

Development of Ethnic Museums and Museums in Ethnic Areas and the Challenges They Face

Yong Jirong
Curator of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities Museum
State Ethnic Affairs Commission

1. History of Ethnic Museums and Museums in Ethnic Areas

1) Inception

China's ethnic museums and museums in ethnic areas can be dated back to the 1930s. They were founded by the nation's first ethnologists and renowned scholars.

2) Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Areas in China

Starting in the 1950s, the Chinese government has conducted extensive surveys on the nation's ethnic groups, covering their histories, cultures and languages. And 56 ethnic groups have been identified.

According to the 2000 consensus, China's ethnic minority people totaled 106.43 million, accounting for 8.41 percent of the nation's population. China has established five autonomous regions – Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang Uygur, Ningxia Hui, Guangxi Zhuang and Tibet, 30 autonomous prefectures and 120 autonomous counties/banners. They add up to 64 percent of Chinese territory.

3) Development in the Early Years of the PRC

Chinese government attaches great importance to protection of cultural heritage of ethnic minorities and the development of ethnic museums. Not long after the PRC was founded, the state collected ethnic antiques all over the nation for exhibitions, and meanwhile, began to restore and build museums and exhibition halls for them.

In 1952 Minzu University of China set up an ethnic antique department. In 1953 Xiamen University established the nation's first anthropological museum. Soon more ethnic museums or show rooms opened in universities and regions with large ethnic minority populations. Among them are exhibition rooms of ethnic antiques in South-central University for Nationalities, Southwest University for Nationalities, Museum of Heilongjiang Province, Museum of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, History Museum of Sichuan University, Museum of Yunnan Province, Museum of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Museum of Guizhou Province and Museum of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. By 1959 all provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the central government, except Tibet and Qinghai, had established their own museums.

4) Fast Growth since the 1980s

China's ethnic museums were ushered in a new era in the 1980s. In 1981 the museum of Yunnan University of Nationalities was completed and opened to the public. In 1982 the Chinese Association of Museums were founded, and became a

member of the International Council of Museums the next year. In 1984 the State Ethnic Affairs Commission began to work on a national ethnic museum. In 1986 the museum of South-central University for Nationalities was established, followed by the one of Southwest University for Nationalities in 1992, and more in other universities, including the Northwest University for Nationalities and Yunnan University.

Meanwhile, more museums were built in ethnic areas. They include the Ethnic Museum of Heilongjiang Province, Museum of Tibet Autonomous Region, Museum of Qinghai Province, Guyuan Museum in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Ethnic Museum of Yunnan Province, Ethnic Museum of Hainan Province, Ethnic Museum of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Ethnic Museum of Guizhou Province. Many prefectures, counties and even towns also built museums dedicated to particular ethnic minorities, special themes or native cultures. The five autonomous regions alone now run more than 200 museums, whose collections exceed 1.2 million items/sets.

2. Challenges Facing these Museums

The challenges facing ethnic museums and the museums in ethnic areas come from the social and economic imbalances in particular periods in the course of China's development, and are also attributed to defects of these museums. Of all the problems the most prominent is preservation of ethnic cultural heritage.

1) Preservation of Ethnic Cultural Heritage Imperative

Chinese society and economy have undergone great changes since the 1980s, particularly in the past decade. Industrialization, urbanization, globalization, the information technology and market economy are transforming the nation, boosting its growth but also causing wide imbalances. This has put mounting pressure on the work to preserve and pass down ethnic cultures.

2) Proactive Measures by the Government

The Central Government

In August 2004 China signed the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In 2005 the State Council released the Opinions on Strengthening Preservation of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Notice to Enhance Protection of Cultural Heritage. The Notice said China would step up protection for cultural heritage and cultural environment of ethnic minority groups, and give special support to preservation of intangible cultural heritage in ethnic areas. It suggested that in areas with rich cultural heritage and well-preserved cultural environment, the protection should be well-planned and deployed in a holistic and dynamic way. The ethnic cultures at risk of distinction should be put on a priority protection list, and emergency measures must be designed and implemented at the soonest.

At instructions of state leaders, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, in partnership with other ministries and government organs, set up a research panel in

2006, looking into the problems in protection of ethnic cultures and poring over more effective measures in the sector. Based on its findings, the central government held the national meeting on ethnic minority cultures in 2009, which passed the State Council's Opinions on Continued Efforts to Strive for Greater Prosperity and Development of Ethnic Cultures.

Cultural Administrations

The Ministry of Culture made statutes such as Provisional Measures on Protection and Management of National-level Intangible Cultural Heritage and Provisional Measures on Designation and Management of Inheritors of National-level Intangible Cultural Heritage. Eight provinces and autonomous regions -- Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Fujian, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Ningxia and Xinjiang -- also promulgated local laws on preservation of ethnic/folk culture and intangible culture heritage. A scientific and efficient system to preserve intangible cultural heritage has been established, with the protection for major heritage projects and their inheritors at its core. During the first national survey on intangible cultural heritage, China confirmed 870,000 objects of intangible cultural heritage, and completed a catalogue on them that is divided into national, provincial, municipal and county subsets. Meanwhile, theme museums about intangible cultural heritage and learning centers to pass down these old arts and crafts are built all over China. And making of the Law of Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage is underway.

As the protection of intangible cultural heritage in general makes strides forward, protection for that of ethnic minority groups has drawn increasing attention, and made marked progress. Of the 26 Chinese entries among the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity approved by the UNESCO 10 are of ethnic minorities. And of the three rated as demanding urgent protection two are of ethnic minority groups. Among China's eight national-level pilot preserves of cultural environment three are dedicated to cultures of ethnic minority groups - Rebong, Qiang and Wuling Area (habitat of Tujia and Miao). On China's list of national-level intangible cultural heritage 699 of the 1,218 entries are of ethnic minorities. Besides, 622 ancient books of ethnic minority languages are put under state protection as rare ancient books and historical records.

Cultural Heritage Authorities

As required by the State Council's Notice to Enhance Protection of Cultural Heritage, cultural heritage authorities have worked strenuously to build a museum system of Chinese characteristics and greater diversity in kinds and content. The goal is to revive cultural heritage through the preservation of antiques. They adopt new conceptions on cultural heritage protection, and expand the protection scope to cover more cultural elements and formats. Being aware of the public's strength in preserving cultural heritage, the government has set up the Cultural Heritage Day. And many more measures have been taken in the field, including extending legal protection on cultural heritage, managing museums according to law, establishing a

cultural relics security system, rescuing and protecting cultural heritage after natural disasters, staging major protection programs, improving museums' ability to serve the public, extending the free admission policy among museums, carrying out the third national survey on cultural relics and bettering management of cultural relics.

In the aspect of preservation of ethnic minority cultures, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage has sponsored archaeological excavations, protection of major ancient ruins and restoration of state-level historical sites in regions inhabited by ethnic minority groups. Thanks to these efforts, the Old Lijiang City, Potala Palace and Norbuglingka entered the World Heritage List. The government also hands support for the construction of 500 or so museums in 12 provinces, autonomous regions and cities in western China where ethnic minorities have a large population, and gives priority to ethnic autonomous regions in funding and personnel training on cultural heritage protection. Extra attention and assistance have been steered to the groups with small populations and habitats whose indigenous cultures are in danger and whose capability to protect them is weak.

Missions of Ethnic Museums and Museums in Ethnic Areas

Chinese government has high expectations and clear goals for ethnic museums and museums in ethnic areas. As are stated in the State Council's Opinions on Continued Efforts to Strive for Greater Prosperity and Development of Ethnic Cultures: "The state supports key museums of ethnic or folk cultures in autonomous areas of ethnic minorities, and encourage public forces to build ethnic museums of all kinds. Museums in ethnic autonomous areas should give prominence to their ethnic features, and keep appropriate numbers of exhibitions of ethnic cultures. A better job should be done in evaluating collecting, storing, and researching antiques of ethnic cultures." These are the missions that ethnic museums and museums in ethnic areas are obliged to fulfill.

After efforts in the past years, ethnic museums and museums in ethnic areas have grown in size and competence, but still far from meeting the demands of the current situation.

First, with a humble start, these museums have a long way to go to improve their working conditions and services.

Second, the imbalances in their development have impaired their effectiveness in safeguarding the diversity of regional and ethnic cultures. In Inner Mongolia for instance 32 out of its 50 museums are located in Hulun Buir. This imbalance can be attributed to the uneven distribution of natural and cultural resources as well as the varying financial strength of local governments.

Third, fund deficiency has crippled these museums' ability to do field study and expand collections, which are crucial to preservation of cultural heritage and are essential functions of museums. Given the small proportion of items of ethnic cultures in museum collections, it is imperative for relevant institutions to scrounge for more ethnic cultural relics from the public.

Fourth, the work to evaluate and grade ethnic cultural relics has to be improved. With assistance from the State Administration of Cultural Heritage and commissioned

by Chinese Association of Museums, the Museum of the Cultural Palace of Nationalities, the Ethnic Museum Committee and its member museums conducted a fruitful joint research on the subject of confirmation, classification and grading of ethnic cultural relics. But it takes time and efforts to put the research results into deeds across the nation.

Fifth, these museums need to upgrade their management, exhibition and academic strength. In the eight provinces and autonomous regions with heavy presence of ethnic minority groups there are only eight first-rate museums, 18 second-rate museums and 40 of the third rate, accounting for 9.6 percent, 11 percent and 13.9 percent of the nation's total in their respective categories, lower than those in other provinces and regions.

Sixth, museums have to offer more training and make long-term planning to ease the professional shortage.

Responses of Ethnic Museums and Museums in Ethnic Areas

These museums are groping for new methods and models to effectively preserve ethnic cultural heritage. In the aspect of maintaining the cultural environment for ethnic minority groups for example, Guangxi invented the one plus ten mode, Guizhou, Yunnan and Inner Mongolia created their own respective ways and means known as the Guizhou experience, Yunan experience and Inner Mongolian experience. Museums have increased training and helped universities add more courses on relevant subjects. They also intensify exchanges/cooperation between them as well as with ethnological and anthropological circles. The Ethnic Museum Committee of the Chinese Association Museums is bettering its work to provide ethnic museums a platform of exchanges and collaboration.

We have good reasons to believe that as long as we museum workers continue our efforts and take appropriate measures, we can turn the challenges in our work into opportunities and effectively preserve the cultural heritage of China's ethnic minority groups, giving our museum a full play in building a harmonious society.