

TRAVEL

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You've heard of the National Palace Museum (國立故宮博物院), the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (臺北市立美術館), and probably even the Miniatures Museum of Taiwan (袖珍博物館), but chances are you've never heard of the Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines (順益台灣原住民博物館).

It's not tucked away in some remote town or community. It's in Shilin, diagonally across from the National Palace Museum. But on a recent Sunday, while the latter was teeming with hordes of visitors, hardly a soul strolled the display areas of the Shung Ye Museum.

Unfortunately, many tourists and even local residents neglect to take the time to learn about the history of Taiwan's earliest inhabitants. Images of Aboriginal singers and dancers are widely used to promote tourism, and many tourists are taken by their tour guides to see Aboriginal performances, but few itineraries include a stop at a museum dedicated to the rich culture and fascinating lifestyle of the country's Aboriginal tribes.

This is something the Shung Ye Museum's operators and officials at the Executive Yuan's Council of Indigenous Peoples (行政院原住民族委員會) hope to change, though they acknowledge they need to improve museums that showcase Aboriginal culture.

"In terms of professionalism, manpower and funding, museums focusing on indigenous people's cultures are inadequate in all three areas," said Chen Min-shong (簡明雄), chief of the culture section of the Council's education and culture division.

"We're hoping the museums can become more proactive, by reaching out to educational sectors and doing more self-promotion. Then people will come. We can't simply wait for the tourists to show up," Chen said.

Altogether, Taiwan has about 30 museums devoted to showcasing artifacts from Aboriginal cultures, not counting informal museums in community centers in areas where there are large Aboriginal populations. Many of the museums opened in the late 1990s, and all are non-profit.

Chen said that initially people in the communities where these institutions are located were slow to recognize the importance of their museum. But now the museums are slowly "becoming part of the community" and in recent years overall attendance has been increasing.

"Some museums now offer space for local artists to perform and local residents contribute items to the displays," said Chen. "The residents also like to go there to see old photos."

The Shung Ye Museum is the biggest museum of its kind in Taipei and the second-largest in the country. Other notable museums devoted to Aboriginal culture include the Wulai Atayal Museum (烏來泰雅民族博物館) in Taipei County, the Ketagalan Cultural Museum (凱達格蘭文化館) in Taipei's Beitou District, and the Taiwan Indigenous Peoples Culture Park (台灣原住民族文化園區), which is operated by the Council of Indigenous Peoples Culture Park Area Management Bureau (文化園區管理局) in Pingtung and is the country's largest.

The Shung Ye Museum is perhaps the most accessible and comprehensive of these and is at the forefront of efforts towards improving exhibits and attracting more visitors.

Lin Ching-fu (林清富), an ethnic Han Chinese businessman, opened the museum in 1994. At that time it was Taiwan's first Aboriginal museum, said Lin Wei-chen (林威臣), the museum's supervisor.

The initial collection of 800 to 900 items was donated by Lin Ching-fu, who had collected numerous Aboriginal artifacts over the years. The collection now comprises 2,000 items.

Each year, the large four-story structure attracts about 30,000 visitors. That is not considered a high number, given the museum's size, convenient location and the fact that nearly three quarters of its visitors are students on field trips.

Lin Wei-chen said the museum is not well known among the general public. "People who know are those who really like Aboriginal culture or are students. Of course, we hope there could be more people who visit the museum. That's the greatest hope of our founder," he said.

Part of the reason for the low visitor numbers is that patrons might find the tickets too expensive compared to other museums, he said.

Ticket prices are already quite low, given the museum is entirely funded by Lin Ching-fu. This year, he contributed more than NT\$40 billion, 90 percent of which came from his personal funds and 10 percent from his trading company, Shung Ye Co Ltd. None of that money is used for advertising, said Lin Wei-chen.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHUNG YE MUSEUM AND CINDY SUI

A blast from the past, but who's listening?

Despite its comprehensive displays, the Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines suffers from underexposure

BY CINDY SUI
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

"We put all our budget into operating the museum," he said, noting that the museum has only 10 employees, in addition to 50 volunteers.

To attract more visitors, the Shung Ye Museum has initiated a joint program with the National Palace Museum to offer cheaper admission if patrons buy tickets for both museums. Adults can visit both institutions for NT\$250 and students for NT\$130. (Admission to just the Shung Ye Museum costs NT\$160 for adults and NT\$150 for students.)

The museum has also steadily improved the quality of its displays. In the beginning, these consisted of items such as a model of a traditional house; later, people and animal figurines were added to enliven the displays, and a few years ago the museum commissioned videos to be filmed in Aboriginal villages to show museumgoers how people actually live in such houses. Additional videos show crafts such as cloth weaving, woodcarving and pottery making, as well as traditional dances.

There is little material concerning the problems Aborigines currently face, including encroachment on their land, high rates of unemployment and the danger of losing their languages and culture. But the museum does not shy away from referencing historical events, such as conflicts between Aborigines and Han Chinese settlers and the Wushe Incident (霧社事件) — the biggest and the last rebellion against Japanese colonial forces in Taiwan, which resulted in a massacre of hundreds of Seediq (賽德克) in 1930 by Japanese troops and rival Aboriginal warriors.

Lin Wei-chen said many Aborigines who visit are touched to find that man who founded and funds the museum is not an Aborigine, but he added that for some reason many do not spend much time gazing at the exhibits, perhaps because they believe they already know enough about their own history and culture.

Those who do stand up learning things about their own tribe's culture as well as that of other Aboriginal tribes, said Lin Wei-chen. "They might know their own tribe, but not other tribes."

MUSEUM HIGHLIGHTS

Amis hearth:

This display is a miniature version of the interior of a traditional Amis home. Most such homes were constructed around 100 years ago of bamboo wicker walls and thatched roofs. The floor was covered with bamboo or rattan to insulate the house from the damp earth. The hearth was used for cooking and heating and was the focus of family activities.

Ancestor posts of the Tao:

Ancestor posts are erected under the main roof beam in the rear room of Tao homes. Large posts symbolize ancestral spirits. During the post erecting ceremony, pigs' or goats' blood is smeared on it while the household head recites prayers. When the house is dismantled, the post cannot be used for firewood.

Weaving skills:

This display shows traditional items woven from rattan or bamboo, including a rattan box, fishing basket and backpack.

Slate house:

Slate is common in mountainous parts of southern Taiwan and is used by the Paiwan and Rukai tribes to build homes. Houses made of slate are cool in the summer and warm in the winter. They are also strong enough to endure typhoons. Slate houses are typically divided into four sections: one for daily activities, one for bed platforms, one for food storage and an area for the toilet and pigsty.

Fishing and hunting tools:

This area displays a knife and holder, a spear, bow and arrows, and a fishing net.

Other production tools:

Displays in this area include items used in early Aboriginal hunting and farming, including a large basket for carrying animals after the hunt and tools for startling birds so they don't eat crops.

Drinking culture:

Traditionally, alcohol is consumed only during important ceremonies, so alcoholism was rare. Aboriginal alcohol is generally made from millet. "Over recent decades, under attack by forces of modernization, pressure on living space, changes in productive [sic] methods and a breakdown of traditional communities and culture, patterns of alcoholism broke down [sic], led by excessive consumption, which have had a serious effect on Aborigines' health," states the museum's literature. This section displays wooden cups and a dipper made from a gourd-like vegetable.

Horizontal back-strap loom:

In the old days before man-made thread was available or affordable, making cloth was a time-consuming process. The loom displayed here is typical of the type used by Aboriginal women to make cloth. The weaver first peels the outer surface of the ramie stalk, then twists its fibers into threads. A video shows women demonstrating weaving using a back-strap loom.

Mourning garments (Paiwan and Rukai tribes):

While mourning, women wear triangular black cotton or square ramie cloth. At other times, ordinary people wear only plain colors or blue ramie cloth and may not weave motifs on their clothes. The nobility, however, could wear cloth weaved with patterns depicting the human head or snakes and could wear a wider variety of colors, including red, yellow or green.

Ornaments:

This section shows an array of ornaments, including earrings made of seashells and bamboo, glass beads, leg ornaments, hairpins, bracelets, necklaces, a headdress and a shell-beaded belt. In addition to beautifying the wearer, ornaments also serve to indicate religious belief and social status.

Flower and leaf motifs, are used on rings or headscarves. Fresh lilies are used to adorn women and symbolize female chastity. Rukai men can only wear a lily on their headband if they have successfully hunted five male boars.

Away from home, men of the Tao tribe, who live on Orchid Island, wear silver cone-shaped headwear, rattan armor, chest decorations, armbands and personal knives to serve as ornamentation as well as ritual articles to dispel evil spirits.

Tools for tattooing:

For the Atayal, tattooing serves as an indication of adulthood, an essential aspect of beauty, an indication of personal achievement and virtue, and a means of recognizing other members of their tribe. For the Paiwan and Rukai, tattooing is also used to differentiate among different classes. Tattooing is typically done in the winter to minimize infections and in well-ventilated and well-lit places. A prayer ceremony precedes the process. Needles are forced through the skin using a small wooden mallet or knife. Blood is scraped with a rattan scraper while ash, oil or leaf juices are used as ink. This is repeated one to three times until the design is completed.

Beliefs and rituals:

An introduction is given into the various aspects of animistic beliefs, ancestral spirit worship and head-hunting customs.

Purging sorrow:

In Jhihben Village, after completion of the Annual Festival, young people gather at the home of a family that lost a loved one during the year to extend condolences and purge sorrow through singing and dancing.

Gift shop:

There is, of course, the obligatory gift shop. Unfortunately, although a section in the museum allows visitors to listen to the music of various tribes, the shop does not sell CDs of Aboriginal music.

