

Museum and the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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[This research was sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution Fellowship of Museum Practice, 2006 and was greatly helped by the professionals at the Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies. Provided here is the abstract of the final paper, which has been published in *The Ethic Arts*, issue 6, 2006, in Chinese.]

Museums traditionally collect, conserve, research, and display physical objects, both natural and cultural, from the past. While, in recent years, the museum world is experiencing one of the most noteworthy transformations with the global recognition of the urgent need to preserve both the intangible and tangible heritage resources in the face of the accelerated pace of cultural, economic and technological globalization. It is against this background that the 7th Asia Pacific Regional Assembly of ICOM was facilitated as a strategic initiative in Shanghai, China in October 2002 and ratified the Shanghai Charter with emphasis with emphasis that “museums as facilitators of constructive partnerships in the safeguarding of [intangible] heritage of humanity.”¹ In 2004, ICOM declared “Museum and Intangible Heritage” as the theme for the International Museum Day and later on deliberated on the same theme in the 20th ICOM Triennially in Seoul in October 2004.

It is the formal recognition of interrelationship between museum and intangible heritage that provides much of the impetus for this research. My research is on “museum and the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage”. The “museum” I discuss here refers to conventional object-oriented museums. And “safeguarding” means “adopting measures to ensure the viability of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, including the identification, documentation, protection, promotion, and transmission of such heritage.”

The past decades have seen a concerted effort within the national and international societies to broaden the categories of cultural heritage. The 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* reached the apex of these efforts. The definition given in the 2003 *Convention* also sets up normative standards for the organizations and bodies concerning its safeguarding. According to this *Convention*, Intangible Cultural Heritage means “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skill—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individual recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”²

¹ Shanghai Charter: Museums, Intangible Heritage and Globalization ICOM Asia Pacific, 2002, http://icom.museums/shanghai_charter.html

² <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf>

My research will start with identifying two categories of intangible heritage based on this definition and conventional museum practices. Since the 2003 UNESCO definition is based on the considerations of recognizing the formerly marginalized forms of heritage, it is unavoidable that the Intangible Cultural Heritage is viewed as a separated category, which together with Tangible Cultural Heritage, consists of the whole concept of Cultural Heritage. However, it might not be an operational definition that can be applicable to museum works if we think of it from museum perspectives. This dichotomy between the tangible and intangible elements of cultural heritage may provide an attractive solution to the legal and administrative concerns, but it is confusing to be filled into museum works in the sense that that tangible can only be interpreted through the intangible and all material collections in museums have important intangible values associated with them that the reasons for their protection. In addition, according to the 2003 UNESCO definition, Intangible Cultural Heritage also includes material expressions and physical spaces. By emphasizing the traditional nature of Intangible Cultural Heritage, this definition fails to fully recognize the intangible cultural forms of the Western world or dominant groups. It is not surprised to go through the UNESCO all proclamations of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity and find out that the recognized Intangible Heritage are notably from the minority communities in developing countries.³ Accordingly, to identify Intangible Cultural Heritage that is applicable to museum operation, we need to move beyond the dichotomy of tangibility and the viewpoints, such as that traditional medical knowledge would be classified as “Intangible Cultural Heritage”, while the Western medical system should be classified as “Science”.

In my research, I prefer to divide the Intangible Cultural Heritage into two groups: one is the Intangible Cultural Heritage that used to live and be practiced within original natural and social context. Because of the historical development and changes of social constructions, the original functions of this kind of Intangible Cultural Heritage have entirely disappeared. Consequently, the once-complex holistic tradition has been reduced into symbols of aspects of culture. For example, the Art of Kuqin, a.k.a. Chinese Zither Art, this seven-stringed instrument playing was an elite art form by ancient Chinese literati in intimate settings and viewed as the representation of the noble status of traditional scholars. However, now, the Guqin playing is a professional performing art that usually played in public. Its original meanings and representations have diminished as the changes of social and cultural contexts.

The other one is the Intangible Cultural Heritage that is still living and being practiced within its natural and social context. This type of Intangible Cultural Heritage is viewed as both traditional and contemporary in the sense that the traditional culture and folklore form a living culture that is still a vibrant and self-identified part of cultural communities' lives. Most aboriginal, indigenous and minority cultural heritage

³ According to the 47 Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity proclaimed in 2001 and 2003 respectively, 9 of them in Africa, 13 of them in Latin American and Caribbean area, 20 of them in Asia and Pacific area. As to the 14 proclaimed masterpieces in the Europe, 11 of them are in the Eastern Europe.

can be put into this group.

It is not that challenging for museums to safeguard heritage that won't develop and change. Even if it is Intangible Cultural Heritage without physical forms, museum can employ modern technologies to transform them into tangible presentation. As to the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the biggest challenges come from the second group, which derive from the contradictory natures of museums and this type of heritage.

Firstly, the presentation and interpretation in museums are static, while the elements of this kind of Intangible Cultural Heritage is living and evolving. Secondly, museums collect, preserve and interpret material evidences and intangible values associated with them from the past, while this type of Intangible Cultural Heritage is not simply about the past, but also about present, even future. Thirdly, since its inception in the late 18th century, the development of museum was paralleled with the development of modern western-centered scientific knowledge system. The classification of museums into history, fine art, natural history, anthropology... and the categories of collections and terminology, the conservation, interpretation and research all follows the basis of science, either social or natural. However, the knowledge system, the beliefs and values of most aboriginal, indigenous, or minority community conflict directly with what we have been taken for granted as right for a long time. Fourthly, since the day of its interception, museum is never a place of neutral status. Every single activity within museum is about choice and judgment, which mostly reflect the subjective preferences of people. As to decide what to safeguard and how to safeguard, museums face not only the content and means, but also the ideas and standards which might far beyond what they are familiar of.

Although with the above-mentioned challenges, many museums have already started the explorations in the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. In my research, I used the published case studies as resources. My focuses are on what the practices museum professionals have employed and how these practices might change the conventional museum, both conceptually and operationally.

At the end of my research, I would like to make several general suggestions for the further practices of the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Firstly, to rethink about what a museum is by revising the current museum definition. ICOM has already started by replacing the "material evidence" with tangible and intangible heritage in the 2005 ICOM statute draft.

Secondly, museum's professional standards, such as ethic codes, collection management police should not only reflect the new aspects of museums works but also balance the universal approach to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage and the reorganization of special interests of certain cultural communities.

Thirdly, the most effective strategy for safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage will involve the use of the Intangible Cultural Heritage forms as springboard for new cultural expressions that connect the past and have relevance in the contemporary world.