

To Make a Sanheyuan Perfect

Asuka Tamura

In September 2022, I traveled to Taiwan as part of the Maritime Asian and Pacific Studies Project as I have been attracted to residential spaces for some time. The main purpose was to visit the "Sanheyuan (三合院)," a type of house characterized by a U-shaped exterior. This particular structure is often cited as a representation of the Hakka culture, and in recent years, many of them have been renovated and used as tourist resources. I would like to describe how traditions are being transformed in the reconstruction of traditional architecture based on my research in Jiadong (佳冬) Township, Pingdong (屏東) County.



Photo 1: Sanheyuan after the renovation owned by Mr. X's lineage. (Photo taken by the author, September 2022)

Jiadong Township is known as a place where much of the historical Hakka culture still remains. About half of the residents are Hakka and Mr. X, the cheerful man who guided us around at this time, was one of them. He carefully explained, while walking with us, each of the Sanheyuan that lined the streets in Jiadong. An impressive point was that he always mentioned the materials used in a building's construction. He made a clear distinction between reusing the original stone or wood and using new construction materials such as steel or concrete, making clear that the former was more

valuable. He walked around smiling and saying things like, "This is made of concrete, so it's no good." I broke out in a cold sweat at the thought that the people who lived there might have heard him.

In fact, his career had a lot to do with his statement. His lineage's Sanheyuan was rebuilt about 15 years ago, and Mr. X was the very person who proposed and promoted it. His primary focus at the time was to restore the traditional form of the house, for which he and his lineage had hired a historic preservation architect. Although the cost was more than a typical, it was not a big deal to achieve their goal. They followed the U-shaped structure and retained building materials (such as carved stones, wood, and ornate decorations adorning the roof) inherited from their ancestors. Although some parts were newly rebuilt, such as the tablets and beams, the old ones were not discarded but preserved in other rooms.

As mentioned above, Taiwan's Sanheyuan is considered a tourist resource as part of traditional Hakka culture. However, if that were the only purpose, there would be no need to spend a fortune to hire historic preservation architects or to reuse old materials. When I asked Mr. X about this, he replied, "The original Sanheyuan is beautiful and splendid. It would be a disgrace to our ancestors if we descendants treated it poorly. It's natural to want to further develop what we have inherited from our ancestors." He also



Photo 2: Colorful decorations covering the exterior walls. (Photo taken by the author, September 2022)



Photo 3: A fretwork window panel made by stone. (Photo taken by the author, September 2022)

said, “It is not enough to just pay a lot, nor is it enough to have respect for our ancestors. Only when both are present will a Sanheyuan be perfect.”



Photo 4: The old tablet is also kept in storage, not thrown away. (Photo taken by the author, September 2022)

His explanation made sense to me. Until then, I had thought that the Sanheyuan was merely a Hakka cultural resource and that its renovation was simply "reuse" for the purpose of tourism. However, after listening to his "Sanheyuan theory", I realized that acts seemingly to just "reuse" cannot be grasped solely from the perspective of tourism or economic profit. What is retained in the old? Or, contrarily, what is renewed during the renovation process? Such questions can reveal social and cultural values that lie well hidden in the background. It is often said that doubting the obvious is the foundation of anthropology, and it was a great benefit of this fieldwork that I was able to experience this firsthand.

Notes: This essay is an English translation of a section in Tamura's charge in a report 「現代に生きる『伝統』——台湾客家地域の音楽・民居・社区景觀」 to be published in the second issue of 『客・観』 with additions and corrections.

(たむら・あすか 東京都立大学大学院)