

The Post-Disaster Preservation of Historic Heritages in Chi-Chi (集集) Township: Learning from the 1999-9-21 Earthquake in Taiwan

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On 21 September 1999, a major earthquake rocked Taiwan causing horrific casualties and damage. In Chi-Chi Township, at the epicentre, damage was so severe that 80% of the housing was unusable. Some of the historic buildings such as an old railway station and a traditional literati academy had been severely damaged. After the catastrophe, numerous damaged historic buildings urgently needed to be saved and preserved. Thus, an urgent rescue plan and execution strategy was needed.

This brief has four parts: firstly, a general description of the survived historical building and related area preservation progress, then, some precious heritage sites surveyed and collected in Chi-Chi Township. The third part examines the advantages and disadvantages of the then policies, regulations and laws affecting historic properties. Lastly, a rescue and preservation task plan-proposal for historic buildings. This paper summarizes the earthquake damage to historic heritages in Taiwan and the government response in rescuing those historic buildings, aiming to serve as a reference for strategies to rescue the precious heritages, for and after, future disasters.

Key Words : Chi-Chi, Earthquake, Historic Heritage, Post-Disaster Management, Preservation, Taiwan

1. Background

The literal meaning of the word Chi-Chi (集集) is the “gathering”, which indicates a gathering of people and commodities. Immigrants arriving Taiwan from the Chinese mainland have cultivated this area since 1771. The Chi-Chi area became prosperous during the Qing’s dynasty period (ending in 1895) as the result of increases in the production of bananas and camphor. In 1920, the Japanese Colonial Government noticed its geographical superiority and built a new railway station, which made Chi-Chi become a collecting and distributing centre in the area and continued to prosper until 1945. In 1998, Chi-Chi was a waning small town with a population of only 12,347. Chi-Chi’s abundant cultural and natural resources are still its most precious heritage. In recent years, some advertising has placed Chi-Chi as the focus of television commercials, resulting in Chi-Chi becoming one of

the most favoured tourist locations nationwide.

Unfortunately, a major earthquake (Richter scale 7.3) rocked Taiwan on 21 September 1999 causing horrific casualties and damages. In Chi-Chi Township, at the epicentre, damage was so severe that 80% of the housing was unusable. It is estimated that at least 2,300 people killed, 8,800 injured, 600,000 people left homeless and about 80,000 housing units damaged by the earthquake and larger aftershocks. Damage estimated at 15 billion U.S. dollars. Maximum damages were at Tai-Chung and Nan-tou Counties. Chi-Chi town is the epicentre. (Fig.1)

Figure 1: Location of Chi-Chi (集集) Earthquake

Some of the historical features such as the old railway station and a traditional literati academy were severely damaged. After this catastrophe, numerous damaged historical buildings urgently needed restoration. An urgent rescue plan and execution strategy was needed.

(Source: <http://www.rcep.dpri.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~sato/taiwan/index.html>)

Figure 2: Falling Building of 9-21

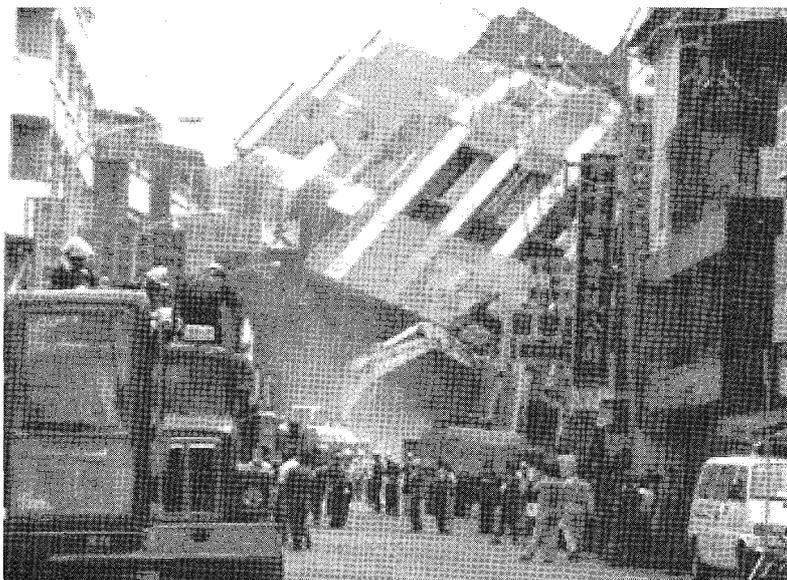
(Source: http://www.earth.sinica.edu.tw/880921/fig_index.html)

Figure 3: Falling Building at 9-21

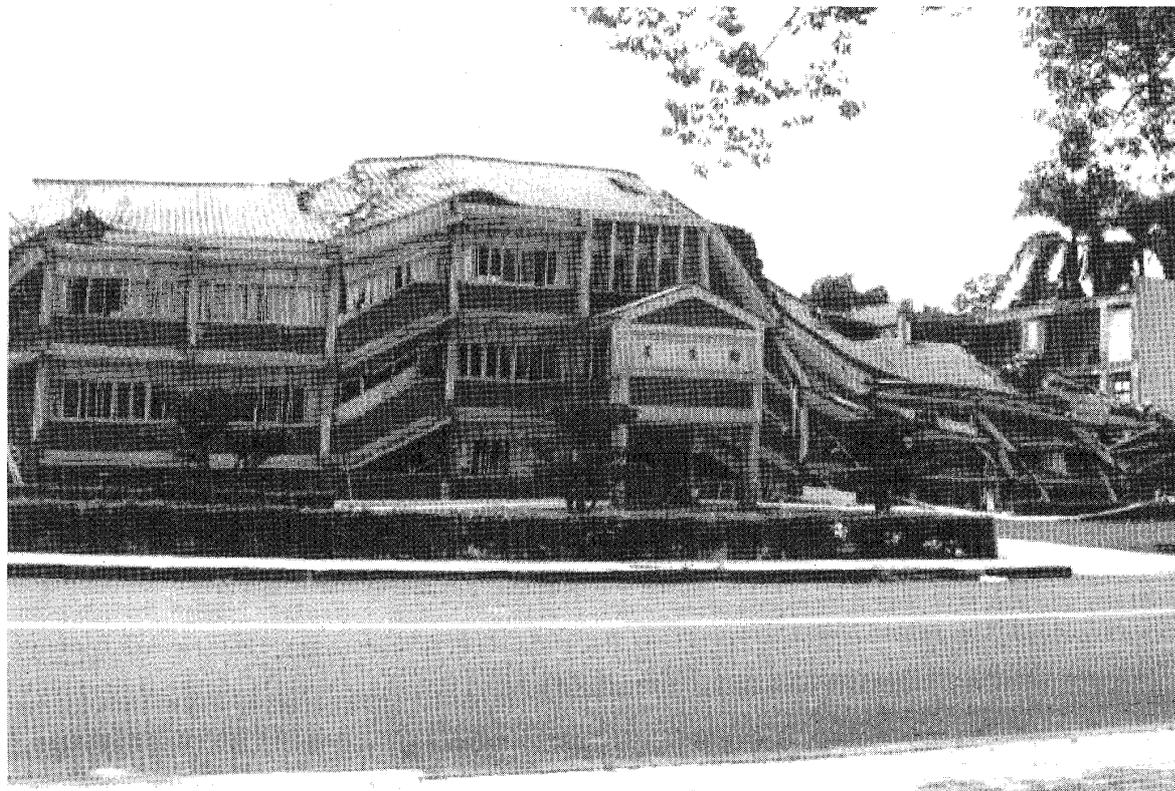


(Source: http://www.earth.sinica.edu.tw/880921/fig_index.html)

Figure 4: Falling Buildings at 9-21 Earthquake



(Source: http://www.air-worldwide.com/_public/html/air_currentsite.asp?ID=790)

Figure 5: Damaged Government Building at Nantou

(Source: <http://www.rcep.dpri.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~sato/taiwan/twpics/captions/tw044.html>)

UNESCO appointed the Year 2001 as the Cultural Heritage Promotion Year. The Taiwanese legislative organization (Legislative Yuan) also passed an important amendment, the Cultural Heritage Preservation Amendment, which was amended in January 2000 with new revised wording added. Some deficiencies of the original act were corrected and the sphere of application was extended.

Unfortunately, this amendment came too late, three months after the earthquake, to suit the realistic needs for rescue and preservation of historic heritage, especially at the outset of the disaster and the immediate period thereafter. Nevertheless, just like the old Chinese saying: "it is not too late to mend the fold even though some sheep have been lost", this amendment might be not in time to satisfy the needs after the earthquake, and however, it indeed helped us to resolve some problems during the historic heritage restoration planning period.

Historic preservation in Taiwan, concerned with saving particular landmark buildings, has been under the responsibility of the Council for Cultural Affairs of the Executive Yuan, which has limited experience in dealing with serious situations, especially caused by the disastrous earthquake. Although we obtained some expertise from Japanese and American

scholars and specialists, we had to depend on our own resources to complete most of this work. The senior researcher (CP Chen) of this paper was commissioned for Chi-Chi Township in response to a Cultural Affairs Council request to architecture, design and landscape departments at 20 universities nationwide to conduct preservation work in the earthquake-damaged areas (Chen 1999).

2. A Description of the Reconstruction following 9-21 Earthquake

The bulk of our reconstruction works included items such as:

- Mental rehabilitation: visiting families, arranging cultural and recreational activities, providing the temporary settlements.
- Community education: outdoor education, vocational training.
- Rehabilitation of damaged buildings: consulting for repairs.
- Preservation of cultural heritage: instructions on strengthening, surveying, preserving and tour guides for the historic buildings.

We spent nearly the entire year (2000) completing the above-mentioned works. Due to the limited

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space for this report, only the details on cultural heritage preservation will be discussed. The detailed cultural heritages preservation works are described as follows:

2.1 To establish a tourism system that gives priority to cultural heritage and historic buildings to promote Chi-Chi's tourist industry, and to increase public identification and appreciation of their cultures.

- Producing the large “historic buildings guide” colour poster and posting it in the important town locations to arise tourist attention and interest.
- Producing “historic building guide” maps for distribution to tourists.
- Designing and setting up a historic building guide and signage system along the main roads to guide tourists in easily finding their destinations.
- Editing the “historic buildings guide” brochures.

2.2 To hold the various cultural activities on various selected festivals or holidays:

- Holding an “away from sorrows and merry Christmas” party on 1999.12.25 more than 300 Chi-Chi inhabitants attended this party.
- Producing a lantern exhibition, during the period

between 15-19 February 2000, to celebrate Chinese Lantern Festival.

- Holding “children’s life experience camp” in August 2000.

2.3 To use the cultural industry as a strategy to promote local enterprises:

- Renovating an old snack vendor site into a classic restaurant that eventually became an ideal interaction place where people gathered to share their ideas and negotiate their disputes.
- Rehabilitating a traditional timber house and to serve as tourist accommodations.

2.4 To save the precious cultural heritage:

- Completing the first stage of surveying the historical buildings in Chi-Chi (Chen 2000).
- Completing the site survey, drawing and recording the oral history of the 13 selected historic buildings chosen for the advanced research (Chen 2000).
- Consulting on the renovation of Cheng’s house that is a delicate and refined Japanese timber house.
- Completing the final survey and electronic filing on the Chen’s house, the oldest and most valuable courtyard house in Chi-Chi.

Figure 6: Sun-Moon Lake Post-Disaster Redevelopment: Reconstructing the Lake Area



(Source: <http://value.yam.com/921photo/3.html#>)

Figure 7: Reconstruction of the Local Pagoda



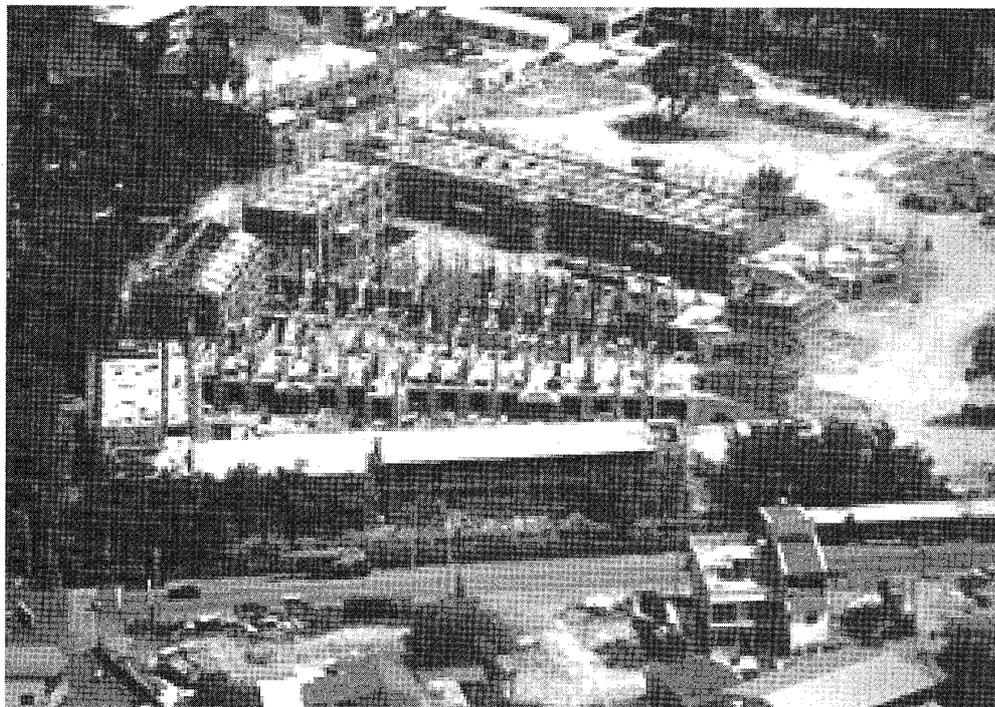
(Source: <http://value.yam.com/921photo/3.html#>)

Figure 8: The damaged Pu-Li Brewery turns into 921 Memorial Theme Park



(Source: <http://value.yam.com/921photo/3.html>)

Figure 9: Rebuild for Schooling



(Source: <http://value.yam.com/921photo/2.html#>)

Figure 10: Post-921 Eco-Friendly Wooden Structured New School



(Source: <http://value.yam.com/921photo/2.html#>)

Figure 11: New Secondary School with Local Culture-Informed Architecture

(Source: <http://value.yam.com/921photo/2.html#>)

Following the 921 earthquake, the research team, as well as many academics, at Chung Yuan Christian University engaged in various tasks to help the earthquake refugees to survive the hard times and overcome their plight. The afore-mentioned shows only a part of the cultural heritage preservation work that was conducted.

3. A Review of Post-Disaster Reconstruction

The following discussion will be discussed in the three perspectives such as: the conflicts of policies, the attitude of people's participation, and the development plan:

3.1 The Friction between Tourism Development and Heritage Preservation

During the tourism development process, Chi-Chi Township has gradually taken on a new form that is obviously is a transplanted copy of the typical urban landscape in Taiwan. Modernization that had been thought a necessary means to stimulate tourists to consume has been gradually changing the indigenous structure of the traditional township. Everything regarding historical memories and cultural heritage has been totally ignored under the shadow of the

grand plan "revive Chi-Chi as a tourism city".

Tourism development was seen as the only way to revive the economic development of Chi-Chi Township. For the people of Chi-Chi, who have been used to following the will of the authorities, yielded to the desire of the officials in changing the characters / identities of their township? They silently accepted all of the changes that accompanied the tourism modernization. Yet, these new patterns for developing tourism are dangerous in that they presented only governor's unilateral interpretation of tourism and his personal imported transplanted experiences, which catered only to the needs of tourists and totally ignored the real needs and values of the local people. This would eventually destroy the historical and cultural heritage of Chi-Chi.

The wind of tourism indeed gives this small town the hope of revival, yet, in pursuit of such a development, public opinions were intentionally ignored. In Chi-Chi's case, over-interference by the local governor virtually sabotaged Chi-Chi's chance for revival.

3.2 Social Education and Attitude of People's Participation

The aim of cultural spaces construction is not to

merely build some physical environment; cultural development should establish the people's sense of participation in communal affairs and promote an aesthetic life style for the people. In other words, the essence of cultural reconstruction is not to create "objects", but to create revitalized "people", just as a famous Taiwanese professor said: "the process and the goal of community construction is, essentially, to reform the people" (Hsia 2000:165).

In Taiwanese society, because of the lengthy domination of society by the political powers, the people have developed a stern cool ignorant attitude towards public affairs. The people do not seem to believe that they participate in and have control over their communal affairs. The people of Chi-Chi Township who are country people with a grass root personality always remain silent and wait for instructions from the dominant authorities.

The cool and ignorant attitude of folks after the disaster in Chi-Chi Township was once juxtaposing negative views toward preservation works in Chi-Chi Township. Due to their ignorance, people have poor imaginations and do not value cultural heritage preservation. Yet, they had much concern and attachment to their own historic buildings, which are attached to their own memories and emotions. Hence, it was (and still is) commonly agreed that if we can foster the people's sense of participation and self-awareness regarding the significance of the heritage under restoration, they will become positive about this work.

3.3 The Master Rebuilding Plan for Chi-Chi Township

The reconstruction master plan, which was dominated by the Township government, was actually initiated even before the earthquake disaster. The spirit of this plan was quantity-oriented instead of quality-oriented. For instance, the planned population was estimated at 82,100, over six times than the original population. In order to attain that population service goal huge scale, high density, and intensive development concepts were emphasized. This was in total conflict with the original aim of this plan to restore Chi-Chi. According to my research (Chen 2000), the government plan has the following drawbacks:

- The blind transplantation of imported incongruous experiences.
- The destruction of the native charm cultural heritage and collective memories of the Chi-Chi inhabitants.
- The negligence of cherishing the eco-environment.

Soon after the 1999 Earthquake, the central government of Taiwan committed great sum of money and huge manpower to help the local Chi-Chi government rebuild. If the local authorities, for political reasons, used the reconstruction subsidy for their own purposes, the well being of the people and the good will of the central government would suffer. This reconstruction effort should emphasize quality of life and environment not quantity of crass commercial interest.

4. Some Reflection of the Reconstruction

Our researchers have compiled the results of personal field survey findings, the responses from the public sector, and interviews with the people of Chi-Chi, and conclude the following as blueprint for the reconstruction of the Chi-Chi disaster area and the preservation of Chi-Chi historic heritage:

4.1 To enhance the general survey of damaged historic buildings in the disaster area

Our senior researcher (CP Chen), with scholars from 20 universities nationwide, had been recruited by the Taiwanese Cultural Affairs Council to participate in a general survey of historic buildings in the earthquake damaged area. Unfortunately, this work was merely a preliminary survey due to the limited budget and time. For the sake of long-term consideration, a deeper and much more detailed survey is urgently needed. This detailed survey should include at minimum: a collection of the historic background, interviews and oral histories, documents and related literature. A thorough reconnaissance of the damaged historic building structures, construction, style, decorations, etc., to allow restoration to the original form of these buildings and for the advanced rehabilitation science reference.

4.2 To establish a grass roots task force for the preservation effort

The scholars that conducted the survey can try to manage a hierarchy that contains economic, social, cultural, geographical links. These links form a network that can allow people with heterogeneous backgrounds work in concert together. For instance, some historical buildings are dispersed in various locations. These interdisciplinary human links can put them together into a network that can be used as a means to allow the local residents to participate in the reconstruction effort. We hope that this

can encourage people with various backgrounds, socio-culturally or geographically, to establish a grass root task force to take the full responsibility for the reconstruction and preservation of all cultural heritages.

Yet, the public sector should only play an assistance role. The main role must be shouldered by the people. This would produce a dramatic change in Taiwanese cultural preservation history. The town folk who were originally dominated by the authorities are now becoming key players in the reconstruction.

4.3 The diversion from tourist gaze to the formation of daily life

Tourism in Taiwan has always involved some spectacle with cultural practices. The tourist gaze into some aspect of people's life. (*cf.* Urry, 1990) To incorporate the historic buildings and with the life of the town folks, the historic buildings should provide a milieu in which authentic folk life can be shown to the tourists. Precisely speaking, using the combination of historic buildings and folk life, and local public participation, people (residents and tourists alike) can acknowledge the authentic humane activities and memories. This is what the preservation of historic heritages really means. The real goal for the preservation is absolutely not for the sensational enjoyment of tourists only.

Since 1998, our leading researcher has conducted a project on the planning of cultural spaces in Chi-Chi. When we began the planning two alternative sites were chosen (an old railway station and a traditional Taoist temple respectively). Both sites possessed certain advantages. The railway station is not only a landmark building but also a renowned tourism site. The Taoist temple is a religious centre and the representation of collective memories. The original intention of this plan was to satisfy both tourist and inhabitant interests. After careful consideration, we decided that what Chi-Chi people really need is a place that they can completely belong and identify. The tourist gaze was seemingly not the essential issue of this plan. The cultural area concept was changed to take into account the needs of the local people. Tourist was therefore the second priority in this project. Unfortunately, the changes in plans was totally against the will of the local authorities who firmly believed that the bright future of the town could be served only by modern Taiwan style tourism, and that the interest of tourists and not that of the local people should be considered.

4.4 The reconstruction plan must emphasize cultural heritage preservation

The late architecture professor of Edinburgh University, C. B. Wilson, wrote: "building a traditional house is a miniature of the entire architectural process of making a home in the world - of making a world in which and to which its people and the community feel they belong" (Wilson, 1988:8). By careful examination, we can find that the historic buildings found in Chi-Chi Township present a physical translation of a culture, its needs and values as well as the desires, dreams and passions of the people. Unfortunately, although the official reconstruction plan announces such high sounding statements as: the best environment with fine culture, the unique vernacular character, which the people of community can cherish, etc. The people understand that this is just an idle talk that is present in the plan.

What is needed is a folk version plan that can present Chi-Chi's unspoiled vernacular landscape and folkways, colourful cultural heritage, ample historic buildings, presenting a humane Chi-Chi instead of a mere tourist town. The solutions for developing tourism are many, yet in places like Chi-Chi with a precious cultural heritage, the development plan must be founded on the solid base of the local historical context and cultural traditions. That they were the accumulation of the collective memories and spatial experiences of the inhabitants, and this is the most precious resources for the revival of this community. From the beginning of construction the people e regaining their identity is a far-off consideration of the community management agency.

5. Learning from the (Post-)Disaster Redevelopment

Since the disastrous earthquake, nationwide finance and manpower has been engaged in the rescue and restoration of damaged area. After more than one year's struggle, the pace of after-disaster restoration work has shown a gradually downward pace. We can hardly say people's enthusiasm has declined, yet there are invisible problems that undoubtedly will impact restoration work results. The passions that individuals or groups must face are realistic challenging problems. No one can be sure those passions can be contained any longer. We want to invoke all walks of life to face squarely those potential problems, and if we may be so bold to suggest the following points:

- The central government must coordinate the various expertises in all respects in order to initiate

a comprehensive, long term, feasible plan for the saving of historical heritage. The rescue stage is only an emergency measure and is not enough.

- The local government must reassess situations in which people, without a delicate consideration, roughly initiate some hasty plans in order to restore the damaged area as soon as possible. A further consideration is therefore needed to determine if these hasty plans will actually harm the preservation of historic heritage.
- For the victims, whose plight, of course, should be sympathized and needed an urgent resolution, but they still have to appreciate the dilemma that the government is facing. Because of the extreme damage from the natural disaster the area cannot be restored quickly, therefore, people should have patience to appreciate the great efforts that the government had made and to cooperate and help the public sector to finish the restoration work.

The fragile cultural heritages have been severely damaged during this earthquake, and restoration is urgently needed. We really hope that, during the rehabilitation process, people never put their heritages in a position beyond redemption through negligence and ignorance. We also hope that these cultural heritages will be revived to their old splendid beauty. With the effort from the central and local governments, academic experts, and the local people, we can leave to our descendants beautiful footnotes of historic memories and culture. Let our descendants cherish, even in the face of destruction from natural disaster, our painstaking effort trying to preserve historic heritage.

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