

ITP REPORT 2019

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In the summer of 2019, I was very lucky to participate in the British Museum's International Training Programme (ITP). The six weeks of the programme were fleeting, but the harvest it brought to me is extremely rich. It has greatly broadened my horizons, increased my professional knowledge and skills, and I have made friends with museum professionals from all over the world. It has had a very important guiding significance for the future of my work.

First of all, I am very grateful for the sponsorship provided by the Sino-British Fellowship Trust.

Thank you for the hard work of all the members of the ITP team and for the attentive guidance of the experts at the British Museum. Thank you also for the great support of all the departments of the British Museum and my partner museum - Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums. They have made the whole project meaningful and far-reaching and have changed the present and future of museums from all over the world.

I will divide this report into three parts to express my personal experience of ITP.

1. The British Museum

At the British Museum, we learnt about all aspects of museum operation. It is very exciting to be able to listen to authoritative experts from a world-class museum who impart their experiences. Through the training, I deeply realized many shortcomings of my own museum: the collection management information system is not perfect; the exhibition is not enough to meet the needs of the audience; and the cultural relics protection technology is backward etc.

Exhibitions are one of the important indicators for audiences to evaluate a museum. Aside from permanent exhibitions, our temporary exhibitions are updated very quickly, with an average of three months. However, this general influence is not enough. Through studying in the British Museum, I was shocked by their perfect preparation process. Each exhibition project has been carefully prepared for several years, and various departments have participated in it from the beginning of the project. This may not seem necessary for us, but it has laid a very good foundation for the implementation of various steps of the exhibition. At this point, the cooperative operation between various departments is very worthy of our learning. Unfortunately, in my museum each exhibition usually has only a few months of preparation time, and some core departments, such as publicity and education departments, will not participate until the exhibition stage, so the final presentation effect can be imagined. This is one of the problems that our museum urgently needs to solve. Therefore, I propose to



my museum to learn the advanced concepts and methods of the British Museum, to involve multiple departments in the early stage of the exhibition preparation, and to plan the exhibition from different angles, so as to avoid the phenomena of information lag and lack of close connection between departments in the later stage. In the overall planning of the exhibition, its core should be changed from "collection-centered" to "public service-centered". For a long time, there has been a common phenomenon in Chinese museums that exhibitions are not close to the audience. For example, only the historical value of exhibits is emphasized, while the interpretation of audience's emotion is ignored. We only attach importance to the safety of the collections, ignoring the audience's experience of viewing the exhibitions, etc. In contrast, the British Museum has a world-class collection and it considers the needs of different groups of visitors physically and emotionally, such as the placement of collections at the bottom of the exhibition cabinet to accommodate the visual angle of children.

The new museum definition proposed by the ICOM in 2019 is *"Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing."* In my opinion, as a member of the museum world, in my daily work I should pay more attention to my social responsibilities and better take into account the feelings of different groups. In order to better serve society and give audiences more opportunities to visit the museum, our museum follows the British Museum's measure by delaying the closing of the museum on weekends from the normal time of 16:30 to 20:30 every Saturday. This has been a relatively easy change to implement and has been praised by many museum fans. However, the attempt to delay the closing of the museum also faces many challenges. In order to facilitate the management, we can only open the exhibition halls of several permanent exhibitions, which makes the number of visitors to the museum not very large during the extended period of time. In addition, due to the lack of publicity and promotion, on-the-job staff in the museum sometimes outnumber the visitors in bad weather. For this reason, after discussion, our museum has adjusted its policy of extending the closing time, shortening the extended period and changing it to 18:30. Through the attempt to extend the closure of the museum, I learned that when we learn from the experience of advanced museums such as the British Museum, we should not only change the superficial problems, but also take various factors from the perspective of the overall situation into account, make sufficient audience research and feedback, increase other activities to attract audiences during the extended period, and make long-term planning, etc.

In the management of cultural relics and archive materials in the British Museum has been done very well. The curators and collection managers can easily find relevant collections

information through the management system and database. At the same time, the audience can also find a lot of information on the collections through the Internet. This has set a very good example for us. My museum urgently needs to establish a better collections management system, to store all kinds of information digitally, and make more of the information public, so as to better perform the functions of the museum. However, in China's museums, there is a general lack of information disclosure. A few museums can provide limited information. On the website of my museum, only a few dozen collections are introduced and there is no public information inquiry system. It can be said that in the aspect of information disclosure, it is rather backward and still stays in a very closed and conservative stage. At present, China's museums are vigorously promoting the digital construction of museums, which will be a long process. Through the training of the ITP, I have learned more about the gaps between the BM and our museum in this area. There are both internal and external causes to change these gaps. The external causes such as technological gaps are actually not large. The main challenge lies in the internal causes such as the transformation of people's ideas and minds. Personally, I had an extremely precious time in the British Museum. Thanks to the ITP, it has opened the door for me. Through the understanding of various departments, I can not only limit myself to my own work functions, but I also regard the museum as a whole, enabling me to think more deeply about the present and future of the museum.



2. Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums

There is no doubt that the British Museum is a global, top-notch museum and an excellent place for people from all over the world to learn about cultural heritage. However, many of its conditions are not available in most museums in the world so therefore, from this point of view, there are certain limitations for most of us. The advantage of the ITP programme is that it also provides participants with the opportunity to learn about museums in other parts of Britain, which provides us with many relatively accessible experiences. First of all, I would like to express my sincerest appreciation once again to Jackie, Bill and their colleagues at TWAM. I was very lucky to be able to go to Newcastle to visit and learn about many museums with

special features. What struck me most was that each museum showed excellent audience participation. From the layout of the museum to the details of the exhibitions, the concept of focusing on the audience was always reflected. This greatly changed my previous impression of the museum. The museum was not silent and rigid, but open, lively and integrated into people's daily life. In the partner museums of the ITP, I felt a decidedly different atmosphere from that of the British Museum. I was no longer surrounded by bustling tourists from all over the world, but by many lively and lovely children as the museum became an excellent place for residents to spend their family time together. Through the introduction by the staff of the Discovery Museum, I learned that they even will sort out some of the storerooms for the visitors to experience. Compared with Chinese museums where the storeroom is regarded as a secret, I think it is a very good attempt to let the visitors uncover the mysterious veil of the museum storerooms, in this way they can blend into the atmosphere of the museum. The Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums in Newcastle, taking the Discovery Museum as an example, has also set a very good model in performing its social functions. They provide paid training courses to the public, such as schools. On the one hand, they have strengthened communication and cooperation with other institutions, and on the other hand, they have increased museum's own income. These are all very worthy of our reference. The exchange between our museum and social organizations is currently limited to public welfare lectures and other forms of activities. If the relevant knowledge of the museum can be constructed into a set of proper training courses for example, it can interface with relevant majors in universities and provide a good platform, which is both conducive to the cultivation of more professional talents for society and beneficial to the continuous updating of the museum.



In terms of visitors' experience, it is very necessary to design different brochures and guides for different groups. At present, most historical and comprehensive museums in our country

are still using the traditional brochure, which does not highlight enough information to enable the audience to quickly integrate into the story of the exhibition, nor participate in it. During my stay in Newcastle, I observed that when the curator is telling a story, they can use many specific characters to tell the details of the history through videos, pictures and recordings, which can greatly attract the audience though having a certain emotional resonance. At the same time, many interesting details are hidden in the exhibition to attract children and other groups. I realize that there is still a long way to go for Chinese museums in terms of audience care however, through the ITP I have greatly increased my confidence in making changes in this area. I have seen many excellent examples and learned many experiences. Next, I will gradually incorporate these changes into future exhibitions and design some different guided tours, etc. The key to change is to rethink the exhibition context of the museum. The cold historical statement which is like an archaeological excavation report should be changed to a more audience-friendly way for the museum is not only a research institution, but also shoulders the important task of serving the society.

3. Personal summary

What makes the ITP project so special and profound? I consider that is because it was designed with a lot of practical sections, such as discussions and workshops during the courses, and the finally "Object in focus" section. This greatly increases the participation and enthusiasm of the participants and makes the ideas of museum people from different countries with different responsibilities fully communicate and collide. Through these practical sections, I have enhanced my independence and creative thinking, learned about some aspects that I have never reached in my past work, changed the perspective of treating problems from "this can't be done" to "how to implement this" and improved my communication skills. Through discussions and exchanging ideas with partners, I learned about the development of museums in other parts of the world and have a new understanding of my future career vision. At present, the most difficult parts of exhibition organisation are the selection of themes, budget and use of funds, design and so on and each part should bear the corresponding responsibility. The project system requires an all-round ability, that is, the refined ability of research, the ability of coordination and organization, and the ability of overall planning. Not only were all these abilities given to me by the ITP 2019, but I have also established an extensive network of participants. We can continue to connect with the BM and other institutions and partners through the ITP blog, email sharing, academic exchanges and interviews, etc., all in order to promote the development of museums around the world.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the Sino-British Fellowship Trust and the British Museum once again. The ITP of the British Museum is the greatest training programme I have ever experienced, which has given my insights a big leap and activated my long-term thinking.