

# Local Knowledge and Interpretation of Culture of the Construction Craftsmanship of the Bamboo Theater for San Kong Opera of A-Ma Temple in Macao

澳門媽閣廟神功戲棚營建技藝的地方性知識與文化闡釋

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## Research Background

Macao has a long history of maritime culture represented by sea god beliefs, primarily worshipping Tin Hau (Mazu), Hung Shing, Tam Kong, and other sea deities. Sea god temples were mostly built along port coastlines, forming a unique urban spatial pattern of "mountain-city-temple-harbor-sea". The temple forecourt serves as public activity space, with gods-reward opera (San Kong Opera, 「神功戲」 in Chinese) being the core ceremony of deity birthday celebrations.

Bamboo Theater (「戲棚」 in Chinese) is a traditional temporary theater paradigm spread in Macao for celebration during folk religious festivals. Instead of being built as a highly articulated and permanent structure like any other theater buildings, theaters for gods-reward opera are temporary theaters that only exist for several days a year and can be quickly built and dismantled. To achieve the unique features of such temporary theaters, bamboo and wood are mainly used as construction materials due to their lightweight and flexible nature, as well as their ecological and economical sustainability, hence the name "bamboo theater for San Kong Opera (「神功戲棚」 in Chinese)".

## Research Gap

Existing research focuses on the ritual functions of ritual opera from perspectives of drama studies, folklore, and anthropology. Lack of architectural perspective on the construction and tectonics of bamboo theaters. These articles use Macao SAR's two largest existing bamboo theaters of Tam Kong Temple in Coloane and A-Ma Temple in Macao as case studies to fill this gap. The bamboo theater of A-Ma Temple is the oldest bamboo theater in Macao with historical pictorial evidence and the existing bamboo theater with the largest single-span bamboo arch and the only bamboo theater equipped with spectator stands which has a construction history of over 200 years. The bamboo theater of Tam Kong Temple is the largest existing bamboo theater and the only bamboo theater retaining a sea-land form.

## Core Arguments

The articles point out that the construction of the bamboo theater is not merely a technical activity but a space of Rites de Passage embodying the cultural concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity". In an era of mechanization and artificial intelligence, this traditional construction technique—hand-built, orally transmitted, and adapted to natural conditions—demonstrates timeless value of "responding to change with constancy".

**Cultural Spatial Value:** Bamboo theaters are important spatial carriers of Macao's sea god belief culture, embodying spiritual connections between "human-god-sea".

**Construction Wisdom:** Traditional craftsmanship adapting to local conditions and materials, demonstrating profound understanding of tidal patterns and material properties.

**Urban Anchoring Function:** Sea god temples and their theater activities serve as structural elements in Macao's historic urban landscape layering.

**Contemporary Inspiration:** Against the background of folk revival, systematic protection mechanisms need to be established to inherit architectural construction wisdom.

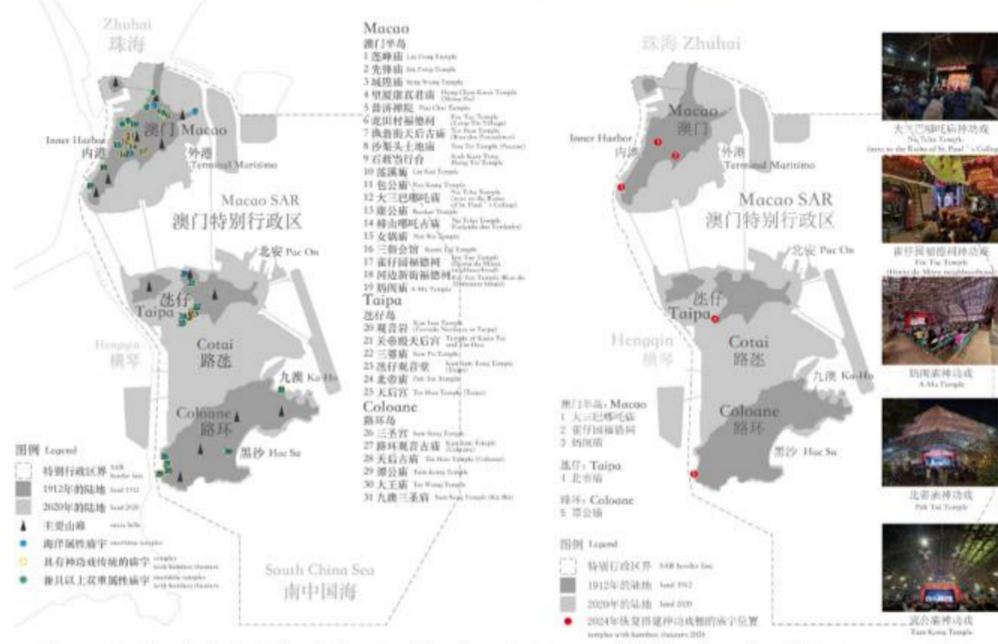


Figure 1 & 2. Historical and existing distributions of temples related to sea god beliefs and temples with San Kong Opera in Macao

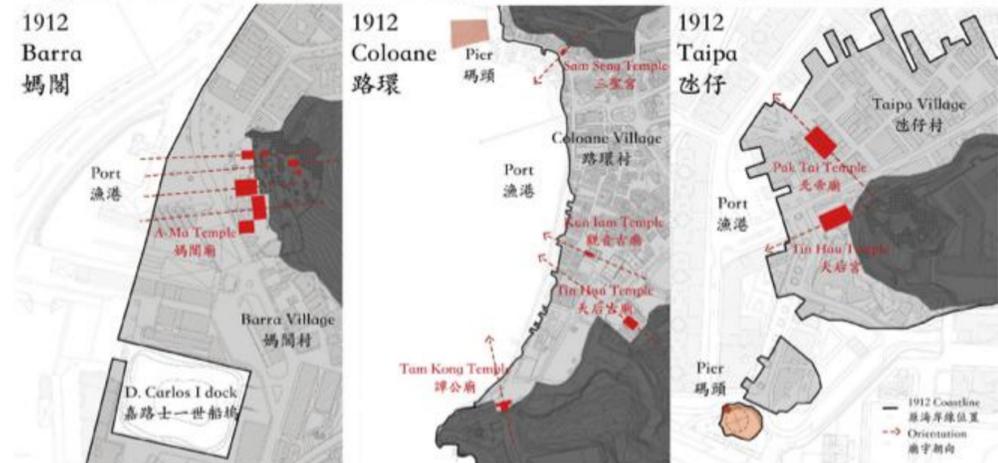


Figure 3. The urban spatial pattern of "mountain-city-temple-harbor-sea" in Macao

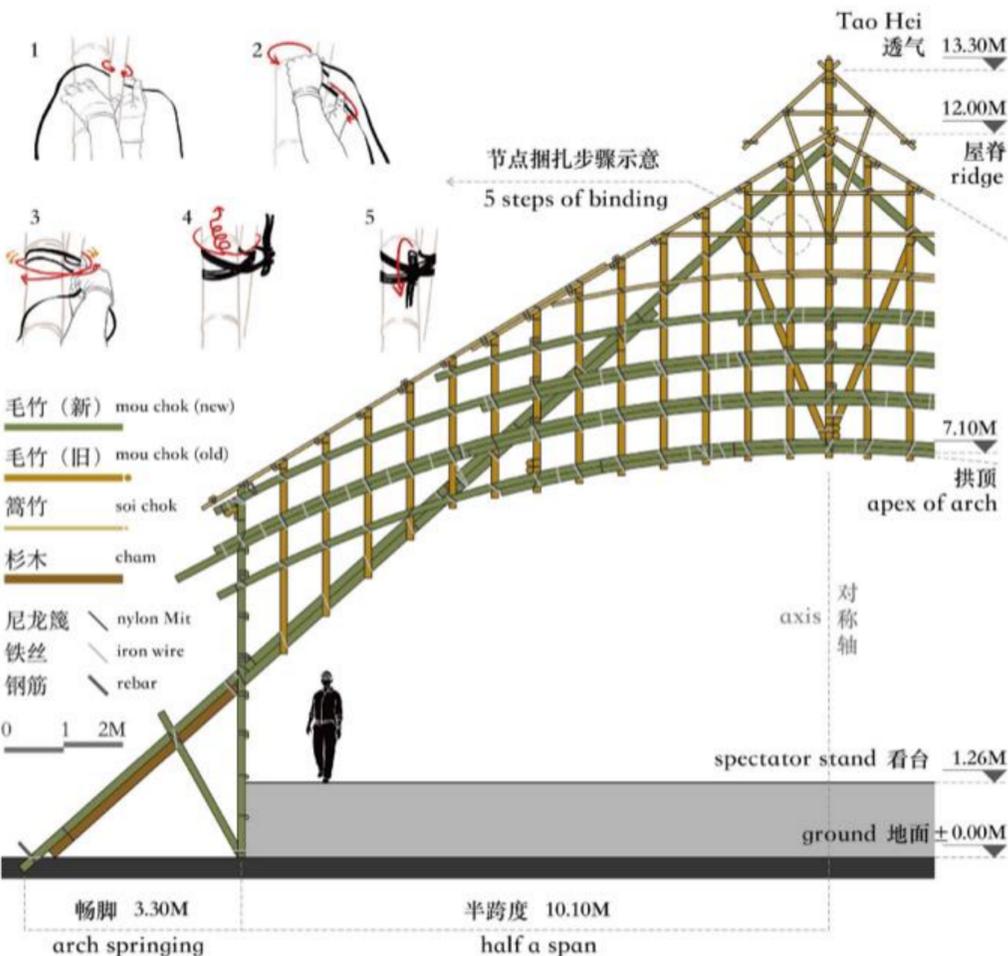


Figure 10. Section of the bamboo theater of A-Ma Temple

Figure 1, 3, 4, 6, 8 & 9 source: MAI S, ZHANG X T, LIU X. Construction and tectonics of bamboo theater for Gods-reward Opera of Tam Kong Temple in Coloane, Macao[J]. New Architecture, 2024(2): 16-21. DOI: 10.12069/j.na.20231147

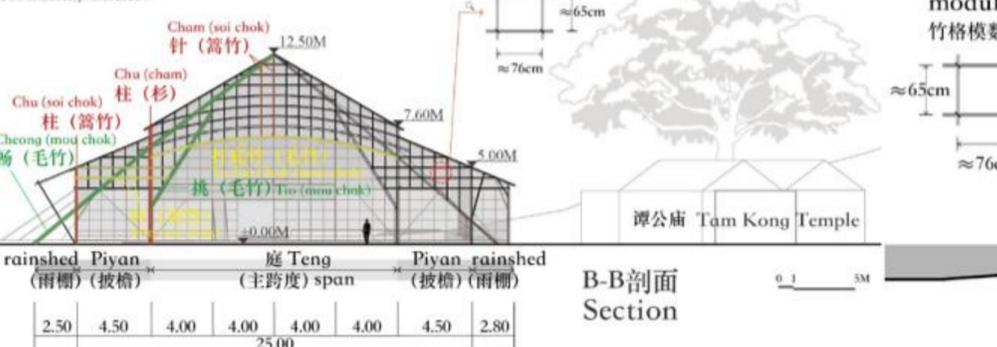


Figure 8 & 9. Sections of the bamboo theater of Tam Kong Temple

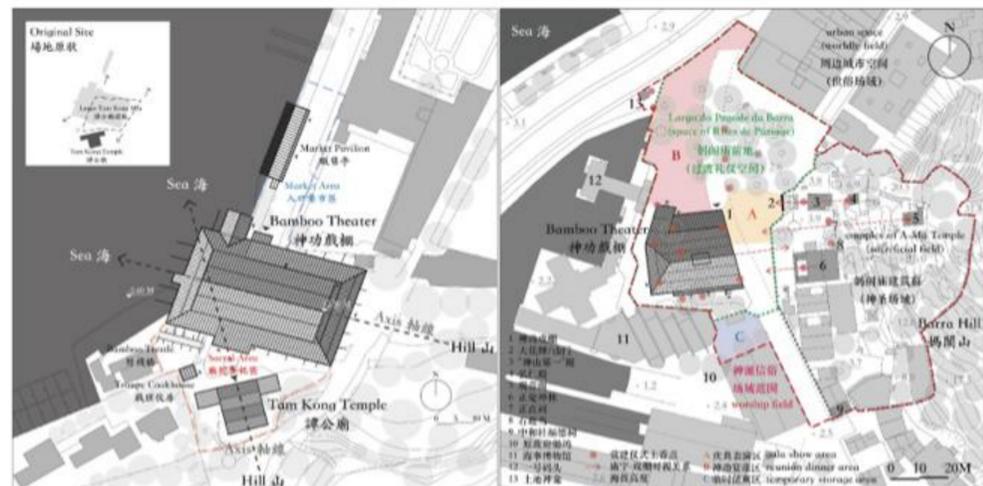


Figure 4 & 5. Site plans of bamboo theaters of Tam Kong Temple and A-Ma Temple

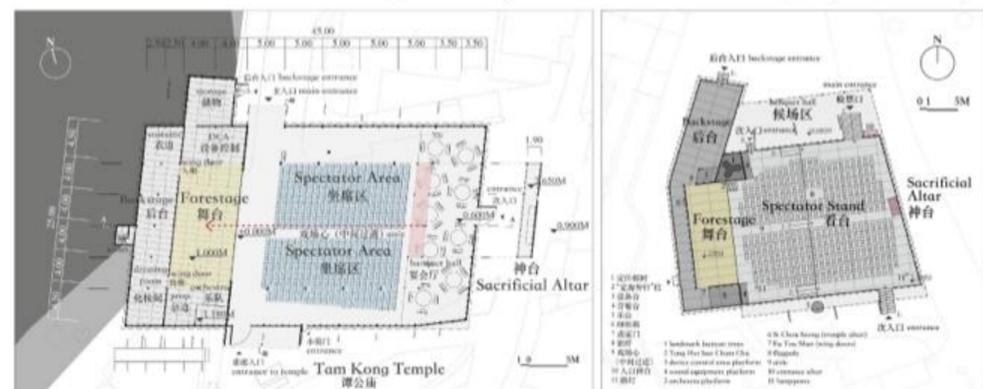


Figure 6 & 7. Plans of bamboo theaters of Tam Kong Temple and A-Ma Temple