

Being a cultural ambassador in Cambridge and Hong Kong

Thanks to the referral of the Department of Anthropology in CUHK, I was very grateful to be selected as a summer intern in the Cambridge Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology (MAA) from July to August, 2013. As an anthropology student, I was keen to know how to reconstruct human behavior from the traces it has left in the past and relate such discoveries to the present human behavior. On this training ground, I was always looking for a chance to preserve the heritage and pass over the wisdom from the past to the future generations. Housed with innovative collections about the contemporary life all over the world and modern-day indigenous communities, MAA served as an invaluable platform empowering me to give meanings to the 'dead objects', to reinforce an integral platform between research scholars and public, and most importantly to be an education ambassador engaging young children and teens into arts education through public outreach activities.

Let the 'dead objects' live forever and ever!

Collections management is not about handling dusty and boring 'dead objects', but instead it sustains the life and mission of each unique artifact. While human beings have limited lifespan, the artifacts can live forever as the proof of the extraordinary stories from our ancestors.



Handling collections with gloves

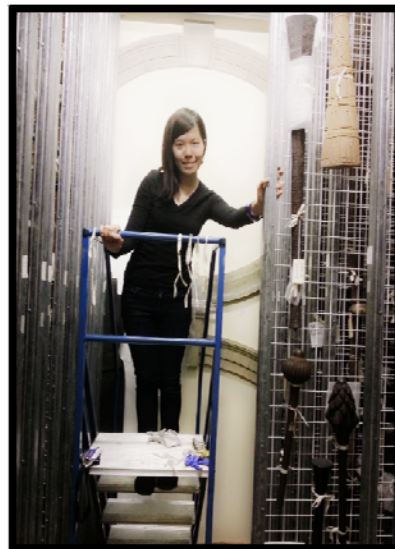
My job was to ensure these collections were preserved carefully in the best conditions through a well-established management system in museum,



starting from packing, storing to pest control. I had to wear a pair of specially designed protective gloves in order to avoid contaminating them with the bacteria on my hand. It was also very important to identify the most fragile parts of objects, which needed extra protection from pressure. Then, the collections were packed into different boxes according to their sizes and categories. Finally in the final phase of storage, storage area had to be maximized for as many as collections as possible. I also had to keep all the collections from pest damage by putting pest traps all over the storerooms and exhibition areas. And regular checks had to be conducted to exterminate the reproduction of harmful pests.



Handling Fiji Clubs



Storing Fiji Clubs on racks

Such behind-the-scene efforts had revived the life of these ‘surviving witnesses’, reminding us of how our present lifestyle is shaped by the wisdom of our ancestors and the uniqueness of our cultural environment. These treasures in the museum can never be substituted by artificial counterfeits or any other electronic texts.

Reinforce the integral platform between donors, researchers and the public

Apart from collections preservation, museum is an important integral platform between donors, museum professions, researchers and the public. Museum acquires the best of the artifacts from individuals and cultural institutions. It is also an irreplaceable interactive ground for museum professions and researchers to decipher the genuine artifacts and to extract information from the details of these treasures. It ultimately enriches the display boards and educational tours, bringing to the public visitors new perspectives to appreciate the collections. The key to maintaining this tight connection between such a diversity of parties is an accurate, consistent and updated database system.



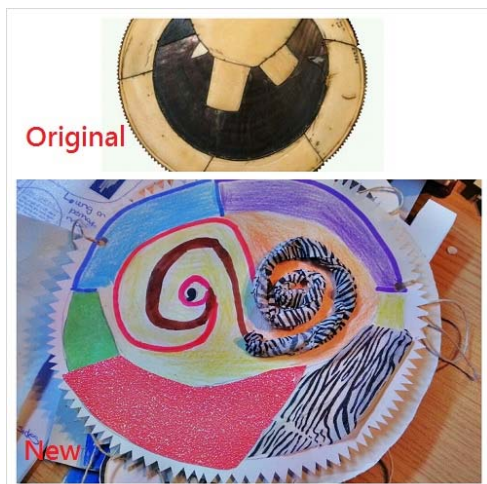
Extracting information for database maintenance

To facilitate this information passage process, I had to update the database system with the collections' general description, sources, location in storage room, physical dimensions and object photos from different angles. I also needed to make sure that there was no missing item in the collections. When it came to some rare collections without any existing documentary record, the information contributed by the research scholars became extremely important. A database can help identify and locate the precious collections that interested the researchers during academic visits, and I then had to take notes of the additional information or new discoveries they had mentioned for the database system.

Being an education ambassador to delight and inspire the public

Museums do not only acquire, conserve, research and exhibit the evidence of material culture about the past, they can also be 'forward-looking' centres inspiring and educating the public, explore diversity and foster creativity, putting impetus to the arts and cultural development in the community as a whole. Organizing CHYPPS outings for young children and a summer school for high school students, I had a chance to promote their appreciation of arts and expression of creativity by using the museum collections.

In cooperation with Cambridge City Council, I helped to organize a range of CHYPPS outings (known as CHildren and Young People's Participation Service) in the city outskirts, aiming to promote the cultural customs and museum collections to mainly children and teenagers who do not have much chance to visit museums at city centre.



CHYPPS participants expressed their creativity through the handicrafts making workshops



Instead of making the workshops extremely informative, our strategy was to share with the young children the MAA collections and their stories through making handicrafts, during which they learnt to identify the key feature of each artifact and to modify the original design. This was an important process of education,

encouraging the appreciation of arts and the expression of creativity. The handicrafts had brought the history and culture behind the collections into the participants' lives. This also empowered them as the agents to create and enrich culture, to pass on the inspiration to the wider public when proudly sharing their products with their peers and families.



The young children's product adapted from Dari headdress



Participant proudly presenting her mask



With our outreach target shifting to the teenagers, I also volunteered in preparing for a summer school sponsored by an educational charity Sutton Trust, introducing a group of elite yet less privileged high school students to the study of Archaeology and Biological Anthropology in MAA. The museum has performed as an excellent educational ground, in which the students could participate in the seminars, interact with museum professionals, handle the actual artifacts in a practical approach and try the cut-edge research methods. Having lectures together with the participants, my understanding about material culture was improved in a more practical way.



Students having material handling class

Thanks to my wonderful colleagues who were both passionate and eager to share their knowledge in promoting museum collections, this summer internship experience has made my past summer the most meaningful one in life. What the internship benefits me the most was the inspiration on how I can apply my theoretical understanding about anthropology and archaeology into the work of collections preservation, research, education and public outreach, bringing social impact to the public. From the public outreach activities, I have come to discover that every single individual is born to absorb, reinvent and sustain cultures. Beyond this, I have come to realize the cultural uniqueness of Hong Kong, and was aspired to become a cultural ambassador in Hong Kong promoting the significance of our cultural roots with a global vision through working in a local museum after graduation.