

The Mingyue Lay Buddhist Temple

One of the largest Chinese Buddhist temples in the Southern Hemisphere, the Mingyue Lay Temple has come a long way since its origins – in 1982 - as a small fibro building used nowadays as a cafeteria.

History and development

The Mingyue Lay Buddhist Temple is today a massive building of about 16 000 square meters. Its gestation dates back to 1985 - during the year of Yi Chon of the Chinese lunar calendar - when a group of local Chinese residents, native mainly from the Cantonese speaking southern region of Si Jiu, began planning the construction of the temple. A group of Vietnamese people also joined the project, and a campaign for donations soon began. The temple had a promising start when a wealthy benefactor, Mr. Sop Sisomphou -a Laotian-Chinese who came to Australia as a refugee and made a fortune in the timber industry - donated half of the construction land. He also was the founder of the Australian Chinese Buddhist Society, the community organisation responsible for the administration of the temple.

In the mid-autumn of 1987 – year of the Ding Mou – a ceremony was held to lay the foundation of the temple. At a final cost of 3 million dollars, the temple was officially opened in January 1990, during the year of Geng Wu. The Most Venerable Patriarch Yenteck, Chief Primate of the Bohman Khunaram Temple in Thailand, performed the Blessing ceremony.

Architecture and symbolism

Built with its front facing the East and its back to the West, the Mingyue Lay Buddhist Temple uses a 12th century Chinese design and is a fine example of the Buddhist Mahayana tradition. This design lacks the tall, pointed spires - a characteristic of the Cambodian and Laotian Buddhist temples. Both the inside

and outside of the building were fabricated with materials traditionally used in Chinese temples.

The building contains four main halls and they constitute an ecumenical celebration of Buddhism, Taoism and Zen. The largest and most impressive hall is the Main Shrine up on the second floor. It houses thirty - seven bronze Buddhas brought from Thailand. The figures are made from brass and the largest one weighs about 400 kg. Just inside the door you will see the shrine of the God of Wealth. This God is part of the Taoist tradition and his very prominent place in the Temple suggests this temple, although Buddhist, also relies heavily on Chinese folk traditions.

Just across from the main entry, you will see the striking images of the “Three Buddhas.” Referred to as *Ru Lai Fao*, these three seated Buddhas represent the Shakyamuni Buddha, who is the teacher of the earthly universe, seated in the centre; the Buddha of the Western Universe, and ethereal world of the faithful, on the left; and the teacher of the Eastern World on the right.

On the right of the Three Buddhas, you will find the image of the goddess Quan Yin, one of the most popular deities in China and also in Vietnam. The legend says she delayed her ascent to nirvana – the holiest state in the Buddhist tradition - after hearing the cries of humanity. At the left of the Three Buddhas you will see Di Sung Wang, the God of the underworld whose name is celebrated every year during a Chinese Festival called “the opening of hell.” If your offerings have been plentiful – according to tradition – he may let your ancestors out of hell.

The eastern hall is the Temple of the Immortals. It is not unusual for the Chinese to worship men and women who have excelled in life. One of the most well known “immortals’ celebrated here is Li Tai Po, the famous Tang Dynasty poet and prophet. He is considered a mystical literary genius.

The western temple is occupied by the Gallery of the Ancestors, or gallery of names. This temple houses around 700 vaults and plaques bearing the names of those who have passed away. At the back of this temple all ashes of the dead are kept in ornate jars of ivory, porcelain, or teak. They are worshipped and incense is burnt in their memory. Between the eastern and western temples is the community hall used for public activities, offices and as a Buddhist library.

Culture and community

As its name indicates, the Mingyue Lay Buddhist Temple is mainly run by lay people and it is attended by Buddhists from Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. Occasionally, monks or nuns are invited to conduct religious services. The Temple's function goes beyond just religious services. Since its early days, the Temple has performed major fund raising activities for humanitarian causes, including floods and bush fires. One of the most recent, major fund raising activities was organised in benefit of the East Timorese people.

It's very likely that the Chinese presence in Australia dates back to the early days of European settlement. The first recorded Chinese person in Sydney was Mak Sai Ying, who was born in Canton and arrived in Sydney in 1818. Today, Australia's ethnic Chinese population is estimated at between 260 000 and 400 000, and is drawn from a dozen countries. Sydney is home to more than 40 000 Chinese-born people, and this number grows to over 200 000 when Chinese who were born overseas, in countries other than China are included. It is estimated that more than 4 000 Chinese-born people have settled in Fairfield.

Visiting and protocols

The temple is a major cultural centre. Visitors are welcome. The temple is open between 9.00 am-5.00 pm daily.

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