

# AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO TAIWANESE TEMPLES 圖解台灣廟宇傳奇故事

*124 myths and 300 illustrations to unlock the secrets of traditional temple art*

The depth of information embodied in the decorations of Taiwan's traditional temples can sometimes seem intimidating – but that shouldn't be a reason for anyone to miss out on the chance to enjoy their exquisite craftsmanship. The walls, roofs, eaves and ridges of temples are layered with meaningful decoration, not to mention the countless statues illustrating famous scenes from legend and literature. Kuo Hsi-Pin, an expert on temple culture, has written an engaging, unpretentious introduction to the most common of these stories, equipping readers with the knowledge to appreciate these traditional forms of art and architecture.

This book divides these tales into ten categories, from the myth of Nüwa patching the sky to the most famous scenes in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Journey to the West*; from the sea goddess Mazu to the enlightenment of Buddha. The stories are paired with attractive images, labelled to show the temple location, the names of the craftsmen, and the relevant historical era. The biographies of these craftsmen are also threaded through the chapters, opening up a whole new perspective on their art.

In an era when traditional arts are in decline, Kuo Hsi-Pin's labor of love offers a unique glimpse into a world of gods, demons, dragons, phoenixes and qilins, chronicling the masterpieces of craftsmen whose achievements are all too easily forgotten today.

## Kuo Hsi-Pin 郭喜斌

Kuo Hsi-Pin has dedicated his life to recording the stories of temples through words and photography. It is his belief that temples are akin to art galleries, encapsulations of local culture that fuse folk customs, culture, history, lifestyle, and art. He has written several other books on the traditional culture of temples, most notably *Listen! Taiwan's Temples Are Telling Their Stories*.



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# AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO TAIWANESE TEMPLES

By Kuo His-Pin

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## At a glance

### Traditional Temple Decorations

The outside of a Taiwanese temple is usually covered with bright, traditional decorations. On the graceful ridge of the roof, you can see a riotous profusion of figures from myth and legend, or charms to ward off evil. These carvings and decorations are not just there to attract the eye: each one has its own story and meaning, each character his or her own distinctive pose. If you don't know the background, you can't appreciate the art that goes into the creation of these dazzling scenes. Fortunately, the stories are easy and enjoyable. So let us take you on an illustrated tour of Taiwan's temple decorations, to show you what is what and where you should look.

## The temple roof

### Cochin ware tells a story

Taiwanese temples have a rich system of designs and charms to ward off evil. Every element has its own meaning and function, and the designers of cochin ceramics incorporate images and themes from myths and folk religion, making temples a brilliant museum of Chinese folk art. (Scenes from Grand Master Wen's defeat of the Western Foothills, cochin ware decorations on the Tzu Feng Temple in Pingtung. Left: Grand Master Wen, with three eyes. Right: Chiang Tzu-Ya)

## Generals astride dragons

Generals in pairs ride on the backs of fearsome dragons, wielding flags, maces, or spears; sometimes it is the god Nezha instead. The bright, dramatic images represent devotion to the gods.

(Cochin ware decoration at the Hsing Chi Temple in Tainan)

### **Along the roof ridge**

Along the ridge of the roof are an upper and a lower road. On the road you may see a procession of the Eight Immortals, figures from history or famous plays. This is another key opportunity for cochin ware artists to display their skill. There is also secondary decoration in the form of seasonal flowers like the peony, plum blossom, lotus, chrysanthemum, and bamboo.

(The Eight Immortals on parade along the roof ridges)

### **The triad: Prosperity, Status, and Longevity**

These three figures developed out of our awe for nature. The gods Fu (prosperity), Lu (status), and Shou (long life) were stars in the sky, but our ancestors developed characters and a mythology around them.

(Tzu Chi Temple, Syuejia, Tainan)

### **Other common cochin ware decorations**

#### **Dragons chasing the pearl**

The *cintamani* or dragon pearl shines with light, representing the rising sun. Pearls pursued by dragons are often flaming.

(Baoan Temple, Taipei)

#### **Dragons guarding the pagoda**

Pagodas are originally a Buddhist form, but they have been adopted in folk practice as a general symbol of good fortune. Yeh Ming-Chi, a cochin artist from Tainan, explains that the pagoda is a channel for communication with the heavens, and they are built with an odd number of storeys (odd numbers being associated with the sun). Dragons have always been known as controllers of water, so their presence helps to protect the wooden temple from fire.

(Pei Nan Temple, Chiayi)

#### **Phoenixes greeting the sun**

Goddesses riding phoenixes wheel in the skies. In earlier temples, the phoenixes often greet the sun alone. Later on, female immortals or goddesses were added wielding flowers and swords.

(Cochin phoenix at Kung Yun Temple in Yunlin)

#### **Decorative fascia**

At the ends of certain ridges, there are decorative fascias, usually showing didactic tales or dramatic scenes from traditional operas. This is a telling indicator of the quality of craftsmanship.

Diagonal panel, dragon panel, *Hua Mulan* frieze, tiger door, incense altar, middle door, dragon door, dragon panel, diagonal panel, dragon column, cross beam, *Wang Zhaojun* frieze, bagua door, decorative bracket, scroll-style painting, May Your Career Advance, May Wealth Be Upon You, shrine, beam paintings, roof beams

### **Side friezes**

Some temples have wall friezes just inside the door, showing legends and historical stories. They are both an artform and a tool for teaching. In the Tzu Chi Temple, there are friezes showing the well-known stories of Wang Zhaojun and Hua Mulan, tales that prove love and filial duty are not the sole domain of either gender. They were created by the renowned artist Chen Shou-Yi in the classical style, with soft lines and refined faces for each character. His work is a marvelous asset for the temple.

(Bas-relief frieze of *Hua Mulan*)

### **Diagonal panels**

Another opportunity for the cochin ware artist to display his skills. Some richer temples have these friezes in every hall. In the Tzu Chi Temple in Chiayi, that includes the innermost hall.

(These panels were made by Chen Chuan-You, one of the five great students of Hong Kun-Fu)

### **Gods of the gate**

By Pan Li-Shui. The middle door is flanked by Qin Shubao and Yu Chigong, with a scholar-official's cap and gown, representing academic advancement and career success.

(Bas-relief frieze of Wang Zhaojun)

### **Bagua door**

The bagua is a symbol of good fortune. An ordinary door is here turned into a defense against evil and a charm for the gods by applying this innovative design.

(The two pictures flanking the shrine are the Seventh and Eighth Masters on one side, and the gods of the underworld on the other side.)

### **The shrine**

The shrine is where the temple god resides. At the back you will often see paintings of mythical beasts as an imposing backdrop for the god: dragons, phoenixes, qilins... Around the sides of the shrine is a carved screen, dividing the mortal world of the worshippers from the divine space. Often the ceiling is ornately carved. The dragon pillars around the shrine will have images of fierce beasts, the four seasons, immortals and saintly figures, or traditional nature images like birds and flowers. They add a note of human artistry to the divine splendor of the shrine.

### **Scroll over arched door**

(Cochin ware)

The relief scroll over the door may contain sculpted flowers or cochin ware mosaics, and is another space for the cochin master to demonstrate their skill.

**Side friezes**

Often in the form of paintings, incorporating calligraphy and traditional auspicious designs, sometimes carved as bas-relief. Common themes are the blessings of heaven paired with the star triad.

Temple interior decoration

Tzu Chi Temple, Chiayi

## ***Journey to the West***

Source: Huang Studio, Jiali District, Tainan

Location: Beam decoration, rear hall

Artwork: Painting

Artist: Chen Shou-Yi

Year: 1953

Status: Removed for renovation

### **Monkey King Fights Bull Demon**

#### Bull Demon

Bull Demon is a character in the Chinese epic *Journey to the West*, and Princess Iron Fan is his queen. Bull Demon had once been a friend of Monkey King, five centuries ago, but later became his archenemy. When Monkey King steals Iron Fan's fan (actually made of banana leaves), Bull Demon takes the form of the Monkey King's companion Pigsy to steal the fan back.

#### Monkey King

*Journey to the West* combines fantasy and religion. Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, is a universally recognizable figure. His archenemy is the Bull Demon, who is no easy adversary. Ultimately, Sun Wukong has to call on the help of Nezha and Pigsy to bring the Bull Demon to justice.

The Bull Demon was one of Sun Wukong's friends, five centuries before. But now he was the Monkey King's archenemy.

Sun Wukong wanted to borrow Princess Iron Fan's magic banana-leaf fan, but she refused to lend it to him. Sun Wukong persuaded the local hill-gods to give him directions, and found his way to the Sky Scraping Cave on Thunder Mountain. Soon after Iron Fan and Bull Demon had their son, Red Boy, Bull Demon was seduced by Princess Jade Face, daughter of the Eternal Fox King. Princess Jade Face had brought a huge dowry and persuaded Bull Demon to come and live in her cave. He now rarely returned home to his queen, Princess Iron Fan, and his son.

When Sun Wukong reached the mouth of the cave, he called out Princess Jade Face. Sun Wukong began by insulting her: he started talking about how she had wronged Princess Iron Fan by buying the affections of Bull Demon. Jade Face was furious. She quickly ducked into the cave, grabbed her magic sword, and fought a good few rounds with Sun Wukong. But she was unable to defeat him, so she ran into the cave to report the situation to Bull Demon. Bull Demon came out fully armed, and without much ado, closed with the Monkey King in battle.

"You wretched ape!" he roared. "Why did you force my boy into becoming a monk?"

"You left your wife and son to take up with another woman," retorted Sun Wukong. "What kind of a man are you?"

The pair of them fought several hundred rounds, but neither could gain the upper hand. Right in the middle of the fight, a message suddenly arrived inviting Bull Demon for dinner.

“Wait!” Bull Demon roared. “I am invited to dinner. When I return, we shall continue.”  
(Apparently in those days you could pause a battle!)

Sun Wukong was not impressed, but there was nothing he could do if his opponent wouldn't fight. If he wanted that banana-leaf fan, he was just going to have to wait.

Sun Wukong waited a long time for Bull Demon to return, but eventually he got bored. So he took on the appearance of Bull Demon himself, and decided to obtain the fan from Princess Iron Fan by trickery.

When Bull Demon returned from his dinner, he realized what had happened. He thought that if Sun Wukong could disguise himself, then he, Bull Demon might as well try the same trick, so he took on the appearance of Pigsy, and waited by the side of the road for the Monkey King. Sun Wukong was so pleased with his success that he became careless, and didn't notice Bull Demon hiding under Pigsy's form. So soon enough, he handed the fan over, and Bull Demon had it back once again.

[Backgrounder]

Bull Demon fought with two swords in the Journey to the West. This image is a beam painting from Huang Studio in Tainan. Huang Studio originally housed some large murals by the renowned painter Chen Yu-Feng, and many works from Chen Shou-Yi's younger years. Unfortunately, the studio was demolished and rebuilt in 2013, with the result that another set of these great painters' works were lost to history.

## Stories of the Buddha

Source: Tsong Kan Temple, Tainan

Location: Guanyin Hall

Artwork: Mural

Artist: Ting Ching-Shih

Year: 1985

### Guanyin Repels the Enemy

(Vajrapani Guanyin: Guanyin has many, many different appearances, perhaps as many as 32 or 33 incarnations, each of them a response to a different trial that we face in life. Guanyin was usually depicted as male up to the Sung dynasty, but as Taoism and Buddhism later blended together, Guanyin was more often seen as female.)

(Li Quan: According to *Daikin Records*, Li Quan was eight feet tall and carried a spear, so was known as Li Spear. His wife was also said to be a fine spear warrior.

During the Southern Song dynasty, there was a man named Li Quan who excelled at the martial arts. His weapon was a spear, and his skills made him the equal of any immortal. He was known as “Li Spear”. Li committed himself to the military life, and placed his own troop under the command of the empire. In reward he was made a general and stationed in Qingzhou, in modern-day Shandong.

Soon afterwards, the Mongol army invaded Qingzhou. Li’s brother asked for back up, but the Song court put him to death. Distraught at this unfair treatment of a faithful subject, Li revolted against the emperor.

Li’s army was a bunch of ragtag recruits, and they robbed and plundered as they fought. That stirred up a lot of animus against Li.

The Shaolin Temple was a very powerful force at the time. Neither the imperial army nor the rebels dared incur their wrath, and both sides wanted to win the powerful temple to their side. Li Quan made multiple representations to the monks, but his persistence only infuriated them. Finally, the monks of Shaolin simply cut the ears off Li’s representative and threw him out.

Li Quan was enraged by this treatment. “These monks claim to be paragons of virtue,” he thundered, “and they respond to my overtures with this violence? The ground will run red with their blood.”

The envoy with no ears was seen by an apprentice out cutting wood, who realized that it could mean disaster for the Shaolin Temple. He prayed to Guanyin protect the temple. Guanyin became a wandering monk and visited the temple. The abbot arranged for him to work in the kitchens with the young apprentice, and together they cooked and cut firewood.

When Li Quan brought his army to Shaolin, the monks intercepted him at the foot of the mountain, and a fierce battle ensued. Li’s forces were on the verge of wiping out the Shaolin monks, when suddenly the wandering monk led a small contingent of kitchen monks to the front, and began laying into the enemy. Soon, Li’s troops were scattered, and Li fled with his wife. Li’s Red Army never dared attack Shaolin temple again.



Only after the battle finished did everyone realize that the wandering monk was in fact Guanyin himself. Some of the more talented artists among the monks captured his likeness for posterity, and this is how the knowledge of Guanyin's male form was passed down to future generations.

[Backgrounder]

This artwork is from the Tsong Kan Temple in Tainan. The story of Guanyin defending the Shaolin Temple first appeared in the Qing dynasty novel *Legends of Guanyin* by the Mandala Master. Guanyin is probably the most popular of all the bodhisattvas. In Taiwan, there is a saying that shrines to Guanyin and Matsu can be found in every home. We are all used to seeing Guanyin in a kindly female guise, and along coastal China, including Taiwan, she is often portrayed on a moonlit sea. Her male form is rarely seen in Taiwan.