Material, Sprite and Location. Notes on the Removal of the Zhang Fei Temple (Shaohua Zhang)


The Zhang Fei Temple 张 庙 is located at the foothill Feifeng 山, along the southern shore of the Yangzi River, facing to the original district Yunyang 云阳, Chongqing 重庆. The Temple belongs to the major sites to be protected at the national level. Since the original site is situated in the sluice district of the Sanxia 三峡, from October 2002 to July 2003 the whole architectural complex including more than 100 old trees was moved to the hamlet Panshinew 盘石, south of the new district Yunyang, 32 km away.

The Zhang Fei temple was built in memory of the great General Zhang Fei of Shu-Han 蜀 (AD 221-AD 263). As the sworn younger brother of the emperor, he was famous of his martial braveness and honesty. The local legend states that after the general was murdered his head was thrown into the Yangzi River. A fisher dragged it, but without any attention he threw it away. In the night he got a nightmare, the dead General blamed him. On the next day he got the general’s head back and buried it. In order to offer sacrifice, he built a temple above the grave on the cliffs of the shore.

According to the historical records, the earliest construction was in the last years of the Shu-Han. Because of the floods of Yangzi River, the temple was many times destroyed and constantly restored and rebuilt. The extant constructions based on the rebuilding of 1871 (the 10th year of the Tongzhi are of the Qing Dynasty). The main body of the buildings was distributing among two layers on the cliffs; the whole area was about 1200 m². The constructions from east to west in the lower layer were the pavilion cuckoo 佇亭, the stelae hall 廈室, the meeting room 接待室, the studio gazing clouds 望云楼 and the attic brotherhood sworn 墬楼. In the higher layer of the cliffs stood from the west to the east: the main hall 廮殿, the side hall 側殿, the pavilion wind accelerating 助亭, the side corridor 侧廊 and the exhibition room. Across the steam, on the west side of the cliff were the attic gazing clouds 望云楼 and the pavilion gazing clouds 望亭.

The removal of Zhang Fei temple began on 8 October 2002. It is the biggest removal project of culture relics in the district of the Sanxia- reservoir 三峡, which is also the largest relocation of a building in the last 50 years in China. The basic principle of the project is: the original surrounding and the cultural worthy should be maintained as far as possible. So that during the disassembling of the old buildings, more than 97.8% of the original timber components was numbered and conserved. In the new location, those conserved materials were in basic of the identical numbered plan, in traditional method in form of the original composed. The irremovable parts were remade according to the primal one. In order to reserve the primal surrounding, more than 120 old trees were also transplanted around the new temple.

After the Temple was moved to the new place, the archaeological group excavated into the foundation, tried to find the earlier monuments. From 14 November 2002 to 10 April 2003 they dug 16 trail squares and 4 trail trenches. The result is exciting. The earliest foundation of the Zhang Fei temple, which was excavated this time, was dated to 13th century. Its layout was totally different comparing the one of the Qing Dynasty. The main buildings laid in the west part of the lower layer. There was a long footstep from the riverbank to the main entrance. The remains show that from the 13th to the 17th century, the monument and the buildings, the architectures extended from the west to the east of the lower layer. In the middle of the 17th century, the lower layer was abandoned and the most of the buildings were removed to the upper layer. The main entrance of the temple changed to the east of the lower layer. No longer after that, a bridge was built above the steam to connect the temple with the west cliff, as a result the main entrance then moved to the west side of the upper layer, which we see today.

On 19 July 2003 the new temple was opened. Despite the clear guiding principle, the new buildings are far from identical to the original. The area of the new temple is 2 times bigger than the old one. The brand new colour of the buildings reduces the sedate of the temple. A big new bronze figure replaces the former clay sculpture of General Zhang Fei in the main hall.
Shortly after the opening in 2003, some experts described it as "one of the most successful case of the removal of Chinese ancient building". But 5 years later, in 2008 the scene of the new temple is a shock: The whole temple is situated in a landslide area, which reaches about 200,100 m². The debris around the temple slides from the slopes straight into the Yangtze River. Furthermore, the split in the roadbed reaches 20 to 30 cm wide. Because of landslides, one-third of the building is submerged into mud and some parts of the architecture were broken. Access to the temple is strictly forbidden because of the dangerous situation. According to the director of the Museum of Zhangfei Temple, the problems are not only caused by the choice of the location but also by the unplanted constructions around. Furthermore the 127 old trees, which were transplanted from the old temple in order to keep the temple landscape all died off. Except the physical reasons, the new temple is at the beginning not accepted from the local people. One village says: ‘’General Zhang Fei in our mind is not only a general, but a God, a Bodhisattva. We used to go to the temple and worship him for the well-being of the family. The new temple lacks the momentum of the general, the spirit of the General did not move.’’ So that, on the top of the primal location the local people built a small hut as the temple of the General Zhang Fei, where they attend the worship and offer sacrifices. This phenomenon is quite interesting. It brings up the question, how should we understand and treat a “monument”? As a monument, especially in East Asian, not only the importance of the aesthetical and material worthy should be taken to heart. The spiritual messages, which embodies in the building and even the whole natural environment act a considerable role. How can we protect all the historical, societal messages of a monument? To find adequate answers to this question is still a great challenge for us.