Fuzhou Ting Status Report of December 10, 2010:

This status report will be short – perhaps the shortest ever – and, here it goes. Tile roofing continued, and a jet engine heater blew hot air intermittently in the enclosed part of the Ting to help the curing process for the stucco on the infill walls.

Last week, we talked about decoration components. You got a taste of the use of the bat and the dragon head on some of the pieces. On today’s menu is fish. I’ve got two specials for you – the “corner fish” and the “hanging fish.”

A. The “Corner Fish” (角鱼 Jiao Yu):

These are the four fish-shaped decorative wood pieces installed on the four corners of the main roof. The corners are where three rooflines converge – the tail end of the Corner Ridge and a fascia board from either side of it. The rooflines are all curving up and, if not “tied down” or “stabilized”, would appear to be “lifting up and flying away.” This is where the “Corner Fish” pieces come into play. Pointing downward, they work ingeniously at four critical points of the roof system, calming down the entire structure, all the while achieving a balance, both visually and aesthetically. Small wonders, working almost like acupuncture needles, are they not?

The first character 角 Jiao means corner or angle, and the second character 鱼 Yu is fish. The two characters together happen to form a biological term which means cowfish, but I doubt it has anything to do with cowfish, other than perhaps the shape. I believe the first character works as the adjective, hence the translation of “Corner Fish.” Also, I don’t see fish appearing on these pieces for the Fuzhou Ting, and I am not sure about other Chinese structure. What is more important is that fish pronounces the same as 餘 which means residual, left-over, or remaining, which implies that you have plenty to spare. Therefore, fish is among the most popular symbolic animals that Chinese love to use on architecture, decoration, paintings, artwork, etc., and it means wishing for abundance.

B. The “Hanging Fish” (悬鱼 Xuan Yu):

“Hanging Fish” is a particular term in Chinese architecture (and I am not sure whether “Corner Fish” is also), and it refers to the fish-shaped decorative piece of (mostly) wood installed on the top of the gable (also known as the “hanging mountain wall”) underneath the main ridge. There are two of them on the Fuzhou Ting, one in the front and the other in the back. They are hanging and “floating” out of the surface of the gables, making the flat gables not as plain to look at.

The first character 悬 Xuan pronounces like the word “shoe” quickly followed by the word “one”, and it means hang or suspend. The second character 鱼 Yu is fish. Like the
“Corner Fish”, the “Hanging Fish” has the connotation of wishing for abundance. For the Fuzhou Ting, there are actually two fish carved on each “Hanging Fish”. In addition, there is a Tai Chi logo carved on top of the fish. I am not sure what the intent of the designer/artisan was when they threw that in or if this is THE combination that must be used. Then, again, it doesn’t matter. The artwork as a finished product is in its own existence and is up to the interpretation and appreciation of the viewers. We know Tai Chi is a philosophy and art of balancing the forces of Yin and Yang (Yin and Yang referring to, respectively, negative and positive, or gentleness and assertiveness, for lack of better terms). The “Hanging Fish” pieces for the Fuzhou Ting remind us to wish for abundance and strive for balance. That would be my interpretation. What would be yours?

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A The “Corner Fish” (角鱼 Jiao Yu)

B The “Hanging Fish” (悬鱼 Xuan Yu)
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