

Project Report

The American Folklore Society-China Folklore Society Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project, 2013- 2016*

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Abstract: Emphasizing its museum-focused sub-project, this report describes the second phase of the China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project (2013-2016). Supported by the Henry Luce Foundation, the larger project links these two national scholarly societies in a program of professional exchanges, scholarly meetings, and joint inquiry around issues of intangible cultural heritage policy and practice. The museum sub-project has included joint exhibition development work, travel to local communities in the United States and in Southwest China, and other collaborative initiatives. This report describes the project's history, funding, outcomes, and some lessons learned.

[Keywords: documentation; ethnic museums; folklore and folklife; folk museums; heritage; intangible cultural heritage; preservation. Keywords are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

In 2007, the American Folklore Society (AFS) and the China Folklore Society (CFS) began collaborating on what has become a thirteen-year partnership to build more and better connections among folklorists and folklore studies institutions in both countries. After four years of preliminary work, in 2011 AFS began receiving financial support from the Henry Luce Foundation for larger-scale work toward this goal. In 2013, the Luce Foundation awarded AFS a second three-year grant to take up a new phase of this partnership (and the Foundation's support has continued into the 2017-2019 period). This project report covers the period of 2013 to 2016. It was during this phase of the project that it took up additional work specifically focused on ethnographic museums and their place on the intangible cultural heritage landscapes of China and the United States.

During this period, AFS—again working in partnership with the CFS, and in collaboration with a number of institutions in both countries—managed a program

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of conferences (in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Guiyang, Guizhou Province, China) and professional development exchanges to increase mutual understanding between staff at Chinese and American ethnographic museums, oversaw the development of several new online resources to support. It also shared information and best practices knowledge about folklore studies scholarship in both countries, and carried out a number of planning activities that led to a series of folklore summer institutes for early-career folklorists beginning in 2017.

The ethnographic museum work that is part of this larger effort also had its roots established more than ten years ago. In 2007, Dewhurst had the opportunity to meet Xie Mohua, then Director of the Yunnan Nationalities Museum in Kunming, China. This meeting grew out of Dewhurst's role as Chair of the Advisory Council of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Director Xie was part of the planning team for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival program entitled, Mekong River: Connecting Cultures (Smithsonian Institution 2007). In 2012, they reconnected again when the exhibition, *The Sum of Many Parts: 25 Quiltmakers in 21st Century America*, traveled to the Yunnan Nationalities Museum.¹ During this exhibition tour, Dewhurst and Xie began a dialogue about the commonalities that characterize the work of the provincial nationalities museums in China and the folk and traditional arts programs based at some university museums in the US. This led to a successful grant award from the Asian Cultural Council to begin a partnership between the MSU Museum and Yunnan Nationalities Museum that would focus on professional staff exchanges, "digital repatriation" of Chinese traditional arts in partner museum collections, informal training initiatives, and planning for collaborative exhibitions and other possible joint projects.

Around the same time, the American Folklore Society had formally commenced the AFS/CFS Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project that, as mentioned above, received major support from the Henry Luce Foundation, and additional support from a number of sources in China and the US. At that time, Lloyd was the AFS Executive Director and Dewhurst was serving as AFS President. They were able to participate together on the programs for what became an ongoing series of Henry Luce Foundation-sponsored *AFS/CFS Forums on Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage*.²

During the period of 2013-2016, the number of participating museums grew to three Chinese provincial nationalities museums and three American museums with strong folklife programs.³ There have been many notable outcomes from the museum-focused sub-project, including two scholarly conferences (The Fifth Forum on China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Bridging Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage in Ethnographic Museums and Heritage Sites at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA in 2014 and The China-US Nationalities Museums Collaborative Project Forum at the Guizhou Nationalities Museum in Guiyang, China in 2015) and a major international touring exhibition, *Quilts of Southwest China*, with a groundbreaking bilingual publication (MacDowell and Zhang, eds. 2016). However, what has been most significant are the growing

scholarly and professional relationships that have been established by both senior and, more importantly, younger ethnographic fieldworkers, curators, educators, exhibition designers, and collections managers—and other museum staff—that have participated in this collaborative work (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An AFS/CFS forum on Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Bridging Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage in Ethnographic Museums and Heritage Sites was held from November 9-11 at the Museum of International Folk Art following the 2014 American Folklore Society Annual Meeting. The theme for the AFS annual meeting was Folklore at the Crossroads, and it was held on November 5-8. Both events took place in and around Santa Fe, New Mexico. The attendees participated in both the AFS Annual Meeting and the CFS/AFS forum that followed. As part of the forum, participants visited area museums and cultural sites, such as the Poeh Cultural Center and Museum at the Pueblo of Pojoaque, New Mexico, where they met with professional colleagues and community members (American Folklore Society 2014). Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst. October 9, 2014.

While there are many remarkable stories that have emerged from the growing partnerships over these years, one of the most valuable opportunities for participants has been to learn about the rich collections that our respective museums hold. These collections document the traditional cultural life of the ethnic minorities of Southwest China as well as the traditional arts and ethnography of diverse American peoples. We discovered early on that the participating folklife and ethnographic staff have a

common passion for fieldwork, for active safeguarding of cultural traditions, and for collaborative work with community tradition-bearers. We also learned that we shared museum missions that focus on the documentation, preservation, and presentation of cultural heritage from diverse, often marginalized, cultural groups, and on developing educational programming and exhibitions that present and serve underserved audiences.

The participating partners were genuinely excited to share their museum collections and to tell the stories of how their collections were acquired, how the objects were made, how they were originally used in communities of origin, and the status of these traditional arts and material practices today. This process of staff exchange enriched our understanding of each of our collections as additional data was added to our respective collection records. We thereby learned more about one another's collections holdings for future collaborative research and for new educational uses. We also planned strategies together to make these collections more accessible both in physical and digital ways for research and community engagement (Figure 2).

The relationships that were established continue to grow through the ongoing communications and convenings of these Chinese and American folklorists. We have collectively learned a great deal too about how we each do our work. We are learning from one another not only new theory and current practices—but also how challenging it is to sustain international work due to a variety of factors (Dewhurst and MacDowell 2015).

Among the many things that we have learned from one another is that it takes time to build trust over distance. While electronic communication is valuable, spending time together at one another's museum collections and making team visits to local communities is essential (Figures 3-5). This has helped participants to forge a personal sense of comfort and ease with one another that enables deeper scholarly sharing and collaboration.

The museum staff members from China and the US have acknowledged there are significant national cultural and language differences that need to be constantly addressed. We also have realized that successful collaborative partnerships require honest, direct, open, and transparent communication for planning as well as implementation of our sustained partnerships. Fortunately, we have been able to develop effective strategies for communication and a sincere shared commitment for sustained equitable individual and institutional relationships. Bilingual participants with training or experience working in both nations have played a particularly crucial role in our museum collaboration.



Figure 2. An important part of the collaboration between the leadership of the six museums from the US and China were the regular discussions regarding folklore and intangible heritage policy and practices. These conversations provided an opportunity to co-create mutually beneficial initiatives and to equitably share in the coordination and funding needed to realize these efforts. Here the leadership team from the museums meet over lunch in Guizhou—toward the end of a period of rural field visits—to assess our experiences and to make plans for the next phase of work, including the *Quilts of Southwest China* exhibition. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, December 11, 2014.

Over the past few years, we have had to learn a great deal about our respective institutional hierarchies and administrative processes that need to be respected and followed in order to be successful. In the end, probably what was most important was our strong collective view that, while collaborative work is demanding, the rewards are worth it and partnerships can be transformative in terms of understanding our collections and the museum practices active in our respective nations.



Figure 3. An important part of the design of the field experiences was for the participants to study the approaches for the presentation of folklore and intangible cultural heritage by eco-museums in China. The eco-museum staff members became valuable professional colleagues through this process. The eco-museums have become sites for innovative community engaged scholarly work led primarily by the local communities, often with guidance and support from regional nationalities museums. This image comes from a visit to the Suojia Miao Eco-museum in Guizhou, China. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, April 16, 2015.

These experiences set the stage for the collaborations between the museum partners after 2016, when we decided to move beyond professional staff exchanges, scholarly forum sessions and joint community visits to develop and pursue collaborative fieldwork projects. The new phase of work involves joint ethnographic work in Northern Guangxi led by the Anthropological Museum of Guangxi. The international fieldwork teams involve folklorists, cultural specialists, and museum professionals pursuing collaborative “project-based learning experiences.” This has enabled us to more effectively share our individual experiences with studying and safeguarding ICH. These efforts currently include not only the original fieldwork partners but also involve the staff of local eco-museums and community-based cultural organizations in Guangxi. This next stage of work was commenced in 2017, with additional grant support to the AFS from the Luce Foundation, and it will be described in a future project report.



Figure 4. Marsha MacDowell (right) and Lynne Swanson (left) from the MSU Museum document batik traditions in Anshun at a Suoijia Miao Eco-museum in Guizhou, China. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, April 16, 2015.

This museum's work, and the larger AFS-CFS China-US effort of which it is a part, has been characterized by the emergence of a large number of unforeseen outcomes that have helped us toward reaching our goal of greater international connections in our field. These are discussed by Lloyd (2017) and include spin-off exhibitions, the building of new museum collections, various publications projects, and new international partnerships that extend beyond China and the US.

One example of an unanticipated outcome for Dewhurst was the opportunity to create synergies between Chinese ICH and museum work and his role as Director of Arts and Culture with the office of University Outreach and Engagement at Michigan State University (MSU). Along with some of his colleagues, he proposed that a university thematic year should focus on China. Together with colleagues on the MSU Cultural Engagement Council (comprised of deans and directors primarily in the arts and humanities), they produced an eighteen-month China Experience initiative for MSU. This included exhibitions, performances, festival programs, chef exchanges, artist residencies, symposia, lectures, and seminars on China. With over 4500 Chinese national students on our campus of approximately 50,000 students, the programming proved successful in helping build cross-cultural awareness and experience that

benefitted the Chinese population at MSU, all MSU students, and the larger community (Michigan State University 2015).



Figure 5. Tim Lloyd, then Executive Director of the American Folklore Society, is formally welcomed to the Suojia Miao Eco-museum with a traditional beverage in Guizhou, China. Photo: C. Kurt Dewhurst, April 16, 2015.

The focus here has been on the first (2013-2016) phase of joint projects linking Chinese and US museums of ethnography for work studying ICH issues under the auspices of the CFS and AFS. We look forward to future reports from the current (2017-2019) phase of the project as well as to the substantive research studies and outreach projects that will arise from it.

Notes

1. The MSU Museum, where Dewhurst serves as Curator of Folklife and Cultural Heritage, played a coordinating role in *The Sum of Many Parts* exhibition, together

with Arts Midwest and South Arts. Funding support for the project came from the US Embassy in China and the US partners. See Hollingsworth and Malone, eds. (2012).

2. For the programs for all conferences to date, see American Folklore Society (n.d. a).

3. The museum partners are the Yunnan Nationalities Museum (Kunming, Yunnan, China), the Anthropological Museum of Guangxi, Nanning, Guangxi, China, the Guizhou Nationalities Museum (Guiyang, Guizhou, China), the Mathers Museum of World Cultures (Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA), the Museum of International Folk Art (Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA), and the Michigan State University Museum (Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA). To learn more about the larger project, consult AFS (n.d. a, n.d. b) and Lloyd (2017).

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C. Kurt Dewhurst serves as the Director of Arts and Cultural Initiatives and as a Senior Fellow, University Outreach and Engagement. He is director emeritus of the Michigan State University Museum, as well as a Curator of Folklife and Cultural Heritage and a Professor of English. The author or co-author of numerous books, articles, and exhibition catalogues, he has also curated over sixty exhibitions and festival programs. He teaches courses in folklife, material folk culture, and museum studies. He currently serves as chairperson of the Board of Trustees for the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. He has also served as president of the American Folklore Society.

Timothy Lloyd serves as Senior Advisor for Partnerships for the American Folklore Society. He was the Society's Executive Director from 2001 to 2018. Before his time at the Society, Lloyd spent his career in folklore, intangible cultural heritage, and cultural heritage policy work for agencies of the US national government, including the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution, in the state governments of Maryland and Ohio, and in the NGO sector. He has been a board and committee member or consultant for many US and international organizations, and has taught and lectured at universities in the US, China, and Finland.

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