

Construction of Hsinchu Shrine in the Japanese Colonial Period: Focusing on the Matsushima Family

Chang-Wei Li, National Taiwan University of Arts, Taiwan
Chia-Yi Chang, National Taiwan University of Arts, Taiwan

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Abstract

This study investigates the technical context and transnational construction process of Hsinchu Shrine during the Japanese colonial period through a semi-structured interview with Yoshitomo Matsushima, director of the Japan Architectural Craft Design Office. The research focuses on the Matsushima family, “*Miya-daiku*” (shrine carpenters) from Dazaifu, Fukuoka. It confirms that the master carpenters recorded on the Hsinchu Shrine munafuda—Matsushima Shigeru, Matsushima Sadayoshi, and Matsushima Yoshimitsu—were brothers. Originating from a barrel-making background, the family transitioned to shrine carpentry and established long-term collaborations with the Ashizu Workshop of Fukuoka and architect Sunami Takashi. During the approximately two-and-a-half-year construction period of Hsinchu Shrine, the male members of the family relocated to Taiwan as a group, managing both onsite technical execution and daily life necessities. By synthesizing oral history and archival documents, this research reconstructs the life histories of these craftsmen and illustrates the dynamic processes of technical organizations, labor mobility, and the flow of construction materials between Taiwan and Japan.

Keywords: Hsinchu Shrine, shrine architecture, *miya-daiku*, Matsushima family, Japanese colonial period

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Introduction

The Remains of Hsinchu Shrine and Its Attached Buildings, a municipal historic site in Hsinchu City, Taiwan, provide significant physical evidence of historical timber construction methodologies. While existing literature outlines the political history and spatial layout of the shrine, documentation regarding the specific builders and their technical lineages remains incomplete. Investigating these craftsmen is necessary to establish an empirical baseline for the ongoing first-phase restoration project and to document the technical parameters of the original construction.

Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To reconstruct the lineage and technical history of the Matsushima family, the *Miya-daiku* (shrine carpenters) responsible for building the Hsinchu Shrine.
2. To identify individual roles and trace cross-regional labor mobilization within the construction process.
3. To examine how their traditional craft adapted to post-war technical and environmental changes, thereby establishing the historical value of the shrine through the lens of architectural technology and providing an empirical reference for the restoration project.

Figure 1

Historical Photograph of Hsinchu Shrine



Source: National Diet Library

Research Methodology

This paper integrates oral history with archival verification. The primary source material was collected during an interview conducted on December 7, 2025, at the Japan Architectural Craft Design Office within the Jinja-Honcho in Tokyo. The informant, Mr. Matsushima Yoshitomo, is the son of Matsushima Yoshimitsu and the nephew of *Tōryō* (master carpenter) Matsushima Shigeru, and currently serves as the director of the office, maintaining direct access to family records, logs, and corporate archives. To verify the oral data, the testimonies were

systematically cross-referenced with the Hsinchu Shrine *munafuda*, historical construction photographs from the National Diet Library of Japan, and the corporate records of Aarii Construction.

Research Findings and Discussion

Technical Evolution: From *Okeya* to *Miya-daiku*

The Matsushima family originally operated an *okeya* (barrel-making) workshop in Dazaifu, Fukuoka Prefecture. From the perspective of technological history, the transition from utilitarian vessel production to *Miya-daiku* was facilitated by shared tool proficiencies. The fabrication of watertight barrels required precise handling of the *kanna* (plane) and specialized techniques for shaping curved timber. Additionally, *okeya* work demanded exactness in processing *hanamono* (small decorative pieces or offcuts). This proficiency in extracting precise structural components from raw wood laid the technical foundation for executing complex joinery and sacred ornamentation.

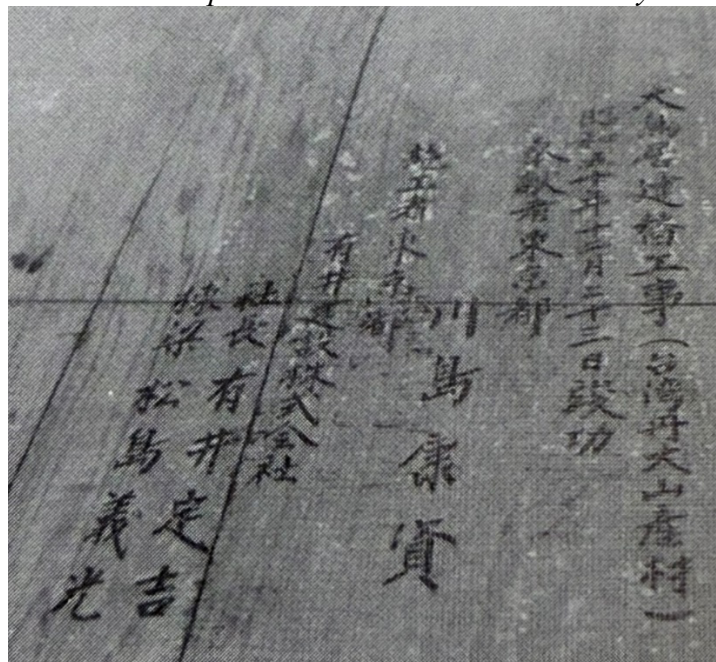
The formal transition to shrine carpentry began with the patriarch, Tokutaro Matsushima, who secured maintenance work at the Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine, establishing a specialized craft practice wherein all six of his sons trained as *Miya-daiku*. The family operated via a structured division of labor: the eldest son, Matsushima Shigeru, served as the *Tōryō*, managing the technical core, while the branch family provided administrative support through Tokuji Matsushima (Tokutaro's brother), who acted as the *Genba Dairinin* (site proxy). The lineage expanded its operations by working with the Ashizu Shaji Komusho, an organization founded by Kojiro Ashizu that funneled skilled Kyushu craftsmen into major regional construction projects.

Onsite Roles and Craftsmanship at the Hsinchu Shrine

The construction of the second-phase Hsinchu Shrine (circa 1940) lasted approximately two and a half years. The extant *munafuda* confirms the collective mobilization of the family, explicitly listing three biological brothers whose roles reflected a clear generational hierarchy:

1. **Matsushima Shigeru (Eldest Son):** Served as the *Tōryō* and technical lead. He was approximately 52 years old and personally executed all major decorative carvings. His craftsmanship is characterized by *asobi* (artistic playfulness), visible in the deliberate asymmetrical design of the *gegyo* (gable pendants) at the *Ema-den* (votive picture hall), reflecting individual technical autonomy within a standardized framework.
2. **Matsushima Sadayoshi (Fourth Son):** Participated as an intermediate carpenter at approximately 25 years of age. He trained under his eldest brother and later moved to Tokyo, where he founded Aarii Construction.
3. **Matsushima Yoshimitsu (Fifth Son):** Participated as a 15-year-old apprentice. Lacking advanced technical training at the time, he managed daily logistics, tool maintenance, and cooking. Despite his status as an apprentice, his presence was formally recorded on the *munafuda*, showcasing the operational reality of the traditional apprenticeship system.

During the project, only the male family members moved to Taiwan, maintaining a communal residential unit on-site while the female members remained in Kyushu.

Figure 2*The Relationship Between the Matsushima Family and Arii Kensetsu*

Source: Mr. Yoshitomo Matsushima

Professional Networks and Post-war Material Continuity

The family maintained a long-term collaboration with Sunami Takashi, an architect of the Bureau of Shrines (*Jingi-in*). This professional relationship was underpinned by personal trust; Sunami reportedly stayed at Matsushima Shigeru's home during inspection tours of the Dazaifu Tenmangu. Sunami's architectural designs tended to emphasize plant and geometric motifs rather than elaborate animal carvings. This design preference appears to have corresponded well with the Matsushima family's technical expertise in fine timber detailing and *hanamono* craftsmanship.

In the post-war era, the fourth son, Sadayoshi, was adopted into the Arii family (renamed Sadakichi Arii) and established Arii Construction in Tokyo. Facing urban fire codes and timber shortages during the 1950s and 1960s, the firm collaborated with Sunami to translate the proportions and design logic of traditional timber structures into reinforced concrete (RC) architecture, completing the reconstruction of numerous modern shrines.

This network also facilitated a continuous cross-strait flow of construction materials. The lineage systematically documented the properties of Taiwan Hinoki (cypress), noting that its high oil content (*aburake*) provided superior decay resistance in humid climates, though it caused the wood surface to darken (*kurozumi*) over time by attracting dust. Arii Construction utilized Taiwan Hinoki for major post-war projects, including the reconstruction of the Second Torii of Meiji Jingu in 1965 using Alishan timber imported via Kawashima Zaimokuten (Kawashima Lumber), and the reconstruction of the Takekoma Inari Shrine in Sendai.

Conclusion

This study verifies that the three *Miya-daiku* recorded on the Hsinchu Shrine *munafuda* were brothers from the Dazaifu Matsushima family, establishing their lineage and technical

transition from *okeya* to shrine carpentry. The architectural features of the shrine, such as the asymmetrical *gegyo*, demonstrate how master builders exercised individual craftsmanship within standardized frameworks. Furthermore, the lineage's post-war transition to reinforced concrete structures and their continued use of Taiwan Hinoki underscore the continuity of this technical network. These findings provide a specific historical and material baseline to guide the current physical restoration of the Hsinchu Shrine.

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Contact email: a0958909911@gmail.com