better quality materials for the paintings), but bearing in mind that it is impossible to preserve *all* works indefinitely. Several factors will influence decision-making, for example, the work's state of conservation, its values (historical, aesthetic, etc.), the economic resources available and the relationships a community may have established regarding the work.

In the case of particularly valuable works, conservation and restoration of the door gods could be carried out with methods and criteria endorsed by international institutions. The possibility of exhibiting the works could also be considered, once they are of no further use to the temple, thus becoming artefacts or relics of a historic-artistic nature. In other cases, where the works' disappearance is inevitable, being able to conserve at least a comprehensive documentation of the paintings, becomes especially important. It would also be extremely useful to keep a record of the materials used by painters and of the paintings' evolution, as well as what solution to adopt when a work reaches the end of its *life-cycle*.

This is the complex situation today, between the sacred and the profane, tradition and contemporaneity, destruction and preservation, art and craft, intuition and science.

Conclusions

In recent years, conservation criteria have started to be discussed in Taiwan, although there is still a great deal of work to do. Further and more thorough debate is certainly necessary among all those concerned, all stakeholders must be involved in the conservation project. Clear regulations are also essential in order to determine criteria and reduce conflicts which tend to arise between the opposed stances of the traditional or the more scientifically inclined.

Traditional painters teach their apprentices orally and through practice how to use traditional techniques and materials. They rarely carry out any research. However, several researchers are making a great effort in two directions. On the one hand, reconstructing traditional techniques, thanks to first hand information from painters who still conserve that knowledge, and also to technical examination and analyses of works (this is much more difficult as there are few ancient works still existing). On the other hand, learning about the materials painters use today, in order to better determine the most adequate preservation techniques.

From the field of conservation, recommendations can be made, as far as possible without involving an increase in cost, for painters to employ techniques which would enhance the paintings' stability.

The door gods have a limited life, determined by environmental conditions, daily use and rituals and, sometimes, natural disasters. These factors imply a fast deterioration of the materials. Furthermore, belief that the paintings are, somehow live beings who are born, die, and must re-incarnate in another new painting through which

they can show all their power, conditions the little interest in long term preservation. Given these circumstances, renovation is, perhaps, the most logical option, and, often, also the cheapest.

In this way, economic and religious factors combine, in circumstances which, unfortunately, do nothing to favour the concept of preventive conservation. This reality must be accepted. So, under these circumstances, it probably does not make much sense to plan or consider the complete and absolute conservation of all the door gods. The great many temples and paintings, traditional beliefs and conditions of use make this kind of approach non-viable. However, what is possible, important and urgent is to record the works carried out, so that at least there is documentary evidence of their realization. One of the problems revealed by this research has been the complete lack of documentation regarding the whereabouts of some paintings. It is impossible to know whether they have been destroyed, covered over by a new painting or perhaps, even conserved in a different location.

Having access to all this information would enable painters to receive much better advice and also help in decision-making regarding the suitability of conservation for paintings which are no longer of use to a temple. From that moment on, it would be possible to decide whether they should form part of a collection or not. It is a matter of carrying out small actions which would help enormously with making more data available, making better decisions and, if the actual physical survival of the painting is impossible, at least its memory would be preserved.

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Appendix

This is an example of a conservation process carried out on two parts of a painted door attributed to Cai Cao-Ru (c. 1970, private collection, Tainan), and which probably proceed from the Baoan temple (Annan district, Tainan) (Figures 6 and 12). Its study has been a key source of information in order to elaborate this paper.

The structural conservation of the wooden support consisted in strengthening some of the joints between boards with polyvinyl acetate emulsion and reintegrating some small losses with Balsite. Losses on the crossbars were not completed.

The removal of the cellulose nitrate varnish was carried out with a solvent gel (made up of 2 g Carbopol 934, 20 ml Ethomeen C25, 100 ml acetone, and 10 ml deionized water). The gel was removed with a mixture of White Spirit and acetone (50:50). The consolidation of paint and ground layers was carried out with animal glue. A first layer of varnish prepared with 20 g dammar resin dissolved in a mixture of 30 ml Shellsol A and 70 ml Shellsol D 40 (stabilized by the addition of Tinuvin 292 - 3% of the dry weight of the resin) was applied. In order to fill the losses in the paint layers, calcium carbonate was used with animal glue as the binding medium. The painting reintegration was carried out with watercolour and Gamblin Conservation Colors: by means of *tratteggio (rigatino)* in the larger lacunae and pointillist retouching in the smaller ones. As a final phase, a thin layer of varnish was applied, prepared with 20 g Laropal A 81 dissolved in 35 ml Shellsol A and 65 ml Shellsol D 40 (stabilized by the addition of Tinuvin 292 - 2% of the dry weight of the resin).

Figure captions

Figure 1. Right door of the Xingji Temple (Tainan).

Figure 2. (a) Incense burner in the Zhenxing Temple (Chialee, Tainan) and (b) people praying at the Longshan Temple (Wanhua, Taipei).

Figure 3. Renan Temple (Baihe, Tainan).

Figure 4. Fore hall of the Kaiyuan Temple (Tainan).

Figure 5. Details of Figure 4. Central door (a-b) and one of the right door's leaves (c).

Figure 6. The back of some painted doors removed from a temple (private collection, Tainan).

Figure 7. Detail of a painted door from the Chiaying Temple (Budai, Chiayi) with pictorial structure losses. The canvas, the ground and the pictorial layer can all be seen.

Figure 8. Detail of a painted door with application of decorative *pastiglia* (*lifan*) and gilding.

Figure 9. The sun's rays on the door gods. Left (a) and central (b) doors of the Baoan Temple (Fangliao, Pingtung).

Figure 10. Damage caused by fireworks on a painted door.

Figure 11. Remains of paper adhered to a painted door and losses caused by tearing them off.

Figure 12. Damage on the pictorial structure. Detail of a painted door attributed to Cai Cao-Ru (private collection, Tainan).

Figure 13. Details of paintings carried out on top of previous pictorial strata. (a) Doors of the del Peitian Temple (Putz, Chiayi). (b) Doors of the Zhenxing Temple (Chiale, Tainan).

Figure 14. Painted bas-reliefs protected by a transparent sheet (Cian Temple, Anding, Tainan).