
Report on *Heritage and Community*

**The Third Biennial International Museum Anthropology Conference,
Yunnan University, Kunming, 30–31 October 2021**

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Organized by the Chinese National Museum of Ethnology and Yunnan University, the Third Biennial International Museum Anthropology Conference took place 30–31 October 2021. Seventy-six scholars in the fields of museum studies and anthropology from around the world joined the conference online to explore the theme of “Heritage and Community.” The purpose of this conference is to take museum anthropology as an analytic framework to explore how ethnic minorities, nation-states, and the global community engage with the values of integrity, harmony, strength, and vitality through materials and cultural heritage.

Three keynote speakers, Sharon Macdonald, Mike Rowlands, and Shouyong Pan, addressed the relationship between museums, community, and cultural heritage from various perspectives. Macdonald spoke about the role of ethnological collections in the construction of national identities and values. Through the case study of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, she discussed what could be expressed through the display of ethnological objects in contemporary national imaginaries. Rowlands focused primarily on the “intimacy” of private museums, by exploring how personal loyalty to one’s native birthplace could be set in conjunction with more inclusive political domesticity. Pan talked about how museums, as a unique architectural space of cultural production, could make significant contributions to rural development by fulfilling its significant social responsibility of local community-building.

The keynote speeches set the tone for the panel discussions by proposing a series of groundbreaking questions regarding museums, heritage, and community. Do museum representations of a community solely serve the purposes of political discourse and identity-building? How does a museum fulfill its social responsibility toward “communities” at different levels?

Responding to the overall theme, the nine panels of the conference can be categorized according to the ideas of “knowledge production” and “contact.” As an institution of knowledge production, the museum plays a key role in creating and presenting a nation-state’s collective identity. And it is widely recognized among museum professionals and anthropologists in China that knowledge production with the premise of “community” has been carried out since the earliest Chinese museums were founded in the late nineteenth century.

This understanding was further developed at the conference. It was argued that throughout the history of Chinese museums, the idea of China being a “multiethnic” country was constantly brought into public view through the interplay between politics and academic research in museum spaces. The Chinese anthropologists who participated in the planning of ethnological museums in the early twentieth century found that artifacts of a certain ethnic group did not



exist in isolation but were deeply influenced by interethnic interaction. Different ethnic groups interacted with and learned from one another, and they jointly built the overall Chinese culture. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, archaeology and historical chronology provided the narrative logic for shaping what was seen as a stable and long-lasting community. This narrative logic was widely applied in museum technology and the collection standards of artifacts. While museums do play an important role in the creation of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991), a reexamination of China's multiethnic nature would reveal that the idea of museums as a mere tool of state discourse is too simplistic. At the same time, attention should also be paid to the complex and multilayered nature of the concept of community that museums are engaged with. Museums are often assemblages of individual pursuits, collective values, academic outcomes, cultural policies, and representational techniques.

The idea of “contact” indicates that museums should not be merely places where visitors receive knowledge passively. Rather, a new dimension of museum knowledge production could be advanced as discussed in the conference, following the concept of “contact zones” made popular by James Clifford (1997). In this respect, “translation” is key to making contact and achieving mutual understanding. The need for communication and translation abounds, between the UN Charter and the appeal of Indigenous residents of heritage sites, between museum curators and visitors, and between different generations of the custodians of cultural heritage, from the right to interpret objects to disputes over the repatriation of colonial-era objects. There have been heated discussions in the field of museum and cultural heritage studies over who should be involved in knowledge production and what role they should play. These disputes indicate that a new power structure is yet to crystalize.

The Third Biennial Museum Anthropology Conference had two broad aims. First, in response to the theme of Museum Day 2021 “The Future of Museum: Recover and Reimagine,” the conference was designed to inspire museums to enhance their capacity to reshape the community through cultural heritage in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference identified certain challenges and limitations in the field of cultural heritage studies and museum anthropology. For example, it is clear from the conference that traditional studies of cultural relics and artifacts have reached a state of stagnation, because most museum professionals focus on the practical and technological aspects of museum work, while the theories and methods of museum anthropology have not received sufficient attention. The conference also revealed that, apart from the concept of “contact zones,” few other anthropological concepts or theories have been widely accepted by the museum world. Also, there has not really been a dialogue between anthropologists and museum professionals.

The conference contributed to building dialogue between scholars in order to promote research in museum anthropology. In an attempt to reinvigorate the bond between anthropology and museum studies, this conference has fostered a long-term collaboration between the Chinese National Museum of Ethnology and Yunnan University. It is hoped that the reflections made at the Third Biennial Museum Anthropology Conference will help guide museum anthropology in China to a brighter future.

■ REFERENCES

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.