

Report on ITP Legacy Project ‘Museum Association Conference 2019’

Xuejing Dai, Shandong Museum, China

10/14/2019

I am Xuejing Dai From Shandong Museum, China. Thanks to the Sino-British Fellowship Trust I became a member of the ITP family in 2015. Big thanks also go to the Getty Foundation, the British Museum and CSMVS, so I could be part of the 2015 Mumbai workshop, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the ITP. It was in that year that ITP got the funding for more legacy projects. The Mumbai workshop ‘*Creating museums of world stories*’ benefitted me with a global perspective of what a museum is and how museums should operate to cope with the fast-changing global community. This legacy project made it possible for me to attend a follow-up sustainable legacy project, the 2016 ITP Leicester University conference ‘*Museum’s in the global contemporary*’, which perfected the exhibition proposal project in Mumbai. How fantastic to see participants in Leicester immersed in our ITP workshop on *Shared Histories and Global Voices*. I would like to extend my great gratitude to all the funders for the ITP, without your funding I could not continue to be part of ITP legacy projects four years later.

The ITP legacy project ‘*Museum Association (MA) Conference 2019*’ enabled me to explore Brighton and to figure out what the MA is. Big thanks also go to the Weald and Downland Living Museum and Polesden Lacey for enabling us to make the pre-conference trips. Last but not least, great thanks to the ITP team, Claire Messenger and Anna Cottle, without your diligent work, nothing could be made possible, you are the ones who make us believe ‘anything is possible’. So, ITP-ers, JUST DO IT!

I would like to summarise what I have learned in these few days in four points.

First, how the MA Conference theme attracts, enlightens and perfects me.

The Museum Association in the UK was founded in the early 20th century, which is much earlier than ICOM. The *Museum Ethics Code* issued by MA is a guidebook for all cultural heritage sectors and professionals in the UK. It is not just guidelines, it is also a practical book for museum professionals to figure out what is the right ethical practice in real life. Being attracted by this guidebook, I applied for this year’s conference.

When I arrived in Brighton, attended the conference, listened to all the speeches and discussions, I can definitely be sure that I had made the right decision. The Museums Association Conference & Exhibition 2019 is the biggest event of its kind in Europe for museum and heritage professionals. It showcases inspiring work from across the world that places museums at the heart of communities and transforms people’s lives. *Museums Makes A Change!* While making changes to the community and people’s

lives, how to create *'sustainable and ethical museums in a globalised world'* was debated at the conference. A list of keynote speeches, panels and seminars focusing on the theme were held in two days. The conference explored what the environmentally, financially and socially sustainable museum of the future might look like. How can institutions adapt to a rapidly changing world and what of kind leadership is needed in the sector to make change possible? In the age of globalisation, it is more important than ever for museums to have ethics at their core. The conference also interrogated the ethical implications of the international partnerships we seek to develop, how we confront the legacies of empire, and the role of global tourism in a more sustainable world. In essence, what are ethics? What is sustainable development in the museum sector? In the globalised context, what should we do about the problems in the museum's world? To cope with these questions, we should develop a forum to host a debate. The MA annual conference is the right place for debate. Various case studies were presented by speakers, however, there is no one answer to all these questions. It is suggested that special consideration of each case should be attended with a unique solution, while taking all the previous cases into consideration.

Second, in order to help us get a better understanding of sustainable and ethical museums in the global context, this legacy project arranged two day trips to museums near Brighton.

The first stop was the Weald and Downland Living Museum. It helped us to look at how the cultural sector in the UK preserves its history and how it is presented to visitors through 'living' museums. What is a 'living museum'? It is a museum that brings the past to life with historic buildings and costumed guides, which has revitalised the museum scene across the country. Just as the museum director Simon Wardell said, *"we rescue and conserve historic buildings, we teach traditional trades and crafts to ensure their preservation and we share the untold stories of rural life and those who lived it in the South East of England."* The Weald and Downland Living Museum covers 40 acres with over 50 historic buildings dating from 950AD to the 19th century. Being threatened by destruction, these 50 historic buildings were carefully dismantled, conserved and rebuilt in their historical form at the museum. In China, there is the historic village or town, which is managed in the similar way as a living museum. Local residents live in it; life goes on as usual in these villages or towns. Visitors can enjoy the rural life as well as the taste of the ancient way of managing ancient craftsmanship. The difference lies in the fact that these places could only have a certain period of time's buildings, such as 16th century buildings and so on.

The most interesting part of this museum is that it has a collection storeroom which holds 15,000 objects from building parts and trades tools to transport and vehicles. The large number of collections makes it possible to install temporary exhibitions for visitors to explore a certain building types from particular historical periods. Yes, the living museum is truly committed to caring for the site with the environment in mind. It plays a vital role in protecting the ecosystem and gives the museum an opportunity to

describe the important bio-diversity of the environmental heritage. “Downland” can be defined as thin soil over chalk, characterised by grassland with a high diversity of species. That’s why we can see the living animals in the pond and on the meadows. It is a park, and it is a historic park where visitors can stroll on the road and entertain themselves with kids playing around. It brings everything to life, thus getting its name ‘living museum’!



Students visiting the museum



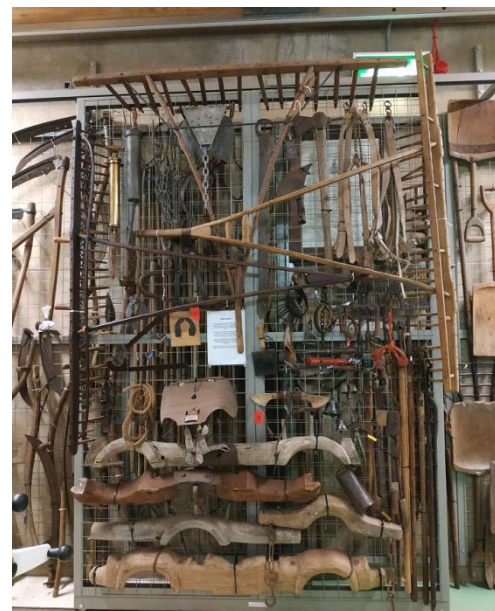
Vegetable seeded in the garden



The stele bearing the founder of the museum, Mr. Haris Zeuner, who developed the museum with passion and energy



Cattle on the meadow



Collection storeroom

The second stop was to Polesden Lacey, which is run by the National Trust. The National Trust is the cultural sector in the UK which plays an important role in protecting,

preserving and presenting national heritage. It is a charity founded in 1895 by three people who saw the importance of UK's national heritage and open spaces and wanted to preserve them for everyone to enjoy. More than 120 years later, these values are still at the heart of everything they do. As a charity, they rely on income from membership fees, donations and legacies, and revenue generated from their commercial operations.

Polesden Lacey is an Edwardian country retreat owned and managed by the National Trust. Both the house and gardens are magnificent, and the National Trust tells a wonderful story of the family who owned the house and the staff that worked there. It was owned and gifted to the National Trust by Dame Margaret Greville who lived at Polesden Lacey from 1906 – 1942. It was used as a 'party house' and weekend retreat, which hosted many elites and royal families. There are 15 rooms that are currently open to the public and there will be 10 further rooms opening in the near future. As it is a historical house, objects are placed at their original place, including ceramics, lacquered wooden furniture, textile, paintings, and books. Visitors entering this house are like guests to Margaret, who feel free and comfortable to walk around the rooms since there are no barriers between the object and visitor, even in the library, visitors can apply to read any book on the bookshelf.

It is aiming at becoming community-friendly, nice place for families, for seniors, and a place for meeting friends. There are a series of programmes organised by the National Trust, such as the exploration tours of the garden and the daily tours of the house. Since there are some sensitive objects in the house, it has limited opening from 11:00am and the last admission to the house is 4:00pm then all the curtains will be closed when the house is closed in order to secure better preservation conditions. As a historic house, there is no collection storeroom; therefore, all the objects visitors can see are displayed in the room, which is also another charm of it.

There are 48 staff and 800 volunteers working at Polesden Lacey. One of the reasons for volunteering in this place is that volunteers can have free entry to all National Trust properties which covers over 500 historic houses, castles, ancient monuments, gardens and parks and nature reserves.

Additional to the membership fee, the revenue generated from running coffee & gift shops can contribute some extra money for the running of the properties, but there is still a need for more funding and more staff for the property itself. There are some memorial halls in China, such as the Yuefei Memorial Hall, which is a county-run national property, but still it needs to generate more money from tickets and programming. The big difference lies in the fact that those national properties in China cannot join in hand to constitute a larger organisation which could benefit its members more.



Kids playing around in the garden



Banquet Hall



Visitors reading the script folder.



Life goes on



Volunteers bring the story to life

Thirdly, the MA Conference highlights the climate crisis, decolonisation of

cultural objects, and the sustainable and ethical development of museums in a globalised world.

There are three keynote speeches and five panels which inspired me and here are some highlights. The first round of keynote speeches were on **social activism and the climate crisis**, with four speakers.

“What is sustainability?” Subhadra Das, host of the conference, gives the definition. It is a noun, which can be explained as ‘the ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level’, or it can be referred to as ‘avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance’. Sustain as a verb, has three meanings, ‘strengthen or support’, ‘cause to continue’, ‘uphold, affirm or confirm the justice and validity of’.

“Museum activism in an age of intolerance” given by Sharon Heal, Director of Museums Association, addresses the ethical responsibility of museums to address the critical issues of climate crisis. A museum can make a change, and change is possible against the backdrop of populism and intolerance and it can be concluded that museums are turning into convening and healing spaces, which are not neutral in modern society.

Heledd Fychan, the head of policy and public affairs at National Museum Wales and the chair of the MA’s Ethics Committee introduces a “sorry or not sorry way” movement, which is a forum for people to express their own ideas on ethics. Museums should work for the public benefit, especially when getting sponsorship. Museums should build a network with the community, instead of for the community, which is the perfect ethical practice.

Farhana Yamin gives a report on the need to declare a climate and ecological emergency. She urges that everyone on the planet should work to reduce their carbon footprint. As for the ownership of nature, cultural sectors are guardians and stewards of cultural heritage, we should be aware that whose stories are represented in the museum are of vital importance.

The second round of keynote speeches were on **what is a museum** and succeeding the discussion of the museum definition from the ICOM Kyoto 2019 General Conference, the MA invited speakers to continue the discussion.

Dr. Errol Francis gives his understanding for “future museums”. The origins of European museums used to be a ‘cabinet of curiosity’ but beyond this is there a museum without objects? Just like the *Museum of Tomorrow* designed by Santiago Calatrava, how museums might evolve in future is a question we have to consider.

Jette Sandahl, the Chair of ICOM MDPP committee, has said *‘there is no meaningful definition without a vision. There are no meaningful functions without a clear purpose.’*

As is known to all, a museum is a balancing act of collecting and preserving, documenting, researching, exhibiting, educating, and communicating. A museum is (tries to be) in the service of society. However, one may ponder on these questions, such as 'Who owns the interpretation of this core question?' 'What does service mean?' 'Which society?' 'Is their one singular society?' 'Who decides?' 'Who has the power?' 'Who is accountable?' We have to admit that 'a museum is part of society and embedded in society. It is never neutral'.

Dr. Richard Sandell, Professor of Museum Studies, Leicester University, said that at its best, what should a museum do to meet the basic needs of human beings? It should be value-led, value-based. What kind of museum does society need now? It should be a museum of dialogue and a museum of social space. It should be a non-western model of museums. The core of the idea of museums should be a unification of form, format and content

The third round of keynote speeches was on *The end of empire* discussing decolonisation of cultural objects in a global context.

Germany has worked out a framework for claims for the return of cultural objects. The complexity of cultural objects needs to initiate working with countries of origin, to decode what decolonisation means, to a certain extent, 'just do it!' Share power and authority.

The first panel was about the **post-colonial museum**. What next for the post-colonial museum? During the periods of colonial expansion, trade and exploitation, objects from the colonial regions were turned into the collections of institutions. In the post-colonial age, efforts are being made by institutions to reframe their collections and we are asked Who are the original owners? How to make the collections aligned to the future? Is the museum the public platform for saving endangered culture, instead of just a collection storeroom? The best solution is to talk. By engaging in dialogue, museums can become a place to talk and a place for conversation.

The second panel was on the implication of **#MeToo** for museums and galleries from an ethical perspective. What is the implication of **#MeToo** for museums and galleries from an ethical perspective? Museum ethics in the **#MeToo** era looks at the "We are not surprised" movement, which has thrown up a host of charges against curators and collectors exploiting power.



The third panel was about **ethics – who are they good for?** A series of discussions furthering the debate on ethics is held in this session. National Museums Liverpool's ethics group holds that 'our ethics group acts as the conscience of NML and helps provide an environment where staff can confidently recognise and address challenging situations in a safe place of work.'

Richard Sandell, took the *Being Human Gallery* in the Wellcome Collection as an example to illustrate the ethical and unethical interpretation. It is about having the awareness that the stories we tell, the language we use and the experiences we create, have effects in the real world. It is detailed research and careful storytelling or taking events in the past out of context to tell a sensational story. Can we say museum interpretation should always take account of contemporary realities? It is an open question.

Finally, what kind of exhibition can be held in a museum? Who should have the final say, the board, and executive team, internal ethics group (staff), public or other? Ethics – who are they good for? The answer, maybe, is *everyone*.

The fourth panel was about a case study to illustrate museum ethics **The Mummy Returns? Exhibiting ancient Egyptian human remains**. This exhibition shows Ta-Kheru's mummified body in its original wrappings, and CT scan of the interior of her body. In exhibiting mummification, the curator aims to create a respectful environment, respect the name of the mummy, adapt a text, create a "novelistic" tone, speculative text to make sure every real life lived, women's perspective and a facial reconstruction. Just as an article has remarked, "by taking care of her body and by keeping her memory alive, the exhibit ensures her a joyful spot in the otherworld. Exhibitions dealing with human remains should go through thorough ethical discussion and do the best to preserve humility.

The fifth panel is about the **Learning Curve**. Over the past year, the Museums Association has been researching the current state of museum learning and engagement in the UK and thinking about what the future holds. They have spoken to over 150 museum workers, funders and sector organisations and asked about the opportunities and challenges for learning and engagement work. Are museums an alternative classroom? Community hubs for lifelong learning and well-being? What role do we play in the wider learning network? How serious are we about community agency? Whose cultural and democratic rights is this? Principles and values: social justice, cultural rights, community agency, participatory and socially engaged practice make a difference in confidence when talking about learning. This session invited all participants to give some reflections on activism, education, and so on, which offered nice feedback to the organiser.

Fourthly, I have to say that the ITP itself is working to create and promote a sustainable global network of museum and heritage professionals. The scope and range of the ITP has grown and developed over the past 14 years. ITP aims to create global connections with participants from 48 countries and regions. That's what makes the participation in MA's annual conference so reasonable. We had



We had Astghik Marabyan (Armenia), Wesam Mohamed (Egypt), Namrata Sarmah (India), Roshan Mishra (Nepal) and Zulkifli Ishak (Malaysia), as well as Claire Messenger and Anna Cottle from the ITP team and John Williams, Head of Photography and Imaging at the BM and the nine of us made most of the time. We exchanged ideas on the theme of MA's keynote speeches and talks. We learnt from each other, we communicated with each other, learning more about what is the case in each other's countries.

Sitting in front of my desk now I am back in the office, I am in dire need of making a change in my museum. We should make an ethical interpretation of the labels in the gallery, we should offer a communication space for the visitors, we should take responsibility for the climate crisis, we should be active in bringing museum collections to life in an ethical way. I was deeply impressed by the *Our*



Ancestors exhibition in Brighton Museum and Art Gallery. The third person narrative interpretation, the natural background of the installation, the friendly and welcoming hands-on activities, the vivid facial reconstruction, the interpretation of archaeological findings combined to make a fresh method to bring past to life. We at Shandong Museum have our Shandong Archaeology Gallery. It is a gallery that introduces the archaeology of Shandong but it lacks a sense of life. A friendly and welcoming interpretation would make it rigorous in the future. It is a taboo to display human remains in museums in China, however, what if we display them in a respectful and ethical way. It would become a bridge for us to meet our ancestors. This is something I can make a change in my museum.

Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to those who have inspired me in these days. I am going to make a change in my museum!