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Revival

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By Paul Katz

Just over two months have passed since the devastation wrought by Typhoon Morakot, but the reconstruction of Siaolin Village 小林村 and its venerable Plains Aborigine (平埔族) culture is already well underway. A major step forward took place this past weekend with the [successful restaging](#) of the annual Siraya 西拉雅 ritual known as the "Siaolin Night Festival" (小林夜祭). This event was accompanied by the holding of a [conference](#) on the reconstruction of southern Taiwan's Plains Aborigine culture (「重建南臺平埔族群文化」學術研討會) and the official opening of an [exhibition](#) of artifacts from Siaolin's Plains Aborigine culture (小林平埔文化特展) at the Chia-hsien Cultural Hall (甲仙地方文化館). Visiting dignitaries included Huang Pi-twan 黃璧端 (Minister of the Council for Cultural Affairs), Lin Chien-Chi 林倩綺 (General Director of the Kaohsiung County Bureau of Cultural Affairs), Kaohsiung County Magistrate Yang Chiu-hsing 楊秋興, Chia-hsien Township Head Liu Chien-fang 劉建芳, etc.

Of particular significance was the attendance of Sun Da-Ch'uan 孫大川 (Puyuma (卑南) name = Paelabang danapan), the Minister of Taiwan's Council of Indigenous Peoples, Executive Yuan (行政院原住民委員會主任委員). His presence sent an important message due to the fact that the Council has committed to allocating funds for Siaolin's cultural reconstruction. Sun's visit also coincided with the Ministry of the Interior's decision to approve plans for the formal establishment of the "Association for the Reconstruction of Siaolin's Plains Aborigine Culture" (小林平埔原住民族文化重建協會), which has been organized by Professor Chien Wen-min 簡文敏 and his colleagues (林清財, 段洪坤, 洪淑芬, 黃智慧, 潘英海, 簡炯仁). This marks one of the first instances of the Taiwan government's recognizing the use of the term "Plains Aborigine" in state documents, and represents a major breakthrough in the quest for this group's being officially listed as one of Taiwan's indigenous peoples.

The Night Festival is staged each year on the fourteenth or fifteenth day of the ninth lunar month, which this year happened to fall on October 31 (Halloween!). It began with traditional Plains Aborigine rituals referred to as *kaixiang* 開向 ("releasing the *xiang* magic"), which were held at a Siraya shrine (公廨) that had been newly constructed in the village of Wulipu 五里埔, located near the site where Siaolin used to stand. The shrine is dedicated to the worship of a deity known as Taizu 太祖 (other Plains Aborigine deities include Alizu 阿立祖 and Laojun 老君). With the exception of Laojun, most of these deities are believed to be goddesses, and in Siaolin Taizu is generally conceived of as a group of seven sisters. The shrine is also noteworthy for having no statues and no altar. Offerings (especially cigarettes and betel nut, as well as the usual sticks of incense) are placed on the ground atop leaves from the 姑婆芋 plant (*Alocasia macrorrhizos*; "Giant elephant's ear"). In the center of the shrine stands a bamboo cylindrical structure of seven knives (one for each sister) adorned with flowers.

A temple to the Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heaven (玄天上帝) known as the Beiji Dian 北極殿 was also rebuilt at Wulipu. While numerous Beiji Dian dot the mountain areas of southern Taiwan, and have long served as sites for the interaction between Han Chinese and Plains Aborigines, the reconstruction of the shrine proved especially [heartening](#) to Siaolin's survivors.



The *kaixiang* rites were presided over by a female Plains Aborigine specialist known as the *xiangtou* 向頭 (“head of the *xiang* magic”), who is responsible for both summoning and communicating with Taizu and other spirits while joining them in enjoying cigarettes and betel nut. Her rites reflect the profound ethnic reverberation that has shaped southern Taiwanese culture, combining traditional Siraya songs with the use of Hoklo vernacular when issuing instructions to worshippers. The *xiangtou* was assisted by other members of Siaolin’s women’s community, which reflects the matriarchal nature of Siraya family structures.



After the spirits had been summoned, the *xiangtou* led villagers to cut down a preselected bamboo plant (砍向竹) located in the hills near the village, which was then erected in front of the shrine (立向竹). Seven bundles of straw were attached to the bottom of the bamboo (one for each sister, and also representing steps ascending to the heavens), while a larger bundle of straw was hung from its top. In the past, human heads were said to be used instead. There was also a ceremony for repairing the shrine’s roof (整修公廨). Taizu pronounced [approval](#) of the rituals.



The afternoon was devoted to villager worship (村民祭祀太祖) and a Plains Aborigine feast (平埔美食呷平安) prepared by each household featuring a dish known as “mai” 米買 that is made using glutinous rice. This was followed by evening ceremonies (公祭典禮) that combined elements of state sacrifices and mourning rituals, including statements made by leading officials and village leaders (長官致詞, 族人代表心聲感述). The most moving part of the ceremony was the [reading of a memorial](#) addressed to Taizu (in Hoklo), which expressed the villagers’ sorrow at their loss, pride in their history and culture, and hope for the future. Its opening and closing statements are worth quoting here:



“今夜原本是呷恁祝壽和開向歡喜的日子，無奈您們的子孫在二個多月前的風災當中，四、五百人去乎崩山來埋去，阮也因此失去了阿公、阿媽、爸爸、媽媽、兄弟姐妹、族親呷好朋友。連咱祖先辛苦建立的部落也瞬間來化為烏有，崩山時的驚嚇，土石打置身上，一定真痛，蒼天不仁。”

“緬懷歷史、傳成文化是咱的本份，開創更好的未來是每一個人追求的目標，在太祖的庇佑之下，咱來創造一個嶄新且符合新時代良好的生活環境，完成在這一次不幸罹難親人心中的遺願，以慰他們在天之靈。”

The evening rites concluded with village leaders' expressions of gratitude and vows to rebuild. While the traditional nightlong dancing and drinking revelry were abandoned this year, a promise was made for all participants to join hands in dance one year from now.

The Night Festival was marked with occasional moments of grief, especially during viewing of a documentary about the village prior to its destruction. At the same time, however, there were also many outpourings of joy, including making offerings of rice wine to Taizu in the shrine and listening to elderly women who just weeks ago had been torn with grief singing childhood songs (including some in Japanese). There was also the appearance of a beautiful [butterfly](#) (*Hypolimnas bolina kezia*



(Butler); "Blue Moon Butterfly") in Taizu's shrine.

Efforts at material reconstruction are also proceeding apace. Surviving villagers who have spent weeks living inside overcrowded temples are now moving into temporary houses constructed by the ROC Red Cross in Shanlin 杉林 (a township in Kaohsiung County nearer to the Kaohsiung metropolis). These structures are rudimentary, and there is a pressing need to add gardens and other greenery, but villagers are happy simply to have a place of their own that they can call home. There are also plans for two separate sets of permanent homes. The first, also located in Shanlin, are to be built by the Buddhist Compassion Relief Merit Society (佛教慈濟功德會). The second, which will also include either a Plains Aborigines Cultural Park (平埔族文化園區) or Plains Aborigine Memorial Park (平埔族紀念公園), will be situated in the village of Wulipu. The villagers' positive feelings found clear voice in a poster and press release that accompanied the Night Festival, which expressed sentiments of "Gratitude (感激), Commitment (承諾), and Hope (願望)". What has been accomplished stands as a testimony to the human spirit, and the inner strength of the Taiwanese people. Siaolin [has stood up](#).

*Note: Many thanks to Hung Shu-fen 洪淑芬 for sharing her photo of the butterfly.

Tags: [Siaolin](#)