

Department of Anthropology,  
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# Summer Internship 2015

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Thanks to the opportunity offered by the Department of Anthropology in The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), I have interned as a summer voluntary assistant in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (M.A.A.) from late June to mid-August in 2015. As an anthropology student, I had always been interested in how history, knowledge and power are being constructed and communicated in a museum, as one of the ideological state apparatuses. In the two months working with my colleagues, I was always looking for bits-and-pieces in their curatorial work to understand how history and power were being interpreted and reproduced by the museum.

Being one of the 8 research museums in Cambridge, the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology plays a crucial role in both ethnographic and museological studies. With the ethnographic and archaeological collections from the worldwide, M.A.A. served as a cultural platform for both researchers and indigenous scholars to follow the footsteps of former collectors, ethnographers and curators, and interpret objects together — a place where knowledge was produced in the dialogues between curators and representatives from local communities.

M.A.A. started off collecting ethnographic objects from the local societies (Cambridgeshire) and Fiji. In two centuries of time, it expanded into a complementary collection from various cultures around the globe, with the aid from various donations from ethnographers. M.A.A is now operating genuinely as a public institution where audiences can interact with cultural bits and learn more about our world.

### **The River Stars Reindeer Project**

Harking back to what happened around three months ago, I was assigned to work with a research team on Orochen-Evenki ethnographic project: the River Stars Reindeer Project. I had to work as a immediate translator between curators and the academic scholars from Manchuria. In the discussion between Orochen scholars, Russian scholars and curators, consensual interpretation on Orochen-Evenki objects like birch-bark made pouches, boxes, cradles were made for more detailed and “authentic” documentation of their functions: while early ethnographers and

curators would try to guess objects' functions, method-to-use and cultural significance, collection management nowadays stressed more on empowering the local community to speak of their history.

One fascinating thing about this project had visual collections involved — thousands of pictures taken by Lindgren in her journey to Mongolia. Pictures are like museum display storages: they record the human activities and living environment at a particular time in its own contexts. Through studying the pictures, we had learnt more the missing history of the Orochen-Evenki tribe and its people. The project was, at the end, a public exhibition introducing the Orochen-Evenki culture.

### **Museum Work on an Everyday Basis**

Coming to an end of the project, I have moved on working for the documentation and interpretation of China's ethnographic objects. The series of China's ethnographic collection involves mainly collectables from Canton and Peking, like toys, jades and woodcrafts.

#### Working with Collections in the Stores

M.A.A's collections are largely kept in storage. They are packed according to their size, weight and fragility. The box numbering system in M.A.A has each type of an object given a code; for example, 33 refers to personal adornments. Each type is further categorized according to its details; 33.G refers to breast ornaments, while 33.D, arm ornaments. A typical box list should thus read as 33.D.1, 33.D.2, 33.D.3 and so forth, indicating the types of its housed collections. Object numbering systems in M.A.A, on the other hand, underwent more transformations and changes. Since the museum collected both archaeological and anthropological artifacts, early numbering system involved E and A: which represent ethnographic and archaeological collection respectively. Early collection management lacked computing system, which made early numbering system very problematic to document and manage. Thereby the museum invented another system of numbers, the Z numbers ( in Z00000 form), attempt to override the original ones. Yet still the lack in labor had led this numbering system another failed one. Nowadays the museum made use of refined numbering system, in form of 1934.571, which illustrated its year and number. The refinement is still in process.

#### Familiar as Strange, Strange as Familiar

The first moments when I touched these artifacts, I thought "hey, aren't these the little objects from my homeland?" Yes. These Canton objects were collected in around the 1930s, exactly the ones that I had seen in my childhood. But the details of these objects had been left blank. My supervisor thus asked me to write a detail descriptions of what these were, for the reference about these collectables. Then, like most other information gathered from the

indigenous scholars, these words entered the catalogue system of the museum.



Fig. 1.1 Cantonese Paper puppets

The production of knowledge is never a synchronic action, but a diachronic accumulation of the words from different stakeholders. While the knowledge acquired from different times might have been distorted due to their political and historical understanding, the way how the museum document the objects — by keeping every comment from visitors — successfully preserves the transformation of human history.



Fig 1.2 a 2-cm jade fish collected in late Qing Dynasty

### Restoration and Destruction

Another week I had been working on Japanese ethnographic collection — a box-full of Japanese *katanas* and *taichis*. Being a practitioner of *Kendo* and Chinese *Kung-fu*, this had been the most precious opportunity for me to understand the transformation of blades in both China and Japan.



Fig 1.3 Japanese *katanas* and *tachis*

In particular, there was a blade being wrongly assembled with another *tsuba* from different times. I immediately spotted this mistake and worked on “restoring its correct order”. Being a practitioner and an experienced weapon repairman, my reactions to these kinds of mistakes were almost instinctive. Nonetheless this reckless idea had led me into another mistake: the two pieces might have undergone certain historical events for them to be put together. The actions of mine might erase the interactions between the objects and a Japanese scholar. From a museological perspective, sometimes historical contexts embedded in objects are more important than their authenticity.

### Collections as Bargains of Power

In the dialogue with my colleagues, I had come to realize that some of the collections were once made as permanent loan to other museums. Museums in early ages had a tendency to *collect every type in every kind of artifacts from different cultures*, also as known as, the missionary purpose of a *perfect museum*. Nevertheless, the transformation of missionary purpose from being mainly a ideological state apparatus to a public institute had made this kind of transaction no longer applicable among museums around the world.

### Gallery and Public Communication

Being a public institute in Cambridge, M.A.A nowadays made use of a various anthropological methods to understand how artifacts and knowledge are communicated through museums to audiences every day. I had volunteered doing participant observations with audiences every Friday. My work mainly was to help my supervisor to track our visitors and see how they would visit the museum. After the visitors had finished the whole floor, I would come to ask them about their experience and engagement with the collections. One of the most interesting points about this work, is to see how museum display would affect how visitors subconsciously walked around in the gallery. Before I thought visitors visit according to their own will, for example they would walk to whatever they wanted to see, and skip those they would love to neglect. But the inside findings through the tracking experiment reveals the fact that people would submit to the inclined angles of certain display boards and storages, and walk on an expected path.

Thanks to my inspiring colleagues and everyone whom I have met in the museum, who generously shared their knowledge and experiences to me. Even though that museum itself is not the topic I am most interested in, the summer internship still benefited me and broadened my horizon. How culture is being preserved and communicated in the museums will always be a question in my later studies. Here, I would like to express my gratitude to my department and M.A.A. Without the support from the former and the generosity of the latter, I would never had learnt so much in this two months. I will remain curious in my life to every archaeological and museological finds!