

Enlightening Chinese museums – lessons from university museums

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Abstract

In recent years, with China's economic growth, a rapid expansion in the number and size of Chinese museums can be seen. Unfortunately, the aim of museums to serve communities has not reached the appropriate level. Visitors' participation and recognition need to be improved. In this article we explore the road ahead for Chinese. We suggest ways for Chinese museums raise money, attract more visitors and better serve and engage their interest.

Campus resources available to university museums

As we all know, the development of museums is closely related to financial investment; daily operations such as collecting, displays, exhibition rooms and safe facilities require stable funding. Most Chinese museums are state-owned (over 2,000), while there are only about 300 private museums (about 15%), according to the available incomplete statistics. In Western countries, the number of private museums is up to 40%. In contrast, Chinese museums mainly rely on national or local appropriation. Of course, some museums clearly develop themselves through income-generation from tourism resources. University museums in China have more advantages than others in attracting funds from the community.

Firstly, on institutions: universities are equipped with bodies such as councils, education foundations, and alumni associations. These bodies are set up to attract and integrate external resources, especially financial contributions. But in China today, the majority of general museums are without these special institutions and are dependent on national funding. Secondly, from the social marketing perspective, the social impact and cultural transmission of universities are higher and stronger, and the university museums are important facilities in the campus culture. University museums thus find it easier to catch the attention of donors. In addition, when the university alumni return to their alma mater, they sometimes contribute funding to the museums thus allowing teachers and students to benefit permanently; and the effects of such donations can be clearly seen. For example, the Arthur M. Sackler Museum of Art and Archaeology in Peking University and the Museum of Art and Archaeology in Zhejiang University attract contributions from home and abroad. Our museum in Shandong University also has received financial support from the Youth Foundation established in Taiwan.

Of course, the development of university museums would be greatly restricted without a fixed support from the state budget. In such a situation, their very existence depends largely on how much attention the university decision-makers pay to them. Undeniably, the method and idea of drawing funds from the society to run a university museum has become both useful and popular. With China's economic development, Chinese museums can raise money from the increasingly affluent social environment, lessening dependence on state finance. In order to comprehensively promote their self-development they should set up dedicated bodies to communicate with the outside society both to attract external financing and, more importantly, explain the role and function of museums.

Who visits museums today? Who will in the future?

A museum is a cultural facility, designed mainly to meet the spiritual needs of the audience. With China's economic development, people are gradually moving into the well-off society. However, all is still not perfect, people still pursue material wealth; especially they are concerned about housing, transportation and other living conditions to meet their immediate needs. Therefore, on the whole,

people today are not keenly interested in museums. Instead they seek new friends or scenic and historical attractions. With the improvement of living conditions, tourism has been very popular in China, but visiting a museum is considered by very few.

There has been no significant increase in the number of visitors recent years despite the museums of provincial and municipal offering free entry (with financial support from the government). Clearly, the reason why people do not like to enter museums is not about price or tickets. The reasons are various. Firstly, on living conditions: so far, China's economic life does not allow people to live off the fat of the land so it is hard for them to spare time for just visiting museums for enjoyment. Secondly, a museum is not simply a place for displaying objects; it requires the visitor to have certain knowledge, understanding, aesthetic and other emotions which require some cultural training. This brings stress to the audience that reduces the pleasure of visiting. In other words, the audience's education level is directly proportional to the number of visiting museums. Consider the museums in Beijing, Shanghai and other developed areas, for example: the number of visitors to museums is significantly more than in regional areas in which there are fewer educated people.

Teachers and students make up the majority of the visitors to university museums, who are the highest educated and centralized in society. From the audience statistics of university museums in recent years, it's noticeable that the number of visitors is not only more but also relatively stable, which shows that those who visit and use university museums are more culturally educated than 'ordinary' people. From this trend, it seems that with the popularization and development of Chinese education, the cultural quality of people will be gradually increased; and that more and more people will visit.

University museums have accumulated experience in how to provide considerable services to their audience with certain cultural training. For instance, various seminars are held regularly taking advantage of the variety of professional researchers on campus; activities of different sorts are organized to attract youth full of eagerness for knowledge and liveliness to explore the sources and connotations of museum collections through the interaction between the museum staff and the students. This can change museums into leisure facilities for the youngsters and help them explore the resources available. This is an inevitable future development of museums.

We should also rule out the erroneous view that the low level of cultural quality can be blamed for low visitor numbers. On the contrary, where there is no strong need of museums, the museum staff should overcome it by taking the initiative to find what the audience is really interested in instead of passively waiting for an audience to turn up.

University museums and their community counterparts

Such a trend of museums serving fixed communities leads the development of modern museums, as well as assisting social improvement. The community museum is a brand-new type first developed from the 70s of last century in the West. It's an organization aiming at improving the quality of community residents, increasing their sense of identity and belongingness, and promoting community economic and cultural development by means of collecting, preserving and displaying the historical witnesses which are inextricably and emotionally linked with the local development and natural environmental transition.

Communities not only refer to an area, but also to cultural groups, political groups, as well as single societies, even human society as a whole. Although university museums are different from local museums, neighborhood museums, eco-museums and community museums, they are generally located in a fixed area on campus; so the audience is also more stable, mostly cultured teachers and students. Take the Museum of Shandong University for instance, its collections of artifacts originated from the archaeological excavations of the department of archaeology, paintings from the collection of

retired professors, and the exhibition of university history is about the history of the last century of our school. All these collections have an emotional resonance with our audience. The activities of the museum are all concerned with the entire campus and the faculty, investigating their needs and attracting their participation, in order to promote campus culture.

The concern and research on community museums began in the latter half of 90s of the 20th century. Issues raised at ICOM conferences and the information of museums abroad assisted us to provide service to our communities. Community museums in the West have been in existence for nearly half a century, in Britain, France, Germany, Australia, Japan, Kenya and Morocco. In China, community service has just started.

University museums promote school and campus culture, increasing their sense of pride through paying close attention to developments and changes on campus, centralizing on the faculties, collecting and showing various items and memories closely related to the teachers and students. Such ideas and methods can be used by other museums. There will be more and more community museums in China.

Only by understanding and possessing the knowledge of specific areas and the various factors of living environment, cultural customs and material levels of the residents can the museum usefully plan an appropriate service that will be appreciated and used.

Summary

The points discussed are: favorable terms for the development of the university museum. Colleges and universities generally receive attention from our governments of different levels and society due to the policy of striving to develop education. And the thoughts and practices carried out by university museums indeed are worth learning by all types of museums. However, the public outside the university campuses is generally unaware of the benefits of visiting museums. In the future, to meet the Chinese audience's current and future needs, museums should get inspiration from university museums in how to communicate and make reach out to the surrounding community, analyzing the needs of the potential audience, striving for multiple sources of funding, and generally going further in community service.

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