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**My Research at the National Museum
of Taiwan Literature 國立臺灣文學館**



Figure 1

My first contact with the National Museum of Taiwan Literature (NMTL) was with its website in search of a topic for my master thesis, in which I hoped to bridge my major of Modern Sinology with both of my minors East Asian Art History and English Literature. The website made both a very comprehensive and professional impression on me. After contacting the general service desk, explaining that I hoped to write my thesis about the role this museum played as a public establishment of education in institutionalizing the Taiwanese culture, I also received an immediate reply that my email would be attended to and that I would hear back from the museum within a maximum of 10 days. When you approach a public institution like a museum, and you do not have, or hope not to rely on, the connections you have to people affiliated with it, it is often the first contact that has a great influence on your attitude towards your project. I was thus delighted that only four days later I was contacted and referred to Mr. Zhang 張信吉組長, chief of the Public Service Division and associate researcher, who became my contact person throughout my research at the museum.

He welcomed my research at the museum and encouraged my project. But he also reminded me that I would have to rely on my own effort concerning interviews with museum visitors and suggested that I send him a rough outline of the kind of questions I was hoping to ask the director. These reminders motivated me to thoroughly prepare a list of questions for the visitors and staff during my first two weeks in Taipei. I spent my time in the main library of the National Taiwan University, reading the annual reports of the NMTL, especially the introductions by the directors, to find starting points for later discussions and also to avoid asking questions which had already been elaborately dealt with in official reports. In addition, I designed forms for the visitors to fill in their names, age, sex, residence and educational background, which was also of great convenience later when organizing the audio files of my interview recordings.

During my research in Tainan I stayed in a backpacker hostel which was very affordable and clean and only a 10-minute bike ride from the museum. Renting a bike for my 14-day stay proved to be a very convenient and inexpensive method of transportation. Apart from a dictaphone I had acquired in Taipei these were my major expenses during my trip.

I divided my research time at the museum into two major parts. During the first few days, I spent my time in the museum as a visitor and observer. Only after having engaged in everything the museum had to offer to the average visitor did I take the initiative in the second part of my research to interview the visitors and staff. Since I am a strong supporter of the arguably outdated audio guide and after having had my difficulties working with the fashionable multimedia guide at the Literatur Museum der Moderne in Marbach, I was happy

to explore the museum on my own with the free audio guide, which is available in Mandarin, Taiwanese, English and Japanese. I listened to the Mandarin and English explanations in turn. The introduction was very informative and nevertheless easy to understand and encouraged the visitor to ponder a few questions while strolling through the exhibition. Since many museums in Taiwan and in China often lack English explanations and since exhibiting Taiwanese literature to a non-Chinese speaking public poses even greater challenges, I was thrilled to learn that the English version of the audio guide was in no way inferior to the Chinese one. Observing the museum as a casual visitor was possible, but since I spent so much time in the museum (opening hours are from 9 am to 9 pm), my presence did not go unnoticed. I did, however, gain an insight into the habits of both visitors and volunteer staff, into what time of day certain kinds of visitors were present in the museum and at what times the exhibition rooms were empty, which was mostly around noon. In the mornings the museum was the liveliest, for school-outings were made to the museum from different schools around the Tainan area nearly every day. In the late afternoon high-school students occupied the study area to do homework and nap and in the evening mostly couples strolled through the museum holding hands, enjoying the quiet atmosphere. Tourists chose the museum as their last sight-seeing stop of the day, due to its long opening hours. From the first third-grader to the last backpacker, there was a constant coming and going in the museum.

In the second part of my research I finally approached these visitors, asking questions ranging from why they had come to the museum that day, over which exhibition piece had made the greatest impression on them, to why, in their opinion, one would want to exhibit literature in the first place. I interviewed around 100 visitors and their answers were very diverse. I was very pleased to encounter opinions of a few visitors from China and their perceptions of the museum and the idea of a distinctive Taiwanese literature. One exchange student from Xiamen, who is studying in Taizhong, was very eager to know more about Taiwanese literature and willing to discuss China-Taiwan relations both on a cultural, as well as on a political level. Other visitors from mainland China were less open about the matter, using expressions such as “都是一家人嘛” (we all belong to one family). A

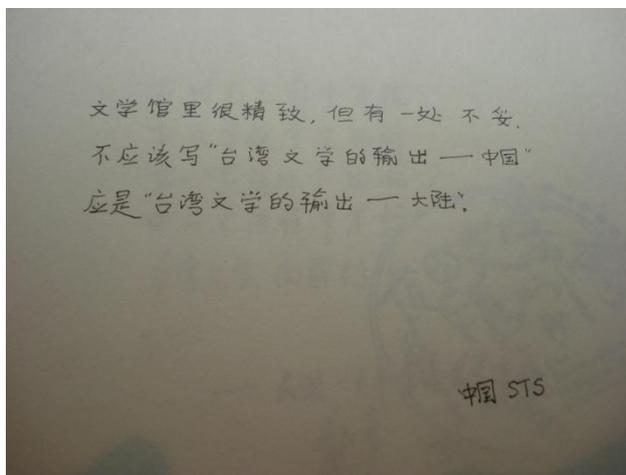


Figure 2

message I found in the guest book implied such a point of view, commenting that the exhibition should not differentiate between Taiwan and China, but between Taiwan and Mainland instead (figure 2).¹ Mr. Zhang was very open on the matter and shared his experiences with authors from mainland China who regularly meet with Taiwanese authors and scholars for round-table discussions organized by the research department of the museum.

¹ 文学馆里很精致, 但有一处不妥. 不应该写“台湾文学输出-中国”, 该写“台湾文学输出大陆.” (The museum of literature is quite excellent, there is, however, one aspect, which is not appropriate. It is not supposed to say “Taiwanese literature was exported to China”, but instead say “Taiwanese literature was exported to the mainland.”)

Amongst the Taiwanese visitors I came across a few who had very strong political opinions, which turned their answers into appellative speeches, and a few people who had simply entered the museum to use the bathroom and had decided to walk through the exhibition before going out. The interviews varied from 5 to 40 minutes and I could not have asked for more cooperation from the visitors. Some were quite nervous during the interview, because they had no interviewing experience and speaking to a foreigner was very unusual for them. Some were very enthusiastic about participating, up to a degree that one young student from Tainan even returned the next day to complement what he had said the day before, since he had thought of many things he had hoped to add after he had returned home. All in all, the interviews with the volunteers and visitors ran very smoothly and I enjoyed listening to the very diverse people who come together in this public space.

Mr. Zhang scheduled the interview with the director for me and also introduced me to other research colleagues at the museum. The interview with director Li Ruiteng 李瑞籐館長 lasted one hour and he, too, was very welcoming (figure 3)². In the course of the interview he became very enthusiastic and I decided not to follow the outline of questions I had originally prepared, but to be more flexible and engage into what he said more freely, thus avoiding interrupting his flow of speech. This proved to be the most challenging task for me, since Mr.



Figure 3

Li is a very eloquent speaker and occasionally I had to urge him to return to certain points of discussion, or to refer to more concrete examples. Mr. Li, however, was very cooperative and informed me of his involvement in and influence on the museum's exhibition. His descriptions showed that political tendencies and personal preferences do exert influence on which aspects of Taiwanese literature are focused on in the exhibitions. I was lucky to have been present at a very curial time

at the NTML, for the main exhibition, which is designed for a five year period, is just about to change at the end of this year. What effect the change in the executive leadership will have on the exhibition will become observable when the museum reopens. I, however, was privileged to hear beforehand that a greater focus will be on individual writers, instead of the general development of Taiwanese literature, and that mainland authors will gain in significance, unlike in the present exhibition in which they play a more marginal role.

Having the opportunity of speaking to the director about the plans for the new exhibition in person was certainly the highlight of my trip. However, I also had the chance to meet other researchers affiliated with the museum, such as the chief secretary Wang Suihui 王素惠, with whom I have the common interest of the reception of the museum amongst the public, which led us to exchange ideas and research material on the subject. Furthermore, a research assistant of the Department of Exhibition and Education, Wang Jialing 王嘉玲, gave me a special tour through the main exhibition. It was then that I was made aware of the great

² Figure 3: Photo taken by Hsin-ru. Figure 1/ Figure 2: Photo taken by Emily Mae Graf.

influence “designer companies” 設計公司 have on the inner design of the exhibition, and that many interactive exhibits and theoretical ideas are put into action by these companies, which constitute another step in development the original concept of the exhibition passes through before it is realized. Having had a chance to meet these and other employees of the museum, seeing that they were willing to take time for me and provide me with research material, both published and unpublished, and enrich me with further suggestions for my thesis was a great honor for me, since this cannot be taken for granted even by a PhD student, which I am not.

Besides the main exhibition, I was also present at the opening ceremony of the special exhibition on the author Sanmao 三毛, during which I had the pleasure of being led through the exhibition with journalists and other special guest. I also seized the opportunity to see other exhibitions on literature during my stay in Taiwan, such as the Balzac and Bing Xin 冰心 exhibition in Taipei, and in Beijing I visited the National Museum of Modern Chinese Literature 中國現代文學館 and the recently reopened National Museum with its special exhibition “Art of Enlightenment”. Having the chance to visit all these exhibitions on literature and art in person was of immense value for me and by spending two weeks in the Museum of Taiwanese Literature I have come to really understand the everyday life that takes place within the museum walls, and see the museum both through the eyes of the visitors, as well as through the eyes of the creators. No amount of visual or written material could have compensated for this experience, and I am therefore very grateful for the financial support I have received.