

Abreast with the Times in a Panoramic View: The Significance and Operations of the National Palace Museum Southern Branch as a Museum of Asian Art and Culture

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Abstract

The National Palace Museum, originally founded on the national day of the Republic of China on October 10, 1925, was relocated to Taiwan in 1949. It was not until 1965 that, with its collection merged with that of the National Central Museum, the museum was renamed as the National Palace Museum (NPM) and reopened in Waishuangxi of Shilin, Taipei. The past 90 years have seen the rise of the NPM to international fame.

Around 30 years ago, as the NPM was gaining international recognition, the Museum became aware of local expectations for an increased relevance for a museum basing primarily on the imperial collections from the dynastic periods to the local Taiwanese population. In response, the Museum instructed the Department of Rare Books and Historical Documents to compile and publish materials in the imperial archives and maps related to Taiwan and to organize the exhibition "A Special Exhibition of Ch'ing Archive Materials on Taiwan." Later in 1994, the Department of Antiquities organized the exhibition "Great National Treasures of China" at Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, receiving phenomenal success in southern Taiwan. The success of "Great National Treasures of China" resulted in the travelling exhibition "One Hundred Treasures of the National Palace Museum" that travelled to the southern, central, and eastern Taiwan as well as to Penghu islets (a.k.a. Pescadores archipelago) in 1997. While the Museum dedicated itself to meet the public demand for a "north-south balance of cultural wealth," NPM's former director, Chin Hsiao-yi, came up with the idea of opening a branch of the museum in the south. The former director Tu Cheng-sheng then officially announced the construction project of the southern branch in July 2001 and in 2003, a site measuring 70 hectares previously belonging to Taiwan Sugar Corporation in Taibao City, Chiayi County was selected as the location of the Southern Branch Museum. Designed to develop differently from the NPM in Taipei, the Southern Branch was set later as a "museum of Asian art and

culture." According to the NPM Southern Branch Construction Project approved by the Executive Yuan on December 15, 2004, the branch was scheduled to open in 2008. Regrettably, the construction was interrupted by a contract dispute and therefore, the former director Lin Mun-lee had to revise the project and reschedule the opening to 2011.

Before the completion of the hydraulic engineering project on August 8, 2009, the construction site was unfortunately flooded by intense rainfall due to Typhoon Morakot. The construction project was also fraught with legal disputes, resulting in the contract termination with the then construction company. Consequentially, the museum management was urged by the President of the R.O.C., Ma Ying-jeou, to review the entire project in order to overcome obstacles and effectively resolve contract disputes. Under the leadership of the former NPM director Chou Kung-shin, the "Second Amendment to the NPM Southern Branch Preparatory Project" was approved by the Executive Yuan on October 22, 2010, according to which the opening and trial operation of the Southern Branch Museum was set to the end of 2015. The Executive Yuan also decided that the Construction and Planning Agency should take over the construction project while the NPM would focus on the museological aspects including display, curatorial planning, exhibition design, and landscaping design of the 50-hectare outdoor area. The amendment was a breakthrough on the NPM Southern Branch Project and construction eventually resumed and proceeded smoothly with the groundbreaking ceremony held on February 6, 2013 and the beam-raising ceremony on June 5, 2014. The opening of the Southern Branch Museum on December 28, 2015 was scheduled to mark the final culmination of the year-long celebration for the 90th anniversary of the NPM.

This essay is divided into two parts: "Evolving with the Times" and "A Sweeping View of the Southern Branch Museum." The former accounts the decision process of the NPM for the construction of a Southern Branch in response to the social changes in Taiwan. This project was realized through the efforts of five directors spanning 14 years. The project is thus not only an achievement of which Taiwan can be proud but also the first museum across the straits that encompasses art from the entire Asia. The latter describes from a holistic perspective the organisational structure and collection management rules developed according to the principle of "one organisation, one system, integral collection and separate administrations" by the NPM to preserve the organizational completeness of the NPM as a single institution. The latter also presents how the Museum's curators managed to realize the objectives of the Southern Branch Museum of the National Palace Museum: Asian Art and Culture Museum

through in-depth research that resulted in the exhibitions that highlight cultural exchanges and mutual influences at the Southern Branch, drawing objects from the NPM's own collection and Asian artworks borrowed from international institutions.