

## AN OBSERVATION AND THINKING ON JAPANESE MUSEUMS

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### ABSTRACT

Developing with Japanese economy in the past half century, the industry of museum has obtained unprecedented progress. The circle of museums in Japan pays much attention to collecting and preservation, and there are very large collection storehouses in many museums, with temperature-adjusting and moisture-adjusting equipments available. Japanese museums invest quite a lot of manpowers, material resources and funds in long-term exhibition. There are many good examples in the aspects of the exhibition subjects and design and the application of new technologies, for instance, the exhibition in Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum and in Shiga Lake Biwa Museum. Many museums, especially the large-scale ones in Japan, pay much attention to the scientific research. Generally speaking, the museum should be not only an education center to meet the needs of the society, but also an organization of scientific research. In recent years, with advocating “Education throughout one’s life”, more and more museums become the promising places of study to all one’s life.

I have been in Japan for five months to study in museum management technology, supported by Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), from July to December 2000. During this period, I visited more than 40 museums, and exchanged views with more than 60 museum specialists about museum management and scientific research. During my stay in Japan, I widened my vision and had plenty of thoughts and feelings.

### A BRIEF INTRODUCTION ON JAPANESE MUSEUMS

In Japan, museums are classified into national level museum, municipality level museum (such as prefectural), and private enterprise museum. Developing with Japanese economy, the industry of museum has obtained unprecedented progress. In 1951, when Japanese Law of museum put into force, all museums were only 200 or so throughout the country, while there have been over 3500 museums in 2000. According to the statistic figures coming from Japanese Museum Association, there are 3691 museums in Japan, including 2388 local museums, holding 65%, private museums, holding 32%, 79 university museums, holding 2%, and 42 national level museums, holding 1%.

National museums are directly invested and governed by the state, which have a little in amount, but have a large scale and a huge fund. They have more influences in the country such as

Tokyo National Museum, Nara National Museum, Tokyo National Science Museum, Osaka National Museum of Ethnology. National museums have more effects both in the domestic and overseas because they usually host high-level exhibitions on the cultural exchange. In the last half year of 2000, Tokyo National Museum held an exhibition on “International Four Ancient Civilizations”. The Ancient statuary coming from Egypt and the ancient ceramics coming from China attracted tens of thousands of visitors.

Prefectural museums are constructed by a local government with largest amount, and some of them, such as Shiga Lake Biwa Museum, Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum, Chiba Central Museum earned great reputations. Japanese local government pays high attention to development in museum, and regards the museums as a symbol of improvement of civilization and development of economy, and even as an industry to operate. Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum is a typical example. The local government, after the dinosaur fossils have been found in this area, invested and built up the modernized dinosaur museum, and propagated it on a large scale. In Fukui there are various statues of dinosaurs on both sides of the street, and poster of dinosaur on the train and automobile. There are dinosaur souvenirs to sell in hotels and grocery stores, and even trash bins are in the shape of dinosaurs. The dinosaur has become a symbol of Fukui. Since being opened in July 2000, Fukui Dinosaur Museum has attracted so many people and earned the favorable reputation. It has improved greatly the popularity of Fukui, and has driven development of the other industries, too.

Private museums are built and operated by the private corporations in order to raise the popularity of companies. Japan Footwear Museum in Toyama is a private museum. The manager now in office is a woman. The owner family of this museum is engaged in the footwear industry for five generations. For commemorating the forefather's contribution and the history of shoe making in Japan, the present manager's husband has founded this museum in 1978. It is the first and only museum about the footwear industry in Japan. The building of the museum is unique, magnificent and refined. In the museum, there display all kinds of straw sandals, clogs and modern shoes, and has various shoes from different countries. And it has introduced the shoes history in Japan and World systematically. The first manager of Japan Footwear Museum passed away unfortunately several years ago, and his wife continued serving as a manager. Though the operating status is not very good, the son of the manager who operates a footwear factory often replenishes, and the manager has decided still to run down this museum.

University museums are operated by a university, depending on the financial resources and attention of school in scale. Generally, university museums have a strong cultural atmosphere. For example, Kyoto University already made the investment and built in the large-scale modernized museum. It is open to the public to show the characteristics and strength of the school, and develops work in scientific research. The Kyoto Museum for World Peace, Ritsumeikan University (private) propagates the anti-war thought to Japanese and also introduces the towering crime which the Japanese government made in Southeast Asia during World War II, holds the international scientific seminars on the world peace regularly, and publishes books, periodicals and magazines. It has a great effect.

Among Japanese museums, the historical type has a quite high scale (see Table 1). Nation level history museums and local history museums have 2141 in amount, rated scale is 58%. We can find out that, from this figure, the Japanese government pays attention to historical relic's protection and carrying forward

traditional culture very much, but on the other hand there is a trend over complex. The experts believe that some local governors think museum as a window and a symbol of local culture. No matter how many collections there are, building a museum is first thing. Some small cities have built a large museum, but it has no more ability to bear, whereupon leading to the fact that funds of the museum are difficult and almost is deserted.

As a whole, the museum circle of Japan made considerable progress in the past half century, presenting a prosperous scene. Especially in recent years, with advocating "Education throughout one's life", the Japanese government pays more and more attention to provide the convenient conditions for people's elastic study, more and more museums become the main places gradually for such study. In addition, the appearance of the subject park and the large-scale recreational facilities leads to more and more people go out of door to museum to look for amusement and relaxation. At present, the museum industry in Japan is still making great efforts to seek innovation under the new situations in order to attract more visitors.

#### COLLECTION'S COLLECTING AND PRESERVING

Collecting and preserving of collection is one of the main functions for museums. The circle of museums in Japan pays much attention to this job. There are very large collection storehouses in many museums, with temperature-adjusting and wet-adjusting equipments available. It's said by some experts that area of the collection storehouse should be 1/3 of exhibition area of a museum. In the large storehouse of Osaka National Museum of Ethnology, all kinds of collection are put on the shelves fully. The staff well trained is busy sorting out and restoring collections, the chief said that the museum would expand collections every year. The storehouses are more and more crowded now. It seems that the storehouses should be built much bigger. What attracts me is that Japanese museums not merely pay attention to collecting collections of ancient time, but also attach importance to collecting the modern collections. In some folk custom museums, they have collected chopsticks, wooden barrel, water ladle, fishing network, clogs, etc., most of which have not been used any longer. In the National Museum of Osaka, there are Chinese kite, day figurine, festive lantern, bridal sedan chair, dancing lion collected. Among the museums that were visited, I believe that Takenaka Carpentry Tool Museum in Kubo is the typical one that collects and keeps modern artifacts.

Takenaka Carpentry Tool Museum is a small-scale museum, built in 1984. Various kinds of carpenter tools were displayed systematically in terms of the order of time, from early stone tools to modern electric devices from saw, plane, chisel to axe, hammer, and the ancient ink marker coming from China. A big saw in the museum, about 3 meters in length, looks very cumbersome, and the last man who can use it already passed away two years ago. I also learned there that Chinese carpenter

TABLE 1. Statistic List of Museum's Classification

| Classification                    | Amount |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| History Museum                    | 1613   |
| Local History Museum              | 528    |
| Artistic (Art) Museum             | 799    |
| Nature and History Museum         | 177    |
| Science Museum                    | 170    |
| Zoo                               | 80     |
| Aquarium                          | 72     |
| The Botanical Garden              | 88     |
| Zoo/aquarium/The Botanical Garden | 27     |
| The Synthetic Museum              | 137    |

pushes plane away forward from behind, but the Japanese usage is just opposite. The director of this museum told me that the manufacture of the wooden furniture was changed since 1960's, from by hand to by machine, so that carpenter tools have disappeared gradually. The purpose to set up this museum at that time was to collect and keep early carpenter tools and technology in Japan, to carry forward Japanese traditional carpenter's spirit of struggle, and let the new generation know about this period of history. Because carpenter tools have been disappeared quickly, the most tools collected are more than 100 years old and that are of the remote past are difficult to collect. In fact, the speed for our social development is too quick and people's life and existence way are being changed rapidly. If we don't make great efforts to keep some "material evidence", they would disappear forever.

#### DISPLAY AND DESIGN OF EXHIBITION

It's one of the main functions for a museum to undertake the long-term exhibition. Japanese museum invests quite a lot of manpower, material resources and funds in this respect. There are many good examples in the aspects of the exhibition subjects and design and the application of new technologies. The followings are two typical examples.

First, the Shiga Lake Biwa Museum should be introduced. Lake Biwa is one of the oldest lakes in the world, which comes into being 4,000,000 years ago. The lake is also the biggest one in Japan and occupies about 1/6 of Shiga in area. Lake Biwa is always the major water source of Shiga Prefecture and even Osaka region. About 20,000 years ago, people began to settle down in lakeside and generations are multiplied successfully. So the characteristic culture of the lake was quickly formed. In recent years, the special culture of the lake region was eliminated gradually and the lake water was also polluted because the lakeside region had been vastly cultivated. In order to protect the peculiar culture and retain source of clean water, the government of Shiga Prefecture made an investment to build a large of museum in 1996.

The topic of exhibition emphasizes the mutual relationship of human being and the lake, which systematically introduces the formation history of the special culture in the lake region. The exhibition shows people the various fishes, which are endangered or already extinct, and suggests people to protect the water and organisms. Details of the exhibition are designed picturesquely and interestingly. A large scale of map for Osaka region is encaused with ceramic tile on the floor of entry hall, which is named as "Where is my home". It enables visitors to look for their own homes groveling on the ground as soon as they come in the indoor exhibition is closed, but the well designed windows can make visitors visit the beautiful scenery of the lake through it. And in fact, the beautiful scenery of the lake out doors is also a part of exhibition. The visitors are easily able to have the feeling of worshipping and protecting nature,

while facing to wide surface of the lake. The museum was opened in October 1996, and the number of visitors is up to 1,200,000 in a year. I believe that the exhibiting design contributes a lot.

The exhibition in Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum is another successful example. Dinosaur Museum is one of the new, which is open in July 2000. The museum is built on a hill. It is just like a pellet in shape, studded with glass and it also looks like a bright pearl surrounded by mountains. There are three floors for the building. Visitors can enter the entry on the 3rd floor and then go down to the basement, it is very convenient for visiting. Design pattern inside is very exquisite and magnificent. Its feature can be described with comprehensiveness, novelty and refinement.

1. Comprehensiveness. Though there are only two sets of fossil frameworks, disinterred in Fukui, many duplicates are applied in the large scale of exhibition. The museum has duplicated many kinds of dinosaur fossil models from the countries such as China, U.S.A and Mongolia, and also bought large dinosaur fossils from Mongolia. All above enable it to be a dinosaur museum, which has a largest scale and the most kinds of fossils in Japan.

2. Novelty. New research results have been used in exhibition, resulting from joining of many experts. For example, the museum duplicates the specimens of many kinds of birds and dinosaurs disinterred in the western of Liaoning Province, China, and then simulates the hypothetic process from dinosaur to bird in detail. Multimedia technology has been applied in the exhibition, which can make visitors operate facilities by themselves. In addition, a large amount of electronic models, voice simulation and large screen stereoscopic televisions reproduce ecological landscape of dinosaur times, which make visitors have the feeling of being on the spot in person.

3. Refinement. All details of exhibition are quite exquisite and models are elaborately made, and the multimedia programs are very vivid and interesting. Besides the dinosaur exhibits, the museum also displays the other kinds of marvelous fossils. Fish fossils from Morocco tell a story of a big fish devouring a little one: the head and half body of the poor small fish is already in the mouth of the big fish, while its tail seems like trembling out. That the geological scene is fixed on a stone makes every visitor astonished.

Besides long-term exhibition, the most museums hold one or two temporary exhibition every year. When I visited Tokyo Science Museum in September of 2000, many people are crowded in the hall of the temporary exhibition of diamond. Its atmosphere was very lively. With the improvement in living standard, people love the jewel (being made of diamond) more. The museum takes occasion to hold the diamond exhibition. Various kinds of display means introduced systematically the nature of diamond, chemical composition, crystallization structure, hardness, thermo-conductivity, surface characteristic and the process of diamond making. A lot of famous diamonds

with fine works are displayed, attracting so many visitors. It was a very successful temporary exhibition.

Usually, it would be a certain period to finish the renewal of the standing exhibition. This couldn't attract local visitors. So to hold excellent temporary exhibition is really an effective method to attract repeat customer.

#### SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND SOCIAL EDUCATION

Many museums, especially those large-scale ones in Japan, pay attention to the scientific research very much. The museum is not only the education center that is geared to the needs of the society, but also the organization of scientific research. For example, there are 70 researchers in Osaka National Museum of Ethnology engaged in studying musicology and ethnology. These scholars travel around Japan and go overseas to carry on the relevant researches and collect the collections every year.

There are 30 employees in total in Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum. Among them, paleontologists are nine who have been recruited from the various parts of the country. The museum offers rich treatment and superior research conditions to them with strict assessment criteria. This museum should be built into not only the center of dinosaur exhibition in Japan, but also the research center of paleontology.

The large museum generally issues its own publications of museum. For example, Osaka National Museum of Ethnology issues four kinds of the magazines regularly. Chiba Central Museum also regularly issues publications such as *Study of Natural History*, *Natural History*. These publications are delivered to the relevant organizations in home and abroad for academic exchange. On the shelves of the stores of the museum, a lot of books and periodicals of the museums are ready for visitors. It's very easy for visitors to get new information from the experts' achievements in research.

Besides the work in scientific research, the museums also pay more attention to develop various forms of educational activities. The many large museums have large meeting rooms and activity rooms, where the lectures of the popularization of science and educational activities are often provided. When being in Japan, several people of same profession from Peru, Bulgaria and Malaysia and I were invited to give reports twice by Osaka National Museum of Ethnology for introducing the situations of our own countries' museums. There were the experts of the museums and the enthusiastic people from the other walks among the audiences. They put forward questions constantly, so the atmosphere was extraordinarily active. At Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum, I once participated in a training activity making the casts of fossils for the middle school teachers. Under the guidance of the professional personnel in the museum, the teachers from more than 10 middle schools learned how to make the casts of fossils and operated very seriously step by step. When the teachers of these middle schools saw the casts made by themselves, they seemed very excited and proud. The director

of the Department of Social Education of the museum introduced that they often carried out the training activities for the teachers from the middle or primary schools to give them various kinds of knowledge in paleontology and geology, then the teachers could serve as the guides when the students of the middle or primary schools come to visit.

In terms of scientific research and social educational activities of Japanese museums, there are two aspects which impress me deeply. First, the museums pay more attention to apply new scientific results to the exhibitions to make people learn of the trend of the scientific development in time. Second, their ideas that develop the activity of social education are very strong and the methods are systematized and standardized.

#### SOME SUGGESTIONS

Besides collection, display, and research, other aspects of Japanese museums are available for reference, and certainly some lessons should be learned, too.

##### 1. Pay attention to the selection of museums' location.

The principle of choosing location is convenient for the populace to visit the museum. It's considered by the experts that museum's location should be the place in one hour's drive for most of the residents and it should not be too remote. If possible, different kinds of museums can be built in the relatively centralized places, forming museum culture area, such as Osaka encyclopedically exhibition park area where are Osaka National Museum, Folk Art Museum, International Art Gallery, Japan Home Garden and Japan Natural Culture Garden, etc. If one museum has no good location, it cannot necessarily attract numerous visitors even though it owns good collection and exhibition.

##### 2. Exhibitions should be full of distinctive features

Almost all of the museums, which attract multitudinous visitors, have their own distinctive features, such as Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History and Tokyo Museum of Maritime Science. On the contrary, some small-scale local historical museums, which display the same things as the other ones, only attract few visitors. We ought to learn from this lesson not to build too many local historical museums.

##### 3. Improve the circumstances of museums

At present, many visitors consider visiting museums as high-level activities of amusement and recreation. So it requires having a better environment of museums. Nara is an old city in Japan and there are plenty of well-preserved Buddhist temples opened as the museums. The government of Nara attaches high importance to the protection of the whole city's circumstances. There are ancient Buddhist statues and first-rate national treasures in the museum. There are quiet streets and herds of leisure deer outside the museum. Once the visitors come here, they seem to stay in the land of Peach Blossoms where they can purify hearts and soul. It's perhaps the reason why so many people visit the ancient capital of Nara. While in our country,

some museums are surrounded with noisy markets. Those poor circumstances would influence both the number of the visitors and the effect of visit.

#### 4. Develop work in publicity

Publicity of a museum is very important and should be paid more attention to. Most of the Japanese museums have prepared various brief introductions, color advertising pages, visiting guides, large-scale albums, etc. The brief introductions of museums are presented with tickets and can be distributed everywhere. In Japanese railway station, there are stands to lay up various induction materials of museums, which can be got

freely. And many museums provide bright seals for visitors to seal on the brief introduction of the museums by their own hand as the souvenirs. The good propaganda work can receive a full and perfect result with half of the effort. I think some methods of Japanese museums are worth learning.

After my 5 months' visit, study and communication in Japan, I have widened my vision, and relatively deeply learn the current development situation of Japanese museums. I benefit a great deal, and also I wish what I heard and saw can enlighten us in some respects.

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*Footnote:* Under the Intensive Course on Museology of the JICA Group Training Program JFY2000, Ms Shuqin ZAN visited the Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum from November 21 to December 1, 2000. As the token of her visit, she kindly contributed this note, which is, through agreement of the editorial board, printed here, in the original form. We acknowledge her keen effort, and also the Osaka International Center of JICA who have made her report possible.