

# WHEN PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE MEETS LOCAL WISDOM

## A Dilemma in Trans-cultural Participatory Design

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### ABSTRACT

It's the summer of 2003. In a remote fishing village on the island of Matsu off the coast of Mainland China province of Fujian, professional planners and designers from Taiwan were inadvertently mired in a conflict with a highly revered local deity, the Armoured General. As the metamorphosis of a frog, the Armoured General has long been worshipped and trusted for his wisdom in community affairs. A proposed extension of the temple plaza and a new entrance gate to the plaza brought the conflict into focus. The planners commissioned by the county government to preserve the cultural landscape of Chinbe village exercised their professional judgement with regard to the proposed temple plaza and gate. The proposal was too large, out of scale with the neighboring buildings, and inappropriate in form and material. The temple committee, acting as the medium through which the Armoured General speaks, insisted that it was the wishes of the god to build a large plaza and gate. Should the outside professionals acquiesce and respect the wishes of the god or should they remain firm in their best judgement? How will a local deity respond to disrespect and irreverence? What are the lessons for engaged and progressive professionals in a trans-cultural context? This paper will first tell the story of the Chinbe Village Frog and the events leading up to the conflict. The story will examine the key issues of contention between the interested parties, including the professionals, the deity, as well as the local people and the politicians. It will document how the conflict was resolved and what questions remain. Then the paper will address the general issues that are pervasive when professionals engage in trans-cultural planning and design activities where communities strive to preserve and develop their own local distinctiveness. Specifically, this paper intends to explore the essential dilemma of a generalized system of environmental knowledge in the face of local belief systems. The paper will try to demonstrate that in a local community setting, there are multiple realities that embody

values and functions necessary to the maintenance and promotion of local environments. Professional knowledge needs to incorporate this multiplicity and diversity in the process of making plans and designs. The enrichment of professional knowledge in this regard remains a challenging epistemological subject matter.

### EVERYDAY HAPPENINGS<sup>1</sup>

When you turn the corner in the road and see the austere village of Chin-be below teased by the gentle waves of the South China sea and nestled up against the steep banks of the rocky hill, a single colorful and exuberant building stands out among the subdued gray clusters of stone houses. This is the temple of the Sea Goddess, Matsu, or the Queen of the Heavens. What is not visible, until you get close to it, is a tiny little stone structure hidden behind the temple. In it sits a 30-cm. tall green frog with an ear-to-ear smile, the Frog deity worshipped by the local community. The Frog had been designated the Armored Commander and later elevated to the status of General, a high-ranking figure in the local Taoist belief system.

It so happens that Matsu's domain is far and wide and she must constantly be out tending to the needs of her believers that she could not pay too much attention to the local village affairs in Chin-be. Consequently the Sea Goddess delegates the Armored General (the Frog) to look after the needs of the villagers. This is a most satisfactory arrangement since the villagers feel closer to the Frog anyway. With power vested from the Sea Goddess, the Armored General now has absolute authority over the affairs of the community.

For an individual in the village, if there is a question of a personal nature, such as some ailment or distress, the Armored General would provide guidance. For a family in the village, questions regarding such decisions as building a new house, marriage arrangements, business opportunities, etc., would all be answered. For the village community, major events such as the building of a new road or a new fishing pier, the timing for a festivity or a ceremony, etc., would also require the approval of the Armored General. More importantly, anyone who aspires to a public position, whether it's the village chief, the town council, or even the county magistrate, would all adhere to the admonishments of the Armored General. Local politics, as such, is definitely within the purview of the Frog.

And how does the Armored General dispense his authority and by what means does he convey his wishes? First, the individual, a family, or public figures in the community asks for a hearing with the Armored General. At the assigned time, the petitioner presents the deity with a question either in written form, (including pictorial forms of drawings, diagrams, pictures, models, etc.) or simply by asking the question orally. The response from the Armored General is always in a written

form, including drawings and sketches. This is done with a wooden sedan chair wherein sits a personified statue of the Armored General and is held up in motion by four villagers who, in unison, compose the response by dipping an arm of the sedan chair in wine and immediately proceeding to write on a flat board so that the writing is visible. To be qualified as a carrier of the sedan chair, a male member of the community must undergo a lengthy period of training in order to be able to enter into a collective trance-like state and the motions of the sedan chair are therefore results of the direct will of the Armored General. Every question to the god is answered in this fashion, and incense is burned and offerings made to thank him for taking the time.

In this way, individual questions are answered, family disputes are resolved, and community decisions made. The Frog, in the form of an Armored General, dispenses power and resources to keep peace and harmony. Ordinary daily life in this fringe and mundane village continues to revolve around the symbolic figure of the Frog, proprietor of local wisdom in its totality.

### **SETTLEMENT PRESERVATION AS PUBLIC POLICY**

Socio-political and economic transformations over the past decade contributed to the public intervention in preserving Chin-be village as a historic settlement. The single most important development during this period was the demilitarization of the Matsu Islands by the central government in Taiwan. This was done partly as a gesture towards the relaxation of animosity across the Taiwan strait and partly due to the realistic acknowledgement of the uselessness of the outdated military installations defending the front lines against a possible invasion by the mainland communists. As a result of increasing cutbacks in military spending on the islands, the heart of the local economy, businesses catering to the servicemen declined drastically as fewer and fewer soldiers remain stationed here. Restaurants, pool halls, barber shops, internet cafes, convenience stores, etc., all faced closures.

Prior to the military occupation of the islands, of course, the people of these islands were fishermen off the coast of China. Here at the mouth of the Ming River in northern Fujian Province, one of the richest fishing grounds in the Asian Pacific is located nearby, fought over by not only the Chinese themselves, but by foreigners over the centuries to lay claim to its wealth and its strategic location. Living witnesses to this history of contestation are two lighthouses built by the British in the late 1800's situated at the northern and southern tips of the islands to guide British ships in and out of the treaty ports along the China coast. These lighthouses were manned by the British well into the 20th century up until the military takeover in 1949.

The other important evidence of the contestation over these islands is the physical settlements which record materially the history of the villages through the traces of form and construction, and of family clans in their rises and falls in fortune and piracy, and in political allegiance and cultural identity. I will come back to the settlements later.

As the number of servicemen dwindled, so did the local residents. True, over the past fifty years since military occupation, at least three generations of residents have sent their young people to Taiwan for higher education. As there is only one high-school and no college on the islands, young people seeking higher education must leave home to go to school in Taiwan. Over the years many have settled in Taiwan and have raised the next generation. Some have returned, working as teachers in elementary schools, as government workers, and as local business owners. But overall, there has been a general decline in local residents over the past decade largely due to the dwindling number of soldiers who had been the main customers of local businesses. The visible consequence of this trend is the gradual dilapidation of houses in the villages and of whole villages now deserted and overgrown with weeds.

About ten years ago, with the pull-out by the military and the erosion of both the physical and social fabric of the villages, a few of the local intellectuals, including teachers, artists, and council representatives, began to discuss the alarming situation of this precipitous decline. At that time, on Taiwan proper, there was already a movement towards the historic preservation of buildings, places, streets, and villages through the strategy of community participation. Progressive planners and activists in the academy forged an alliance of public agencies, budding non-governmental organizations, and local community residents to promote preservation. This movement evolved into what we now know as the Comprehensive Community Development program. On Matsu, these few thoughtful people sought a program of cultural revitalization through the preservation of old and abandoned villages.

On a particular occasion in 1994, a seminar was held in Matsu to introduce historic preservation ideas to the local people. Several academics were present and afterwards the group visited Chin-be village. It was at this moment when the wide-eyed outsiders first saw the extraordinary beauty of Chin-be that the concrete idea of preserving its entirety came into being. Thereafter, as the name of Chin-be spread, more and more people came to marvel at its rugged setting, the particular fit of the stone houses into a clustered settlement, the narrow winding paths and stairways which open up to small interior courtyards with long views out to the calm waters of the protected cove. From the small wooden windows of houses in the village, one can see a framed picture of Turtle Island (a rock outcropping in the cove) alive from every angle. The

picturesque reminiscence of Italian hill-towns and Greek fishing villages is unmistakable, as people are generally familiar with the images of the Mediterranean. The romancing of Chin-be had begun in earnest.

Given all the attention, Chin-be was chosen by the county government to be the first village designated as a historic settlement. Resources from the central government including the Construction Bureau and the Council for Cultural Development were allocated towards the planning for its preservation. Most of the initial planning was undertaken by the county staff planners and was focused mainly on physical surveys, measurements, typological studies of buildings, and methods of construction, etc. From these materials, a new term, the “Ming-dong” (eastern Fujian) building type was coined to distinguish it from what is generally known as the northern Fujian type. Some of the distinguishing characteristics of this type are the thick masonry enclosures of each house, the independently constructed wooden structure for the interior with traditional Chinese post and lattice beam assembly, and the red clay roof tiles augmented with rows of granite stones as weights. Small openings in the stone walls are suggestive of the necessary protections against the natural elements and against possible intrusions by pirates and thieves. Houses are huddled together so as to form clusters set into the steep rocky landscape of the cove.

During the Spring of 2001, eight houses were selected for renovation. With agreements from all the house owners, the County embarked on a fast-track effort that completed the work in two months in time to host an international symposium. At the end of May, over eighty people from Japan, the United States, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, came to Chin-be for three days. One large house which had a front court was rebuilt as a restaurant and bar. Another large house with a two-story space was renovated as the main meeting room. The other houses were refurbished, complete with every item of fixtures and furnishings imported from the IKEA store in Taiwan, as sleeping quarters for guests.

The conference was a great success by all accounts as the international participants fully appreciated the breath-taking setting and the newly completed effort to use the old buildings. As an example of preservation and reuse of historic settlements, this appeared to fulfill the aspirations of all parties concerned. Throughout this effort, one particular individual played a crucial role. With the encouragement of local cultural elites, a young architect enthralled by the unique and distinctive beauty of the vernacular houses decided to stay in Matzu after completing his mandatory tour of military duty. The county government was just embarking on the renovation of the first group of houses, and this young man was hired to be a staff planner to manage this project.

Over the next year of intensive planning and organizing, this staff architect, Mr. Z, managed to not only successfully complete the renovation on time, but also to introduce to Matzu, for the first time, a new aesthetic of the Taipei modern, ala IKEA. The subtlety of the spatial manipulations which juxtaposed modern forms of consumption with the roughness of the vernacular buildings was unmistakable to the visitors as well as the local residents. What was crafted out of the ruins of this abandoned village matched well with the imaginations of a possible future where cosmopolitan visitors would consume the exotic beauty of a traditional settlement while fully enjoying the material comforts of the city. Once the script had been played out during the international symposium, visions of a bustling tourism destination where local people as entrepreneurs find glamour and money at their doorsteps took hold. Not only did the remaining residents of the village begin to think of ways to capitalize on this new development, even the gods in the temple were stirring for a piece of the action.

Subsequently, Chin-be has indeed turned into an exotic tourist destination catering to individuals looking for a different experience and to various groups holding retreats. By the late summer in 2002, a gathering of all the directors of culture departments of counties and cities in Taiwan was held here. Thus only one year after the initial conference Chin-be was already a very well known destination.

The county planners, buoyed by this early success, embarked on the second phase of renovations. By now, more absentee home-owners were eager to participate in the preservation program. Agreements between the local government and the home-owners were refined to accommodate individual needs such as using a graduated formula to calculate the subsidy to each house depending on the size of the house and the extent of repairs. In addition, more study was focused on the possible reuse of the houses as well as the management aspects of the preservation project.

Within the last year, four other villages in Matzu have been designated as historic settlements. Preservation plans are being prepared and work will be underway to rehabilitate and reuse them. The local county government's active intervention in saving these villages reflects a shift in public policy away from the traditional new development strategies towards transforming what is already there. By building upon traditions and local cultural resources, it is envisioned that a more enlightened and sustainable future will be gradually realized.

#### **EXPANDING THE PLAZA AND BUILDING A NEW GATE FOR THE TEMPLE**

Meanwhile, at the temple to the Sea Goddess, the governing committee including the village chief has also been busy sprucing up the temple as more and more visitors come to the

village. A few years ago, an unsuccessful attempt was made to beautify the temple by applying a shining facia of marble and granite to the existing front of the temple which resulted in accusations of corruption and ridicules of bad taste. Some suggested knocking down the fake stone work and cutting back the plaza which protrudes menacingly over the main pathway in the village. However, nobody wished to offend the god and nothing was done to repair the damage.

In the summer of 2003, the temple committee informed the county government that, with the funds promised by the new county magistrate during last year's elections, it is now ready with plans for an expansion of the temple plaza and the building of a new gate. In accordance with the dictates of the god, in this case the Armored General, a local architect had drawn up plans. When the county planners saw these plans, which entailed building a 10-meter high retaining wall to hold up the expanded plaza, and also an even taller gate situated down-slope from the plaza, they realized that the temple committee was about to repeat what they had done before.

Had the county planners not intervened, the project for the expansion of the plaza and the construction of the gate would have proceeded. When the county planners voiced concerns that these new and clearly exaggerated spatial gestures would seriously impact the settlement landscape, the magistrate had to take notice. But what could he do? He had promised the temple these public funds, and in return, the local village had given him the decisive edge in winning the election. He negotiated with the temple to no avail. They were not budging, the will of the god must be carried forward.

The stalemate lasted for several months while informal negotiations continued. When it became apparent that neither side was willing to compromise, it was then suggested that the experts and scholars be brought in to be the detached and independent judges. While we, as experts and scholars, were not entirely objective, since we had earlier expressed our displeasure with the previous fiasco, and had backed the county planners opposing the new plans, we were still considered to be fair mediators. Thus finally after some arrangements, we were invited to be part of the process.

Originally the temple issued an invitation to us, represented by a professor at the most prestigious university in Taiwan, to come to Chin-be and to be part of the ceremony to directly discuss the issue of the plaza with the god. Of course for academics trained in western ways of thinking, we look upon traditional beliefs with curiosity and interest, but would consider them as unrelated to the concerns of planning and environmental quality. We initially did not see a role in actually communicating with the god, and thus were reluctant to go to Chin-be. Later, the temple decided to advance their quest by saying that if we did not wish to go to Chin-be, then the god would come to us!

This they did by flying the statue of the Armored General from Matzu to Taiwan in order to meet us in Taipei.

On the appointed afternoon, the entourage from Matzu accompanied the Armored General came into a crowded apartment in a suburb of Taipei. Along with four of us from the university, there was also the legislator and his assistants all gathered to have a face-to-face negotiation with the god over the design of the plaza/gateway. The local architect, who had previously drawn up plans according to the wishes of the god, brought his power-point presentation and proceeded to project it on the wall. A brief ceremony was performed where the sedan carriers drank from a bowl of liquor while incense was lit as an offering. The Armored General, sitting in his sedan chair held by his four carriers, looked on the diagrams and drawings, and conversation began. Incense and smoke filled the tight room and everyone spoke at the same time, in different dialects. When there was a lull, I quickly injected my opinion that what we were really concerned about was the scale and massing of the proposed plaza/gateway, that we worry they would adversely impact the plain and subdued landscape of the stone houses nestled together against the steep bank of the rocky hillside. This was translated into the local dialect for the Armored General to consider. After a moment, the carriers began to dance the sedan chair back and forth, swinging it from side to side. Then it stopped abruptly and as if of its own will, the chair, using one of its wooden arms, started to write on a wooden tablet previously prepared and placed on a table, in Chinese. One of the four carriers, being the chief interpreter, read out the words and everyone shouted his own understanding of what the god was trying to say. Well, the god said the plaza needs to be larger because he is planning for a big party, and the gateway needs to be taller because it must be of the same height as the Sea Goddess temple. The conversation continued in this fashion for the next two hours without much progress. While trying not to offend the god, we the professionals also did not acquiesce to his wishes. On the other hand, the god, being who he is, remained steadfast in his position. He not only made verbal/written wishes known to us, but was conversant with spatial/visual ideas as well. At one point, perhaps becoming impatient with our insistence, he proceeded to draw the shape and form of the gateway himself. It was a large, ornamental gateway of three arches which extended far beyond the restricted space in front of the temple. It was late afternoon and was apparent that we were at an impasse.

Not knowing how to further engage the god in a reasonable discussion, and not wanting a decision made de facto on his wishes, we initiated a final attempt to try to stall the decision. We made two suggestions: the first that the arches the god had drawn seemed un-Chinese, not part of the tradition, and second that what had been shown to him by the use of the

power-point projection is two-dimensional and did not reflect the three-dimensional qualities of the hillside location. Would the god kindly consider looking at a 3-D model which we would prepare for him, and defer from making a decision that day. To our relief, the god replied readily that this would be fine. We then arranged to meet again in three weeks with a model of the site along with the proposed plaza and the gateway.

During the next three weeks, we mobilized to make a cardboard model of the site with the existing temple and the new plaza extension and the new gateway. Behind the scenes, our staff engaged the community leaders and the chief interpreter for the god in intensive negotiations on what would likely be acceptable to both sides. We made several models of the gateway, each to be revised and changed according to informal conversations. Finally, when the three-weeks time was up, we had come up with a design which both sides could agree to. We flew the model to Matsu and a formal audience with the Armored General was held in the Temple of the Sea Goddess. This time, many more people were present including many prominent professionals and academics, many more local residents were present, as well as many more government officials. It was more of a gala event with an air of festive excitement surrounding it.

While the county magistrate and the professors looked on, the model was shown to the Armored General. It was clear that the model was helpful in engaging the god in discussing the specifics of the design. For example, he asked specific questions about the height of the gateway. After we answered, he would make a point of finalizing the height in specific numbers. The dialogue went smoothly and a decision was reached in a short time. Everyone was happy and relieved.

Drawings and construction documents for the revised plaza/gateway were prepared, ready for implementation. The work was expected to be completed within six months. End of story.

### **THE KEY ACTORS AND THEIR ROLES**

The first set of actors are what we call public figures. These are individuals who, besides being members of the community, assume functions and roles as either representatives of the people, or serve the people in different capacities. Here we identify the following:

The County Magistrate Mr. C who is not from this village but who, as the highest-ranking political figure in the county, oversees the distribution of resources to the local communities. He is the one who promised the Ma-tsu temple in Chin-be sufficient funds to build a new and enlarged plaza with a ceremonial entrance gate. The promise of funds was made in return for the support in the previous county-wide elections. Now Mr. C must deliver on his promises. However, the disagreements over the plan

have put him in an awkward position. He cannot offend the Armored General by reneging on the promise, and he doesn't want to disregard the advice of the staff and professionals opposed to the plan. Mr. C is in a bind and the natural outlet is to go to the Armored General (the Frog) for a decision on what to do with the plaza and the gate. Being an astute politician, he knows when to relinquish his power and to let the local deity take on the difficult task of resolving the dispute. In this instance, secular public authority over the management of public funds is handed over to the local religious authority.

Within the community, it is the village chief, Mr. W, who is most powerful in channeling public funds. In the case of the temple plaza and the gate, because it involves construction, it is naturally a project of high visibility with potentially good profits. Local contractors and builders would be vying to do the work. Because it is a project using public funds, county procurement procedures must be adhered to, at least on the surface. Thus, bidding and the selection of the builder, etc., would all appear to be open and fair. Here the village chief, through his position, can be very influential in determining the outcome of any public process. Yet again, the village chief would most likely defer to the wishes of the Armored General with regard to what is to be done and how it will be done.

Besides the village chief, there is also the head of the community association, Ms. W, who, in her own right is the leader of a powerful faction of the Upper Village community. She has aligned herself with the village chief forming an alliance to determine the future course of the village. Similarly, she and the Upper-village community are devout followers of the Armored General. To be close to the General, all of above public figures have to pay homage to those who manage the temple, the keepers of the Frog deity.

Typically, a local temple is managed by a governing council elected by the worshippers. Here in the village of Chin-be, the Matsu temple's governing council is chaired by a Mr. T who apparently has direct access to the Armored General. To illustrate the importance of this person, by reviewing the origin of the plaza/gateway project, we find that it was Mr. T who first proposed the project in the name of the Armored General. Mr. T conveyed to the county magistrate that the General wants to enlarge the plaza in front of the temple and that there should be a new ceremonial gate. Thus, in return for support in the local elections, the county magistrate promised funding for the project. While his position as the chair of the council does not have the status of a public official, but it is easy to see that he holds the key to access the General.

There are other players in the public realm, though they may not seem as crucial to the events as those mentioned above. There is the national legislature representative, Mr. Tsao who is responsible for ensuring the continual flow of federal funds

into the county. He is often present at crucial audiences with the Armored General when major decisions are made. At these occasions, Mr. Tsao tends to be passive and remain as only a witness to the decision making process. But his absence would be noticed and often a pronouncement by the General would have to wait for his arrival.

Then there is the local county legislature representative, Mr. C, who represents the township of Bei-gan wherein the village of Chin-be is located. He is not an active participant in this episode since his stated position is to try to get a more equal distribution of resources to all the villages in the township. He feels that there is already too much attention on Chin-be and too much funds going into it. He would like to divert some of it to other villages. Thus he tends to stay away from the internal maneuverings in the village. Yet he is not ignorant of what's happening in the village. He has ways of keeping a tap on the village and he knows how to manage the needs of all of his constituents. For example, he knows how to deal with people in the other villages who complain about the favored status of Chin-be.

The next group of actors is the community. In Chin-be there are basically two neighborhoods: one is the so-called Upper Village which now dominates the community association and the temple council, and the other is the North Village which numbers only four families. The North Village people feel strongly that their needs have not been met by the village and county officials, and that the Armored General has been taken hostage by the Upper Village faction. Specifically, they complain that the General is no longer a fair and just god.

There are other people in the community, the house-owners who no longer reside in the village. These are people who have left the village to live elsewhere in the county or have moved further away to Taiwan where there is now a substantial community of ex-patriots from Matzu. Even though these people no longer participate in the daily affairs in the village, their consent on certain issues affecting the community is necessary. For example, a house-owner must sign an agreement with the county government in order for the county to repair and use this person's house for some public purpose.

An important actor in the community is the manager of the restaurant/hotel at Chin-be. Ms. Z is a daughter of a north village family who grew up in Taiwan and has now returned to become an entrepreneur in running the restaurant/hotel. As a business woman, she is keenly aware of the internal dynamics and the local politics. She cannot afford to offend anybody and she pays her due respects to the Armored General. She has a contract with the county government on the management of the restaurant/hotel and she needs to work hard to keep that contract.

The third group of actors is the professionals. By professionals I mean those individuals and organizations who use specialized knowledge to intervene in the daily life of the village. Here the professionals include planners and designers such as the Foundation, which is an academic-based non-profit professional service group, outside architects, county staff professionals in community planning, advisor/consultants such as professors and experts, and others, notably a self-styled psychic claiming to be able to communicate directly with the Frog, who are involved in one way or another. These people are all outsiders and none of them speak the local dialect. The professionals know a great deal about their own respective specializations such as vernacular building, community planning, historic preservation, and management of local businesses. But each only knows a very little about the village community and how it functions.

## **TOWARDS CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS**

(To be continued)

## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> The writing of this story began in Fall 2003 while on sabbatical at U.C. Berkeley Department of Landscape Architecture. I wish to thank Randy Hester for listening to this story and for his insightful comments.