

Overview of Huining Temple and Its Murals in Beipiao

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Abstract: Huining Temple in Beipiao, Liaoning Province, is the largest and best-preserved Buddhism temple with the most complete layout in Northeast China, bearing a history of nearly 300 years and embodying the profound integration of Mongolian, Manchu, Han and cultural elements. This paper first sorts out the historical evolution, geographical background and overall architectural layout of Huining Temple, elaborates on its architectural form characteristics of combining Buddhism's Mandala imagery with Han-style central axis symmetry and the Sino integrated decorative art, and also introduces its overall relocation and protection project for the Baishi Reservoir construction. Then, it focuses on the in-depth analysis of the mural art in the Mahavira Hall, Scripture Collection Pavilion and Guandi Hall of the temple, including the thematic content, composition forms, line techniques and color application characteristics of the murals in different halls, and reveals the multicultural integration characteristics reflected in the murals, such as the reference to Han-style landscape painting techniques and the absorption of Peking Opera facial makeup color rules on the basis of Buddhist painting traditions. Finally, the paper makes a preliminary inference on the production materials and craft techniques of the murals from the aspects of ground layer materials, mineral pigment types, layered painting techniques and the protection and restoration measures adopted during the relocation. As a typical carrier of multicultural communication in the Mongolian area of the Qing Dynasty, Huining Temple and its murals not only have important historical and artistic value, but also provide precious physical materials for the study of the spread of Buddhism in the northeast of China and the cultural integration of various ethnic groups in the Qing Dynasty.

1. Introduction

Huining Temple in Beipiao, Liaoning Province, is the largest and best-preserved Buddhist temple with a complete layout in Northeast China, boasting a history of nearly 300 years and embodying the profound cultural integration of the Mongolian, Manchu, Han and ethnic groups. This paper first sorts out the temple's historical evolution, geographical background and overall architectural layout, and elaborates on its architectural characteristics—the integration of Buddhist Mandala imagery with the Han-style central axis symmetry principle, as well as its Sino integrated decorative art. It also introduces the overall relocation and protection project of the temple for the construction of Baishi Reservoir. Then, the paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the mural art in

the Mahavira Hall, Scripture Collection Pavilion and Guandi Hall, focusing on the thematic content, composition forms, line techniques and color application features of the murals in different halls, and reveals the multicultural integration reflected in the murals, such as the reference to Han-style landscape painting techniques and the absorption of Peking Opera facial makeup color rules on the basis of traditional Buddhist painting. Finally, it makes a preliminary inference on the production materials and craft techniques of the murals from the perspectives of ground layer materials, mineral pigment types, layered painting techniques, as well as the protection and restoration measures adopted during the relocation. As a typical carrier of multicultural communication in the Mongolian areas of the Qing Dynasty[1], Huining Temple and its murals not only possess important historical and artistic value, but also provide precious physical materials for the study of the spread of Buddhism in Northeast China and the ethnic cultural integration in the Qing Dynasty.

2. Historical Evolution and Architectural Layout of Huining Temple

According to the Mongolian stone tablet in the temple, in the early Qing Dynasty, Wenbuchaoheri, a descendant of Genghis Khan, moved here from Tumed Banner in Hohhot to serve as a Beizi (a noble title in the Qing Dynasty) and built a temple with a glazed roof. His great-great-grandson, Beizi Hamugabaisigulangtu, in order to promote Buddhism, invited lamas from all over the place and successively constructed and expanded the Scripture Collection Pavilion, Mahavira Hall, Bell Tower, Drum Tower, Mountain Gate, Scripture Lecture Hall, and east and west side halls in three phases in the 3rd year (1738), 15th year and 22nd year of the Qianlong reign. He also built a red courtyard wall, forming a large-scale temple complex. In the 21st year of the Qianlong reign (1756), the emperor conferred the name "Huining Temple" on it.

Subsequently, the ruling Beizis of successive generations carried on the family legacy and expanded the original construction. Renovations, reconstructions and new constructions were conducted successively in the 48th, 49th and 60th years of the Qianlong reign, and the 5th and 8th years of the Jiaqing reign, as well as the 1st year of the Daoguang reign, adding the Seven-Bay Hall (also known as the Shede Hall), Guandi Hall, Scripture Lecture Hall, carving stone lions and erecting flagpoles. At its peak, more than a thousand lamas resided in the temple, with countless Buddha statues inside, earning it the name "the Warehouse of Ten Thousand Buddhas".

There is a folk legend about Huining Temple: it is said that the temple was originally a golden palace built by the Beizi of Tumed Banner who intended to rebel against the Qing Dynasty and proclaim independence. Later, his wife, a member of the Qing royal family, informed the imperial court of his plot. Fearing execution, the Beizi hastily had Buddha statues made and converted the palace into a temple, thus it became a grand Lama temple.

The existing Huining Temple is an overall relocation and reconstruction project, moved 1000 meters back from its original site in Xiafu Village, the former Xiafu Mongolian Autonomous Township. At that time, the original site of Huining Temple was in the inundation area of Baishi Reservoir. To protect this precious historical and cultural heritage, the provincial finance allocated 20 million yuan for the off-site protection project of Huining Temple[2], which started on April 16, 2002. After three years of construction, the main buildings were completed on May 12, 2005, and ancient trees from the original site were later transplanted. The temple is surrounded by towering pines and cypresses, some of which are several arm spans in girth with canopies like umbrellas. The magnificent halls are hidden among the green pines and verdant cypresses, creating an extremely elegant scene.

With a history of nearly 260 years, Huining Temple is basically well-preserved to this day. It is the largest existing Lama temple in Liaoning Province and the entire Northeast China. In 1988,

Huining Temple was announced as a provincial cultural relic protection unit in the fourth batch by the People's Government of Liaoning Province[3].

The existing Huining Temple is 198 meters long from north to south and 63 meters wide from east to west, covering an area of 12,000 square meters. The buildings are arranged symmetrically along the north-south vertical axis. From south to north, the central axis consists of the Mountain Gate, Heavenly King Hall, Great Assembly Hall (Mahavira Hall), Square Hall (Scripture Collection Pavilion), and Seven-Bay Hall (Sarira Hall). On the east and west sides, there are successively the Side Gates, Bell (Drum) Tower, East (West) Watchhouse, Medicine King Hall, Calligraphy Hall, Martial King Hall, Five Buddha Hall, Side Halls, Maitreya Hall, and Guandi Hall.

Originally, many storehouses were built around Huining Temple, with more than a hundred rooms. At present, two relatively complete courtyards, namely the Stone Buddha Storehouse (Master Buddha Storehouse) and the East Master Buddha Storehouse, are still preserved on the east side of the temple.

2.1 Geographical and Historical Background

Huining Temple is located in Xiafu Village, Xiafu Mongolian Autonomous Township, 15 kilometers southeast of Beipiao City, Liaoning Province. [4]It is a Buddhism temple with a history of nearly 300 years. First constructed in the 3rd year of the Qianlong reign (1738), it was built by Hamugabayasigulangtu, the most prestigious Jasagh Gushan Beizi of the Right Tumed Banner in Josotu League. Emperor Qianlong conferred the name "Huining Temple", which literally means "a place bestowed with peace for cultivating one's moral character and seeking enlightenment" in Chinese.

The entire temple faces south with its back to Duantumatadu Mountain, south to the Daling River, and not far east to the Mangniu River. The architectural style of Huining Temple integrates the architectural styles of four ethnic groups. It is large-scale, well-proportioned and magnificent. As the largest and best-preserved existing Buddhism temple in Liaoning Province, it was announced as a key provincial cultural relic protection unit of Liaoning Province in 1988.

In 2002, to support the construction of Baishi Reservoir, the higher-level cultural relics administrative department launched the overall relocation and protection project of Huining Temple according to the actual situation, moving the entire ancient temple complex to a hillside 1 kilometer behind the original site. During the relocation and reconstruction, all buildings were comprehensively protected and renovated[5]. The overall relocation and reconstruction project of Huining Temple, which lasted for several years, passed the completion acceptance organized by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage in 2005.

2.2 Architectural Form and Characteristics

The architectural layout and form of Huining Temple in Beipiao are distinctive. It is a typical representative of Buddhism temple architecture in the Mongolian area of the Qing Dynasty, vividly reflecting the artistic style of the integration of Han, and Mongolian multiculturalism. The entire building complex has a rigorous layout, following the traditional "Mandala" imagery of Buddhism temples and the central axis symmetry principle of Han-style architecture[6], forming a spatial sequence with a clear distinction between primary and secondary parts and well-organized order. Starting from the Mountain Gate, the temple passes through the Heavenly King Hall, Scripture Recitation Hall and other leading buildings, transitions to the core building - the Mahavira Hall (Great Scripture Hall), and finally ends with the Dharma Protection Hall, advancing layer by layer and creating a strong religious sacredness and ritual sense. This layout method, which combines the

cosmic view of Buddhism with the traditional construction techniques of the Han region, is the primary characteristic of its architectural form.

Its core building, the Mahavira Hall (commonly known as "Eighty-One Bays"), is massive and magnificent, concentrating on showing the architectural characteristics of multicultural integration. Structurally, the hall adopts the Han-style beam and column wooden frame and hip-and-gable roof, covered with grey cylindrical tiles, with glazed roof ornaments on the main ridge and brackets supporting the eaves, all of which are typical Han-style official construction techniques. However, strong styles are integrated into the architectural details and decorations: the outer wall has a significant batter, presenting a calm and solid posture; style blind windows or crimson red Bianma wall decorative bands are often set around the main hall; the interior space is open with dense column networks to meet the functional needs of numerous lamas reciting scriptures collectively, and this internal spatial layout also has distinct characteristics of scripture halls. This "Sino integrated" architectural form not only meets the religious functional needs but also becomes a material witness to the cultural exchange and integration between the Mongolian and Han ethnic groups.

In terms of decorative art, Huining Temple is extremely gorgeous, comprehensively using various crafts such as wood carving, stone carving, colored painting and gilding. The beams, brackets, caissons and other parts of the halls are painted with bright and colorful decorative paintings, whose patterns include both Han-style spiral paintings, dragon and phoenix patterns[7], and Buddhism elements such as the Eight Auspicious Symbols, Vajra pestles and the Sanskrit Six-Syllable Mantra. The gilded ornaments such as the golden Dharma wheel and recumbent deer on the temple roof shine brightly in the sun, outlining the unique skyline of the temple from a distance. These exquisite decorations not only endow the buildings with a noble religious beauty but also have extremely high artistic value in themselves.

To sum up, the architectural form of Huining Temple has successfully integrated the spiritual connotation of Buddhism with the architectural skills and aesthetic tastes of the Han and Mongolian ethnic groups, forming a unique regional style. Its buildings are not only the physical carrier of the murals, but the micro-environment created by them (such as changes in indoor temperature and humidity) is also closely related to the preservation state of the murals. What's more, they are an indispensable and important part of understanding the creative background and cultural connotation of the mural art.

3. Artistic Style and Content Analysis of the Murals

3.1 Mural Content of the Mahavira Hall

Inside the hall, the mural on the left side of the south wall depicts Yama and his sister Yami standing on a lotus throne. Yama has a black-blue body, a bull's head, two arms and two legs, waving a skull stick in his right hand and holding three spears in his left hand. Yami on the left is holding a kapala bowl filled with blood and offering it to Yama. The mural on the right side of the south wall depicts the Two-Armed Mahakala (also known as Mahakala) with a blue-black body, upright manes and a five-skull crown on his head. He holds a Vajra chopper high in his right hand and stands on a lotus seat, with raging flames burning behind him.

The two murals on the first floor of the Mahavira Hall both adopt a central composition, giving people a sense of solemnity, stability and order. There are no other decorations, highlighting the main subjects of the paintings. The overall lines are smooth and elegant, and the facial outlines are delicate. The orange flames in the background provide a warm tone for the entire painting with low brightness and natural shading, making the blue-black skin of Yama and Mahakala more prominent and their faces more ferocious.

On the second floor of the Mahavira Hall: There are 2 murals each on the east and west walls and 3 on the north wall, totaling 7 murals.

The seven groups of portraits of eminent monks and gurus on the second floor are different from the murals outside the hall. Each mural shows a spatial perspective from the distant sky, clouds and mountains, to the figures in the middle, and then to the offering table in the near distance.

In the overall composition, the figures are basically horizontal, distributed transversely and balanced on the left and right. Tsongkhapa and Sakyamuni are mostly in the middle, reflecting the concept of the main deity being in the center. Auspicious clouds, plants and other elements serve as the background and are symmetrically distributed, making the painting more rich and stable.

The lines are relatively simple and plain. Whether it is the facial features of the figures, or the auspicious clouds, clothing and plants, the lines are smooth and clear, delicate and exquisite in delineation, showing skilled line expression techniques[8].

The background colors are mainly blue and green, creating a cool tone, making the whole painting fresh and elegant. Red and yellow are mostly used for the figures to form a contrast and highlight the characters. Intermediate colors are used for the transition in details such as clothing and auspicious clouds, making the layers richer, the whole painting more three-dimensional, and the fusion of colors more natural.

3.2 Mural Content of the Scripture Collection Pavilion

In terms of composition, the east and west murals are well-proportioned in density as a whole. The stories are connected by buildings, mountains, rocks, trees and clouds, and each group of stories echoes and develops with each other. This is different from the central composition method in traditional painting, that is, works with Buddha's Jataka stories and Buddha's life stories as the painting themes adopt a circular composition technique.

The lines are relatively realistic and simple, with flat coloring as the main color application method. There are differences in the facial expressions of the figures between humans (Sakyamuni, believers, monks, etc.) and demons (Mara Pancika). The human faces are stretched, calm and gentle, while the demons glare with fierce and hideous faces. The line drawing, texture strokes and broken brushwork of mountains, rocks and trees obviously draw on the shading techniques of Han-style landscape painting, showing the layering of trees and the hard and rough texture of stones.

In terms of color, the paintings take blue, red, yellow and green as the main colors, and red, blue and green are mostly used to express the large areas of clothing colors of the figures. Mountains, rocks and trees are mostly blue and green, and the overall color is elegant and harmonious, with a strong style of Han-style blue and green landscape painting. Traditional Buddhism paintings have bright and vivid colors, with a variety of contrasting colors and complementary colors commonly used to create a sacred and solemn atmosphere.

3.3 Mural Content of the Guandi Hall

There are three murals painted on the north wall of the Guandi Hall, with Guandi paintings on the left and right sides and couplets written on both sides of the paintings, and a mural of two dragons playing with a pearl in the middle. On the left mural, there are three people, a table and a flower pot in a study. Guan Yu sits in the center of the study, leaning slightly to the left, twisting his long beard gently with his right hand and resting his left hand on the table while reading a book. Zhou Cang stands behind him on the left, holding the Green Dragon Crescent Blade, and Guan Ping stands on the right, holding a sword. The couplet on both sides of the mural reads: "The treacherous prime minister in vain treated him with empty courtesy, not knowing that Guan Yu would not surrender to Cao Cao." On the right mural, there are four people, a table and a horse depicted. Guan

Yu sits on a chair slightly above the center of the painting, twisting his long beard gently with his right hand, with a white circular nimbus and clouds behind his head. Zhou Cang stands on his right hand side holding the Green Dragon Crescent Blade, and Guan Ping stands on his left hand side holding a seal in his right hand and a sword in his left hand, both with green circular nimbi behind their heads. At the bottom of the painting, Zhang Liao, with a white circular nimbus behind his head, leads the Red Hare horse with his right hand and presents it to Guan Yu. The couplet on both sides of the mural reads: "He alone cut through enemy generals and should be unrivaled; his fame has been inscribed in calligraphy through the ages."

The two murals on the east and west walls of the Guandi Hall depict the life stories of Guan Yu, including: "The Oath of the Peach Garden", "Warming Wine and Slaying Hua Xiong", "The Three Agreements at Tushan", "Keeping Watch by Candlelight All Night", "Crossing Five Passes and Slaying Six Generals", "Reunion at the Ancient City", "Scraping the Bone to Cure the Poison" and so on. Each story scene is surrounded by clouds, which separate and connect the scenes with each other.

3.4 Mural Composition and Color

The murals on the east and west walls of the hall are well-proportioned in density as a whole. The stories are connected by buildings, mountains, rocks, trees and clouds, and each group of stories echoes and develops with each other. In traditional painting, most works take Buddha's Jataka stories and Buddha's life stories as the painting themes and basically adopt a central composition method. Different from this composition technique, the murals depicting Guan Yu's life stories in the Guandi Hall adopt a circular composition technique. The separation between the scenes is realized by decorative borders, the division of mountains, rocks and trees, or the separation of flowing clouds. The whole painting looks rich and varied, dense but not messy, complex but not overlapping, and well-proportioned. It embodies changes in concentration and unity in changes. The integration of line drawing and heavy color complements each other, forming the beauty of composition.

In terms of lines, the brushwork is simple with relatively single lines, and flat coloring is the main color application method. The human faces are stretched, calm and gentle. The line drawing, texture strokes and broken brushwork of mountains, rocks and trees obviously draw on the shading techniques of Han-style landscape painting, showing the layering of trees and the hard and rough texture of stones. The mountains, trees, long tables, city walls and other buildings in the painting have obvious distinctions of near, middle and far distances to express the depth of space, and have the perspective characteristics such as the law of near big and far small. These are in line with the historical background of the integration of Chinese and Western painting concepts during the "east spread of Western learning" in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In terms of color, the paintings take blue, red, yellow and green as the main colors. The colors and implied meanings of common opera facial masks are roughly divided into several categories: red usually represents bravery, loyalty, integrity and enthusiasm; white often symbolizes purity, kindness, wisdom and nobility; black usually represents evil, darkness, cunning and coldness; blue symbolizes freshness, peace, tolerance and calmness; yellow represents vitality, joy, liveliness and enthusiasm; green symbolizes life, hope, vitality and growth. The facial colors of the figures in the murals are obviously inconsistent with the above, but conform to the rules of Peking Opera, in which red represents loyalty, bravery and integrity (Guan Yu) and black represents fortitude and firmness (Zhou Cang). Mountains, rocks and trees are mostly blue and green, and the overall color is elegant and harmonious, with a strong style of Han-style blue and green landscape painting.

4. Preliminary Inference on Production Materials and Techniques

Combined with on-site observation and preliminary analysis results, the production materials and techniques of the murals in Huining Temple can be preliminarily inferred as follows: the ground layer is mainly made of lime, fine sand and hemp fiber, with mature soil mud ground layer adopted in some areas, with a thickness ranging from 0.3 to 1.5 centimeters. The pigment layer is mainly composed of mineral pigments, including cinnabar, red lead and iron oxide red for red, ultramarine for blue, basic copper carbonate and Paris green for green, chrome yellow and orpiment for yellow, white lead for white, and carbon black for black. The painting technique adopts layered painting: first laying the base color, then drawing lines, shading and dotting[9], with the powder tracing and gold pasting technique used in some areas. During the relocation in 2002, the murals were cut into pieces, and the new support structure adopted a wooden keel and resin fiberboard structure with ventilation gaps reserved in the picture frames. During the restoration at the original site, traditional materials and techniques were used for filling and aging treatment.

5. Conclusion

Huining Temple in Beipiao, a well-preserved large-scale Buddhist temple in Northeast China[10], is a typical material carrier of the integration of Mongolian, Manchu, Han and cultures in the Qing Dynasty. Its architectural form artfully combines Buddhist Mandala imagery with Han-style central axis symmetry, and integrates Han and architectural techniques in structure and decoration, embodying the profound cultural exchange between ethnic groups in northern China. The temple's murals, distributed in the Mahavira Hall, Scripture Collection Pavilion and Guandi Hall, inherit the traditions of Buddhist painting while absorbing Han-style landscape painting techniques, Peking Opera color symbolism and serial story composition methods, forming a unique regional artistic style and reflecting the localization of Buddhist art in the northeast Mongolian areas. The preliminary research on the mural production materials and techniques shows that the works adopt traditional Chinese mineral pigment and layered painting craft, and the combination of traditional methods and modern technology in the 2002 relocation and restoration effectively protected the cultural relic's integrity, providing a valuable reference for ancient building and mural conservation. As an important heritage of multi-ethnic cultural integration, Huining Temple and its murals possess significant historical, architectural and artistic value, offering precious physical evidence for the study of Buddhism's spread in Northeast China and ethnic cultural fusion in the Qing Dynasty. Its protection and in-depth research are of great significance for excavating the connotation of Chinese multi-ethnic cultural integration and enhancing the sense of the Chinese nation's community.

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