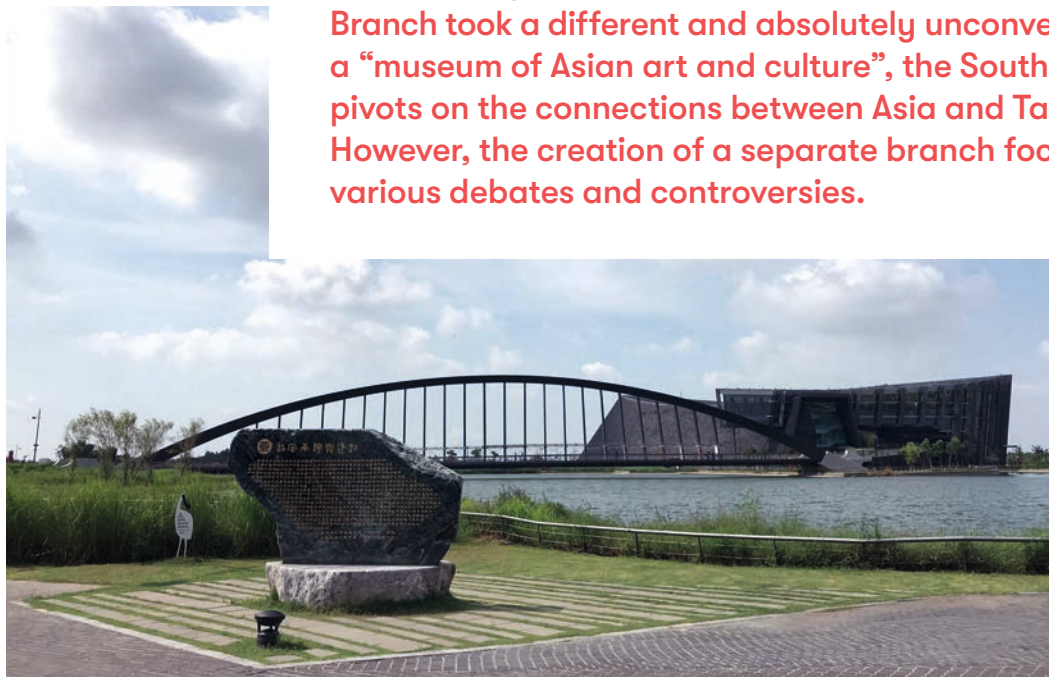


# Representing Asia in the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan

Susan Shih Chang

The Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum (NPM) in Taiwan opened on 28 December 2015 ([south.npm.gov.tw](http://south.npm.gov.tw)). While the main branch in Taipei holds vast collections of Chinese art and antiques, and prides itself as the protector and inheritor of Chinese civilisation, the Southern Branch took a different and absolutely unconventional route. Positioned as a “museum of Asian art and culture”, the Southern Branch is a project that pivots on the connections between Asia and Taiwan’s multicultural history. However, the creation of a separate branch focusing on Asia spurred various debates and controversies.



Above: View of the Southern Branch National Palace Museum. Right: Stupa Railing with Tree Goddesses (2-3 AD, India), situated at the entrance of the exhibition *Imprints of Buddhas*.

For the opening, Chinese nationalist actor Jackie Chan donated replicas of bronze zodiac sculptures originally seated in the Old Summer Palace in Beijing. The gift was publically criticised as a symbol of the looming Chinese history that overshadows Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> Just days after the opening, two of the sculptures were ‘vandalised’ and spray-painted with the text ‘Cultural United Front’. This incident demonstrates how national museums can be battlefields for forging and maintaining political power through dominant ideology, and how museums not only reflect a nation’s political and social development but also, in Taiwan’s case, respond to the ‘imperial centre’ of each era.<sup>2</sup> This event is also one of the many cases that illustrate Taiwan’s public reaction to China, ‘Chineseness’ and the ‘China factor’,<sup>3</sup> signalling a harsh reality that the formation of Taiwanese identity must, in many circumstances, consider China and ‘Chineseness’ as reference points.

My research, which seeks to discover other possibilities for referencing, focuses on how the Southern Branch positions itself as a linkage of Asian heritage and civilization via an ‘intercultural and cross-cultural discourse’. I explore the narratives that the museum uses to strengthen the position of Taiwan as a hub where Asian cultures continue to create, recreate and integrate. Through examining the exhibitions and interviews with the curators, I was given insight into how the museum applies the concept of ‘cultural spheres’ throughout the permanent galleries. This novel method, I argue, represents a quest for a new kind of modernity for Taiwan, which symbolises the need, consciously and unconsciously, for an alternative explanation of history and other possible perspectives to view the relationship between the self and the other.

## The museum: a quest for identity

When Chiang Kai-shek-led Kunmingtang (KMT, aka the Nationalist Party) retreated to Taiwan in 1949 after losing the Chinese Civil War, the original plan was to use Taiwan as a temporary base to reclaim the Mainland

from the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong. As Taiwan had previously been colonized by Japan (1895-1945), the KMT government promoted ‘re-sinicisation’ on the island through installations of Chinese cultural institutions, including the National Palace Museum. The architecture is modelled after the Forbidden City in Beijing and displays elements of traditional Chinese royal designs and symbols. In addition, the museum emphasises a collection that is ‘inherited’ from the Qin Emperors, in order to gain international recognition for the legitimacy of the KMT as the true government of China and the sole preserver of Chinese civilization.

In 2000, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the presidential election, ending the KMT’s nearly forty-year authoritarian rule. The DPP is a Taiwanese nationalist political party, strongly committed to political change, human rights and a distinct Taiwanese identity. The Southern Branch was initiated and built in order to transform the National Palace Museum from a legacy of Chinese civilization into a museum and research centre that focuses on the arts and cultures of Asia as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

The Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum was envisioned and put into planning by Tu Cheng-Sheng, who was later appointed Museum Director by President Chen in 2000. Tu is one of the historians who came up with the concept ‘New History’,<sup>5</sup> with which they argue for alternative interpretations of Chinese history and its relation to the Asian region and Taiwan. He explicitly explained the need for the NPM to transform itself, so as to become a cultural window for the nation.<sup>6</sup> He stressed the need for the museum to not only represent Chinese and Taiwanese culture, but to also educate the public about Asian culture and art. One objective of the newly established branch would be to show the linkage of Chinese culture and civilisation with other parts of the world. And so, in addition to newly acquired and borrowed collections from India, Japan, Korea and other parts of Asia, the museum also houses artefacts from the NPM’s original collections of Chinese art. Staying true to its mission to re-orient the National Palace Museum towards Asian arts and cultures, the



Southern Branch opened with five permanent exhibitions: 1) *Imprints of Buddhas*: Buddhist Art in the National Palace Museum’s Collection, 2) *Boldness of Forms and Colours*: Asian Textiles from the National Palace Museum’s Collection, 3) *The Far-Reaching Fragrance of Tea*: Tea Art and Culture in Asia, 4) *Through the Annals of Time: A Brief History of Chiayi*, and 5) *Understanding Asian Art*: Multimedia Gallery Guide.

## Maintaining and pushing boundaries

The exhibition *Imprints of Buddhas* houses a rich collection of Buddhist artefacts, “comprising dignified and elegant Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and statues passed down from the Qing court as well as 407 gold Buddha statues donated by Mr. Peng Kai-dong (1912–2006) in 2004, 2006 and 2008”.<sup>7</sup> Buddhism originated in India and spread across South, Central, Southeast, East and Northeast Asia. It has played a crucial role in shaping the lives and cultures across Asia, and this exhibition demonstrates how the religion spread from one location to another, creating multiple new cultural centres, along with numerous interpretations of Buddhism. “The popularity of Buddhism in the aforementioned regions has led to the birth of various Buddha statues such as Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, heavenly kings, and dharmapalas”.<sup>8</sup>

The exhibition comprises five sections, with each section presenting a different region during the same period to show similarities and differences of the materials, artistry and philosophy behind the making of the artwork. The displays of these Buddhist artefacts aim to highlight the transformations resulting from interactions with regional and local cultures, aesthetics and beliefs.

One of the most significant exhibits is the *Kangxi Manuscript Kangyur in Tibetan Script*. The manuscript is the first Kangyur written in gold and also the only Buddhist scripture named after the dragon, making it one of NPM’s finest items of Qin court art. The manuscript was commissioned by the Grand Empress Dowager Xiaozhuan, the grandmother of Emperor Kangxi, whose origin can be traced back to Mongolia. By positioning the manuscript in dialogue with other Buddhist art from all over Asia, the museum shows the historical trace of multiculturalism within the Qin Empire. By doing so, it invites the audience to rethink their understanding of Chinese civilisation as ethno-nationalistic and monocultural.

## Constant redefinition

The Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum ‘de-centres’ the ‘nation’ by bringing in the multifaceted and trans-cultural relations of Chinese civilisation through new collections and displays of Asian cultures and art, and by placing current Chinese artefacts into novel and unconventional contexts. The museum hereby also ‘re-centres’ Taiwan by shifting its subjectivity and bridging new inter-Asian connections. This allows Taiwan to seek its position in the world and embrace the Chinese ‘cultural sphere’ at the same time. The novelty of the *Imprints of Buddhas* is not only that it ceases to use geographical boundaries to define cultural boundaries, but it also provides visitors with an innovative perspective by exploring cross-cultural topics with collections originally categorised as ‘Chinese’ artefacts. The de-centring and re-centring process, therefore, is not merely a political agenda that embodies a conflicting ideology and notion of ‘Taiwan as a nation’, but also a quest for a new kind of modernity, a new relationship between the self and the other.

The *Imprints of Buddhas* exhibition has paved the way for future exhibitions, illustrating that topics on self/other don’t have to be restricted to relationships and historical ties between Taiwan and China. The museum’s future projects will continue to explore the issues of self and other, as well as examine the perspectives and the myths, thereby opening new dialogues of inter-cultural transformations and influences within the Asian region.

Susan Shih Chang, Phd Candidate in Cultural Studies in Asia, Department of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore [chang.shih@u.nus.edu](mailto:chang.shih@u.nus.edu)

## Notes

- 1 The Initium. 2015. ‘Jackie Chan donated replicas of zodiac animals to the National Palace Museum, criticized of united front tactics [成龍捐生肖獸首複製品與台灣故宮，被批統戰]’; <https://tinyurl.com/initium-JC>
- 2 Wu, Rwei-Ren. 2016. ‘The Lilliputian Dreams: Preliminary Observations of Nationalism in Okinawa, Taiwan and Hong Kong’, *Nations and Nationalism* 22(4):686-705.
- 3 Wu, Jieh-min. 2016. ‘The China Factor in Taiwan: Impact and Response’, in Schubert, G. (ed.) *Handbook of Modern Taiwan Politics and Society*. Routledge, pp.425-445.
- 4 Council for Economic Planning and Development. 2003. *Challenge 2008: National Development Plan 2002-2007*. Taipei; Ting, R. 2003. ‘A 6000 million NTD budget for the construction of National Palace Museum Southern Branch’, *China Times*. Taipei.
- 5 Tu, Cheng-Sheng. 2004. ‘異國風情—亞洲文物展 [The Arts and Culture Asia]’, *The National Palace Museum Monthly of Chinese Art* 22(1):4-7.
- 6 Tu, Cheng-Sheng. 2003. ‘變革的時代談台灣博物館永續經營之道 [The Sustainable Development of Taiwan’s Museums in a Time of Change]’, in National Museum of History (ed.) *Crisis and Opportunity: Museums in the New Century Forum of Museum Directors*, pp.143-157.
- 7 National Palace Museum. 2016. ‘Imprints of Buddhas: Buddhist Art in the National Palace Museum Collection’; <https://tinyurl.com/NPM-buddhas>
- 8 Idem.