

Info Forum Museum for the Regional Cultures of China Gallery

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Info-Forum Museum for the Regional Cultures of China Gallery

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At the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka (hereinafter “Minpaku”), we launched the Info-Forum Museum projects in 2014. In this paper, I will report on the use of visual images in one of the projects, namely, “Building an Info-Forum Museum for Regional Cultures of China”.

1. Overview of the Info-Forum Museum Project

This project involves the multilingual online transmission of information on objects in the museum’s collection to facilitate their utilization by people around the world. Our aim in the project is to achieve two-way communication regarding information. For example, there is a possibility that researchers who see information transmitted by Minpaku about objects, or others in the source communities who produce and use those objects, will be able to utilize that information and supplement it with new information. This will be possible due to the online publication of the information in multiple languages.

To date, fourteen related projects have been undertaken, twelve of which are to produce databases for specified ranges of objects in Minpaku collection. The remaining two projects, of which our own is one, deal with objects in the galleries. In particular, the project involving the Regional Cultures of China Gallery is characterized by our strong intention to present information online in a manner that reflects the display in the gallery as closely as possible. Information will be released in three languages and four character sets in Japanese, Chinese (simplified and traditional characters), and English.

2. Use of Visual Images in the Regional Cultures of China Gallery

Four types of visual images are used in the China Gallery, namely, maps, photographs, illustrations, and videos.

In the China Gallery, ethnic diversity is represented by displays of ethnic costumes. The ethnicity distribution map is located near the entrance of the gallery, alongside several ethnic costumes and a sheet of commemorative stamps featuring all fifty-six of China’s officially recognized ethnic groups. The aim here is to convey an overall impression of China’s ethnic diversity (Photo 1).

Photographs are the most frequently used visual images in our gallery, and the ways



Photo 1 The entrance display of the Regional Cultures of China Gallery (Image by the author)

in which they are used can be broadly divided into three categories. The first of these is to show the contexts (that is, the backgrounds) of the exhibition objects. For example, the cormorant fishing (*ukai*) boat in the Subsistence Section is accompanied by a field photograph showing cormorant fishermen aboard similar boats (Photos 2 and 3). The second is to provide additional explanations for things like production processes or how to use the displayed objects. For example, the Miao tunic and pleated skirt displayed in the Costume Section are made of lustrous purplish textiles. Such textiles are produced by beating indigo-dyed fabrics, and this process is explained through multiple photographs.



Photo 2 Cormorant fishing boat (Image by the author)



Photo 3 Cormorant fishing in Hubei Province, China (Image courtesy of Shuhei Uda)



Photo 4 Photo panel of a collective ancestral tablet and its altar cabinet displayed in the gallery (Images by the author)

The third use is as a replacement for the real objects when display space is lacking. In the Religion and Writing Section, field photographs showing a collective ancestral tablet (*páiwèi*) and a house-shaped altar cabinet in which the tablet is stored are displayed (Photo 4). While Minpaku collection does include a house-shaped alter cabinet, since it measures about a meter wide by 60 cm deep, we were unable to secure enough space to put it on display (Photo 5).

Illustrations are primarily used in place of photographs. Since we were not able to obtain an appropriate field photograph of a Miao mouth organ (*lúshēng*), we used an



Photo 5 An altar cabinet for an ancestral tablet in the Minpaku collection
(Images by the author)

illustration (Photos 6 and 7). As is also the case with the floor plan of a stilt dwelling used by the Zhuang people, illustrations can be effective when providing explanations since they allow the illustrator significant freedom of depiction.

Videos recording a series of movements have an expressive power that photographs lack. The spectacle of how a threshing machine placed in front of a stilt dwelling is used can be seen in the Minpaku Digital Guide, which uses videos recorded in the field.

3. Use of Visual Images Online

Online, visual images are used to stand in for actual objects in the gallery. In the process of preparing for online transmission, we ran into challenges and new possibilities arising from its differences with the gallery. These may be summarized into the three following points.

3.1 Establishing “Exhibit Units”

Providing online availability of the object database for Minpaku collection storage can be accomplished solely by organizing visual images for each individual objects. However, to reflect the circumstances of how these objects are exhibited in the gallery and show this online, we decided to introduce a new idea of “exhibit units.”

Our primary reason for this decision was to achieve a greater degree of semblance to the objects as they appear in the gallery. In the real three-dimensional space of the gallery, supplementary context is provided with some of the objects’ displays. A typical example may be found in the section featuring the stilt dwelling traditionally used by the Zhuang people. A bed, for example, is placed in a room that has been reproduced in

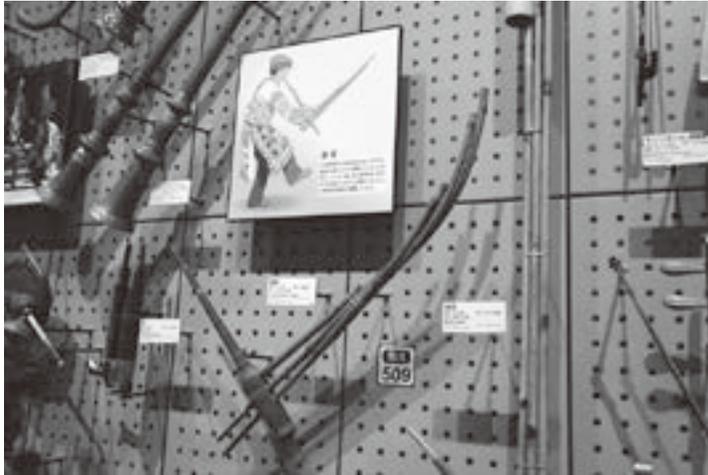


Photo 6 Illustration panel of the mouth organ displayed with the objects
(Image by the author)



Photo 7 Illustration panel of a Miao man playing the mouth organ displayed in the gallery (Source: National Museum of Ethnology)

dimensions approximating those in the field. The bed consists of eight separate objects including the bed itself as well as the bedding, bedspread, pillows, and other items. If we were to show these objects online as individual items, the relationships between these eight items and how they work together to form a whole set would not be immediately visible. Therefore, we decided to make a “bedding set” as an “exhibit unit” and foregrounded the exhibit unit in the online display. This allows viewers to understand the



Photo 8 The bed in the Zhuang stilt dwelling reproduced in the gallery (Image by the author)

8 Objects ⇒ 1 Exhibit Unit: Bedding Set

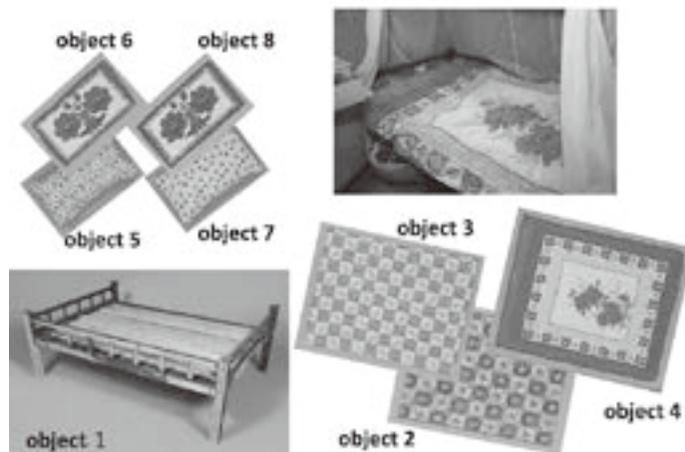


Photo 9 Eight objects compose an exhibit unit of the bedding set

bed in a way closer to that in the actual gallery (Photos 8 and 9). In the online presentation, the exhibit unit is followed by data pertaining to each of its constituent objects.

Another reason was to eliminate problems arising from inconsistencies in the registration of objects. Most of the ethnic costumes in the Regional Cultures of China Gallery are displayed on mannequins dressed head to foot in complete sets of clothing. The ethnic costumes of China purchased by the museum in the early 1980s were registered in the collection with a single identification number corresponding to an entire costume set consisting of many parts, each of which has the same identification number with a lower-level branch number (Photo 10). However, sets of attire purchased later



Photo 10 A set of 22 items registered with a single identification number



Photo 11 A set of 7 items registered separately with different identification numbers

began to be assigned identification numbers for each individual part (Photo 11). In other words, we have entire sets of ethnic attire worn by mannequins that have been registered with single identification numbers, and other sets for which each part is registered individually. When the objects were organized online on the unit basis of individual items with identification numbers, the issue of inconsistency in registered units was exposed. This problem was solved by defining the whole set of ethnic attire worn by a single mannequin as a single “exhibit unit.”



Photo 12 Peasant paintings displayed in the form of a printed album
(Image by the author)

3.2 Possibilities for Online Exhibition Free from Architectural Constraints

There are other examples than the one mentioned above of the use of photographs to compensate for the lack of display space in the gallery. The peasant paintings and socialist posters in the Crafts Section and the woodblock prints known as *niánhuà* in the Transmission of Chinese Tradition Section are displayed in the form of printed albums featuring objects from Minpaku collection that stand in for the actual objects (Photo 12). Since the online exhibition is free of the constraints of architectural space, users can look carefully at the individual objects in printed albums as visual images in the same way as they might with other actual objects displayed in the gallery, rather than merely viewing images in an album format.

In addition, as mentioned above, while we try to add supplementary context to the displayed objects using field photos in the gallery, we can provide even more photographs in an online setting free of the constraints of physical space.

3.3 Setting New Categories and Arrangements Necessary for Online Publication

The China Gallery is made up of an entrance vestibule and nine sections, and some sections are further divided into subsections or corners. These subcategories in each section have the effect of clarifying the intention of the exhibition, organizing its contents, and facilitating understanding. In some cases, subcategorization had not been carried out due to the conditions of a given section in the gallery. For this project, after performing a review with an eye to online publication, we added new subcategories not previously applied in the gallery. In addition, we came up with a rearrangement of order in which to display exhibit units online.

The arrangement of objects in the three-dimensional space of the gallery is spatially distributed and rich in variation. Certain groupings and classifications of objects can be

made by the positional arrangement or display methods used, which facilitates visitors' understanding without explicitly introducing named classifications. The best example of this is how the objects are arranged in the contextually rich interior of the stilt dwelling. As the living space is partitioned into rooms, there is no need to introduce further classifications by naming the subsections or corners. However, the kind of contextuality provided by the real gallery space is not available in the online space, where arrangements are simple, uniform, and flat. In order to secure the same understandability for the Stilt Dwelling Section of the online exhibition as visitors would have in the museum gallery, we decided to set eight categories corresponding to rooms and sites under which to arrange their associated exhibit units (Photos 13 and 14).

The order in which the exhibit units are lined up had to be adjusted case by case in consideration of the characteristics of the online space, that is, not three-dimensionally, but linearly on the same level. In the corner of "Diverse Styles, Colors, and Patterns" in the center of the China Gallery, mannequins wearing various ethnic costumes are arranged in a double concentric circle. Each mannequin has been positioned based on its respective region, in counterclockwise order corresponding to the north, northwest, southwest, south, and southeast regions. Thus, when looking from the outside into the circle, visitors will be able to see the ethnic costumes of groups living in the same or adjacent regions (Photos 15, 16, and 17). In order to effectively record the display position of the mannequins in the ledger recording this portion of the exhibition, the order of the costumes in the outer circle is entered first, followed by the arrangement of the costumes in the inner circle. However, simply using the same order in the online exhibition will not make it easy to understand this regional character of the ethnic costumes. Therefore, for the online exhibit, we did away with the inner and outer arrangement and set up a new order that reflected geographical position as much as possible. As a result, groups geographically close to each other have been arranged successively in the linear arrangement found online.

In an online publication that merely functions as a kind of database and involves no consideration of how a display appears in the real museum gallery space, it is sufficient for users to be able to access the search function to reach desired material. In such cases, there is little significance to the considerations and possibilities associated with an online space using visual images to provide information about the exhibits in the gallery as described here. However, as it is expected that Minpaku will be moving toward full-scale online engagement with its exhibitions in the future, we hope that the experience described here will become a useful point of reference.



Photo 13 The interior of the stilt dwelling reproduced in the museum gallery (Image by the author)

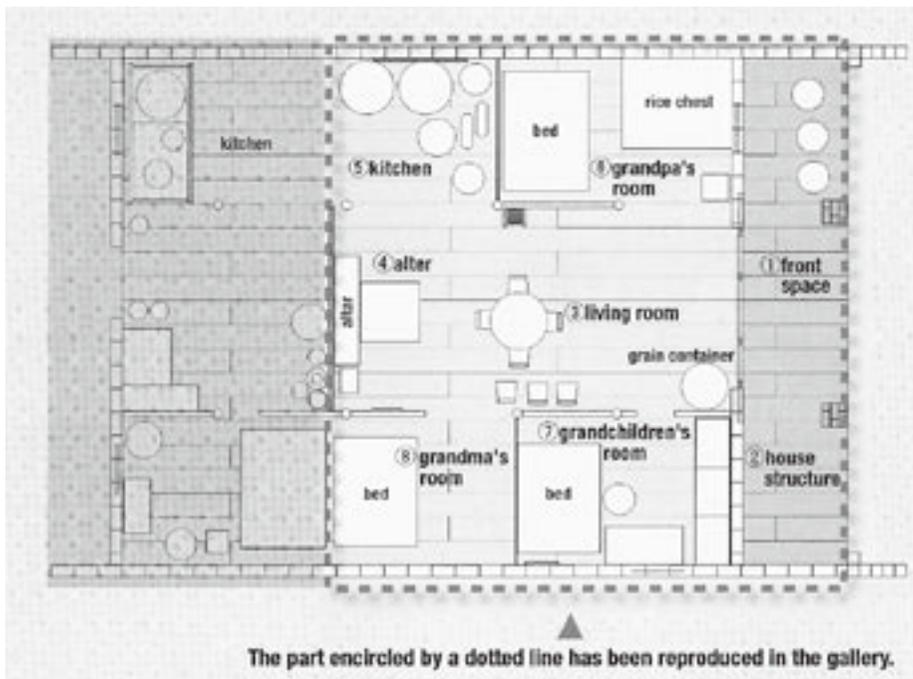


Photo 14 Illustration panel of the Zhuang stilt dwelling with eight categories introduced for the Stilt Dwelling Section online (Source: National Museum of Ethnology)



Photo 15 An angle to view the costumes of the northern area (Image by the author)



Photo 16 An angle to view the costumes of the northwest (Image by the author)



Photo 17 An angle to view the costumes of the southwest (Image by the author)