



Application of Hakka Elements in Design-Novel Oil Paper Umbrella Designs Featuring Meinong Culture

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Abstract

The Meinong District is a unique Hakka district in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, with significant cultural appeal. The area is renowned nationwide for its popular oil paper umbrellas. Images of villages or tribes in Taiwan with distinct cultural features are often portrayed by the special products these places manufacture. The Meinong District is famous for its oil paper umbrellas which are used as a visual representation of the local culture. This is extremely significant for the importance and continuance of Meinong culture. As such, this study investigated the use of cultural elements in the oil paper umbrellas handmade in Meinong, Kaohsiung. The results of this study revealed:

- (1) the long history of Meinong oil paper umbrellas is rich with cultural information and significance;
- (2) the Meinong area has numerous cultural elements that can be used in creating oil paper umbrellas; and
- (3) new aesthetic perspectives can enhance the innovative design of Meinong oil paper umbrellas.

Keywords: Hakka culture; Meinong culture; innovative design; oil paper umbrella

1. Background and Objectives

The Meinong District is a Hakka district in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, with a beautiful natural environment rich in natural resources. The industrious and intelligent Meinong people have created their own vibrant local culture. Meinong oil paper umbrellas are significant in the propagation of Meinong culture. This study investigated how the Meinong cultural elements were converted into visual symbols and integrated into oil paper umbrellas in order to create a physical representation of the local culture. Oil paper umbrella designs have seen multiple breakthroughs throughout history; this study hoped to discover how cultural elements have been applied.

Meinong cultural elements were surveyed and analyzed to determine the essence and meaning within in order to transform them into forms that can be applied in oil paper umbrellas. In addition, the various umbrella styles and designs were investigated to further explore the beauty of the Meinong district and its hidden culture. The following three topics regarding the application of traditional Meinong elements in oil paper umbrellas were addressed in order to recreate and reinterpret Meinong culture:

1. Past expressions of Meinong culture and the historical value of oil paper umbrellas.
2. The current cultural traits of the Meinong District and visual characteristics of oil paper umbrellas were used to compile various umbrella styles and designs.
3. How integrating Meinong cultural elements helps retain the traditional culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The history of Hakka culture

The Chinese characters for Hakka literally mean "guest families." The Hakka originated from central China and moved in a series of migrations due to natural disasters or wars (Xu, 2006). Today, the Hakka are distributed throughout southern China, mainly in eastern, northern, and western Guangdong Province, southeastern Guangxi Province, western Fujian Province, and southern Jiangxi Province. The Hakka ancestors maintained their Han cultural traditions from the central plains while constantly absorbing southern Chinese culture; gradually, this culminated in the Hakka language and culture. The fundamentals of Hakka culture can be understood by examining all the basic aspects of their lives (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Hakka Tu-Lo Buildings

The Hakka population forms the second-largest ethnic group in Taiwan and was one of the largest groups of early immigrants. Hakka immigrants arrived in Taiwan at different times and at different places, so they are dispersed throughout the island; however, they mostly reside in western Taiwan. The Hakka people are divided into dialect groups with different dialects distinguishing one group from another. Dialects serve as the most basic bonds between Hakka

people, in addition to being the most widely recognized. Similarly, one important reason why one dialect group refers to other dialect groups as Hakka is because they have their own dialect (Wang, 1998).

Hakka culture has many special aspects; important material objects include Hakka cuisine, dried persimmons, handmade art, common household objects, and tung flowers, while important abstract elements include being hardworking, economical, and conservative (Liao, 2011). Huang (2010) summarized Hakka cultural factors in terms of four dimensions: spiritual attitude, lifestyle, subtle ethnicity, and government promotion of cultural reinvention.

2.2 Meinong culture

The Meinong District, originally Minong, is a Hakka village located in the northeast corner of Kaohsiung, Taiwan. The Meinong Hakka people are conservative, industrious, and frugal, and most of them originated from Jiaoling County, Meizhou City, Guangdong Province in China. The area was given its name because it is situated in the mountains and has abundant water resources, and in years past, those who lived there were all farmers. Approximately 90% of the residents are Hakka and Meinong District is one of the few villages in Taiwan to completely retain the Hakka culture. There are many records of life and work that pertain to the culture of Meinong, including tobacco buildings, huofang (communal housing), temples (Figure 2), "respect for writing" pavilions, worshipping Kaiji Bogong, Hakka blue shirts, and farming (Figure 3) (Dai, 2006).



Figure 2: Traditional temple



Figure 3: Farming tools

The "Meinong Tourism Guide" published by the Meinong District Office in 2005 provides an overall description of the local culture: "The Meinong people of Yueguang Mountain are hardworking and studious. They have created a beautiful home and contributed many intellectual and cultural developments, including tobacco buildings, Hakka blue shirts, oil paper umbrellas, bantiao noodles, ceramics, and 'respect for writing' pavilions." In general, when discussing Meinong Hakka culture, the items most commonly mentioned are tobacco buildings, blue shirts (Figure 4), oil paper umbrellas, Hakka cuisine (Figure 5), ceramics, and "respect for writing" pavilions.



Figure 4: blue shirts



Figure 5: Hakka cuisine

Huang (2002) stated that Meinong Village is similar to other villages throughout Taiwan in its developments and changes; however, its geographical environment, population structure, and relationships with outsiders make it different from many other places. Meinong Hakka culture is widely known across Taiwan as it strives to maintain its integrity; the clothing, staple foods, housing, and music reflect the intellectual culture created as the Hakka people immigrated and adapted to different environments. However, Wang (1999) maintained that this type of lifestyle stemming from natural adaptation is no match for the modern and electrical trends and that many characteristics and values are gradually disappearing.

In summary, Hakka and Meinong cultural elements can be combined and divided into six categories: history, geography, popular culture, natural landscape, cultural innovation, and personality traits (Table 1).

Table 1 Synoptic table of important Meinong cultural elements (source: compiled by the Author)

Category	Representative object
Historical culture	Huofang, sanhe yuan, tobacco buildings, East Gate Tower, "respect for writing" pavilions, Yongan Old Street, Tianhou Temple, Meinong Water Bridge
Geographical culture	Bantiao noodles, ground tea, long blue shirts, Dongmen kiln, Meinong kiln, tobacco buildings, blue shirts, oil paper umbrellas, Hakka cuisine, ceramics, and "respect for writing" culture
Popular culture	Temple fairs, Hakka music, worship of Tudi Bogong
Natural landscape	Yellow Butterfly Valley, bananas, Zhongzheng Lake, unique terrain
Cultural innovation	Hakka Tung Blossoms Festival, Yellow Butterfly Valley
Personality traits	Hardworking, economical, stubborn, conservative

3. Development of Oil Paper Umbrellas

3.1 The origin of oil paper umbrellas

There are two theories regarding the history of Meinong oil paper umbrellas. One is that an umbrella maker moved from Meizhou City, Guangdong Province, China, to settle in Meinong over one hundred years ago and brought this skill with him; the other is that in 1924, during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, the umbrellas came to Meinong from Chaozhou City, Guangdong, which is why some people call oil paper umbrellas Chaozhou umbrellas (Hou, 2006). Now in approximately their fifth generation of production, these umbrellas have not been passed on for their practicality, but for their artistic and local flavor (Qiu, 2006).

Meinong oil paper umbrellas were originally used to protect against wind and rain, but were replaced by mass-produced foreign umbrellas. Now these umbrellas are valued more for their art and not their practicality. Qiu (2006) stated that the bamboo central shaft of oil paper umbrellas symbolizes being upstanding, just, and selfless; the round shape of the open umbrella also has fortuitous connotations, symbolizing perfect marriages and familial relations. These sentiments have overtaken the popular taboo of giving an umbrella as a gift as an omen for separation, and now the gift of an umbrella symbolizes perfection and unity.

In Hakka society, oil paper umbrellas are practical, but also symbols of good fortune—the profile of an open umbrella resembles the Chinese character for person and the Chinese character for umbrella has four small "people" under a larger umbrella, which ties the character to the old Chinese saying "five children pass the imperial exams," which in turn symbolizes many children and grandchildren. Those living in farming villages always hoped to have many children to help tend the fields; therefore, a traditional Hakka custom was to include an umbrella as part of the dowry when marrying off a daughter, drawing on this symbolism (Zeng, 2001).

As evidenced by past literature, oil paper umbrellas have a multifaceted, positive cultural symbolism which illustrates the Hakka people's positive attitude and the importance of oil paper umbrellas in Hakka culture and tradition.

3.2 The culture of oil paper umbrellas

Xiao (2007) concluded that Meinong Village has retained much of the traditional Hakka culture, within which oil paper umbrellas have a particularly deep cultural significance. In Hakka culture, oil paper umbrellas are auspicious; sons are given an umbrella when they grow up to symbolize that they have become adults, and umbrellas are used to protect against evil during weddings and temple fair processions (Figure 6). Chen (2007) claimed that oil paper umbrellas were the item that most represented Meinong culture. The Chinese word for umbrella sounds similar to the word for "avoid"; as such, it is believed that when inauspicious things see an umbrella during religious ceremonies or celebrations, they will hide. Thus, umbrellas are used to drive away evil and protect peace. This illustrates that the profound significance of oil paper umbrellas in Hakka culture extends beyond their practical use.



Figure 6: Umbrellas are used to protect against evil

In order to present Meinong culture in oil paper umbrellas and conserve their cultural value, manufacturers have begun painting on the canopy of the umbrella. Currently there are three types of oil paper umbrellas: traditional, Meinong, and creative. Traditional umbrella canopies include mountains and water, flowers and birds, religious elements, floral fabrics, beautiful women, and buildings (Table 2). Meinong umbrella canopies have exhibited many artistic styles. Looking at the history of traditional oil paper umbrellas, early plain black umbrellas evolved into nature sketches, of which Chinese paintings were most prominent. Umbrella canopy designs have been used to express diverse elements.

According to historical records, early oil paper umbrellas were plain and in solid colors, either light brown or black. Oil umbrella sales were severely impacted by the introduction of foreign umbrellas to the Chinese market. This also spurred the diversification of oil paper umbrellas, leading to paintings of mountains and water, and flowers and birds, increasing their aesthetic value. These patterned oil paper umbrellas were much more expensive than their plain predecessors, inciting development in the paper umbrella economy. In summary, cultural elements (scenery, life, fictional characters, etc.) were incorporated into Meinong oil paper umbrellas to transform an accessory into art, and art into culture. This transformation is the reason that Meinong umbrellas have survived.

4. Application of Cultural Elements

Local Meinong culture mainly uses tung flowers, floral fabrics, blue shirts, and local scenery. As tung flowers are themselves aesthetically pleasing, they have been widely used in oil paper umbrellas. Despite being more prevalent in north Hakka groups, the visual beauty of tung flowers has made them popular in the south as well. Thus, tung flowers have become a symbol for Hakka culture. Floral fabrics (Figure 7) are also a special element of Hakka culture that was brought to Taiwan from Guangxi Province, China. This is the preferred pattern for accessories and is often used on backpacks, pant cuffs, pillows, and bed sheets, representing the Hakka people's enthusiastic and cheerful nature. Blue shirts are a common, everyday article of clothing that signifies that the wearer is a Hakka and represents the hardworking and simple nature of the Hakka. The techniques used to make the blue shirts have been passed down

through generations. Using blue shirts on umbrellas expresses the Hakka people's feelings for their traditional clothing and makes for a rare sight for tourists. This broke away from the convention of using plants and scenery, and provided another visual representation for this symbolic clothing.

Local Meinong scenery includes natural scenery, such as bamboo forests. The abundant bamboo is also the reason the umbrella industry could develop as bamboo is used for the umbrella framework (Figure 8). In addition, the sun setting on Zhongzheng Lake provides for another beautiful scene. Man-made scenery includes the East Gate Tower, "respect for writing" pavilions, and tobacco buildings. These scenes and buildings represent Meinong culture as they have a long history and are used to pass down traditional culture.



Figure 7: Floral fabrics



Figure 8: Bamboo is used for the umbrella framework

5. Methods for Applying Cultural Elements in Oil Paper Umbrellas

5.1 Analysis of umbrella canopy art methods

The manufacturing of early oil paper umbrellas was often divided among four master umbrella makers who specialized in a particular part of the process. The process included cutting bamboo, soaking it in water, splitting the bamboo, making the ferrule and ribs (Figure 8), drilling holes, threading string, layering the paper, making the spring latch, attaching the handle, applying tung oil, and beautifying the handle with thread (Lin & Wang, 2010). These masters could only teach their particular craft to their disciples and they only allowed disciples to learn one skill to ensure precision; therefore, making an umbrella took an extremely long time (Meinong Magazine Committee, 1997).

As the terrain of the Meinong area is suitable for bamboo and thick bamboo forests cover the region, the local people used bamboo for the umbrella framework. The hard and flexible circular bamboo frame is made by drilling holes and threading string. Next, paper is glued onto the frame using cottonseed oil. After drying, waterproof tung oil is applied to complete the oil paper umbrella. Application of tung oil adds a waterproof layer, increases the robustness of the paper, and gives the umbrella a clear, transparent shine.

1. Types of umbrella canopies

Oil paper umbrellas can be divided into five categories based on the material of the canopy: paper, silk thread, silk fabric, cotton thread, and Hakka floral fabric. In addition to the traditional oiled paper, silk and floral fabrics were also developed and used as umbrella canopies to enhance the decorative nature of the umbrellas. Silk fabrics were an extension of the silk used in the production of fans. Similar to the floral fabrics, they were used merely for visual aesthetics. The floral fabrics were developed by the Hakka people in order to decorate their daily lives with local flavor. The inherent physical properties of paper umbrellas make them unstable compared to other materials. Six months after purchase, the colors in the canopy will darken along with prolonged sun exposure. This improves the historical value of oil paper umbrellas and makes them better able to mark the passage of time (Figure 9).



Figure 9: The material of the canopy

2. Shapes of oil paper umbrellas

There are currently three shapes of oil paper umbrellas: circular, square, and rectangular. Oil paper umbrellas are traditionally circular, as umbrellas of this shape are easier to carry and, once opened, the unity in a group of juxtaposed umbrellas is aesthetically pleasing. Square and rectangular umbrellas open into special geometric shapes; however, these are less suitable for dense groups. Their forms are not as visually pleasing as traditional round umbrellas. When closed, they have a wing-shaped contour which is uniquely aesthetic (Table 2).

Table 2: Three shapes of oil paper umbrellas: circular, square, and rectangular.

Shapes of oil paper umbrellas			
Open shape			
Close			

3. Types of umbrella canopy art

Oil paper umbrella canopy art styles can be generalized into six categories: Chinese paintings, calligraphy, cartoons, paper cuttings, and stone rubbings. The majority of umbrellas use Chinese paintings and water colors as these forms of artistic expression are more visual than the other types. The protective waterproof tung oil layer also reduces the influence of temperature and humidity, making it easier to directly express cultural sentiments (Table 3).

Table 3 Types of umbrella canopy art

Meinong cultural resources					
Example 1	Chinese paintings	calligraphy	cartoons	paper cuttings	stone rubbings
					
Example 2	Chinese paintings	calligraphy	cartoons	paper cuttings	stone rubbings
					
Example 3	Chinese paintings	calligraphy	cartoons	paper cuttings	stone rubbings
					

5.2 Oil paper umbrella canopies

Meinong Village has numerous cultural resources; as such, umbrella makers select local, popular elements for their materials to apply in canopy art, making the umbrellas more culturally significant. The results of on-site surveys and observations conducted in this study found five major categories of Meinong elements used in oil paper umbrellas (Table 4).

- (1) Architecture and scenery: Historical and cultural landmarks such as tobacco buildings, the East Gate Tower, "respect for writing" pavilions, and Zhongzheng Lake are the epitome of life in Meinong Village and have become representative of Meinong culture, closing the gap between the landscape and the people.
- (2) Floral fabric: Floral fabrics are often used by Hakka people for clothing and bags. The soft, gentle texture gives the umbrellas a sense of intimacy and decoration. An entire sheet of fabric is laid across the umbrella canopy, including the ferrule, to create aesthetic unity.
- (3) Blue shirts: Blue shirts are the most iconic clothing of the Hakka people and are often worn in daily life. Paintings of blue shirts on umbrella canopies create a cartoon-like atmosphere. Enlarged paintings of the elements in the blue shirt collar express a strong symbolism.

- (4) Tung flowers: Tung flowers in full bloom are painted, and colors, such as pink and blue, are added to the traditional white coloration. The canopy backgrounds are often single colors due to the simple coloration of the tung flower; most colors go well with this flower.
- (5) Daily life: Bamboo sieves, bamboo hats, clothes hangers, flower baskets, and gift baskets are all closely connected to Hakka life and represent their wisdom, their traditional and hardworking nature, and numerous priceless experiences gained after years of interaction with the environment and the accumulation of life lessons.

Table 4: Oil paper umbrella canopies

Meinong cultural resources					
Example 1	Architecture and scenery	Floral fabric	Blue shirts	Tung flowers	Daily life
					
Example 2	Architecture and scenery	Floral fabric	Blue shirts	Tung flowers	Daily life
					
Example 3	Architecture and scenery	Floral fabric	Blue shirts	Tung flowers	Daily life
					

5.3. Oil paper umbrella designs

There are three types of umbrella designs based on production and decoration techniques: (1) water color on a flat surface, (2) pasting of paper cuttings, and (3) pasting of torn threads. Each has their own unique characteristics, but as they all are given a layer of tung oil, they have similar practicality in the rain. These three methods provide visual aesthetics without losing their practical function, achieving both artistic and technological designs. Oil paper umbrella design traits include the shape of the canopy, as well as various patterns and colorations, creating a cultural impact. This study analyzed these three oil paper umbrella design methods.

The umbrella shown in Figure 10 diverges in its design from the traditional use of objects; instead of using a complete blue shirt, the elements in the shirt are broken down and only the buttons are used to create a spiral pattern on the canopy. The blue shirt is also used for the basic coloration and yellow has been added for contrast; white space is also integrated to increase the brightness of the canopy. In terms of cultural elements (patterns), the umbrella in Figure 11 is slightly conservative. Traditional images are replicated and the edge of the canopy is red with round tung flower petals. The canopy is left white so that in the sunlight it appears that the flower petals are floating in the air. The umbrella in Figure 12 uses light blue threads to create a texture. Although it does not have any specific cultural significance, it is aesthetically pleasing. The threads exhibit a light quality and when paired with the white canopy, create an aesthetic sensation.



Figure 10: Blue shirt



Figure 11: Round tung flower



Figure 12: Texture

6. Conclusion

Meinong Hakka culture has a rich history which has allowed for the establishment of a special cultural resource; therefore, this study examined Meinong culture in order to identify and fully understand its local elements. A compilation of cultural resources can help demonstrate the developments and uniqueness of Meinong village. The purpose of this study

was to find intrinsic connections within the culture and describe their application in oil paper umbrellas. Meinong elements are passed on through consciousness and memories and create culture through people's lives, thus giving meaning to traditional culture, outlining the network of historical memories, portraying Meinong culture, and continuing history.

Over multiple on-site observations and interviews, the author visited the Meinong Hakka Cultural Museum, Meinong kiln, Meinong Folk Village, Meinong Paper Umbrella Culture Village, Guang Jin Sheng Oil Paper Umbrellas, and Lee Family Oil Paper Umbrellas; personally experienced a famous local cultural center and famous specialty shops; bicycled into Meinong Village to observe the lives of the local people; ate Meinong cuisine, drinking ground tea and eating bantiao noodles; and painted oil paper umbrellas with the Meinong people. During the study, the author gathered a deep understanding of Meinong characteristics and cultural symbols and experienced the passionate and simple lives of the Meinong Hakka people.

The pictures of oil paper umbrellas and local customs taken during the field research were summarized to categorize and analyze the cultural elements. The results showed that the materials used for artistic Meinong oil paper umbrella culture stemmed from everyday life, nature, and objects. The general public has a certain impression and understanding of Meinong elements due to the long history and renowned reputation of Meinong oil paper umbrellas. In this modern environment, modifications of and innovations using Meinong symbols and elements in oil paper umbrella designs provide a new cultural experience for the general public.

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