

The Objects of the Museums as Metaphor of Culture, Identity and Education ----Comparative Research between the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum and the Chinese Tuva Private Original Museums

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Abstract

In this essay, the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum and Chinese Tuva Private Original Museum will be involved in the discussion. The firsthand materials collected in Slovenia and Chinese Tuva villages have laid the foundation for academic discussion. With the rapid development of sedentarization, hunting prohibitions and tourism in Tuva villages of China, cultural and social dilemmas as well as the risk of population decline have become the main challenges for the Tuva people in China. Faced with this situation, the local Tuva community leaders endeavored to revive Chinese Tuva culture, strengthen the ethnic identity as well as educate the young generations to realize the importance of traditional culture through establishing the Chinese Tuva Private Original Museum which is falling into the predicament because of economic pressure. In contrast, the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum has a different story. In terms of the museum, not only should the study emphasize the visitors but should also consider the museum as a quasi-sacred place and the visitors as quasi-pilgrims. All in all, the objects of museums as a metaphor of culture, identity and education are playing the complicated role in diverse perspectives. In addition, this essay will challenge the prevailing viewpoint that the object is the cornerstone of museology with the view that the social life of the object in the museums is the cornerstone of museology instead of the object itself.

Keywords: Slovenia Ethnographic Museum; Chinese Tuva Private Original Museum; Objects; Culture; Identity; Education

Nowadays, Tuva people are scattered in Xinjiang of China, Outer Mongolia and the Republic of Tuva. Chinese Tuva people have been classified as Mongolians and live mainly in Kanas, Hemu, and Baihaba villages, with the population of around 2500. Their residential area shares borders with Russia, Outer Mongolia, and Kazakhstan. Disturbingly, under the impact of tourism, hunting prohibition, and sedentarization, the Tuva language, and traditional culture are facing a huge challenge and crisis. Meanwhile, they are also entrapped into the ethnic illnesses and social sufferings. Facing this crisis, some local Tuva community leaders take pains to revive Tuva culture by means of different activities like establishing the private original museums.

After the National Identification, Chinese Tuva people were classified as the Mongolian ethnic minority in China, but they still keep the strong Tuva identity. They were nomadic people and hunters before the encroachment of tourism. This kind of subsistence mode was accompanied with the Shamanism; natural worship and primitive taboos. Despite the rapid development of globalization, modernity, tourism and sedentarization, Chinese Tuva people tried to preserve this belief system. Some local community leaders strategically adopted all kinds of measures to remain and revive the Tuva culture. Tuva private original museums have become the prominent way of preserving cultural consciousness. Despite the economic pressure, currently, the Tuva community leader Suo Longge and several others still operate their original private museums to which tourists, researchers, writers and mass media visits now and then.

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Although Chinese Tuva people are identified as the Mongolian minority, some Tuva people hold that they have their own unique history, language as well as culture, so they should be a separate minority. If they could become a Tuva minority, their endangered culture and language could be rescued and their social status could be improved tremendously as well. In the meantime, Tuva people belong to Buerjin and Habahe County in which the Kazak people is the dominant minority. Especially under the development of tourism, more and more Kazak people poured into Tuva villages. Nowadays, the Kazak minority has occupied absolute positions in many aspects, such as leadership, economy, and culture. Although local tourism is based on the Tuva brand, not only does the Tuva people not benefit from it, but they are prohibited from conducting tourism directly or indirectly. Some Kazak people even pretended to be Tuva and operate tourism businesses. It has aroused the Tuva people's discontent and complaints.

Under the external and internal challenges, Suo Longge has made tremendous efforts to collect Tuva traditional objects and maintain his private original museum. From the museum, not only could the author uncover the cultural competition between Tuva and Kazak, but it also has given the author insight into the metaphor of the culture, identity, and education behind the museums. Meanwhile, Shamanism and natural worship distinguishes Tuva private original museums from others. Tuva people believe objects have their own social life and every visitor should carry them with reverence. According to Suo Longge, once the visitors enter his private museum, they could receive the baptism of their spirit.

The Definition of the Objects, Social Life of the Objects and Cultural Heritage

Susan Pearce, the author of the famous and frequently quoted statement 'objects are the heart of museums', said at the beginning of March 2010, when she was holding a lecture for the Slovenia museum workers, that she still thinks that objects and collections represent the base of museums and their cultural mission and that she firmly believes in that. She is by no means alone in her belief. Zbynek Stransky who was putting forward his definition of museology as a new and independent academic science in the 1960's and 1970's set the issues of museum objects and their function in museology as one of the most fundamental issues dealt with in museology. Likewise, one of the leading theoreticians of museology and museums, Peter van Mensch defined museum objects as 'the smallest element of material culture which has a recognizable and recognized identity in itself', and said that museums and museology are pre-occupied with preserving and using the selected parts of our material environment and with structured (scientific) approach to new information value of these objects. Anyhow, in his opinion the issue of museum objects 'is the cornerstone of a museological methodology. (Jože Hudales 2010:60-70).

Accordingly, from the definition of the key role of the objects of a museum, the concepts of the objects should be discussed further. The object is a complicated concept and has been defined by many scholars. Chen Ye-Ben wrote:

Actually, till now, sociology pays much attention to concepts instead of objects. Auguste Comte said social phenomenon is the natural fact which follows with the nature rule. From it, he implicitly admits that the social phenomenon is the object. But, when he detaches this kind of philosophy generalization, he still regards the concept as his study... If we summarize the viewpoints of Durkheim, the characteristics of the objects have the following aspects. Firstly, the object is the external existence as opposed to the concept. Secondly, the object is also a phenomenon and the observation object of sociology. Thirdly, the object is a subjective image. (Chen Ye-Ben 2010:37)

From the analysis, the concept of the object can be seen as complicated existence. Most scholars consider visibility as the basic attribute of the object. Certainly, this is the crucial feature of the object. But on the other hand, the invisibility of the object cannot be neglected, which is an indispensable part of the object, especially for the object of the museum. The social life of the object is the main part of invisibility. Arjun Appadurai has come up with the crucial concept of the social life of things in his book *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspectives*:

"This essay has two aims. The first is to preview and set the context for the essays that follow it in this volume. The second is to propose a new perspective on the circulation of commodities in social life. The gist of this perspective can be put in the following way. Economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged. Focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather the forms of functions of exchange make it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and values is politics, constructed broadly.

This argument, which is elaborated in the text of this essay, justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have a social life.” (Arjun Appadurai 1986:3).

The concept of social life is considerably instructive for the research of the objects in the museum. Here the concept of the object has been included in the thing. Next, cultural heritage is another important concept. “Recently, we have stressed the importance of intangible cultural heritage. If we just consider from the concept, cultural heritage could be classified into tangible and intangible. However, it is not absolute. These two categories overlap in the time and space. So, the comprehensive understanding of the cultural heritage is pretty important.” (Zhu Fenghan, An Laishun 2004:9) With the development of the museology, the objects of the museum have gradually connected with the cultural heritage. Therefore, the intangible nature should also be highlighted like the social life of the objects in the museums.

The Classification of the Objects in Slovenia Ethnographic Museum and Chinese Tuva Private Original Museums

The author classifies the objects in the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum into several types: wooden objects, pictures, religious things, production tools, culture objects, and others. Meanwhile, the objects in the Chinese Tuva private original museums could be divided into several categories, such as history objects, livelihoods objects, religious things and musical instruments. The objects in the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum are much more abundant than in the Tuva private original museums. And here, the author adopts the “original” museum instead of the “local museum” because the “original” is more proper and applicable to the indigenous concepts in Tuva villages. “Hence the designation of ‘community museology’ appeared, according to which museums shall be institutions for performing public service, employed in the collection, protection, and preservation of cultural heritage. The ‘new museology’ redirected its focus from the past to the present, and also into the development of society; the future became the motto of its operation.” (Jože Hudales 2007:423) To some extent, the intention of Tuva private original museums also refers to public service as well as the protection and preservation of cultural heritage but needs to be understood in depth from the contextualized situation.

Heritage, Identity and Education

“The ethnographic objects in the museum collection in Maribor, have, therefore, become cultural heritage since it is characteristic of them that they respect the ‘heritage’ which was left to us by our predecessors. We collect and tell stories with their help about ‘their victories and defeats, which connects us with our predecessors, we share our virtues with them and avoid their mistakes’. We preserve our heritage because it defines the way we relate with others and defines our identity.” (Jože Hudales 2010:85) The museum has become the important venue for educating the people. After the first visit to the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum, the author deeply felt the presence of the state heritage and state identity as well as the educational purpose embodied in the objects of the museum. Among the exhibitions, there were some old certificates, passports, ID cards, old Slovenian money and stamps, wooden model houses, and pictures that include traditional family members, harvesting scenes, shepherds, forestry workers, marriage rituals, blacksmiths and shoemakers, a big wooden boat, old labor tools, etc. Those objects were displayed in a special way and are accompanied by various background colors and music. The whole atmosphere of the museum provides the visitors with the sense of national identity by means of imperceptible education and knowledge sharing.

In terms of the wooden boat, in the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum, the big wooden boat was placed in the prominent position and was followed by video illustration. Yet in Chinese Tuva villages, the wooden boat is absent from the museums and has become a historical memory due to the destruction of traditional fishing life and culture under the tourism, modernization, and forced settlement. Although the Tuva people were ancient hunters and nomads, the wooden boat was an important tool for fishing life as the complementary livelihood. When the last wooden boat craftsman died, this kind of traditional skill vanished forever. But the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum is subsidized by the state and has enough money, political power, and resources for developing its business and preserving state cultural heritage. At the same time, the rich collections and the vivid objects not only play the role of education but also strengthens the state identity. In contrast to this, the Tuva private original Museums is facing up to the predicament and the Chinese Tuva people are confronted with the dilemma of identity because of the fact that they belong to Mongolian minority as a result of the political designation and Tuva youngsters are gradually forgetting their culture under the influence of modern education and cultural assimilation.

Luckily, some local Tuva community leaders endeavor to collect the Tuva traditional objects in order to protect the endangered culture and educate the young generation to realize the importance of traditional culture.

Nevertheless, more and more community leaders are gradually giving up the operation of Tuva private original museums under the economic pressure. Among them, Suo Longge, who is the local community leader, tries his best to maintain his private original museum. However, he is encountering unpredictable economic difficulties and also his physical condition is getting worse and worse. He worries too much about the fact that some Chinese Tuva people sold the precious Tuva relics to tourists or other collectors for a very low price. Accordingly, the multiple elements like the economy, politics, identity, and education might be responsible for the success or failure of the museums.

Tribal Identity and Cultural Crisis

So, I am sure that big museum institutions which were established and founded for the preservation (and invention) of national (European or world) heritage should likewise work in their urban surroundings---perhaps 'thinking globally and acting locally' could serve as an example for such museums. By all means, every museum, regardless of its 'expert origins', should be aware that there will be other changes, like globalization. Participation in the process of globalization actually means participation in the process of 'cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization', as noted by sociologist Roland Robertson (Linda Young, 2002:3)

Under the development of tourism, modernization, sedentarization and globalization, Chinese Tuva culture is on the edge of crisis. Suo Longge said that before the encroachment of tourism, they lived a nomadic and hunting life and nature was then the biggest museum. However, the whole picture has been changed since the “intervention” of modernization, sedentarization, and globalization. He added that mobile life was their survival root and “nature” was the best mobile museum when they moved freely. So he said, “No nomadic life, no real museum.” Even if he knew the bleak fate of Tuva culture and museums, he still cherished the hope and tried his best to arouse the “tribal identity.” “Tribal identity” was his repeated phrase and was different from local identity and implies ancient recollections and nostalgic feelings.

Suo Longge said he would never care about the number of visitors and the economic returns, but he deeply believes that the success or failure of a museum never depends on the number tourists, but the quality of the visitors. In other words, “the quality of visitors” means the visitors should show their reverence and worship toward Tuva museums instead of seeking novelty. It could be explained through a story of what happened between Suo Longge and a merchant. One day, there was a merchant visitor who wanted to buy an old wooden Tuva bow and arrow for a high price. Not only did Suo Longge refuse the request of this merchant, but he lost his temper and reprimanded him for his disrespect for Tuva culture and collections which cannot be measured by money.

“The first aspect meant that I would base my speech on the experience done in practice, assessing hundreds of museums over the years (EMYA has involved so far more than 1600 museums in more than 40 European countries), an empirical approach founded on the use of an evaluation grid which the members of the EMYA Committee have elaborated starting from Kenneth Hudson’s intuition of the so-called ‘Public Quality of Museums,’ a concept to which we’ll refer more in details later, that we can express in terms of assessing a museum “from the point of view of visitors” (Massimo Negri, Franco Niccolucci, Margherita Sani 2009:7). Interestingly, from this analysis, the visitors should be satisfied by the museums. It is in sharp contrast with Suo Longge’s opinion in that he highlighted the decisive role of the museum itself instead of visitors and considered the museum as a quasi-sacred place and the visitors as quasi-pilgrims.

Syncretism of Other Culture

The syncretism of other culture is also a very important feature of the museums. In the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum, other culture could be seen from the following two aspects. On one hand, geographically it included the culture in Africa, Egypt, India, Arab, and China. On the other hand, it contained the pictures, videos, books, money, etc. Regarding Africa, there was a picture that describes a corner of a family in which a woman was carrying wood on her back and holding her baby with a hanging cloth. Another picture showed an African woman and a monkey were feeding their babies respectively. This picture expresses the idea that animals’ love toward their babies is similar to human beings’. This also could be regarded as the embodiment of cultural relativism.

With respect to China, it referred to Chinese primary school texts, Chinese money, Chinese restaurants decorated by the dragons, Tiananmen Square, a corner of the teahouse and Tibetan culture, among which, Tibetan culture was emphasized specially and was composed of the Potala Palace, Buddha, and prayer wheels, etc. These collections in other cultures show the idea of “think globally and act locally” in the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum.

In Suo Longge’s Tuva Private original museum, “other culture” is also highlighted but is different from the “other culture” in the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum and refers to the culture from foreign Tuva. The objects of this museum came from several channels and most of them were from Tuva villages and others from Tuva People’s Republic. Among the objects of the museum, a map of Tuva People’s Republic was apparent. When the visitors came to visit, Suo Longge was accustomed to narrating the history between Chinese and foreign Tuva. He told the author that he had received the invitation letter from Tuva People’s Republic to participate in the celebration activities, but finally, he failed to go due to political reasons. Historical memory between Chinese and foreign Tuva remains strong bounds. Suo Longge added that he could not permit other cultures except foreign Tuva culture going into his museum. Otherwise, he thought the authenticity of the original museum will be spoiled. In short, compared to the sentence of “think globally and act locally,” in Suo Longge’s museum, it is more like “think naturally and act originally.”.

The Social Life of the Objects in the Museums

“Justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social life” (Arjun Appadurai 1986:3). The object as the cornerstone of museology is based on the tangible interpretation. Yet the author conceives the social life of objects in museums is the cornerstone of museology.

The idea of the phase of commodities in the social life of a thing is a way to summarize and capture the central insight of Igor Kopytoff’s important essay in this volume, where certain things are seen as moving in and out of the commodities state. I shall have more to say on this biographical approach to things in the next section, but let us note for the moment that things can move in and out of the commodity state, such movements can be slow or fast, reversible or terminal, normative or deviant. Though the biographical aspect of some things (such as heirlooms, postage stamps, and antiques) may be more noticeable than that of some others (such as steel bars, salt, or sugar), this component is never completely irrelevant. (Arjun Appadurai 1986:13)

There are a number of channels of making the objects entering into the museums. Some of them were commodities before becoming the objects in the museums; some never experienced the process of exchanging; some were from individual collections; some underwent the procedure of moving in and out as the commodity. Accordingly, the biographies of the objects in museums are diverse. For example, the big wooden boat in the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum has its own social history and has experienced the different stages like tree, wood, boat, exhibited boat in the museum. Therefore, the fact that this wooden boat could become part of the collections of the Slovenia Ethnographic Museum is decided by a variety of necessary and causal factors. The objects that came from Tuva People’s Republic were emphasized by Suo Longge because these objects carried the special social life history that was closely related to the Tuva People’s Republic and it also symbolized the revival of the relationship between Chinese and foreign Tuva. To some extent, the idea of establishing the Tuva private original museums keeps the strong relation with the Tuva people’s Shamanism and natural worship. The social life of the objects is also the expression of the local philosophy that deeply influences Suo Longge’s viewpoints. Facing the huge impact of human centrism, economic centrism, and cultural destruction, the museums try to promote the concept of naturalism and natural centrism. He held that once the objects enter into the exchange realm, the authenticity of the objects in the museum will be spoiled. The maximum value of the objects could be incarnated in the museums and has nothing to do with the profit. As for Suo Longge, he considered his private original museum as the means of educating Tuva people and visitors and also the wishes to revive Tuva people’s identity.

Conclusion

The social life of the objects in museums is a basic cornerstone of museology instead of the objects themselves. The modern museum system could learn lots of inspiring experience from Chinese Tuva people’s private original museums. Ironically, Suo Longge’s private original museum is bound to face such a survival dilemma due to its contradiction to the mainstream idea of maximizing profit. However, he tried his best to assimilate Shamanism, natural worship and the concept of the social life of things into his Private Original Museum.

It is not only an incarnation of the nostalgic symbolism but a way of expressing his resistance to anthropocentrism, economic centrism, demoralization, sedentarization, and globalization. What is the virtue of the museums? Suo Longge's idea was that not only should we care for the visitors, but we also need to consider the museum a quasi-sacred place and the visitor as quasi-pilgrims. From the comparative research between the Slovenia Ethnology Museum and the Chinese Tuva private original museums, the objects of museums as a metaphor of culture, identity and education are playing the complicated role in diverse perspectives.

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