

Study trip to Taiwan/HK organized by the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society 16-22 Oct 2011

The Southeast Asian Ceramic Society has been conducting regular study trips in recent years. In Feb 2009, Professor John Miksic, an authority on ancient temples led a tour to East Java to study the Borobudur temple and the Dieng Plateau. This trip was so popular and enthusiastically over-subscribed that John decided to plan another tour for members. The resultant Burma trip to Bagan in Dec 2009 co-led by John Miksic and Professor Goh Geok Yian proved to be equally popular. In Apr 2010, the society organised a trip to see the ancient kilns of Jingdezhen. It was led by Marjorie Chu, our vice-president and Chen Jiazhi, a former curator of NUS Museums.

This year, SEACS decided on a study trip to Taiwan and Hong Kong in Oct 2011. The initial plan was to see the imperial collection in Taiwan's National Palace Museum, the Museum of history and some private collections. Our very well connected member and guide, Lim Yah Chiew felt it would not be complete if the study tour did not include Hong Kong. He delighted us when he announced that the study tour will include a viewing of the priceless TianMinlou and Jiu Ru Tang imperial collections.

A total of ten persons participated in this very exclusive and privileged study trip.

Below are short reports of the various places the group visited, loosely in chronological order.

TAIWAN

Art of incense appreciation (report by Pauline Ong)



".....seeing its richness through one's nose" - so quotes Mdm Mary Loh, chairman of the Chinese incense art association. Mdm Loh is the widow of Professor Liu Liang-Yu, of the Institute of history and antiquities management, Fengchia University, Taichung , Taiwan. He was a well-known expert on the art of Chinese incense culture.

After a long flight from Singapore, members finally arrived in Taiwan via HK in the late afternoon. We were immediately whisked off after depositing our luggage at the hotel to Mdm Loh's very well appointed home. Instead of viewing the ceramic collection of Professor Liu and his wife, we were treated to a totally unexpected introduction to the scholarly art of incense culture.

We entered a Zen-inspired home of five levels, with a lift and treaded through rooms of a mandarin scholar. After a simple yet elegant home-cooked meal, Mdm Loh demonstrated the art of incense culture, which had been practised by scholars since ancient China. We were introduced to its origin, botanical and organic materials used in the incense, temperature control, and the exquisite vessels and delicate utensils. Scholars would complement the sensory experience with poetry and calligraphy.

Mdm Loh presented each member a book entitled "Chinese incense culture" written by Professor Liu, ending a wonderfully sublime experience and memorable evening.

www.incenseart.org.tw

National Palace Museum, Taipei (report by Alvin Chia)



The National Palace Museum's rich *objets d'art* originate from the Imperial Qing Court in a long tradition of dynastic China's royal collections. Facing the threat of war in 1931, a selection of the most valuable pieces left the Forbidden City first to Shanghai and then to Nanjing. From here, 3824 crates went to Taiwan in 1948 and stayed in Baigou, Taizong until in 1965 when a museum complex was completed in Wisuangxi, Taipei.

The holdings inherited from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasty courts can be summed up as a "national treasure." The museum now features a staggering collection of more than 680,000 objects including treasures of antiquities, paintings, calligraphy and rare books spanning 8,000 years of Chinese culture.

Members arrived at the museum before 9am and were greeted by the chief curator, Ms Tsai Mei-Fen. Our English-speaking guide, Margaret gave us an excellent tour. We were given headsets so that we could hear her voice above the din of the hoards of mainland China tourists which soon filled the museum galleries. Margaret gave members a two and half hour tour of the galleries filled with ancient Chinese paintings, calligraphy, bronzes, jade and ceramics. Noteworthy objects include the famous jade cabbage, Ru wares and paintings by Fan Kuan, both from northern Song dynasty.

We met Ms Chen Yuh-Shiow, curator who worked on the salvage of the Belitung cargo. She shared with us how she had heroically saved the dragon ewer from the hands of pirates at gunpoint to her head.

Chang's Foundation, Taipei (report by Lim Yah Chiew)



When I first arranged for members to view the sherds of Ru and Guan wares, I was anxious that members may not be interested and asked the foundation to include their imperial ceramic collection for our viewing. I was proven wrong as members took to them with great interest.

Miss Shu, a curator with the foundation made a scholarly presentation and highlighted the subtle differences between the two types of wares and also that of reproductions from the Qing period and modern times. Her slides compared the microscopic structures of these wares against each other and presented other materials which proved to be informative and educational.

Members learnt that bubbles under the glaze of Ru wares are big and scattered while those in the Guan wares appear to be smaller in size and crowded in great numbers. This had to do with the different firing methods of each type of ware. After the slide show, members were treated to a sherd-handling session. They displayed great enthusiasm as Ru or Guan wares of the Southern Song Dynasty are extremely rare and command high prices.

Ms Shu generously presented each member a copy of her book on her research and a CD of her presentation, much to the delight and appreciation of members.

The National Museum of History (report by Alvin Chia)



The Museum was founded in 1955 and was originally known as the National Museum of historical artefacts and fine arts. It was the first public museum established by the Republic of China's government in Taiwan. It was also the only national gallery.

The museum's collection of 60,000 pieces include cultural relics spanning 6000 years from pre-historical artefacts to modern-day items after the ROC government settled in Taiwan. They included artefacts from the Huaxia and Taiwanese cultures, aboriginal objects and historical artefacts of international communities. On display were bronze wares and jade from the Warring States, tomb relics from the Han dynasty, tri-colour wares from the Tang period, Buddhist statuary from the Song dynasties, Ming and Qing ceramics and calligraphy works. The collections were built up from donations from museums in China, private organizations and individuals.

We were led by a knowledgeable young guide who spoke excellent English. The museum is smaller than the National Palace Museum and more intimate in scale. As it was less crowded we were able to spend more time to view the artefacts closely. Of particular interest was the display of modern art works.

The museum director, Dr. Chang Yui-Tan generously presented catalogues to the SEACS team and the society with a publication on its collections.

Longshansi, Yingge Ceramic Museum, Sang Pu antiques market (report by Patricia Welch)



Yingge's emergence as a ceramic centre was the direct result of the industry's move inland after a severe earthquake nearly wiped out all of Taipei's ceramic centres. The Zen-like concrete, steel and glass **Yingge Ceramic Museum**, which records the history of Taiwanese pottery from prehistoric to modern times, couldn't be more visually different than the country's most recognisable local pottery—Cochin (or Koji)—introduced to Taiwan in the mid-1800s.

Cochin ceramics are characterised by brightly coloured multi-layered glazes in pink, yellow and green swirls and rosettes that primarily garnish tiles and decorative statues and figurines. (Visit the ACM's China Gallery to see a wall of modern Taiwanese Cochin figures.) You find Cochin ceramics on temples, including Taipei's famous **Longshansi** (Dragon Mountain Temple) in Taipei's Wanhua District, which we visited on the second day of our trip. Built in 1738 by settlers from mainland China's Fujian Province, it's technically Buddhist (dedicated to Guanyin) but features an eclectic melange of Buddhist and Daoist imagery that also features local and household gods, the Eight Immortals, the Weaving Maiden and Ox-Herder, Liu Hai and his toad, and Zhong Kui the 'Demon Chaser'. This lively temple of incense and worshippers, together with a visit to the nearby **Sang Pu antiques market** (Sec. 1, Shing Sheng S. Road) were much-appreciated breathing holes in our tight schedule of museum and collector visits.

Five-Dime Boat Restaurant (report by Freddie Oh)



Located amidst skyscrapers in a posh Taipei commercial district, stood what looked like an ancient volcano. At the top was the head of a fire-spewing dragon and at its foot, large bottle-trees. This was the “Five-Dime Boat Restaurant” the local tour agent took us to dinner. The place took us all by surprise.

Navigating up a winding cobbled path with coloured stones, arched pillars of colourful patterns, we ambled past ancient-looking pagodas and sculptures and reached a large heavy medieval-looking door which opened automatically, much like Ali Baba’s cave. The interior was a gigantic cavern, with richly decorated walls, beautiful paintings and sculptures, both of ancient and modern designs in wood, ceramics, concrete and steel, all glowing in low lighting. Around the main cavern were five levels of small “grottos or caves” with small tables and seats for intimate dining. A winding metal stairway led to the upper levels. From the upper levels, a pond with kois surrounded by tropical foliage is visible below. The restrooms were equally artistically designed.

The place was like Alice’s Wonderland. This was one of four Taiwan restaurants owned and designed by the talented Taiwanese female artist Xie Li-xiang. “The Cavern” or even “The Dragon Mountain” would have been a more appropriate name. This experience itself would have made my trip worth the while.

HONG KONG

The Tianminlou Collection (report by Wong Hong Sze)



I was first introduced to the Tianminlou Collection by a Shanghainese dealer I met at the Sotheby’s auctions in Hong Kong in the 1980s.

He would often outbid the many renowned Western dealers for the finest Yuan, Ming and Qing pieces. In 1987, he presented me two volumes on the Tianminlou Collection which belonged to Ko Shih Chao.

I was ecstatic when SEACS announced its plan to view this rare collection on this study trip. Mr SF Ko (Ko Shih Chao's son) and his wife showed us their priceless collection. These included the Chenghua chicken cup, the coral red enamel Yongcheng bowl, the Kangxi *lang yao* vase, pieces I fondly remembered from his book.

The highlight of the visit for me was a blue and white Kangxi flower pot, featured in the November 1982 auction. It was an export *mingyau* but the underglaze blue wash had deep hues of the typical cobalt blue made famous by the Emperor Kangxi. It was the only piece I could afford at the time but was outbid by Mr Ko. Because it was not a *kuanyau* piece, it was not displayed in the cabinet but lay on top of some boxes. I caressed it fondly, happy that it was in safe hands.

Short of viewing the collection, the book is worth possessing. A member of a team purchased a copy for a cool S\$1000. He opined that it is worth every penny as the book is no longer in production.

Jiu Ru Tang collection (report by Johannes Rizal)



Besides the Tianminlou collection, members were treated the following day to another priceless collection owned by Mr. Leon Lee. The Jiu Ru Tang collection consisted of a collection of Song, Five Dynasty, Tang, Han and Longquan wares. The latter held great significance for me.

Lim Yah Chiew, our excellent guide had made prior arrangements for Mr. Lee to show his star pieces. He and his wife had prepared these treasures in anticipation of our special interest in particular wares. Mr. Lee generously allowed us to handle them, albeit under his ever watchful eyes. This included very rare and top quality Qingbai wares. Qingbai means 'bluish-white'. Another common term is Yingqing which means 'shadowy blue'. We were also shown a beautiful black glazed tea bowl, a Jizhou bowl with mulberry leaf glazed in as decoration. This piece de resistance is extremely rare and we were very grateful to Mr. Lee for showing this treasure to us. Another star piece is a very beautiful and rare imperial Longquan cup with saucer stand from Sikou kiln.

The visit was very special to me as I had been collecting Longquan wares for more than twenty years. To see and handle so many fine examples of imperial quality was indeed a rare privilege. I am grateful to the society for planning such an excellent study trip.

Visit to Hong Kong Museum of Art (report by Chan Heh Pang)



The Hong Kong Museum of Art is located strategically at the Tsim Sha Tsui district. Across the road from the museum stands the famous Peninsula Hotel and the waterfront side of the museum opens out to a panoramic vista of Hong Kong Island's city skyline at the other end of the harbour.

The museum houses an excellent collection of ceramic wares from the early period of the Yangshao culture, Han dynasty pottery (picture second from right: Han black pottery), Tang tri-coloured wares (Tang *sancal*) and objects from the Yuan, Ming and Qing periods. A noteworthy piece from the Tang dynasty was a classic Tang period camel which had an elegant form.

The porcelain section displayed beautifully glazed Song wares and the earliest blue and white wares that emerged from the Yuan dynasty for the use of the Islamic court and nobility. Other objects include Ming blue and white wares and the *famille rose* enamel wares of the Qing dynasty. The level of artistry of Qianlong and Kangxi imperial pieces clearly reached great heights as they were so finely painted. (picture on left: Qing period *famille rose* flask).

Patricia made a keen observation that the imperial wares of the Kangxi period no longer bore the Kangxi reign marks but were replaced with symbols instead.

The museum had an excellent bookstore and many members made purchases.

Reports were compiled and edited by Alvin Chia, President, SEACS, Oct 2011