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Individual paper:

**Study of Lo Pan /Lu Ban (魯班)  
as a symbol represented in  
Chinese craftsmanship and building culture**

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Student:

Leung Mok Kwan, Simon

Subject Leader:

Prof. Laurent Gutierrez

Co-Presenters:

Dr. Valerie Portefaix

## Study of Lo Pan /Lu Ban (魯班) as a symbol represented in Chinese craftsmanship and building culture

### Introduction

Lo Pan (507 BC-444 BC) was a well-known craftsman, inventor, architect and engineer in the late Spring and Autumn period. He played a crucial role in inventing war instruments for the Chinese Civil War (Yan, 2007) and inventing production tools for the happiness of people. His inventions are still widely applied today and Lo Pan himself is revered as the 'ancestor' in Chinese craftsmanship and building industry.

This paper will call back the past of Lo Pan and examine how Lo Pan being a symbolic idol of Chinese craftsmanship and building culture in five aspects (body, object, image, space & time).



## Body



*Lu Ban, the inventor in the late Spring and Autumn Period, by Li Shinan 李世南.*

Lo Pan is greatly valued as the god of Craftsman but not many historical records of Lo Pan's appearance left. The widely circulated portrait above is the general depiction of Lo Pan by a Chinese contemporary artist, Li Shinan. Unlike other Chinese patron saints, Li relived Lo Pan with short and messy beard, sincere and toothpaste smile and clad in shapeless cloth, that are the perspectives of ancient working class, especially, the blue-collar class.

In ancient China, the length of the beard represents the social dignity of a person. The scholars, officials, generals wore long beard which implies wise and power while the working class usually wore a short beard. Lo Pan indicates the cultural outfit of the group of manual workers.

*'The most common fake beards are for a young male, the three-skein beard (sanran); for a healthy, upper-class male character, full beard (manran); ..... for a fierce, low-ranking official or a servant, the short full beard (ertaoran)' (Ye, 2008, P.84)*

## Object

The main reason of making Lo Pan as a symbol of Craftsmanship industry is the cultural objects he invented which are being used in our daily life.

*'Lu Ban therefore began inventing and improving his tools, including the saw, planning tool, drill and shovel, carpenter's ink marker, carpenter's square, and hook and peg on the ink marker.'* (Yan, 2007, P.270)



The Luban's Ruler/ Carpenter's Square (魯班尺/ 矩) is the most representative tool of Lo Pan's invention. It serves as a measuring guidance for the Chinese. The craftsmen and designers have been complied with this measuring rule ever since. The basic unit of the ruler is divided into eight segments, each segment refers to a symbol, which is 'Wealth'(財), 'Disease'(病), 'Separation'(離), 'Righteousness'(義), 'Career'(官), 'Calamity'(劫), 'Evil'(害), and 'Origin'(本). Determining the dimensions of an object or a building should be following the instruction of the ruler: 'seek luck and avoid calamity'(趨吉避凶), the length should be set within 'Wealth', 'Righteousness', 'Career', 'Origin' those four segments. Lo Pan applied Feng Shui(風水) into metrology and this cultural tool caters the spiritual needs of people and builds the structure and dimension of an object in harmony and balance.

Apart from the cultural tools, Lo Pan himself acts as a cultural object exists in many forms. He appears in temples, TV drama, movies, story books, idioms, poetries and even in a puzzle game. There is also a prize is named after Lo Pan. It embodies the degree of worship that people towards Lo Pan's hard-working and innovative spirits and to his inventions.

## Image

Lo Pan is remolded as craftsman master, the ancestor of carpenters and the god of industrial guardian in narrative ways. There

are several Chinese idioms portray Lo Pan as a craftsmanship expert, such as, '班門弄斧':

班 means Pan; 斧 means Axe, one of Lo Pan's invention; Literally: playing hatchet in front of Lo Pan, it implies 'never play tricks in front

of experts'. '準繩分曲直，規矩定方圓' is the maxim that displays in every temple of Lo

Pan. 準繩 refers to carpenter's ink marker; 規矩 means compass and carpenters' square.

Literally, 'yardstick distinguishes the straightness, compass regulates the shape'. Lo Pan, as a craftsman master, gave advice for the posterity that the accuracy of dimension is the key element in construction, otherwise, it ruins the stability and symmetry of the building.

Like other Chinese deities, many folklores of Lo Pan circulate around. Lo Pan invented Wooden Horse Carriage and Wooden Kite for military reconnaissance purposes. The kite he made could carry a person and fly for 3 days (Yan, 2007). Those folklores are the vital



factor to make people hold Lo Pan in awe and build up his image. The worship of Lo Pan raises the social status of carpenters, craftsmen and Sam Hong workers (三行工人, construction workers) to a certain extent.

*'Included among these are those mythical and fantastical elements which feature in myths, or rather in a society's oral traditions which are generally accounted in the form of legends, fairy tales or romances. These traditions hold a considerable place in the folk cultures of the world and form an important part of the study of folklore.'* (Mauss, 2005, P.40)

Consequently, Lo Pan stands for the spirit of innovation, practitioner, and perfection, and also is a representative of building and craftsmanship industries. In China, there is an architectural award christened 'The Luban Prize for Construction Project' which is the pinnacle award for the quality Chinese construction projects ran by the China Construction Industry Association. In Hong Kong, another award is called 'Lo Pan Award' aims to 'praise the outstanding Skills Upgrading Scheme trainees in the decoration and building maintenance industry and promote the "Lo Pan Spirit"'.  


## Space

Luban's Ruler and carpenter's ink marker (墨斗) are the instruments people used in creating and determining spatial culture in ancient China. Carpenter's ink marker is an ink container with a rope. Workers use the stained rope to create a straight line to extend space in alignment. On the other hand, Luban's Ruler limits the building space, i.e., the size of door and building, into 'Wealth', 'Righteousness', 'Career', 'Origin' four segments. Lo Pan has a great influence construction industries as he defined a building philosophy by putting metrology into building space harmony and balance in a literal way.



*'The con. intended or unintended effect of social practices and therefore an integral part of the reproduction of everyday life.'* (Hubbard & Kitchin, 2010, P.463)

In a liberal way, Lo Pan's inventions, spirits and building philosophy are intended and unintended effects of social practices across the boundary through Chinese emigration and cultural exchange. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang gave a hand-made Lu Ban Lock, the traditional puzzle game, as a national gift to German Chancellor Merkel at a Sino-German bilateral forum. This national gift revealed the consummate craftsmanship and ancestral wisdom of China which



affirmed that Lo Pan was advancing himself in craftsmanship industry on the international scene.

The Chinese diaspora brought Lo Pan's spirit and cultural heritage to the world. There are many Lo Pan Temples built in Chinese settlements around the world, mainly in Southeast Asia.

## Time

*'Design must at least be contemporary, or it will not be remembered long enough to be judged as timeless. Perhaps the best a designer can hope for is to remain in dialogue with changing culture, practicing a career of evolving relevancy that accumulates in the creation of what will eventually be judges as timeless work.'* (Cloninger, P234)

Over the years, Lo Pan's inventions are independent of trends. His cultural objects are timeless and can be found in everyday life. Saw, Luban's Ruler and carpenter's ink marker are across the time as the essential tools craftsmen used these days. Even though some of his inventions has been improved by the descendants, his contributions to craftsmanship and building industries are no room for doubt.

The 13<sup>th</sup> June of the Lunar Calendar is Lu Pan Patron's Day. On that day, people who are engaged in building and construction industries would go to Lo Pan Temple to show their respects, i.e., worship rituals, festivals, and 'Master Meal', and pray for their work goes



well in the coming year. Those celebration events demonstrate the status and nobility of Lo Pan among people.

## Conclusion

Those cultural outcomes inspired from Lo Pan are kind of image-breaking and image-making process that made Lo Pan to be the symbolic figure in Chinese craftsmanship and building aspects. Lo Pan is a synonym for painstaking, perseverance, innovation and skillful. He became a spirit and code of ethics in the industry that forms a unique Chinese craftsmanship and building culture - the 'Lo Pan Culture'.

*'Human culture is then the form of those forms of space and time....there are as many kinds of human experience, moulded by those spatiotemporal forms, as there are cultures.'* (Huang & Zürcher, 1995, P.4)



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