

The journey of standardization and improvement in museum practice - The evaluation of regional museums in Taiwan

Christina Chun HSU

Abstract

It is logical to have a standard for any kind of cultural institution under one government, especially when the number of museums have increased to more than four hundred. This is, however, an issue that our museum field is facing. Since the first museum in Taiwan was established under the political power of the Japanese government in 1908, the colonial museum model has become a typical model for subsequent museums in Taiwan. Of course, the museum had been one of the symbolic cultural institutions of Japanese modernization in the 1860's, and the Japanese also took it as a way to modernize Taiwan after the treaty of the War between China and Japan in 1895. Unfortunately they did not have a chance to train museum professionals before the end of their occupation, and museum directors were commissioned by the government during that period. This was the first contact that Taiwanese museums had with a regime of outside governors, who used the museum as a tool for legitimating their domination. The goal of museums of this type concerns nothing about the civil rights of the people in Taiwan. It was not like the British Museum which was first set up as a nonprofit organization by the Trustee of the British Museum placed under the control of their Parliament which represented all English people, and which purchased important collections with the public funds of the Dublin Hospital Lottery in 1753. The three influential factors for a museum's standard: the law, the governance, and the stakeholders of the British Museum, are all in the hands of the representatives of the English people.

Even when Taiwan was freed from the Japanese occupation in 1946, it came under martial control by General Chiang Kai-shek, who retreated from the battles in the now Communist China to Taiwan. Therefore, the National Palace Museum was established by the government of the President's office using the same colonial model of the Japanese in 1953. Again, it was not based on any law but the control of General Chiang Kai-shek and it was funded by the money of all the people in Taiwan. If the existence of the Museum gives any meaning to the people in Taiwan, it is for foreign visitors, especially for diplomacy, because it can be used as proof that this island is a part of China. When the ruling of General Chiang Kai-shek's party came to an end, and the regime was transferred into oppositionists, the museum's directors had to be changed as well, just as the museum directors during the Japanese occupation that were commissioned by the Japanese governor of Taiwan.

Of course, Taiwanese society has changed following the quick transfer of political powers, but not only the civil needs of our communities were never fulfilled, political elections also became the main power driving these political changes, because the one who controls community needs can control the vote easily. Therefore, every elected government, whether it is on the central, local, or even district level, uses museums for its political goals to gain power and status, rather than to build a democratic society. The museum, a shining democratic representation, once again becomes a tool to gain public funds, and not promote civil rights. How can we formulate a way to evaluate our museums in Taiwan with higher standards of a civil society? In my presentation I will lay on the table of the conference for the global museum members to discuss.

Personally, I have to say that I was lucky enough to have a chance to retake my studies of Chinese art history after 15 years of being a housewife, and I finished my doctorate degree in 1984 from Paris VII. Plus, I received a position of education in the Exhibition Department in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. However, my father was killed along with his students who were declared dissenters by General Chiang Kai-shek in the political event of February 28, 1947. Due to this political background, I was forced to take a demoting post and serve as the lowest clerk in the museum, even though I had a Ph. D degree and this was 34 years after my father's death. In addition, none of my professional suggestions for the good of the people were ever accepted by the head of the department. It was then that I realized if a museum does not have good staff, none of its functions could be fulfilled, let alone achieving its mission, regardless of its size, academic category, or if it is private or state-owned. Seven years later in 1991, I left the museum for the position of assistant curator of Asian Art collections in the Art Museum of Princeton University, where I learned the American methods of museology in practice and in theory. In 1994 by the time I returned to Taiwan after the three-year contract, I had suggested that the essential factor of A Success/ Failure Matrix for Museums¹ is the planning competency of museum staff, I decided to teach museum studies in an academic institute rather than helplessly work in a museum with my "black" political background. My vision was to have some healthier museum staff members to work for civil rights in such an unhealthy circumstance where the museums were colonized.

I. Starting with a model of architectural professionals

Just like in all the colonial territories of Western imperialist countries, the first museum in Taiwan was established in 1908

by Japanese governors during the period of the Japanese occupation (1895~1945). Consequently, the themes of these kinds of museums varied as with other colonial museums in the world, focusing on topics such as regional, natural history, aboriginal, and commemoration (colonial education) of Japanese princes or generals, successfulness of agricultural products in Taiwan under the help of Japanese researchers, financial support of Japanese Governors, etc. Although there were also many large exhibitions that displayed the achievement of Japanese governors in these museums, the first traveling exhibition about Taiwanese history and culture did not appear until 1932, and most of the exhibits were borrowed from Taiwanese collectors. There were a few "independent" (private) museums, and naturally, they were all government institutions with political purposes. After World War II, Taiwan was returned to their "mother country" (this is a term with controversy among Taiwanese now), and the martial government of General Chiang Kai-shek (1945~1987) took over and controlled the country with a "foreign" imperialist approach. The government devoted all its power, material and human resources, in economical development, and most of the generated profit was used for national defense. This situation changed when China replaced Taiwan as a member of the UN in 1983, and as a result, China started to open its markets to the world in the 1990s. This was the end of the economical status in the worldwide business world for Taiwan as the "Dragon in Asia," and at the same time, small and local museums were launched with no cultural resources, but only visions created for political purposes again, except this time it is to win political elections.

¹ Weil, Stephen, E., "A Success/Failure Matrix for Museums", *Museum News*. January/February 2005, pp. 36-40.

During this period, the government was preoccupied with controlling Taiwanese people, while struggling to reinstall its power back in mainland China. It had no time to lose military preparation, and no time to consider the cultural differences between the Chinese and Taiwanese. Therefore, the easiest way to treat the complex society of Taiwan was to use the Japanese models as a colonist both politically and culturally, including the setting up of museums. This, in turn, affected the attitude that the people in Taiwan have towards museums, which are seen not as an important tool in the social changes as their counterparts are in a Western culture, but a form of political control to suppress/educate them, and prevent them from developing their indigenous cultures, no matter whether they are earlier Mainland China immigrants or aborigines. What I mean here is that de-colonization of Taiwan has not been successful after the retreat of the Japanese, or you can say, after World War II. The martial law of General Chiang Kai-shek's regime was lifted in 1987, but the new opposition party has not made any changes in museum or cultural policy from the previous regime, because the new government is still preoccupied with politics. Obviously, there is a lack of knowledge in methodology and professionals, and time, money, experienced professionals, knowledge and techniques are needed to develop some new concepts and education, which should have been a priority. Instead, however, the first to improve is the hardware of museums. More cultural buildings are built whenever a political election takes place, and politicians equate cultural achievements to building constructions that resulted in simplified museums without curatorial contents. Needless to say, there is no standard to evaluate the outcome of the governmental cultural investment, either.

We need models to create a new methodology for our own museographers and

museology. During the 10 years of my teaching position, I have focused my research in model-searching from AAM in the US to ICR in Europe.

II. American and European models are in need of being translated

During my 20 career years in the museum field, I have realized that my work has been a problem-solving process. Unavoidably, any museum of our time has to face the new situation of globalization in economics and cultures, and get a 'good' outcome for the society. I have attended the AAM's annual meeting that started in Atlanta since 1997. It was when I started teaching museum studies in the Graduate Institution of Museology in the Tainan University of the Arts. I was as excited as Margriet Lestraden, when she heard in 1988 about AAM's American system of measurement and quality, performance indicators and evaluation.² I have used the same channel to approach this issue. I met Kim Igoe, the newly elected president of AAM in August 2006, who was the Chairperson of the Accreditation Process. She introduced me to Prof. Jane Legget from New Zealand, and to all the resources and materials of AAM and other museum systems following this American system in the world. Since then, I have taken one more step forward than what Margriet has done for South Holland, and that is translation.

In Taiwan, museum staff and future staff, and my students, are working and training without enough adequate materials or any available experienced professionals. The undeniable fact was that they lacked professional training, worked under the immobile mechanism of civil service, and did not use (or understand) English. Museum

² Lestraden, Margriet, Quality and Self-confidence, in Manneby, Hans and Teti Hadjinicolaou, eds., *Museum Accreditation: A Quality Proof for Museums*, Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the International Committee for Regional Museums, ICR, Athens 1999. p. 8.

evaluation, or improvement, is beyond their comprehension; it became too difficult even to explain to those in the museum field in Taiwan. Therefore, I took another way around the problem, and let them understand firstly that there are some helpful models. I started by translating some basic and important publications in the museum field into Chinese, hoping some of these new ideas could be accepted by members of the field, both for my students and my colleagues. At least this teaching position in a national college has helped me expose and spread my ideas. But my effort has yet to be accepted by the executive governmental institutions. Even until now, my books still have a hard time to circulate, read, and be understood by them.

Twelve books have been translated according to my teaching sequential orders. The first group of them is: *Museum Basics*³, *A Higher Standard - The Museum Accreditation Handbook*⁴, *The Museum Accreditation Self-study*⁵ and *Shaping the Museum: The MAP Institutional Planning Guild*⁶. For the first two years of my first teaching career, *Museum Basics* was used in the courses of Introduction of Museology, while I carried out deeper research for another Museum History class. These two classes gave my students an overview of the museum, as my students varied as museum professionals. In the first semester, they could understand what they would be asked to do in a museum and to build a clear concept about why and how a museum was established in Western societies as a cultural institute - a cultural vehicle. These translated introductory books were used as textbooks and my students could easily and quickly read them. Taiwan is not an English-speaking country, and I am not an English teacher, but, I did this out of my responsibility to give them fundamental knowledge about the museum. That was my starting point of translation. We have a wonderful library in the campus that

has collected old and new monographs and periodicals from professors of Leicester University, Book Store of AAM, museum book publishers in the UK, and three out-of-print art book dealers in the US. This 80,000 volumes collection was extremely helpful for my research. I spent all the weekends translating all the pages in the books relevant to these two basic courses.

For the first semester in 1996, I tried to prepare lectures for Museum Accreditation in our department, but unfortunately, this was rejected by our president of the college, who was also the head of our department and known as the Father of the Museum in Taiwan. His reason was that my syllabus was too redundant compared to other colleagues, and as he understood, that there was no such kind of accreditation work in the museum field, because it was a job of the government. Actually, at that moment, I myself was not sure if I was right until I participated in Ms. Kim Igoe's AAM session in Atlanta, in 1997. Then, I included it in my new courses, hoping that my students could understand the process of evaluation, as AAM has done in the last 30 years, and that it probably could help their practical work in the future when they have museum jobs. The last three translated books mentioned above were used in my class, *Museum Evaluation of the American System for Advanced Studies in Museology*. Eventually, in 2000, I also led 9 of our graduate students of this class to participate in the AAM's annual meeting in Baltimore. Ms. Igoe gave them a short talk

³ Ambrose, Timothy and Crispin Paine, 1994, *Museum Basics*, published by ICOM in UNESCO, London: Routledge

⁴ Museum Assessment Programs of AAM, 1997, *A Higher Standard - The Museum Accreditation Handbook*, Washington, D.C.: AAM.

⁵ Museum Assessment Programs of AAM, 1997, *The Museum Accreditation Self-Study*, Washington, D.C.: AAM.

⁶ Museum Assessment Programs of AAM, 1990, *Shaping the Museum - The MAP Institutional Planning Guiding*, Washington, D.C.: AAM.

about this program. That experience actually strengthened their idea of museum improvement theoretically, but it could not encourage them to take this program into their future career, because, at that time, not only had the students never worked in this field, even the mid-job students who were working as civil servants did not consider it useful for their work. In fact, these continuously translated books about museum accreditation did not give any confidence to any public employees working in the Education Ministry Department. They did not even understand the usage of this method, although the Department has already established the seven largest museums in Taiwan. Instead of using these books in their museums, they could only help me publish them, but in a doubtful manner which was their usual attitude towards all public services. Then, I realized that the museum field in Taiwan was not ready to accept accreditation. I had to change my teaching programs and focus on other aspects of museum performances, which became the new class called Exhibition Evaluation that came into the curriculum of our graduate school in 2000.

III. Planning exhibition workshops and continuing translation

After four full years of teaching, although my courses have been expanded to incorporate other related fields, such as Research Methods of Museology, Seminars of Local Museums, and more importantly, Exhibition Evaluation, still, nothing has changed in terms of governmental policy. As there were no further improvements that could be achieved among my colleagues personally, I trained my students to work in a 'team approach' for individual exhibitions.⁷ Therefore, I began to translate the second group of museum books, and they are: *Planning for People in Museum Exhibitions*,⁸ *Before the Blue Print - Science Center*

*Buildings*⁹, *Questioning Assumptions: An Introduction to Front-End Studies in Museums*¹⁰, and *Budgeting Exhibition*.¹¹ As these books focus on the process of planning and organizing a museum exhibition and educational programs, it became easier to see the results that I wished for. But still, I had to teach my students the practical methods of gathering evaluation materials from audience research, and this led to the translation of the third group: *Practical Evaluation Guide - Tools for Museums and Other Informal Educational Settings*¹² and *Try It!*¹³ They were translated and used in class before they were published. Here, in addition, I would like to thank Prof. Jane Bedno of the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Our graduate school had invited her as a visiting professor who could translate her experience in museum exhibition directly to my class for three times from 2002~2004. She also helped make a student exchange program possible between the two institutions, although the program did not succeed until after both of us retired.

As said in the summary that Kenneth Hudson wrote in his book *Museums of*

⁷ This is a special program of museum members held by the Museums Standing Professional Committee on Education of American Association of Museums. It was supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation in the Field Museum of National History from 1992~96. This training program was called "Museums: Agents for Public Education."

⁸ McLean, Kathleen, 1993, and 1996 reprinted, *Planning for People in Museum Exhibition*, Washington, D.C.: Association of Science - Technology Center.

⁹ Anderson, Peter with Boak Alexander, 1991, *Before the Blue Print - Science Center Buildings*, Washington, D.C.: Association of Science - Technology Center.

¹⁰ Dierking, Lynn D. and Wendy Pollock, 1998, *Questioning Assumptions: An Introduction to Front-End Studies in Museums*, Washington, D.C.: Association of Science-Technology Centers.

¹¹ Tremblay, Francois, Allegra Wright and Han Meeter, 1992, *Exhibition Budgeting*, Paris: ICOM-ICEE.

¹² Diamond, Judy, 1999. *Practical Evaluation Guide: Tools for Museums & Other Informal Educational Settings*, London: AltaMira.

¹³ Taylor, Samuel, 1991, *Try It! Improve Exhibits through Formative Evaluation*, New York: New York Hall of Science.

Influence,¹⁴ if a person's good idea cannot be accepted by the society, it would fail eventually even if a revolutionary approach is used to realize the idea. I did not make any revolutionary changes in my teaching career, but I know how to build the strengths to create changes in our society. It was at the Art Museum at Princeton University where I have worked for three years when I performed as a member of the museum field that I realized that American museums have won their autonomous status from Europe's civilization. This is a good example for other post-colonial countries in their cultural struggles.

After these American experiences and the assumption of my teaching of Exhibition Evaluation, I wrote a small book about How to Evaluate Educational Programs in Museums. This was an opportunity to distinguish Museum Accreditation from Exhibition Evaluation for my colleagues, and I tried to conclude that any kind of evaluation will lead the museum to improvement if it follows the small indications of the visitor's museum experiences. My main reason for publishing the book stems from the needs of our social backgrounds. Most of the Taiwanese are immigrants as with the Americans. Thousands of American museums have experienced problems due to the diversity of their visitors. It would be good for us to take our visitors into consideration. I taught courses to staff of small local museums, too. The achievement would not be very visible, as the governance of public museums is still silent. Therefore, theoretically, I should go on pushing my students into taking on practical projects in local museums: organize helpful teams to merge their exhibition projects, provide professional and technical information services, and evaluate their performance firstly. These books translated in Chinese are very helpful for my students and for the members of local museums to understand their problems. It was a silent

victory in the campus at last, but it was also a sound one for the American model. Other good news is that my students have been following my footsteps, and translating, working in museums, organizing exhibitions, writing their theses about Taiwanese museums. They all have agreed that this American model works better than the one our museums are using. This new situation encourages me to advance this model into a system - ICR models, my latest translation - *Guild-lines to Improve Museum Quality and Standard, and Museum Accreditation: A Quality Proof for Museums*, which was published last year.

IV. Set up a system of museum professional training and career structure

Actually, my journey shows a way for museum movement in Taiwan. This movement will take two directions: visitor and museum staff. I can imagine that the next steps will be slower than translating books, because it will happen with a realization of culture in Taiwan. Fundamentally, changes of a system in cultural institutions will be related to the governmental cultural policy and a renaissance of our "middle class" society. It is a job that cannot be done by my students and me alone. It is a cultural rethinking movement of the whole society. We need to educate our professionals as well as our audience. We have to work with the authorities and the individuals in this field, and especially, we need support from the outside world. An experienced, professional, and constant standing organization should be set up for building and rebuilding a higher standard, training programs, and evaluating museums, and it can be non-governmental or

¹⁴ Hudson, Kenneth, 1987, *Museums of Influence*, London, New York: Cambridge University Press. This book has been used as a textbook during the six years of my class, Museum History, from 1996 to 2003, and it was translated and published in 2004.

non-profit.

In our public museums, most of the staff has to pass an examination held every year before filling the vacancies of civil service in governmental institutions. If you pass the examination, you definitely will get a post in the organization which has reported a vacancy. There is another way of recruiting museum staff. One can work in a public museum with a major academic degree in formal education studies. Teachers are candidates of museum staff. The recruitment policy of museum staff is still unclear in informal education. Therefore, neither of these two ways of recruiting museum staff is good for this cultural mission. As a result, different kinds of cultural “powers” can dominate museum exhibitions. These powers can be formed by the government, political parties, press, or money, and there is no voice from the audience of museums. This phenomenon is not an isolated case in Taiwan. It is especially obvious in some post-colonial societies, because their middle class developed differently from those in the Western world, where the museums were their achievement in their society. At first, they became the class of bourgeoisie through their connections with the powers or the cultures of their colonists, and then by becoming industrialized or commercialized and finally democratizing the public. In this process of the so-called “progress” or “modernization,” they have lost their culture in the first two stages. Unfortunately, they do not realize the importance of their own culture until the last stage when “democracy” appeared. Therefore, no “good” museum or a “standard/criterion” of museum could be seen in these countries, but only some “good” imitated buildings of museums. Although it is always too late to “recover” or to “re-discover” a culture, it makes the project of training professionals and building career structure more important than the American project of accreditation.

With the help of the Minister of Education, our department has started a program of Graduate Degree for mid-job museum members since 1998. I received more understanding and help from these students who are working in a museum or a cultural institution. They support me from their office and make my courses much more feasible, but this program stopped after I retired.

To professionalize museum staff, I am starting with a practical proposal of an exhibition workshop to the authorities, the Ministry of Education and the Council for Cultural Affairs, Executive Department. It is based on the International Council of Forum of Museology's article by Maroevic in Study Series no. 8. The author said, “Museology develops from practice, is confirmed by practice and even anticipates practice, studying theoretically those phenomena which will manifest themselves in practice and applying the results within its framework. This makes it inseparable from practice.”¹⁵ I divided my first project into two stages for grounding the field of Museology in Taiwan: theoretical courses and exhibition practice. This project is an attempt to extend into some successful community colleges, where every small museum's staff will have a chance to participate, and the book from ICR will be one of the textbooks used in those classes. It is better that I don't continue this topic here, because this plan has been lying on the desk of the changing chairpersons since 2003. The Council for Cultural Affairs has cooperated with the Chinese Association of Museums in Taiwan to fulfill all the preparation work for this annual meeting of INTERCOM. Of course, this will bring it to the attention of international professionals, and at the same time, through this global participation, the museum field in Taiwan will learn more and faster, too.

¹⁵ Ivo Maroevic, “Museology as a field of knowledge,” *Study Series*, no. 8, p. 5.

V. Another model is from Associateship of Museum Association in UK

Here I have to explain the reasons why I turn my focus to the UK. Before the revelation of our middle class in Taiwan, we need museum professionals to work together to set up a flowerbed for future blossoms. Since our government has copied the institutional forms of the colonist museum, the museum staff has been all civil servants. It would be easier for them to accept a professional system by following a model than their own performance of their own will. If this training project can be a leading program for their performance, then after that, the government or the museum association can follow by issuing a certification, which can be formally used to form a system or a policy for recruiting museum staff. Once the identification of the museum professional is established, their performance will develop according to the fundamental concept - the museum as a

cultural vehicle.

Our members of the museum know that no museum is perfect, even under a good evaluation system. At any given time it may fall short of meeting some standard of the field. However, the American accreditation project, the UK Associateship, or training programs of any country or region do expect a museum to identify accurately areas where it needs improvement and to incorporate these priorities into its planning. It should draw on the collective wisdom of the field gathered from many sources. This information comes from the hundreds of museums members of different countries and regions under various communities of museums. By gathering information from all these sources, we can observe what is happening across the field in the world. These are the lessons that I have learned from my career of 20 years in the museum field.

About the author

Ms. Christina C. Hsu,¹⁶ Standing Board Member of the Chinese Association of Museums in Taipei, retired Adjunct Professor at the Graduate Institute of Museology, Tainan National University of the Arts, got her Ph. D. in Chinese Art History from L'Universite Paris VII in 1988 and has worked and taught in the field of art history and museum practice for over 30 years. She thinks that the role of museum in Taiwan has to be changed and the political force should help and build the professional environment. Therefore, she has been dedicated most of her time to museum affairs.

¹⁶ 徐純