**Beiliao Tianyan Temple**

Opening its doors for the first time after a consecration ceremony in April, 2019, the new Tianyan Temple in Beiliao is a symbol of the continuing importance of Taiwanese folk religions in the lives of the people here.

**Beginnings**

Tianyan temple is the only temple in Taiwan dedicated to the goddess Tianyan, fourth sister of the Jade Emperor. Founded by temple leader Lin-Jiang Yuying, it was begun as a small private home shrine in 1976, and has since grown to become a local center for worship and a NT 200 million dollar edifice funded entirely by public donations.

Lin-jiang was born and grew up not far from where the temple now stands. From early childhood, she was known for her psychic abilities. At the age of eight, she began having visions of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas, and by her early teens, she was forewarning friends and family of coming misfortune so that they could find ways to counter it before it occurred. Neighbors began viewing her as a spirit medium and going to her with questions about their future.

When she married, Lin-jiang moved in with her husband at his family home nearby. It was there that she began experiencing persistent visions of the goddess Tianyan, fourth sister of the Jade Emperor. Lin built a shrine to the goddess on her husband’s property.

By 1981, Lin-Jiang had opened a temple in a small, corrugated steel structure in the mountains just outside of the town to enshrine a consecrated effigy of Tianyan for worship. A forestry department trail ran up the hill behind the temple to the peak of the mountain, and Lin-jiang and her followers maintained it and turned it into the popular Yingding hiking trail. As more and more weekend hikers turned up to enjoy the views over Tainan and the Taiwan Water Corporation’s Nanhua Reservoir, Lin-jiang’s temple also gained increasing numbers of followers, and it soon became clear that an expansion was needed.

Lin began taking in donations, and in 2011, ground was broken on the new temple. Construction work was carried on for six years, and on April 4, 2019, the temple was officially opened to the public after a formal consecration ceremony.

**The Temple**

The new temple is a large, three-story building set back on the mountainside overlooking the reservoir. In the plaza, a pair of large white stone lions stands guard over the temple premises. These are matched by the dragon columns in the entry portico, also beautifully carved in white stone.

Like all temples, the main entrance is split into three doorways. The central door is not used by visitors or worshippers, but is reserved for the gods. Instead of stairs in front of this door, there is a ramp carved with a traditional dragon design. The door to the right of this (facing the temple) is the entrance for worshippers and visitors, known as the dragon door. The tiger door, on the left, is the exit.

*The First Floor*

Each of the three floors of the temple is a separate worship hall, and as with most temples in Taiwan, a mix of Buddhist and Taoist folk gods are enshrined here. In the main hall on the first floor, visitors will find the large, tranquil effigy of the goddess Tianyan, the princess of heaven. The seven strands of pearls on her headdress as well as the white stone ru-yi scepter on the altar table in front indicate her status as a royal princess and fourth sister of the Jade Emperor. It is said that on imperial orders she took on human form and passed into the mortal world. Once there, she was deeply saddened at the travails of birth, old age, sickness, and death that mortals endured in the karmic cycle, and thus vowed to bring aid to those who did good deeds and were kind, and help them get past their troubles.

To the immediate right of Tianyan, also in the main shrine, is Mazu, known as the Empress of Heaven. She is recognizable by the nine strings of pearls on her headdress that indicate her high rank in the imperial hierarchy. Mazu is the patron deity of fisherman, sailors, and shipboard travelers, so it is no surprise that she has long been one of the most popular gods in this island nation.

On the other side of Tianyan is Caishen, the god of money. The shrine to the left is home to Fude Zhengshen, the god of land and wealth. The most popular of all gods in Taiwan, Fude Zhengshen can be found in most village shrines. Zhusheng Niang, the goddess of pregnancy and childbirth, is enshrined in the altar on the right.

*The Second Floor*

The second floor of the temple is dedicated primarily to the 1000-armed Guanyin Bodhisattva, the goddess of mercy. There are many representations of this Buddhist deity, who took a vow never to rest until all beings had been freed from the karmic cycle. This one, with its multiple arms and heads, is related to a story that in her efforts to reach out and save all of those in need of aid, Guanyin’s head and arms shattered into pieces, after which the Amita Buddha graced her with eleven heads and a thousand arms to help in her efforts to aid the suffering.

The second floor is also home to the Chinese Buddhist trinity of Shakyamuni, the Amita Buddha, and Bhaisajyaguru (the “medicine Buddha”). Known as the three treasures, they play an important role in Chinese Buddhist worship.

*The Third Floor*

The third and highest floor of the temple is known as the Lingxiao Palace. This is the abode of the Jade Emperor, who rules over all the gods of heaven. Here, visitors will find gilded columns and a beautiful spiral ceiling well with a gilded dragon motif, symbol of the emperor, in the center. The side walls boast enormous murals, and the open front balcony offers magnificent vistas over the surrounding countryside.

On the altar in front of the Jade emperor are the three sage kings Yao, Sun, and Yu. These are the semi-legendary first kings of China, who lived around 2200 B.C. Each is credited with making great contributions to society, such as a formal system of government, writing, and flood control. Yu may have been the founder of China’s first dynasty.

The altars on each side of the central shrine house the Celestial Doctor, who always accompanies the Jade Emperor, and Wenchang Dijun, the god of culture and literature. This god is popular among students, who pray to him for success in exams.