

The public memory sector

the importance of big picture and strategic thinking in heritage

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When, spontaneously, my Chinese relations bore the idea of contributing an article, I was aware that I could be of little use if referring strictly to Chinese situation which I know only superficially. So I decided to give an independent view of Western reality and offer a list of general advice.

The importance of big picture

As an experienced professional in the field of heritage I am painfully aware of the illusions we suffer by knowing little about the world around us and by being immersed in our specialist area of expertise. Therefore, I risk certain irrelevance with such readers, by offering a contextual view and a broad-brush picture. My opinion of Chinese museums is high but I still know only the general situation. So, I cannot propose a list of advices. Handbooks offer seemingly easy solutions as they often reduce the problems upon managerial knowledge and handling new technologies of communication.

My claim is that once we master the general picture and provide good understanding of humanist vision in dealing with public memory, all else is a mere technique. The wisdom is always the same. If one wishes to be a dancer, his/her career will depend decisively upon proper understanding of dance, whereas the natural disposition, talent and learning are self-understood. Only then the dancer has a chance to identify with dance and become the dance itself. As Buddhist master comments his archery: how can miss if I am the same with the target? If a heritage curator identifies with the needs (not wants!) of the user, how can his museum be obsolete or useless? Everybody must have experienced a performance by a virtuoso as an enchanting demonstration of merge of the player and the instrument. Again, the top professionalism is always the same, only the circumstances change. In brief, the proper mind-set upon one's mission or calling in society will decide upon the quality of performance. The proper professional training with a regular, obligatory transfer of the best expertise is the solution.

Can a new science help the future happen?

My claim that will guide me to the rest of the article is that by tuning to the fine understanding of what is the role of different "memories" in society and why and how they end up in narratives and in public memory domain, - decides upon the quality of service we offer to our communities and fellow humans. Generally speaking, I would say that a museum which is appropriate for local people is, with minor adjustment, excellent offer for the foreign visitors. (By the way, most of the terrible consequences of tourism industry are caused by disregard for the local population while at the same time we know that the sustainable tourism will prefer to leave the local situation habitable for the locals because only then it would remain the long-term destination). The science of public memory which I advocate would, if built solidly upon newest world circumstances, place museology where it belongs; - to be the theory of museum practice. If the same logic is applied to archivistics and librarianship, we might clear space for a common science that would encompass all heritage institutions. It could elaborate the

societal strategy in creation and use of memory and decide upon preferred ways of the collective experience transfer.

The West is trying to suggest that the way of progress for any country is in appropriating democracy. True. No country has it enough. However, the suggestion is that democracy is what the actual West, or rather the forces in power, proclaim as such. This is not so. The long fight for democracy is great European achievement, so we in Europe ought to know better than that. In the last three decades, development of democracy was a sort of horizontal spread of participative formulas for the engineering of the popular consent. Now you may think: Why the theme? Why this political tone? Because museums (and heritage) are a political question par excellence and because they are the tools of democracy. The future will surpass and ignore simple ideological orientations. The insight into the societal processes, and being well and objectively informed will provide the basis for society of justice and equal chances. There is no democracy without free participation in processes of memorizing: collection, care (storage, retrieval, research,) and communication.

Public memory sector includes museums, archives, libraries, digitally born memory institutions and numerous hybrid institutions, - be them public, private or civil. The solidary society of shared destiny that cares for the well-being of its citizens will have to own the control package of conceptual shares of the domain of public memory. It is too serious and too crucial to be left exclusively to particular private or corporative interests, and yet the state should admit the liberty of ownership to all sides. That very same public administration, installed to defend public (democratic) interests must assure its prevalent role to prevent the excessive commodification. The right to form memory freely and take part in the socially responsible process of transfer of collective experience is another expression of freedom. This freedom is freedom of contribution and insight. The welfare state has to provide the opportunities for this process to be of excellent scientific quality, socially responsible and ethically embedded into basic right of humans and nature. Anybody else is welcome to contribute and participate: private institutions, civil society institutions, communities and individuals.

Museology, specially the one that is often named “new” is able to deal with the problem on the level of tactics, which is better than what we are always pushed into, - museography. The latter implies that the solution to all our problems is in technology, be it new buildings, new equipment, new design or new managerial inventions (including business geniuses as directors for our creative memory institutions). But whenever the practice is turned into bursting creative inspiration for a community or side visitors, it is a consequence of deeper insight and part of the philosophy of the emerging, possible profession, - some evident, acting and yet dispersed science of public memory in making. The name is a convention and yet it is good to be a reminder too: in ancient Greek language *mneme* is memory and *sophia* is wisdom, - therefore, we do consider any memory but the one compressed, selected as wisdom. Such a science, a mnemosophy or whatever we decide to call it, can devise strategies. They will become part of the strategies of exit from this seemingly locked state doomed to the infinite growth. Together with ascending human race nature provided all medicine for any of its illnesses. So the civilisation provided us with experiences of our predecessors and ability to select them as remedies for the failures of our humanism. Memory is being taken from us in attempt to disperse coherencies of our diversity and values we have worked hard for and render us victims of anonymity and selfishness. If Western development

paradigm prevails human race is going to be reduced to a shapeless mass upon which an empire of obscenely rich, worthless nobodies will reign (finally) with the help of robots. Retaining the right to form a public profession of memory care and management is a strategic question of any country and a global one too.

Museums as reliable and friendly support

In the West, the media industry contracted into dozens of great corporations to serve the network of money making and controlling corporative associations. The political profession sunk into servicing financial and corporative sector. The states lost their own income by giving up their assets due to a marauding, wild and unprecedented privatisation. The civil society organizations increasingly turned for their finances to the governments and corporative foundations. Their freedom was tagged a price and most of them slowly started to compromise their mission and the common interest by yielding to the pressures and extortion.

All processes that constitute the typical Western democracy are manipulated through artificial political parties and ghost civil society organisations. Never before in human society plain lying was proclaimed a regular means of communication or exertion of influence: spinning is taken as rather naughty but regular part of marketing. We seem to yield easily far-reaching concessions to the managerial elites. In spite of being ingredient of any history, lying was always a very much disregarded as a drawback of human nature. But, instead of discrediting it further it has been granted legitimacy as spinning and admitted into regular PR practices. Needless to say, public memory institutions, the memory of society are naturally expected to denounce such practices I various ways, and they probably would if they were an autonomous, powerful profession instead of being the dismembered army of fragile occupations, increasingly exposed to the menace of decreased financing, political coercion and mercy of corporate sponsorship.

At some ideal origin lobbying was conceived as proposing ideas or actions that others would otherwise not appreciate or even perceive. Instead of mere persuasiveness of arguments that would appear convincing in proposing, the moral value is compromised by pushing lobbying into coercion and bribery. Around 15000 lobbyists in Bruxelles speak badly about democracy in the European Union. Fed with false, biased information, the democratic institutions and the citizen lack the basic conditions for any democratic process to happen. Yet, the mechanism is there, the formalities of insight and consensus are in place so the perfect alibi to governing forces of society for any malicious project of theirs is thus provided. As consequence, there is an evident crisis of confidence in public, governmental institutions and still less in politicized media directly dependent upon corrupted corporations.

In spite of their shortcomings, in such society, museums still figure as trustworthy institutions. Alas, they are traditionally “neutral”, often servile and almost autistic when reality of their community is concerned. Once consolidated in an integrated service of public memory institutions they are well positioned to become part of a new, autonomous profession. As such, they are apt not only to provide transparency and insight into processes around but in fact “lobby” for a well-informed society. They can literally give word to those who would otherwise be ignored as interlocutors or contributors; exhibitions and different activities can denounce the evil of institutionalized lying and reveal, at least to an extent, mechanisms of game of interests. But, of course, you have noticed that museums are pushed forcefully into the moulds of specialist, unrelated knowledge. But, to put it mercilessly, there is a social,

psychological, economic, technological or human side to any painting or any precious object. We need the well balanced complex story. If we tolerate the dream that some history is composed only of genius artists, we should not fail to observe that history cannot consist only of mass murderers no matter what rank or title they have gained. Museums are means of continuation of values recognized worth retaining, victories over evil, trouble and misfortune in a constant strive to ameliorate human condition. Upon war times museums can only speak by advocating peace.

In the world inundated with illusion and simulacra, in the near future, one of the major problems will be how to keep the clear consciousness of what is reality and how far the thin air of virtual reality is still beneficial. The technological (expansions of 3-D mapping, holography, augmented reality and above all 3-D moving images) change our perception daily. The ordinary reality will be a dull scene to our grandchildren, the one to escape from. We shall have to know which virtuality is just enlargement of our perception and which one is digging worm-holes in our time-space coordination tucking us maliciously into a flux of fraud, hoax realities. Museums, unlike many, have the firm grip upon reality any may serve us as a lifebelt. If they consciously as a responsible profession follow these perilous development, at one point they will develop attitudes and expertise that will save our relation to what human being is in the nature, part of the whole to be preserved not out of nostalgia or for profit but as a guarantee of our basic relationship to what humanity is.

Trolling is sowing malicious information on the social media, - a harmful activity undermining people or institutions. It varies from clever satire to unscrupulous bullying. The phenomenon of trolling is a perversion of online communication as it is described in present practice as cynical act of sowing discord. Should museums shrug? I think not. If nothing else, they could make an exhibition on the phenomenon and how the new past works; any honest, entrepreneurial sociologist or psychologist would curate the exhibition. Of course, West knows the exhibitions that oppose and fight for the common sense or common cause. Curators are sometimes courageous, often at the expense of career. For the last two centuries or so, China has been the object of intensive devaluation and denigration: a very varied but consistent bad PR. In the last two and a half decades China is devalued and discredited as a relevant society and worth destination. Who else than museums would be expected to offer a true picture? To encourage locals and inform the foreigners.

The fight for quality

The “karaoke world”, that is the world of today, is turning against professionalism and the rules of quality. The world given over to amateurs shows no need no professional responsibility and their expensive perfection. Anybody can be a painter, waiter, TV presenter, singer, chef, business person, politician, lecturer...even a Nobel prize winner. Anybody can set up a university and claim status of high education and right to public money...The world is getting rid of criteria in the apotheosis of barbarian freedom. Quality is tacitly proclaimed tiresome, tedious and binding. The post-modern paradigm of “anything goes” that at the beginning meant certain freedom of expression and legitimacy of borrowing was turned into the nightmare of “nothing matters”. This way the quality ceased to be the cherished notion and the world started to sink into a grotesque, exaggerated imitation of itself, made upon excessive simplification and shallow appreciation. Like in politics and economy the chaos seems to be preferred condition for those who imagine that they can control it.

Why would museums care? Well they are about identity, the real, genuine, authentic one, - the one that can continue to inspire and oblige, - the one that makes us what we are. Even if challenged and denied, culture exists upon rules, norms, expectations...a contesting a rule is still relying upon the one. The change itself takes course conditioned by the chosen deviation from a former rule. The greatest experts in anything are the masters of change, the arbiters of precise language and proper taste, and the artists of measure and proportion. That is what museums should exercise in any society, appropriating the role of imaginary, wise elders. Museums are about value criteria. The first of the three parts of their conceptual process is selection and, if done properly, the subtlety of their job can hardly be overestimated. Besides, one has to retain, they are about the ways we as society remember the past and conceive the present.

In front of their doors, heritage tourism and heritage industry are extracting cheap sensationalism and entertainment from heritage, throwing every other "dull" quality or virtue of it away as redundant dross. If their campaign continues its victorious penetration into the homes and minds of population, there might come a population which would find museums dull, moralizing bores. Neoliberal world has lifted the obliging adherence to advancement and progress: by its practice of distraction, entertainment, relativization of qualities and virtues it offered firm legitimacy to careless and cruel world, - the leaders and celebrities leading it much resembling a drunken crew of a pirate ship. There is a need felt by many to stand in defence of decent humanity and retrieve the sense of genuine play and plain enjoyment of life. The treacherous media impose on us the bacchanalia of the chosen 1% and their miserable snobbish followers as demonstration of what joy of life is. If public memory institutions will not react as an organized profession will they leave their possible role to religious institutions? The shameful civilizational renunciation of ideal of secular society is the sign that people seek shelter and demand reliable criteria for practicing their freedom and sense of living.

Staged democracy needs alternatives

Indeed, the West created the social mechanisms and implanted the feeling that we can influence, enhance, correct or even prevent various developments in the processes of decision making. But, seemingly, this freedom is realized only when the attention of the ruling forces decline or when they fail to see the cleavage in the system. The general truth is that a gigantic illusion theatre of staged democracy has been created and it works. Museums, by nature on the side of citizens are at crossroads: there are many good museums in developed countries which have a very positive role in their society. Museums cannot change the world, but can help the change by providing awareness and understanding. Any democratic insight let alone the one in decision process is founded upon the scientifically verified, socially responsible and ethically chosen information. Maybe an example would prevent a doubt. Conventional technical museum presents great themes and great people and spreads the knowledge. It would probably never touch the local dilemma: which technology to use to produce energy? The counteractive, engaged, technical museum detects the worries and needs of its community or society and offers, if not answers, then objective insight into the matter and possible solutions with all arguments needed in any decision making.

The Knowledge society or Wise society?

Opting for the knowledge society instead of wisdom society, i.e. not only knowledgeable but the wise one, - the West flooded the society with excess, trivial, misleading and futile

information. There are more and more authors who claim that contemporary societies are exposed to intentional production of ignorance and oblivion. Besides, it globalized the easy manipulation of public mind: Internet is jungle, media are manipulated, institutions are servile, public intellectuals bribed.... The societal issues of little priority are imposed as quintessential. As such they deplete the attention and saturate reality with fake oppositions and disputes. So they spend social good intentions, time and energy only to let important matters being decided parallelly with little or no public participation. To that goal, all the channels of media communication including the subtle penetration in to the social networks, are used for incessant, continuous campaigning. Museums are part of the cybernetic management of society: they make sense only if able to perceive the configuration of problems within the reach of their concept and react to them as a part of solution. Sometimes merely to offer insight, sometime to pose right questions and at times to propose the answers. Museums are mechanism of continuation of the values that we find important to retain as practice or inspiration. In brief, from Western example China can apply little but can learn a lot.

The endangered existence of public sector

The deregulation is part of the neoliberal strategy leading to the excessive privatisation and consequently to chaos and medieval division of power. Roughly speaking, modern civilization has invented public institutions and corresponding professions as the way to run modern society. The strategy is deeply rooted in the doctrine of human rights, rule of law and, eventually, upon the vision of sustainable development. Therefore, the excessive privatisation and commodification of society being entirely delivered to the corporate interests has already ruined the great Western tradition of civil liberties and openness. Now, again, what this has to do with museums which are, at that, “neutral scientific institutions”? Well, everything, because museums are, though scientific by approach, essentially communicational and democratic institutions, certainly not neutral if they wish to represent the best interests of citizens in the social contract. And, besides, - heritage sector has to be aware that the next on the menu at the corporative table will be the public sector; museums and heritage will be their very the admired bite. In some countries the creeping privatisation of educational system is devouring any quality and prevents the society to implant the basic values needed for any functional society. Culture is increasingly regarded as a set of assets, as soft marketable value, and heritage is probably the most vulnerable part of it because it is not defended by a strong related profession. Selling of museums or giving them in concessions has already started. We have much to fear and much to learn as disappearance of public sector means actually the fall of any natural rights. We have the right to our memory. Once totally manipulated and engineered, - nature, with its air, water snow, rain, clouds, plants and animals will become a huge marketable asset in the hands of a few anonymous shareholders.

Some more general advice

In face of all these challenges of the world, museum sector as a whole is more part of the problem than part of the solution. That should not be tolerable. It may take a library of texts to explain that in details, arguments and examples. Yet, a benevolent reader may sigh and find all written in this contribution as convincing set of arguments, concluding that some solutions are not that unattainable as they may seem. Said in the shortest possible way, what we need is a different mind-set, the new attitude of the occupations from sector of heritage. This being most difficult, it will require a new long-term policy of the obligatory professional education.

The result must be a well concerted mega sector of public memory. To be a curator in a museum, one must be more than an archaeologist, art historian, biologist or engineer, - a scientist-communicator with the mind of a visitor. The sector must become relevant and responsible partner to the government and other share-holders of the social contract. How can it be that our institutions show only a fraction of their collections? Why wouldn't we put this huge cultural capital into circulation. For that we need only a conviction that collections belong to all of us and that we can create a network with places where we exhibit collectively our immense potential according to the needs as they pop-up within the network.

As for unifying philosophy that is one of the elements of profession, I am convinced that a new, enlarged field of a certain science of public memory (mnemosophy) (whose object is heritage as selection, research care and commination of societal memory in its entire span), - can give usable answers to all our dilemma. Heritage is formed from individual, collective, cultural and scientific sources, and in the most complex and profound way in memory institutions. That makes their employees the members of the nascent true profession.

If China would have it already, I imagine it would be brave to advice the leaders of the cultural policy to turn the national museum from the world's biggest to the world's most interesting because it has the potential. The splendour and the immense richness must also be attractive, instruct and guide. Only a fraction of the existing space would be able to host a permanent exhibition "This is China". It should give the native as well as international visitors an opportunity have an overview of the rich totality of Chinese heritage as a sort of visitor information and orientation centre, for those in the need of the panoramic picture. Conventional museums tend to lose the benevolence of their visitors by offering them instantly the view upon the huge number of objects, presenting them subtleties of their specialist expertise. But hey have to speak the language of reality and life even when conveying great beauty, unique skills or wisdom.

Most people are aware that China is one of the greatest civilizations. Nevertheless, there is an enormous need to explore this phenomenon and demonstrate it. An exhibition "Fascination China" could be organised periodically to show how this true fascination toured the world and dispersed so much of the material evidence in museums, archives, libraries and private collections. China has to know its exiled heritage too. This fascination should then feed the domestic one, - which is suffering blows of acculturation, the globalist exchange of one's own culture with the imposing others.

Such a profession could probably teach all employees of museums that public memory institutions are agents of selection care and communication of value systems: they are not about past but about present, a true value systems management profession in making. It could teach them that except for prestige circumstances, when architecture needs to be an attraction, the excellence of museum institutions lies in their effectiveness in serving the true interests of their community. Once the full lesson of ecomuseums would be learned, no museum would be made the usual way. Any would make it clear that it serves the needs not wants or projections, prestige or any other imposed motive.

A profession that would know the very essence of the public memory mission and the role of institution would create an enormous network of micro-museums all across China. Low-cost, friendly designed and comfortable, they would celebrate the spirit of place and respond to the local needs for recognition and development. Practically any group or community is

endangered in their system of values and needs support and assistance in changing themselves within their identity. Some will become attractions, but the richness is in heritage to be continued and enjoyed. The world of entropy is seeking legitimacy for its irreversible processes of decadence, decay, disintegration, - of a world getting uglier and hostile place. Though that may seem inevitable, it however is not. The forces of noble memory are there to be united and do their part in advancing the quality of human condition.

China is a peace-making country and a great culture in the need of self-assurance and consolidation. Ever since it has become the object of colonial claims, it has been openly underestimated and devalued. The military industrial complex and different global ambitions will continue its sabre rattling and local wars although the most modern battleship or a submarine cost 3 to 4 billion dollars. The cost of culture is small fraction of it and, besides, we have learned that it directly feeds development and makes world better. But, that being outside our powers and our scope of expertise, we may divert our view the fact that the information war, the war of identities has been always there, now more open, perfidious and effective than ever before. Our differences are instrumentalised to become the source of conflict instead of being an inspiration and enjoyment. All the heritage sector has to do is guard, protect, conserve, treasure and use the richness of diversity we have inherited. Any diversity. All diversity. If all heritage institutions of the world do the same, ideally, Earth will become a safe and beautiful place for all. Seemingly it is only the matter of the (missing the proper) mind-set. Simple, isn't it?