

Tse Kit Ning

Institution: Hong Kong Museum of History

Internship period: 1st – 31st August, 2018

I am very grateful to be given the opportunity to work as an intern at the Urban and Oral History Unit in the Hong Kong Museum of History in August. I cannot have the chance to participate in organizing exhibition this time. However, participating in daily routine in handling collections and archiving, I can know more about the operation of the museum other than the exhibition works. There is also some interesting observation about the role of museum in the eyes of the public and how the museum interacts with them.

Duties during the internship

The first main duties for me is to take photos for the collections, pictures in the Hong Kong Story permanent exhibition. As there will be the plan of renovation a few years later, the museum has to archive and decide what to keep. The process is actually quite routine and what I had to do is to go up and down stairs to make sure that no collections are missing out. It is at the same time challenging. The whole system of organizing the showcase of exhibition can actually be observed. Let me briefly introduce how the whole permanent exhibition is organized. First, there is of course the collections from the museum. They may come from different sources, some are donations, some are borrowed from outside parties. There are also many stimulated scenes with many carefully designed props. I am really astonished that the museum had devoted time to make some props in order to set the whole scene. For example, in the stall, things such as matches and gums are made to fill up the background. One interesting thing is that, some props were bought just to make the scene look better. By the time being, they also become valuable, for they are the brands which extinct now. This will then become one of the collections of the museum. Sometimes, I could hear the grumble from my colleagues for struggling to make classification and decision to keep the collections. It is the good chance to know about how the museum plan and organize the exhibition in order to provide learning experience to the public.

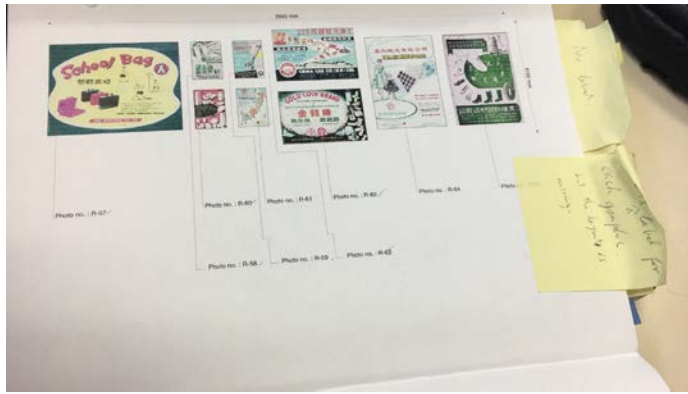


Fig. 1



Fig 2

Fig 1, 2: The description of format requirements for the photos, pictures and text in the permanent exhibition

Another important part of the museum is the handling of collections. It has the sophisticated process from accepting the donations, conservation, to systematic recording. During the intern, it was a precious learning opportunity that I was able to participate in a bit of every part in this process. This allows me to learn more about the functions and roles of the unit.

Accepting donation

Frequently, the public will donate things to the museum. The three units is responsible for different kinds of donation. As the definition of urban history is really broad and vague, our unit actually handle lots of donations. It is really an interesting process to observe the interaction between the museum and people. My colleagues will first access the donations by several kinds of criteria, determining the value of donation to consider accepting them. Communication skills is also important when people are informed of declining their donation. Some people may use the assessment from the

museum to consider selling in the market. Clear communication is needed to protect the right of the society to receive these donations instead of becoming commodities in the market. Also, some people may have the sense that museum will accept everything they donate, so they just treat it as clearing the old stuff at home and things are all in poor conditions. My colleagues will try to work their best to select the most suitable collections from all these diversifies.

Conservation

Most of the cultural objects, if they are textile or papers which are organic, have to go through the process of conservation and restoration. My colleagues will communicate with the Collection Management Unit with the requirements to improve the conditions of the objects. I thought that they are the separate unit. However, it is equally important for the conservation team to know about the background and information of the objects in order to consider the best methods to preserve it. During the process, I knew about many history and personal stories related to the donors and the objects, giving me a little sense of how people live before (this made me think of material culture learnt in archaeology before).

Insert information in database

After accepting the donations and improving its conditions for documentation, it will be another process of making record. I helped to take photos of the collections to prepare for the entry in the museum database. I remembered one time, we had to handle a collection of cheongsam (長衫). From the design, my colleagues explained to me that with such a good condition, it must come from rich families that they can afford to preserve these. I can imagine how people dress in the early 20th century. For example, there are traditional pattern with deities and plants, and people wore suits with colors we will hard to accept now. While it was interesting to discuss about these collections, these collections present the society of Hong Kong to me.

When inserting the information to the database, detailed description is needed. From the color, number of components in the objects to the time of production, all are needed in order to systematically record collections for future reference.

After going through all these procedures, donations can be said to become the collection of the museum.

After the four-weeks internship, I learnt more about different functions about the operation of a museum. How it works as the mediation between cultural artifacts and cultural capital in the society. It also drills my research and problem-solving skills in handling multiple work tasks.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor and my colleagues for their devotion of time teaching me and allowing me to have hands-on experience in many aspects of their work. Also, the department provides us such precious learning opportunity. They gave many opportunities to me to participate and observe in different work. There are some reflections related to the roles and discourse of the museum in presenting the exhibitions and collection, also how to negotiate the roles of museum from the communication with the public, I hope I will have more chance to explore after this internship opportunity.



Fig 3: Photo with my colleagues! :)