

What Museums Can Do amid the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Yangzhou Museum

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China suffered the new wave of indigenous COVID-19 epidemic emanating in 2022. Yangzhou as one of cities of Jiangsu, took one of its worst poundings since the epidemic broke out. The epidemic hit the city, with substantial impact on their cultural undertakings. This article gives an account of how the museums and their local communities in Yangzhou have responded to the calamities, analyzes their interactions, and shares the museum experiences of organizing cultural activities jointly with the craftspeople of local intangible cultural heritage since 2020, when COVID-19 broke out.

Keywords: COVID-19, local intangible cultural heritage, rice-paper flowers, museum

Museums face a large number of hazards such as natural disasters, armed conflicts and economic crisis, but we did not think that one day museums will face pandemics. As the COVID-19 pandemic has spread all the world, our colleagues from all world had experienced to witness some museums closed in force for several months, which will be the worst destruction of global museums after the Second World War. For the strict anti-epidemic measures, all museums were closed, at least in China. For several months no new exhibitions, no events and activities, that means no visitor, no income from tickets, sales and facilities for hire slumped. Our colleagues of all world may face the similar situation; as a staff of museums we should make emergency preparedness plans of our museum in pandemic, meanwhile, we also support our museums and partner such as temporary member of staff, craftspeople and design company.

Yangzhou is located at the intersection of the Yangtze River and the Great Canal in the middle part of Jiangsu Province, China, that is 280 km from Shanghai. Yangzhou was one of the wealthiest cities in the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1911), by contrast, Shanghai was a small county in the pre-treaty ports days. The city was known at various periods for its great salt merchant families, poets, artists, and scholars. As the most prosperous city Yangzhou received the UN-Habitat Scroll of Honor Award and the UNESCO City of Gastronomy.

Yangzhou Museum opened the door in 1951, as a comprehensive city museum, with the collections growing to about 140,000 objects that span the Neolithic Age to the present such as jade, paintings, porcelain, lacquer, woodblock, etc.

To fight the COVID-19 outbreak, residents in Yangzhou city have gone through an extremely strict lockdown for a month-long period.

This is the first time our museum has to handle this kind of situation; at the beginning the main jobs include:

Sterilize the museum;

Focus and record the situation of museum in the pandemic;

Offer help when museum staff make requests;

Keep a watchful eye on pandemic news and prepare for related objects collecting.

We keep in contact with the health and anti-epidemic agencies to acquire epidemic prevention, and learn how to sterilize, how to use sterilizer. At the same time, my colleagues of the Conservation Department and the Repair Department also considered whether there is any damage to objects those made of different materials and observed objects.

We send masks to our colleague who spends vacation in her parents' home in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province, for coming Spring Festival.

Colleagues especially from Collections Department are focused on the local news and social media to collect information, about our city and our citizens on how to fight with COVID-19, in preparation for the day when we need. Our city dispatches 279 doctors and nurses to Wuhan in this battle, and they are our heroes and heroines.

In the process, we find that we underestimate the loss of this coronavirus pandemic. We never think that the strict control measures will last for a month-long period: all restaurants, cinemas, and public space were closed, while gatherings with relatives and friends have been canceled. And the museum re-opened in April. With streaming media being the only access to the outside world, people started to feel isolated and bored.

Then we think what can we do, what museum can do for our citizens, to help them get through this difficult time.

Researching Our Competitors

Firstly, analyze competitors. There are a large number of museums that maybe push their online programme in this special time, not mention online video platform, i-QIYI and Youku for movie and TV episodes, for short video we have TikTok, Bilibili. People can do this in their home and make choice by their tastes, not by museum to provide. Actually, they are all our competitors. If the quality of our museum is below others, they will go to other place. We try to find out what other museums or online video platform do, what kind of activities they serve for visitor.

Secondly, analyze the services they provided for. There are over 150 museums putting their digital museum (DM) or virtual museum (VM) into online service until February 6, 2020 in China. People face increasingly choices, and online means that they did not take distance, money, time into account. We go to their website, social platforms to look what and how they presented.

We found that a good deal of excellent events online. The Palace Museum put a series of video for New Year in the Palace on online platform to introduce some Chinese New Year etiquette and how the Royal Families spend their new year. Some museums launched digital museum or virtual museum. Some video platforms like Bilibili launched a series of popular science videos, for example a professor of criminal law attracted one million fans as soon as he opened an account on Bilibili in first three days.

Thirdly, analyze comments. We check visitors' comments and think why some succeed, some lose their market. A video blogger gave his instruction of electron by 3D display or comic, with fun words. At the

beginning, DM or VM received a vast amount of praise; one of colleagues pointed out that a kind of comment appears, which is said that one is interesting, more are mind-numbing. The objects displayed in museum are similar, one comment said.

Assessing Our Museum

For the strictest anti-pandemic measures, we can not take market research surveys by questionnaire for people.

We just try to find some questions:

What is the highlighting product of our museum?

Does it catch people's eyes?

What group we do it for?

Is our museum accessible in events or activity?

Can people do it in home?

Can we help others by such events or activity?

Can we go further when the pandemic is gone?

What We Do

Yangzhou Museum along with the local intangible cultural heritage association launched an online session on Weibo (the Chinese "Twitter"), to introduce one of the Yangzhou's intangible cultural heritages among the audience.

Why? Because the local intangible cultural heritages play an irreplaceable and indispensable role in our culture and history.

The city government establishes a fantastic project to provide assistance for craftsmen to carry on their career in 2015. This new project sets up an association and a colony for artists and for local intangible cultural heritage craftsmen, 486, named by the city that started building on BC486.

In the colony, it has over 68 local intangible cultural heritage items, like woodblock printing (world intangible cultural heritage), paper cutting, Chinese lyre art, sugar figure blowing art, dough figurines, making Chinese lantern.

The aim of '468' is trying to be concerned with the city's history, intangible cultural heritage and tourist, with all three elements combined. This gives our museum an opportunity to know an amount of craftsmen, and we had been in cooperation with them for years.

In reality, tourism is an important part of the city's economy. The city's tourism industry completely dropped off after coronavirus outbreak. The authority wants to revitalize the city's economy by cultural tourism.

For another reason it is the city tourism that takes major hit as virus halts people's travel; as a tourist resort, this impacts many people's income.

We both believe that this series of online sessions can show our unique culture and heritage, intensify our local citizens' identity, attract visitors to come to Yangzhou, and make a major contribution to the economic regeneration of the city.

However, there are so many local intangible cultural heritages we want to share with people. What do we pick?

After discussion, rice-paper flowers have become the No.1 candidate. Because it is easy to make, and the materials are easy to get, for different age groups, income, education background, and Han-style clothes have become popular in those years. The most important is that people can use it to decorate home. Flowers can bring a gloomy atmosphere back to life, make people happy, as quarantine people can not go out to buy it. The last but the most important reason is that we had been established strong links with craftspeople, for the past years we had cooperated with craftspeople to provide real handling sessions for local primary schools' students, and get highly praised.

About Rice-Paper Flowers

Rice-paper flowers are made of the thin peeled and dried pith of the rice-paper plant also known as *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, or Tongcao (通草) in Chinese. It was widely use in the late 19th century as a common material for gouache paintings sold to Western clients and then got its name with a mistake which it was made from rice.

Historically, people in Yangzhou whatever he or she is rich or poverty wear flowers for hair decoration ever since the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The technology for making rice-paper flowers started to spread widely in Yangzhou in the early Qing dynasty (17th century), as rice-paper flowers are easier to preserve than real flowers. The mid-Qing dynasty saw the peak of the prosperity of Yangzhou's rice-paper flower business: the flowers were even dedicated to the emperor as a tribute. *Yangzhou hua-fang lu*, or literally means *Notes of Pleasure-boat in Yangzhou* (扬州画舫录), a famous guidebook to the beauty spots of Yangzhou, gives description of this: the decoration of the statue of Buddha is used by rice-paper flowers, paper flowers and juan (绢, a kind of silk) flowers which were made in Yuanmen Bridge (辕门桥)'s Xiangshengsi (象生肆, means a kind of shops which make handiwork by imitating naturally in ancient ages, such as making flowers with silk or jewel). However, with the plastic flowers getting more popular since the 1980s, the rice-paper flower started to lose its market. Factories started to shut down and craftspeople got unemployed. There were once two craftsmen working on this business.

Online Session and Follow-up Work

The online session aimed to attract more people to know what is the rice-paper flowers and its history, how to make this traditional skill, and we try to perform the ancient beauty of Chinese costume and hair accessories.

The craftswoman of the online session wore a Hanfu (one of the traditional types of Chinese clothing) with rice-paper flowers as hair decoration.

To make it possible for everyone to engage in the activity, the craftswoman used eye shadow to dye flowers as a replacement of traditional pigments.

This session attracted over ten thousands people engaged, and some people show their works on social media accounts. Some audiences asked whether they can buy the craftspeople's products. So we help the craftswoman open her online shop on Taobao, the biggest e-shopping platform of China, and we put those of the best quality on our museum online shop and sell the materials for those who like doing handwork by themselves. To our surprise, the business began to grow.

After this session, we launched other online session to introduce other intangible cultural heritage of Yangzhou.

As a follow-up to the online session, the museum launched an exhibition about the rice-paper flower after the city re-opened, as one of events in the International Museum Day. The exhibition displays many precious collections of rice-paper flowers, as well as tells the stories of craftspeople behind.

Many people think that museum is waiting for help in the pandemic. However, we can use many ways to help others, not only for our cooperators, also attract tourist visitors to visit museum as an element cultural tourist in re-development for city.

Another issue is most of intangible cultural heritage products are handwork; the price is a little expensive, and purchasers will lose their interest when the products are offered for sale out of competitive prices.

And when the city re-opens, people face increasingly choices about shops, restaurants, cinemas. How will we attract audiences?

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