Reciprocity between the Ninth Century and Modern: Chi Lin Nunnery and Nam Lin Garden in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Being one of the most compact cities in the world that is developing and redeveloping at a fast pace, preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is difficult in Hong Kong. Yet, the Chi Lin Nunnery (“Nunnery”) and Nam Lin Garden (“Garden”), completed in 1998 and 2006 respectively, demonstrate one of the most successful case of preserving ICH in the city. The monastery complex, referenced from the Tōshōdai-ji in Nara, Japan, is a piece of classical Tang dynasty architecture modelled on the ancient building style and skill in the ninth century China, and without using any modern building technique. The Garden, sited in front of the Nunnery, is also built in the classical Tang Dynasty landscape style, based on the blue print of Jiangshouju, a garden of the governor in the ancient Jiang County which is the only Tang landscape garden that has survived the vagaries of time.

Both the Nunnery and Garden represent the refined art of classical garden design and landscaping which flourished in the middle Tang Dynasty, expressing one of the wealthiest times in ancient China. Apart from the Tōshōdai-ji, in the process of building them, vast examples of ancient Japanese temples and wooden structures, like Kinkaku-ji in Kyoto and Byōdō-in in Uji, were assiduously referenced. The successful realization of the project witnessed a unique path of ICH transmission: An ancient Chinese building style dated back from Tang China, faithfully succeeded and preserved by the Japanese, has been transplanted back to China again after more than one thousand years.

Creating this valuable heritage site, tantamount to recreating history, is challenging. The grand complex is sited adjacent to one of the busiest highways in the city, yet its unique and cautious landscape design has bestowed on the Nunnery and Garden a very special ambience that is fitting to the intangible cultural heritage without any compromise. The precious masterpieces, however, are not operated as private enterprises. Both are open to the public without admission charge. The unique design accompanied by high calibre management have warded off deleterious impacts and maintained their authenticity.
Three keys questions are examined: 1) How can an ancient intangible heritage be reproduced in a modern environment? 2) To what extent and how an ancient heritage of building style and related skills can be transferred from the Tang dynasty, preserved in Japan and transplanted back to the country of origin after more than a millennium? 3) How can this heritage be installed and managed in a public park environment without compromising its authenticity?

It is believed that such an assessment of the site can offer insights to other ICH conservation projects to enhance and inform better planning and management.