

The challenge to the conservation of Ancient Bridges: A Lesson from the Reconstruction of Covered Bridges in Taishun, China

Yi Fu and Hui Zhang
Zhejiang University

Abstract

The conservation of ancient bridges in contemporary China does not pay enough attention to the traditional bridge building techniques developed by bridge building craftspeople, which are handed down generation-by-generation. Based on case study and ethnographic fieldwork strategies, this study investigates the on-going reconstruction of three centuries-old covered bridges in Taishun, China, which were destroyed by floods in Summer 2016. This study discusses the participation of bridge-building carpenters and their collaboration with other multiple stakeholders including scientists, historians or heritage experts and government authorities. Different interests in terms of collaboration from the multiple parties resulted in several conflicts. The scientists tend to concern most the effectiveness of building materials and the durability of the architecture. The historians care most about the authenticity of the bridges. The government authorities may emphasis the social and political values of the reconstruction. The bridge-building carpenters may desire for the employment and recurrence of traditional covered bridge building techniques in this reconstruction project. This study aims to explore how such conflicts emerge and are resolved during the reconstruction process. In this study, covered bridges are not only physical architecture, but also the connection between different ideologies of cultural heritage conservation. The study articulates bridge building craftspeople and their techniques contribute new ideology and strategies, but also new challenge to the conservation of ancient bridges. Depending on such findings, this study suggests intangible craftsmanship and grassroots community have great value to the traditional cultural heritage conservation, which usually is top-down, institution- and object-oriented.