University Museums Reflecting the Large Picture: A Case Study of the Museum of East China Normal University

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Abstract

University museums are cultural landscapes of the university themselves, they should extend beyond their walls throughout the campus to reflect the characteristics of the parent university and that of the community. However, a dilemma is that university museums are usually restricted by budget and space. This paper presents several cases outlining how East China Normal University (ECNU) museums solve this problem by making the best use of available resources by: considering the whole university campus as a playground of the museum; and considering each individual on campus as a "walking museum advocate".

Introduction

The history of university museums in China can be dated back to the early twentieth century; however, they did not receive much attention until the beginning of the twenty-first century. The first few examples of university museums in China were established by domestic scholars who travelled abroad and Western scholars who came to China in the early twentieth century, when the concept of "museum" was introduced (WANG 2011). After decades of war and domestic turmoil, the museum industry started booming in China in the late twentieth century. The pace of museum infrastructure development was accelerated when it was no longer reliant on sporadic personal effort, but gained from significant government investment.

Among the museum types, university museums were the last to attract attention. In 2011, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage and the Ministry of Education issued the Announcement about 'Strengthening the Construction and Development of University Museums', which was seen as the national policy guidance for university museums (The State Administration of Cultural Heritage of People's Republic of China, and The Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China 2011). In the following year, the National Educational Alliance of University and College Museums was established, with more than 70 members[1]. Other regional alliances of university museums were established soon afterwards. The founding of these alliances marks the shifting of interest from infrastructure to content development and from display to interpretation and participation.

Most university museums in China depend largely on the funding from the university. Even though university museums are usually gifted with precious historical collections, they still feel they compete as 'neglected stepchildren' with other campus departments for operational support and the attention of the administration (ALVORD 2012). However, since most university authorities are unlikely to ever put a museum as the priority, most university museums in China still need to struggle for survival. Hence, it is essential for Chinese university museums to align themselves with the aspirations of the university, to avoid being isolated, and they must reflect on the larger picture of their organizational environment.

At the same time, the practice of collecting and curating exhibitions is changing. Fiona Cameron has raised the concept of the 'liquid museum', in which museums are reformed as a series of practices as liquid, mobile, and relational (CAMERON 2015).

With this theoretical context, this paper explores new practices that a university museum system has adapted for flourishing with limited resources while fulfilling and reflecting the needs of a large community.

Governance System

East China Normal University was founded in Shanghai in 1951. It is a comprehensive research university, embracing an international diversity of students. One university feature is its training programs to develop teachers for all levels of schooling. The Museum of East China Normal University (ECNUM) is composed of five parts: the Numismatic and Antique Museum, the Biology Museum, the 'Sea Wind' Folklore Art Museum, the Mineralogical and Geological Museum, and the Museum of the Educational Image. All of these branch museums are developed out of the collection storages in different departments. The collections were only used for instruction and research within their respective departments until being drawn into the umbrella structure of ECNU museums.

The Numismatic and Antique Museum, under the History Department, collects ancient Chinese artifacts, including bronzes, jades, ceramic and porcelains, etc. It has a unique collection of numismatics, covering three thousand years of Chinese history. The Biology Museum located in the School of Biology Science holds a wide collection of plant and zoology specimens, the most precious of which are panda and golden monkey specimens. The Mineralogical and Geological Museum has a rich collection of scientific specimens. The "Sea Wind" Folklore Art Museum sitting under the School of Social Development has a featured collection of peasant paintings and also boasts a collection of paper-cuttings by local artists. The Museum of the Educational Image, still under construction and based on the collection in the School of Educational Science, will be the first of its kind, collecting and interpreting an audio and video record of the twentieth century educational history in China.

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1 The National Educational Alliance of University and College Museums, http://museums.sjtu.edu.cn/Web/BWGLM/226001.htm, accessed September 6, 2016.

Fig. 1
The Numismatic and Antique
Museum
Image courtesy of the Museum of
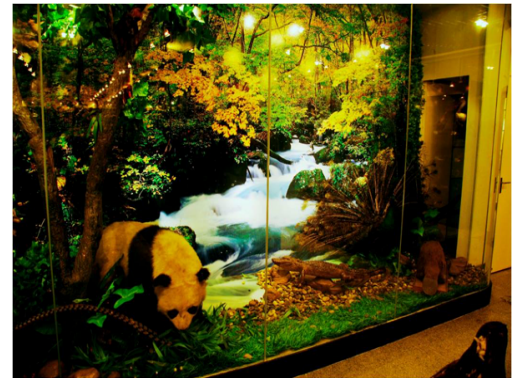**East China Normal University**

Fig. 2
The Biology Museum
Image courtesy of the Museum of
East China Normal University

Resource problems exist in many university museums; the ECNU museums have restricted space, low budget and small staff numbers. At one stage a plan was discussed to develop a brand new museum building, putting all these ECNU museums together to increase the combined influence of the university museums. If this were to be accomplished, more staff would be hired and all the collections would be given more space. However, this plan is currently suspended. The university authority is not putting the centralized museum as a priority, and they are concerned that this plan would involve a continually expanding investment of money.

Therefore, a compromise governance system has been created. Though museums are still separately located, a central museum management office is established to unite the collections and help them realize and develop their museum functions. It is the administratively converged model of Simpson (2012). The office makes strategic plans and sets annual goals, does fundraising, seeks support inside and outside of the university, and coordinates inter-collection projects. Also, with the employment of museum management specialists, the office gives professional advice for the running of the museums. The office reports directly to the Assistant President of the university, so it operates as a bridge between the museum and the university authority.

While reporting to the Assistant President of the university, the office also reports routinely to the heads of five offices (the Public Relations Office, Office of Planning and Policy, Office of Construction, the Archive, and the Office of Liaison) to seek their advice and support for the management of the museums on campus. Even though these offices and the museum do not have administratively subordinate relationship, the museum is glad to invite them to be involved in the development. In return, they help the museum overcome administration difficulties and help pull the threads together when it comes to money and space issues.

The office has established an advisory council to help run the museum. The council includes professors from each department where collections were stored, heads of several supporting offices in the university, and museum experts from outside of the university. These people are invited not only to advocate for the museum, but alsohelp with projectsand practical work. The professors represent their expertise in the study of the collection. Museum experts invited include a Vice Director from the Shanghai Museum, a government official in charge of the museums in Shanghai, and a peer museum professional from another higher education institution. By setting up the advisory council, more minds are focused on support for the museum, possible funding resources outside of the campus can be leveraged, and more attention, inside and outside the campus, is focused on the museum itself. Different committees are created based on projects or temporary needs. For example, when one of the museums is undergoing a thorough examination of the collection, a temporary committee is created, inviting professors in related disciplines but who do not work for the museum to join the project.

The council and committees bring funding to the museum, and ensure space is available when a temporary exhibition is needed. More importantly, this system helps the museum to think more about how to align its development with the development of the parent university, through which the museum would gain more support and attention from the university authority.

It is important to note that the advisory council system is a trial for establishing a sound museum management system in China. In 2015, the Chinese government issued 'Regulations on Museums', which is seen as the first national law about the management of museums (People's Republic of China, 2015). In the 2015 Regulation, it promotes the establishment of the board system in museums. The concept is borrowed from the United States and it aims at encouraging the public to participate in and supervise museum operations. ECNUM is among the first Chinese university museums to invite people outside of the institution to get involved in decision making and daily operation.

'Consumers' as well as 'Producers'

Public engagement in exhibition is not a new practice. (AHMAD et al. 2015) However, engaging the public in the whole process of museum work, from collecting to promoting, is not a widely accepted practice. It is more common in community museums, and university museums can be seen as belonging in this category to some extent. The merits of involving the university community members are more than inviting the involvement of more brains and hands, but are also an act of promoting the museum concept itself by asking people to 'participate'. People gain a sense of ownership in this process. 'People' are the biggest and most significant resources available to university museums, if we do not shelter ourselves away from the rest of the campus. Other than the limited number of people invited for decisions and policies, the whole body of the 'target market (KOTLER & KOTLER 1998) of the museum is an untapped resource. Students, professors, faculties, and alumni, are not just consumers for the museum, they can also be the producers creating the museum 'landscape' of the campus, provided the museum openly invites participation. Apart from trying to unite a few people with various projects, every individual on campus can be 'a walking museum advocate'. That is, everyone can create the 'collection', contribute to the exhibition, interpret the museum, and finally, promote the museum in an unconscious way.

Museum landscape

The term 'landscape' can be traced as it entered museum discourse to describe a new technique of museum display based upon the principles of the picturesque in eighteenth-century landscape painting (RICH 2016). University museums are landscapes of their parent university, boasting the heritage of their featured collections and sometimes historic architecture. However, landscape is not necessarily just a physical witness; it is more than the material evidence, and includes the images and symbols with which we inherit and characterize it. In a university, landscape marks the identity of the institution. Thus, a university museum can express an identity that extends beyond the nature of its collections and can be a mirror reflecting the context that surrounds those collections.

Landscapes beyond the architecture

On the ECNU campus, there are blue flags with words of professors and students on each lamp installed on the main avenue. These flags talk about the spirit and culture of the university. When one walks along the campus and notices these flags one after another, it is like walking along with the professors and students; they talk with the visitor about their understanding and stories about the university. This adds to the impression the university makes on a visitor. Subtle things like these flags represent an important part of the landscape of the university. And this is what can be done by the museum to reflect the larger context of the university with little cost. Thus, by collecting, preserving, interpreting and presenting the landscapes on campus, university museums imbue themselves with the values of the parent institutions. The following are several examples that ECNUM has done to enact the above philosophy.

To celebrate the theme of the 2016 International Museum Day 'Museum and Cultural Landscape', the Biology Museum of ECNU held an exhibition called 'Birds on Campus: Natural Landscape and Cultural Landscape'. The museum launched a contest calling for photographs and drawings of birds on campus. Teachers and students responded actively and many excellent works were gathered. Then an exhibition with selected photographs and drawings was held. It is worth noting that the organization of the contest and the small exhibition were all done by students themselves. The museum cooperated with a student society, the 'Life and Nature Society', and guided the students in developing the small exhibition. Also, a workshop about 'paper-cutting of birds' was also set up with the exhibition. A local paper-cutting master was invited to teach students Shanghai-Style Paper-Cutting, the workshop was not only an echo of the exhibition, but also intended to promote the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

Following the idea of 'the whole university as the playground of the museum', the second phase of the exhibition goes to teaching buildings, libraries, and the school cafe. The selected photographs and paintings were framed and hung in the teaching buildings; a short film about the history and stories of the collection in the biology museum was broadcast in the school cafe; and a book corner with the theme 'life and nature' was set in the library lobby for everybody to take a book about the theme and read. Furthermore, related derivative products were designed by students such as postcards, pins and bookmark. In this way, the museum and its work is promoted, and carried to every corner of the university by everyone.

Museums beyond the walls

Another example is from ECNU's Sea Wind Folklore Art Museum. To align with the theme of International Museum Day, the Sea-wind Folklore Art Museum organized a series of activities about 'Landscapes on Paper-Cutting'. A large piece of paper-cut template including various scenic spots and historical buildings on campus was designed by the artist. Then another workshop was set, inviting students and teachers each to cut a small part of the large piece. All these small pieces created by students and teachers were joined together to present the large artwork about the natural landscape of the campus. Below the paper-cutting, all the contributing teachers and students signed to mark the moment the paper-cut was created. The artwork was included in the museum's permanent collection. The co-contributed paper-cutting is not only seen as an artwork, it is an artwork of landscape created by people in the landscape at a specific time. Here lies the collecting principle of our academic museum. We do not only collect history, but also preserve the present and save for the future. The current time would be a past, and it will one day be treated as a historical moment.

Fig. 3
Paper-cutting Workshop
Image courtesy of the Museum of
East China Normal University

The next plan of the Folklore Art Museum is to use paper-cutting, a kind of intangible cultural heritage form, to enforce the cultural landscape on campus. Another program called 'Masters' Image and Oral History', will record one-hundred famous professors and important alumni talking of their experiences in the university and the paper-cut master will cut their images. The paper-cut images and their recorded audio are then made into an exhibition. When people come to the exhibition, they will see the paper-cut images of their professors and their schoolmates. By scanning the QR code, the audience can see on their own smart devices a short video in which these people are talking about the history and stories of the university. The purpose of this exhibition is to revive the spirit of the university by presenting the 'living' landscape on campus.

QR codes will be adopted in the exhibition to increase user engagement. QR codes have been considered a good subsidiary technology for exhibitions, especially if the target audience is college students (PÉREZ-SANAGUSTÍN et al. 2016; DEMIR et al. 2015). Furthermore, QR codes are viewed by users as social spaces not just a means for information consumption (SHIN et al. 2012). QR codes adopted in an exhibit presenting a topic that is familiar to the audience who belongs to that particular community could introduce dimensions of entertainment and socialization. Hence, these QR codes would be employed as the extension of the exhibition beyond the physical space of the museum.

Landscapes beyond the Campus

As an academic museum located not only in the campus but also in Shanghai, an urban metropolis, the Sea Wind Folklore Art Museum held a forum, inviting craftsmen from all over China to discuss the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. A tour of the Bund, the landmark of Shanghai, was offered and all the craftsmen were asked to represent the Bund in their own way, like paper-cutting, peasant drawings, embroidery, etc. In this activity, the landscape of Shanghai was presented in various art forms; diversified intangible cultural heritages were revived by presenting a popular urban landmark; and the diversity-welcoming spirit of Shanghai was expressed in a new dimension. It is worth noting that this forum would not have been undertaken without the support of the academic department. It was the reputation of the academic department that attracted all these craftsmen to come to the forum.

Another inception goes with the Numismatic and Antique Museum. The museum, working with the student society on campus 'Youth Loving History', launched a national historical drama writing contest for high school students, on the theme of 'the Silk Road and the Integration of Civilization'. The best scripts were by students for performance. The Silk Road was an ancient network of trade starting from China and stretching to Central Asia. Recently, the historical idea of the 'Silk Road' has been revived as 'The Silk Road Economic Belt', the new strategic development concept of China. The museum gave students lectures about the Silk Road, with topics covering both the historical significance and the economic importance. Objects related to the Silk Road were used to help illustrate the topic. The museum was invited by the students to be the judge for the performance contest. In return, the contest served as a mechanism for broadcasting the museum, showing a museum with global vision and focused on the participation of students. At the same time, the significance of the contest was that the historical cultural landscape concept 'Silk Road' has been refreshed with new meaning, and the museum has helped to interpret and reflect the image and concept of the Silk Road landscape.

There were discussions about whether museums should be involved in dramatic performance, concerns that it might harm the seriousness of history have been expressed (BURCAW 1997). Nevertheless, it is a trend that museums integrate fine arts with performance art. The Dallas Museum of Art offers an excellent example (PITMAN & HIRZY 2010) of this practice. This event also illustrates that public engagement of a museum does not have to happen inside the museum, and it can be tailored for the interest of a particular group. In China, there is now a rising trend for museums to cooperate with schools and students, and go out of the museum door and design curriculum or activities for a particular group, especially teenagers. This started after 2015, when the government issued a guideline paper about promoting the cooperation of engagement between museums and schools (The State Administration of Cultural Heritage of P.R.C., and The Ministry of Education of P.R.C., 2015). This guideline paper brings change for almost every museum, new ways of cooperation with schools and students are being formulated.

Future Steps: 'Creating' the Landscape

The ECNU Museum has done a lot as a focal point for gathering resources and by not only taking care of its own collections, but also the landscape of the parent university, the city and the country of location. In this process, it has achieved quite a lot of support. However, what needs to be done in the future? Broader vision calls for further steps. University museums can't stop at being a mirror reflecting or illustrating what already exists; they should be places that "create" landscapes in the university context. As landscape does not have to be a material manifestation, it can be about the academic atmosphere, professional pursuits and campus culture, which are the core of the development of the university. Even though museums are usually considered in a marginal place for these developments, we can pull threads together and be a catalyst for innovation. According to what is presently under consideration, there are three aspects that are worthy of focused effort.

First, as an academic museum, the ECNUM should put more effort into launching inter-disciplinary research. There is a wealth of expertise in different disciplines that can be tapped for research and interpretation. Academic museums can be campus leaders in fostering interdisciplinary collaborations and forging new directions in education. Since the collections in museums can be researched and interpreted in many different ways, academic museums should be the incubator for initiating cutting-edge research. In this way, the museum can make itself play a vital role in an academic mission. An inception goes with the Tsung Dao Lee Library & Museum located at Jiaotong University in Shanghai. The famous physicist Tsung Dao Lee initiated a Science and Art Foundation. Each year, the foundation holds a worldwide scientific seminar and a contest calling for artworks related to the scientific topics are held correspondingly. The selected works of the contest constitute an exhibition presenting the integration of science and art. It sparks new thinking about science and promotes new expressions of art. By holding such an annual exhibition and seminar, the museum initiates pioneering academic discussions and improves its role and stature in university research.

Second, as an academic museum in a campus and society embracing diversity, the museum can be more active in promoting cultural interaction. This can be achieved through holding exhibitions or workshops, embracing the participation of students from diversified cultural backgrounds and offering a platform for their varying forms of cultural expression. For example, one project currently being planned is called 'one object, one-hundred stories'. In this project, the museum will select one object at a time, and hold lectures and workshops for international students about the interpretation of the object in artistic, cultural or historical frameworks. These lectures and workshops are actually stimuli for inspiring students to give their version of stories. Students are encouraged to respond with objects or stories from their own cultural backgrounds that come to mind when seeing the object introduced by the museum. Their responses may be similar objects with different meanings; or different objects for similar use, or just some other threads that come to mind that they would like to share. All this feedback will not only be interesting stories to share, but can also be developed into a small focused exhibition representing the similarity and differences of diversified cultures. For university museums, small exhibitions like these are cost-effective, and may have as good an impact in the community as blockbuster exhibitions do for large museums.

Third, as a museum located in a "community" where the education of students is seen as the most important role, the museum should drive towards this main goal in many different ways. The Yale Center for British Art, for example, has offered an Enhancing Observational Skills (EOS) program to Yale School of Medicine, aiming to train students' observation techniques to help these future doctors to be more adept and accurate in formulating diagnoses. This program used fine art as a medium and as a formal training tool for teaching clinical medicine. The program was so innovative and successful that other institutions, such as Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, have also introduced this program (ALVORD 2012).This program offers an excellent example of integrating campus museums into the curriculum for students in various departments, and it inspires us to explore more museum-centered programs to take an active role inthe curriculum. For the case of ECNUM, the main body of students would be teachers in the future; hence, the museum can be an ideal practice platform for the future teachers to develop their professional capabilities.

Conclusion

In summary, though ECNUM is in its own unique situation, it offers some experiences for all university museums to share. Discussed above are small program examples that may look trivial to museums of large scale, but they represent our current thinking in response to making the best use of our museums within their institutional setting. We are in a time that academic museums are facing more challenges than ever in competing for visitors, reputation and support, and thus we have to deal with the situation using creative new solutions.

We need to always ask ourselves questions such as: how can we meet broad vision with a limited budget? How can we integrate ourselves more into the community and resonate with the development of society? How can we prove our value while facing questions about the need for maintaining campus museums? One thing is certain: we need to broaden our horizon and look beyond ourselves. An academic museum should not just focus on its own collection or isolate itself on campus, but try to engage, interpret and even shape the cultural landscapes of the campus and the community. By making these efforts, the museum shares more social and cultural responsibility and, in return, gains more attention and support for its development.

The paper also serves as an example that represents the current trend of museum development in China, where it is realized that museums should be broadly and proactively supportive of the needs of the community and the society. For the development of university museums, there is a shifting focus from infrastructure construction to content development, from being isolated within an institution to being tied directly to institutional aspiration.

Acknowledgements

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