

RESEARCH ARTICLE

On the evolution of the architectural style of Tao Fong Shan

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Abstract: The characteristic architectural style of Tao Fong Shan in Hong Kong is unique in the sense that this Christian institution looks exactly like a traditional Chinese Buddhist monastery. What kind of secret exists behind this seemingly uncoordinated appearance? The two names of Karl Ludvig Reichelt and Johannes Prip-Møller are closely connected with Tao Fong Shan buildings, but few people know how exactly the Norwegian founder of The Christian Church for China's Buddhists met and cooperated with the Danish architect in designing these buildings. The present paper is an effort to retrace the initial vision of architectural style for Tao Fong Shan shared by Reichelt and Prip-Møller, as well as the evolution of the later designs at different stages. Reichelt found many common features between Chinese Buddhism and the Gospel of John in New Testament. In order to promote the missionary work among China's Buddhists, he tried to create an environment in which the inquiring Buddhists would find it comfortable and at ease. Reichelt's another contribution is in raising money for the construction of Tao Fong Shan buildings. His method of crowd funding proved to be practical and effective. Prip-Møller had ten years' experiences of working in China and was a top-notch expert in China's Buddhist architecture. His professional expertise has ensured that Reichelt's idea of combining the traditional Chinese Buddhist architectural style and the Christian nature of Tao Fong Shan buildings could be eventually realized.

Keywords: Karl Ludvig Reichelt, Johannes Prip-Møller, Tao Fong Shan, architectural style

Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Center, with its red-pillared, tile-roofed building on top of a hill, surrounded by thick woods, is now one of the few rare scenic spots in Hong Kong (Figure 1). It is a favorite place not only for common hikers, but also for those who try to escape from the madding crowds of the metropolitan city and spend a couple of nights for contemplation in a secluded room on this hill of natural beauty. The characteristic architectural style of Tao Fong Shan is unique in the sense that this Christian institution looks exactly like a traditional Chinese Buddhist monastery. What kind of secret exists behind this seemingly uncoordinated appearance? The two names of Karl Ludvig Reichelt (Figure 2) and Johannes Prip-Møller (Figure 4) are closely connected with Tao Fong Shan buildings, but few people know how exactly the Norwegian founder of The Christian Church for China's Buddhists met and cooperated with the Danish architect in designing these buildings. The present paper is an effort to retrace the initial vision of architectural style for Tao Fong Shan shared by Reichelt and Prip-Møller,

as well as the evolution of the later designs at different stages.

1 New home of the Christian Mission for Buddhists

To really understand the reason why Tao Fong Shan buildings look like a Buddhist temple, we have to start from the very beginning.

Karl Ludvig Reichelt joined Norwegian Missionary Society and was sent to China in 1903. After studying the Chinese language for about a year in Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province, he then went alone to Ningxiang to set up a missionary station in that small town. At that time, Western Protestant missionaries in China as a whole had very negative view of Buddhism, not only regarding its religion as superstitious and repellent, but also its monks as ignorant and even immoral. Nevertheless, through one of his personal experiences, Reichelt found them otherwise.

By chance, Reichelt visited the great monastery of Weishan in 1905 and spent a few days with the Buddhist monks there. While witnessing the Buddhist service and prayers, he realized, to his own surprise, that the solemn atmosphere in that Buddhist temple was somewhat similar to a Christian church, he also found some of the Buddhist monks there pious in nature, or even learned. Yet at the

Received: Dec. 6, 2020; Accepted: Dec. 9, 2020; Published: Dec. 10, 2020

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Citation: Shen H. On the evolution of the architectural style of Tao Fong Shan. *Int J Arts Humanit*, 2020, 1(1): 28-35.

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Figure 1. Tao Fong Shan during June-August, 2017 (The 12 colored photographs here were taken by the author himself in Hong Kong, June to August, 2017)

same time, he was troubled by the fact that it was almost impossible for him to communicate with the monks there, because they had a whole set of subtle and specialized terminology which Reichelt could not understand, neither did they understand what Reichelt was telling them about Christianity. On the very day he left there, he had a vision on top of the hill behind the Buddhist temple, in which he felt that God had provided him with glimpses of truth in Mayahana Buddhism, as well as the “points of contact” between Mayahana Buddhism and Christianity. Since then, Reichelt was determined to study and understand Mayahana Buddhism, and in a number of years, he successfully became one of the top specialists in the West on Chinese Buddhism. His first book, *China’s Religions (Kina’s religioner)* was published in 1913, the year he began his teaching career at the Lutheran Theological College in Shekow.

It was his dream to create a Christian mission among China’s Buddhist monks, for he believed that since there were many similarities between the Gospel of John and Mayahana Buddhism, e. g. the concept of the Tao and that of the Logos, the Buddhist notions of trinity, etc., it would be easier for Chinese Buddhist monks to understand Christianity.

For this reason, he would not lose any chance to visit the Buddhist temples and monasteries in China and talked to the Buddhist priests he met there. In 1919, Reichelt met a young monk named Kuantu (Figure 3) in Nanjing and found him enthusiastic in learning Christian doctrines. Under his close attention and great care, as well as the support of a senior monk named Penchong, Kuantu was given the chance to attend a summer program with the missionaries in Kikung hills in Henan Province. A few months later, Kuantu was baptized at the Lutheran Theological College in Shekow, on Christmas Day of the same year.

Kuantu’s conversion to Christianity was an encouragement to Reichelt, and it gave a great impetus to his dream cause of establishing a special Christian mission for Buddhists, because Kuantu was the best example to prove to the world that his theory about the “points of contact” between Mayahana Buddhism and Christianity was right. On January 4, 1920, only nine days after Kuantu had been baptized, “The Christian Brotherhood for China’s Buddhists” (*Kristne broderskap blandt Kinas Buddhister*) was actually founded in Shekou, Hubei Province. According to the draft constitution of this brotherhood, written by Reichelt himself a year before, the object of setting up such a Christian brotherhood was to “lead Buddhists of all the classes and parties to a living faith in Jesus Christ in whom the deepest ideas of higher Buddhism find their full resolution. [II:1] ... All parts of Tripitaka which



Figure 2. K.L. Reichelt (*B.M.*, May 1926)



Figure 3. Kuantu (*B.M.*, Nov. 1926)

are in accordance with Christian teachings are recognized and may be used in both the ritual and educational work. [III: 4].” (Sharpe 60)

With permission from Norwegian Missionary Society, Karl Ludvig Rechelt and his co-worker, Notto Normann Thelle, set up a home for “The Christian Brotherhood for China’s Buddhists” in Nanjing in November, 1922. They named it “Ching Fong Shan”, which is a common Buddhist name, meaning “favorable wind blowing from the hill.” Within a few years, a fairly large number (c. 5000) of Buddhists were attracted to this place, and a school was established for their Christian education. Quite a few of these Buddhists later received baptism and became Christians. In order to create an atmosphere of home for the newcomers, Reichelt adopted the strategy of accommodation and combined many Buddhist elements into

his Christian service, as well as the interior decoration of his chapel. Because of this, he was questioned or even attacked by many conservative co-workers in Norwegian Missionary Society. Eventually, at the end of 1925, Reichelt was forced to separate his Christian Brotherhood for China’s Buddhists from Norwegian Missionary Society, and renamed it “The Christian Church for China’s Buddhists.”

In March, 1927, Reichelt and his followers suffered another catastrophe—the buildings of Ching Fong Shan were burned to the ground and two members of his church were killed by the Southern Army. Reichelt and Thelle had been forced to go into hiding before they could escape from Nanjing (Thelle 189). For the next three years, The Christian Church for China’s Buddhists had only a temporary base in Shanghai and Reichelt was constantly looking for a new home for his church, because Shanghai was a big metropolitan city, not an ideal place for contemplation and spiritual cultivation. For this purpose, he had visited Japan, but failed in finding a place that could meet his standards. His next targets would be Taiwan and Singapore, yet for some reason, his scheduled journey to Taiwan was unexpectedly delayed. Reichelt and his new assistant Axel G. Hamre arrived in Hong Kong instead on December 31, 1930.

Accidentally, on a reconnoiter visit to Shatin on February 11, 1931, Reichelt found a secluded hill located in an isolated area, about eight miles from Kowloon. He immediately realized that this nameless hill might become the most ideal site for a new home of the Christian Church for China’s Buddhists. Therefore Reichelt hurried back to Nanjing to secure the Republican government’s compensation for the damage of Ching Fong Shan buildings and, with that amount of money, he was able to bid successfully for the hill-top site he had chosen from the government of Hong Kong. He renamed this newly-acquired hill “Tao Fong Shan”, meaning “Wind of Holy Spirit Blowing over the Hill.” This hilltop is like a white paper on which K. L. Reichelt and Johannes Prip-Møller were able to draw the blueprints of the future Tao Fong Shan buildings.

2 The acquaintance and co-operation between Reichelt and Prip-Møller

Karl Ludvig Reichelt became acquainted with Johannes Prip-Møller, the Danish architect, in 1920, soon after the founding of The Christian Brotherhood for China’s Buddhists. However, it was not until almost ten years later that they had the first opportunity to co-operate with each other in designing the Tao Fong Shan buildings.

Prip-Møller was a professional architect closely connected with Danish Missionary Society. He served in



Figure 4. Axel G. Hamre, Johannes Prip-Møller and Antonette Prip-Møller (*B.M.*, No.7 Sept. 1930, cover)

China twice, for almost ten years. The first time of his visit to China was between 1921 and 1926. While working in Moukden, Manchuria, he became infatuated with the traditional Chinese architecture, especially the architectural style of Buddhist temples. He visited some famous Buddhist monasteries in different parts of the country, in the hope that someday he would be able to write a definitive book on the architecture of Buddhist monasteries in the Far East. After returning to Denmark, he succeeded in applying for a research grant from the Carlsberg Foundation for his ambitious research project on Chinese Buddhist architectures. With this research grant, he returned to China in 1929 for another four years. During this period, he was able to visit more famous Buddhist monasteries and other related architectures, as well as designing Buddhist-style buildings for Tao Fong Shan in Hong Kong. The result of this immense research project was published in a definitive book, entitled *Chinese Buddhist Monasteries: Their Plan and Its function as a Setting for Buddhist Monastic Life* (1937).

With such a professional background for the architect of Tao Fong Shan, it is no wonder that Tao Fong Shan building should have an architectural style of Buddhist Temples.

In an article published in a Norwegian journal, *Buddhist Missionen* (*B.M.*), J. Prip-Møller traced the inspiration of his architectural design of Tao Fong Shan buildings back to the time when he first met Reichelt in Brooklyn, New York City, in the summer of 1920. At that time, Reichelt was giving a speaking tour in the United States on his theory of the “points of contact” between Christianity and China’s Buddhism.

Naar jeg I disse dag har gaaet her paa Tao Fong Shan og tænkt paa planerne for Broderhjemmet, er min tanke ofte gaaet tilbage til sommeren 1920, hfor jeg under et studieophold i Amerika, den første Sondag jeg var i landet, traf Reichelt ude i den norske kirke i Brooklyn. Her fremlagde han ved aftenmodet sine planer om arbejdet blandt Chinas Buddhister og omtalte ogsaa byggeplanerne for

det fremtidige insitut. Da jeg efter modet fik lejloghed til at hilse paa ham personligt og han horte om mine planer om at gaa til China som Architect, fik jeg straks en varm indbydelse til næste dag at komme ud til hans bopæl og se de forskellig tegninge som ingenior Kiær havde udarbejdet for rammerne om dette nye missionaerbejde. (B.M., No. 7, 1930, p.110)

Till this day, I often recall the time when I was studying in the U.S.A., on the first Sunday after I arrived there, I met Reichelt of Tao Fong Shan outside the Norwegian church in Brooklyn. When we met again in the evening, he told me about his plan to carry out missionary work among China’s Buddhists. He also mentions the Christian Mission for Buddhists he wants to create in the future. After that, we had more opportunities for private talks, and he also learned about my plan to go to China as an architect. On the next day, I receive a warm invitation from Reichelt to look at various architectural designs drawn by the engineer Kiær for the future Christian Mission for Buddhists. (*B.M.*, No. 7, 1930, 110)

From that time on, Prip-Møller had already understood Reichelt’s dream of establishing a Christian mission for China’s Buddhists. He also had a visual impression of the Buddhist architectural style in Reichelt’s mind. This is the reason why when Reichelt invited him to design Tao Fong Shan buildings about ten years later, Prip-Møller readily accepted his invitation and immediately devoted himself to doing this tremendous work.

3 The evolution of the architectural style of Tao Fong Shan

Johannes Prip-Møller accepted Reichelt’s invitation to design the Tao Fong Shan buildings in May 1930. At that time, Reichelt had just acquired the hill-top site of Tao Fong Shan in an auction in Hong Kong, and Prip-Møller himself was collecting materials for his ambitious research project and visiting various Buddhist monasteries in China. The first task Reichelt gave Prip-Møller was to draw an over-all design of the new home of The Christian Church for China’s Buddhists.

In the above-quoted article in *Buddhist Missionen*, Prip-Møller mentions that Reichelt had many requirements for the architectural style of the future Tao Fong Shan buildings, one of which was that the outward appearance of Tao Fong Shan buildings must adopt as many Buddhist patterns and symbols as possible, so that the visiting believers might feel comfortable and at home. And this does not concern only the cosiness of life inside the buildings, but also the principle that external appearance should correspond to the internal spiritual life.

Prip-Møller fully agreed with Reichelt’s concept of



Figure 5. Tao Fong Shan during June-August, 2017



(a)



(b)

Figure 6. Prip-Møller's two overall designs of Tao Fong Shan buildings ((a) *B.M.*, No.3, Mars 1930, 30; (b) *B.M.*, No.9 Nov. 1930, 146)

architectural design. In order to understand the functions, concepts and details of China's Buddhist architectural design, he visited many famous Buddhist monasteries in China. Wherever he went, he would record faithfully the environment and atmosphere of those places, not only with words and sketches, but also with measuring tape and camera. He believed that an ideal religious architecture must make people feel free from worldly cares, at the same time feel like returning home. It should be not only fresh and elegant, but also entertaining and relaxing. A successful design of religious architecture must have these characteristics.

Nevertheless, Prip-Møller's first overall design for Tao Fong Shan buildings (Figure 6(a)) was purely imaginary and unpractical, because at that time he has not yet visited the real site of Tao Fong Shan in Hong Kong. Therefore, though his conceptual design contains all the component parts of the future Tao Fong Shan buildings—porticos, Yun Shui Tang (Hall of Cloud and Water), Holy Temple, Institute of Religious Studies, etc., these buildings are arranged in such a perfectly symmetrical order in a monastery of three courtyards that it is impossible to put this plan into practice on the hill-top site of Tao Fong Shan. It was not until after he visited Hong Kong and

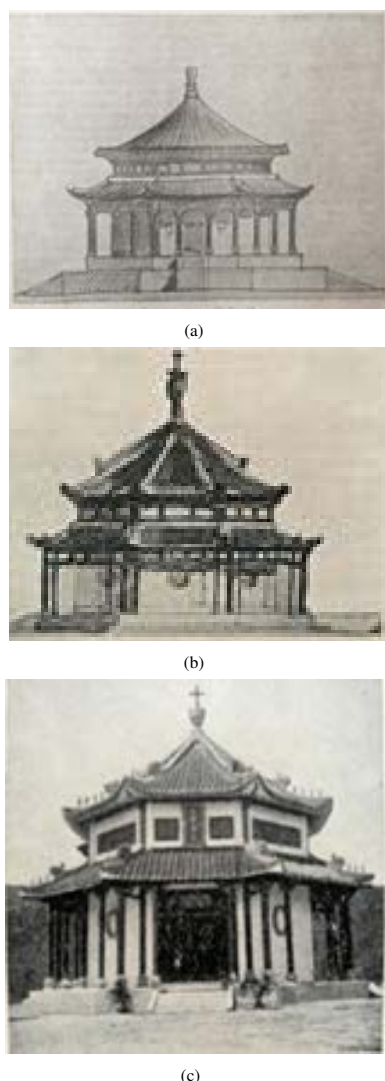


Figure 7. The evolution of the Holy Temple design

surveyed the hill-top site in Shatin carefully that he was able to draw a second overall design of Tao Fong Shan buildings (Figure 6(b)) that fit better the terrain of the newly-acquired hill-top site.

Generally speaking, after Prip-Møller drew the initial design draft, he would request comments and suggestions from Reichelt and others, and make modification of the design. A very good example is the process of designing Holy Temple, the core building of the Tao Fong Shan building cluster. When the first design draft of the Holy Temple (Figure 7(a)) was published on the cover of No. 7, 1930's issue of *Buddhist Missionen*, the circular shape of its roof is the same with that of Huang Qiong Yu in the Temple of Heaven, Beijing. When its second design draft (Figure 7(b)) appeared on the cover of No.5, 1934's issue of the same journal, there were already several modifications: the circular shape of its roof had been changed into an octagon one, a cross had been added on top of the roof, and the distance between the columns had been

extended, etc. In the photograph of the physical building, which was completed at the end of 1934, there are further modifications, e.g. the ground floor had been heightened to increase its internal space, the walls between the double eaves had also been heightened, and glass windows had been added to increase the daylight effect of the upper floor. (Figure 7(c) *B.M.* No.2, Feb. 1935, 35)

Being a spiritual leader of the Christian Mission for China's Buddhists and founder of its new home on Tao Fong Shan, Reichelt's influence on the evolution of its architectural style is on multiple levels. Apart from those requirements he had stipulated at the beginning for the future home of The Christian Church for China's Buddhists, and the comments and suggestions he gave to Prop-Møller, Reichelt's greatest contribution was perhaps made in the field of raising fund for the Tao Fong Shan's architectural construction. In this respect, Reichelt displayed fully his intelligence and capability. There is the well-known and legendary anecdote that he managed to acquire the hill-top site of Tao Fong Shan for practically nothing. The fact is that after the Ching Fong Shan buildings in Nanjing had been burnt down by the Southern army in 1927, Reichelt made consistent efforts to demand compensations from the Republican government of Nanjing. In February, 1930, he eventually secured more than 3,690 Mexican dollars from Nanjing municipal government as compensations for the burnt-down Ching Fong Shan buildings. On May 23, 1930, he was able to acquire the hill-top site of Tao Fong Shan with 3,705 Mexican dollars in an auction from Hong Kong government. (Yeung 217)

After being separated from Norwegian Missionary Society, The Christian Church for China's Buddhists had great difficulties in keeping the balance of its expenditures. After acquiring the hill-top site in Shatin, Hong Kong, Reichelt had to face the serious problem of raising money to cover the construction costs of the future Tao Fong Shan buildings. He figured out, however, an ingenious way to solve this problem. When Pip-Møller drew the first overall design draft of Tao Fong Shan buildings, Reichelt managed to redraw it into a planimetric map (Figure 8), estimated the construction costs as about 35,000 Norwegian Crowns, and then divided the map into one hundred squares of equal size, each having the value of 350 Norwegian crowns. Then he published this planimetric map in the journal of *Buddhist Missionen*, calling the readers to pledge donations on these individual squares. This method of crowd funding proved to be very effective. Within one year's time, all the estimated construction costs had been pledged by enthusiastic donors. To ensure the double security, Reichelt called a meeting for the leaders of the Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish missions

within The Christian Church for East Asia's Buddhists, and distribute the construction costs among these three missions. For example, the Swedish mission had to pay 10,000 crowns for the construction of the Holy Temple; the Norwegian mission had to pay 15,000 crowns for the construction of roads and wells, etc. After the target of the first round of fund-raising had been met, Reichelt immediately started the second round of fund-raising of 150,000 Norwegian crowns. Once again, the second target was met in May, 1934 (Buddhist Mission, No.7 July 1934, p.115). With this method of crowd funding, Reichelt had miraculously solved the problem of fund raising.

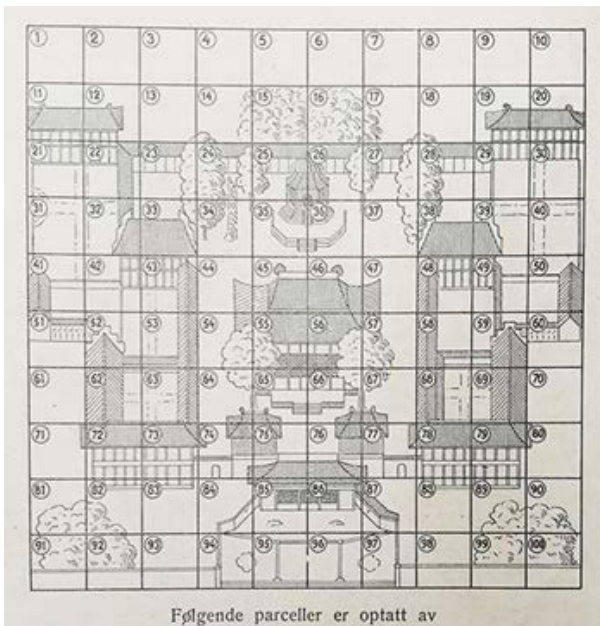


Figure 8. The planimetric map to raise fund (*B.M.*, No.4 April 1930, 63)

Reichelt made frequent journeys to various Buddhist monasteries in different parts of China and wrote down his observations and impressions of these places. In order to attract the attention of the Scandinavian readers so that they could make generous donations for the construction of Tao Fong Shan buildings, he published vivid stories of his travel in almost every issue of *Buddhist Missionen*. The two most impressive series of stories are respectively one about the Tibetan journey made together by Reichelt and the Prip-Møllers during June through October, 1932, and the other about Reichelt's journey to Mongolia and North China in 1935. During the first of the above-mentioned journeys, Reichelt and the Prip-Møllers first sailed by steamship from Hong Kong to Shanghai, and then sailed from Shanghai to the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, passing by Nanjing, Wuhan, Yichang, Wanxian, Chongqing, Kiating Fu, Omei Mountains, and Tatsianlu. Everywhere they went, they would visit some



Figure 9. Tao Fong Shan during June-August, 2017

local Buddhist monasteries. Reichelt would describe in details those monasteries, measure the size of their great halls, comment on their architectural style, and compare their architectural style with that of Tao Fong Shan. The reason why he traveled together with the Prip-Møllers was perhaps that they thought it would be easier for them to exchange ideas on how to improve and perfect Tao Fong Shan's architectural style. The second journey was almost as marvelous as the first. After visiting the Lama temples in Inner Mongolia, Reichelt also visited many famous Buddhist temples on Wutaishan Mountains, one of the four sacred lands of China's Buddhism. Then they went on to visit the Nestorian Tablet in Xian, and other scenic spots of Huashan Mountains, and Longmen Grottoes. On their way back to Hong Kong, they passed by Hankou, Nanjing, Shanghai, and made a special visit to Hangzhou, where Reichelt visited Lingyin Monastery for the fourth time, where he also met S. D. Sturton, superintendent of the CMS hospital, and Robert Ferris Fitch, vice president of Hangchow Christian College.

4 Conclusion

From the above review and analysis, we understand that the original idea of having a Buddhist architectural style for the Christian ecumenical center came from Karl Ludvig Reichelt. As a scholar of comparative religions, he found many common features between Chinese Buddhism and the Gospel of John in New Testament. In order to promote the missionary work among China's Buddhists, he tried to create an environment in which the inquiring Buddhists would find it comfortable and at ease. Reichelt's another contribution is in raising money for the construction of Tao Fong Shan buildings. His method of

crowd funding proved to be practical and effective.

The co-operation between Reichelt and the Danish architect Johannes Prip-Møller is the most important factor for the evolution of architectural style of Tao Fong Shan. Prip-Møller had ten years' experiences of working in China and was a top-notch expert in China's Buddhist architecture. His professional expertise has ensured that Karl Ludvig Reichelt's idea of combining the traditional Chinese Buddhist architectural style and the Christian nature of Tao Fong Shan buildings could be eventually realized.

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