

## Documenting Information Heritage on the Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan

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## **Documenting Information Heritage on the Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan**

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### **1 Objective**

The objective of this presentation is to introduce the process by which Austronesian people in Taiwan as the Indigenous peoples create their own culture by utilizing the knowledge, findings and experience obtained through the exploration of their history and culture based on the ethnic materials stored in domestic and overseas museums.

Before starting the presentation, I would like to set the framework of information heritage as one of the work concepts in which to consider their activities. Information heritage is not limited to landscapes, specific performing arts, and objects that remind you of particular historical events of which the subject of inheritance and scope are not necessarily clarified such as natural heritage, cultural heritage and the memory of the world. Information heritage is a cluster of elements such as “who, when, where, what, why and how.” It is a human act and its description accompanies everything that is so-called heritages regardless of its tangibility. How to organize and hand down these elements is crucial in forming information heritage. In this presentation, I would like to introduce the process by which I have developed the concept of information heritage through the historical and social backgrounds surrounding Taiwan and the Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan.

### **2 Democratization in Taiwan and the Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan**

The Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan mean Austronesian people regarded as native Taiwanese compared to the majority Han Chinese in Taiwan. At present, they are a minority of 450,000 people, accounting for a little less than 2% of the population in Taiwan. Today, 14 ethnic groups have been publicly recognized. The Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan were regarded as “People in Benighted Lands Outside of Imperial Influence” by the Chinese dynasties, and they were also placed in lower positions socially and economically during the period of Japanese sovereignty and even in Taiwan after World War II.

Since the 1980s under the democratization process in Taiwan, the Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan have claimed the restoration of their rights, including respect of

their own culture and original land ownership. In the late 1980s, a social movement called “Indigenous Movement” developed. As a result, the constitution was amended, promising that the national government will guarantee and promote the culture and welfare of the Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan. The words “Indigenous Peoples,” which mean “native peoples,” were adopted as their formal demonym. As an administrative organization, the Council of Indigenous Peoples, of which the aborigines themselves are members, was established as a ministry-level body to promote the administration of indigenous people.

Despite these social movements, ownership of their original lands has not been restored. During the period of Japanese sovereignty, the mountainous areas where most of them lived were designated as mountain reservations, where private land ownership was banned. The Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan continued to live and work there, but their property rights to real estate, including the buying and selling of land, remained vague. This vague situation still continues under the administration of the government of the Republic of China. Nevertheless, the government has provided relatively generous support for promotion of their traditional culture, education and welfare. As for education, a proficiency test system was introduced for advancement of their mother language education, and “Village Schools” were promoted for practical education on their native land. In addition, the Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan have been offered opportunities to receive public financial assistance, including budgetary action for entrepreneurs in cultural businesses and a variety of events.

In their villages, craft centers to produce their traditional clothes and utensils have been opened, and organizations to grow organic crops for nature-oriented consumers have been established. In addition to producing traditional clothes and utensils, the producers are creating craftwork and clothing based on their original ideas.

### **3 Attempts to “Reappearance by Atayal People”**

Among the attempts to produce craftwork mentioned above, Ms. Yuma Taru, a Tayal craftswoman, has been proceeding with the “Program to Reappearance and Store Traditional Garments and Correlated Ware of the Atayal Tribe.” This endeavor aims to produce new creative work by the Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan engaged in manufacturing through an organic combination of their current production activities with museum materials while carefully observing the materials.

Yuma was born in Miaoli County, northern Taiwan, in 1963. Her father comes from Hunan Province in China while her mother is a Tayal woman. After graduating from university, she worked as a public servant at a public institution. She was mainly engaged in the collection and purchase of traditional garments. Then, after working as a junior high school teacher, she started weaving in the

early 1990s. In practice, she began to hand down the Tayal traditional garment culture by herself.

She began weaving as the start of an activity for reconstruction and inheritance of the traditional culture in a village, where women would naturally learn weaving. For Tayal people, weaving is normal work for women, and acquisition of its techniques is regarded as the initiation into becoming a woman. In Tayal communities, it is taboo for men to weave or touch the looms.

When Yuma started reconstruction of the native culture in the area with the village people, the indigenous movement was started with growing claims for their rights, which resulted in amendment to the constitution in 1994 to approve their demonym as indigenous peoples. Similar movements were seen in every group and village of other indigenous peoples besides the Tayal tribe. As monetary and consumer life began to spread like in other Taiwanese communities, this may be a response to a kind of identity crisis caused in a situation where traditional clothes and utensils were not used any longer and they were sold as antiques and collectibles for hobbyists. Producing their own clothes and utensils has come to be a means of recognizing that they are indigenous peoples, as well as a tool to show externally.

When Yuma and the village people started to reconstruct their traditional culture, the first task is identifying where the tradition exists. The Council of Indigenous Peoples founded in 1995 initiated historical researches and traditional culture surveys for each ethnic group while Yuma and other members also surveyed the family trees of the Tayal tribe and their traditional garments. During the survey, they realized that there were very few garment materials and the techniques could not be fully understood through the interviews.

Then, they adopted an interview style using old photographs. You may think that the value of photographs would be dramatically reduced without containing shooting information such as dates and situations. However, the response about old photographs from village elders shown to Yuma and her team did not necessarily support such anticipation.

“We have not seen these garments now, but they are ours. People wearing similar clothes live along this stream, but people living across the stream wear different clothing.”

Through anthropological explorations and ethnological surveys during the period of Japanese sovereignty, it has been known that Tayal people have a residence style of small families scattered along mountain streams. The comment about the old photographs made by that elder confirmed the academic findings and showing anew that similar phenomena still remained under the current material culture.

It is clear that information about old photographs obtained from people who have knowledge and experience of the details brings new value to the old photographs. At the same time, it is also very important from the perspective of the information source that there are still some persons who are able to understand the meanings of those old photographs based on their experiences in these times because their comments may be used as information for judging whether the information available from the photographs is accurate.

Yuma and other members pointed out that these photographic materials have limitations in producing craftwork because photographs are only 2D materials, and they are insufficient to obtain the 3D information required for smooth production. Therefore, Yuma and her team started to scrutinize the aboriginal materials by visiting museums at home and abroad. The National Museum of Prehistory (hereinafter referred to as the Prehistory Museum) opened at that time served as a spur to their production activities.

The Prehistory Museum opened in 1992 was a new national museum in Taiwan so that the museum could not be expected to collect only historical antiques. Accordingly, they thought of looking to the future of the indigenous culture. That is, they record the indigenous knowledge and techniques available at this point by visiting the sites while surveying the materials produced in the past but stored in the museums in Taiwan and overseas for restoration and inheritance of their traditional techniques. The “Program to Reappearance and Store Traditional Garments and of Correlated Ware of the Atayal Tribe” was started when the situation of the museum matched the intention of Yuma toward the inheritance of her own ethnically traditional garment techniques.

Note that they use the word ‘reappearance’ not ‘replication.’ Replication literally means copy. Reappearance shows that they do not hesitate to use new techniques and materials for production, and the products are considered as new creations. There have been various discussions about this. However, the objective of this plan is to link the past with the present by approaching the process by which their ancestors acquired new knowledge through the manufacturing processing they learned. They have had a common understanding that reappearance should be actively accepted. Interestingly, against the background of the concept of reappearance, they discussed whether the replication of ethnic materials was ethically permissible. Following the current copyright system, it would be possible to replicate pieces of non-work. The issue of whether replication of what is unique to a specific ethnic group by outsiders should be treated in an ethically careful manner especially when considering the fact that such ethnic materials are the intellectual property of the group concerned. In other words, museums and researchers were asked about the ethics and authenticity of exhibiting produced replicas of ethnic materials not genuine materials.

## 4 Meanings of Information Heritage

After conducting an outline survey of Minpaku's materials under the project of the Prehistory Museum mentioned above in 2007, Yuma and other members scrutinized the materials stored in Minpaku under my research project in 2012. Through basic morphometry, color survey, overall and detailed photography and so forth, they obtained fundamental data about characteristics and changes in the garments produced during the period of Japanese sovereignty. Based on these experiences, Yuma and her team are trying to produce new garments, and some of them will be exhibited in the Minpaku's permanent exhibition corner to be completely renovated in March 2014.

Collecting ethnographic information written in those times, I have repeated the discussions to collate the information Yuma and her team obtained from the garment materials with the ethnographic context of those times.

The collaboration with Yuma and her team revealed that not only the information available through our research but also the research and study processes conducted to obtain such information are important from the perspective of information heritage. Such information is involved in new Tayal garments produced by Yuma and other members. When the garments produced by Yuma and her team become the targets of later research and study, the fact that Yuma and other members produced them based on the research of the materials stored in Minpaku will be an important element in understanding their garments. In other words, researchers and manufacturers also produce ethnic knowledge and experience while playing a role in handing them down to the next generation. Transmitting the processes themselves as information is expected to enable a more accurate understanding.

Understanding and inheritance of such precise information becomes an important issue not only to the indigenous communities but also to the whole of Taiwan.

As Taiwan had been under the control of Chinese dynasties and Japan for a long time, Taiwan's own historical records have not been sufficiently maintained in Taiwan. In some cases, historical documents and maps are stored in overseas museums and libraries. When the movement to explore not the official histories of China but the real history of Taiwan became strong in democratized Taiwan, only a few materials were available in Taiwan, which became a bottleneck to the movement. The Taiwanese people often felt frustrated that books and maps illustrating their own country are available only overseas. Thus, the Taiwanese government took action by copying the overseas materials. The approach to producing accurate replicas and acquiring information to hand down to people in Taiwan has become established.

The same approach is also applicable to the ethnic materials of the indigenous peoples. Their strategy is not to return them to Taiwan but to increase information to be handed down by repeatedly visiting the museums and institutions storing the materials for research and studying under close relationships with them. Through the collaboration with Yuma and her team, they repeatedly say, “We are becoming less and less interested in having them returned to us. They are the products made by our ancestors, not by us. It is more meaningful for us to create and record new things by making good use of what we have learned from them.” Research and study are not completed at one time but incrementally. Collaboration with Yuma and her team revealed that continual and constructive increases in information can be expected through repeated research and study to settle new tasks found in each research.

## **5 Conclusion**

The key objective of the weaving Yuma and other members are working on is to transmit their ethnic culture and traditions to subsequent generations. At the same time, cultural activities by contemporary youth are also important in their transmission. These activities play a role in raising everyone’s awareness by extending vertically and horizontally and spreading in time and space.

Although culture and history can be handed down within an individual village or ethnic group, no society can exist in total isolation. Taiwanese people have survived complicated relationships with outsiders and are good at turning their relations with others to benefit. The indigenous peoples have taken the initiative to create new information together with the inheritance of their own history, culture and techniques described in an easy-to-understand manner for others.

I am sure that such collaboration will go further. As long as the materials of the indigenous peoples are stored in Minpaku, it will be an obligation of Minpaku to cooperate in research and study of the indigenous peoples. It is also necessary for Minpaku to realize the collection and inheritance of academic information related to their culture and history should be conducted through diverse media. Recording and sharing of information heritage by both parties through well-maintained collaboration will result in continual recognition of the history and culture of the indigenous peoples in Taiwan on a global basis with the museum serving as the keystone. In addition, the *raison d’être* for storing the materials in the repository will be dramatically strengthened for the museums when they become the focus of active research rather than those on exhibition.

The handing down of information as heritage guarantees the reciprocal relationships between the aborigines and the museum, as well as giving us the opportunity to conduct work and find measures together.