

Chapter 7

New Imagined Community by Cultural Participation: A Study on Taiwan's Digital Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

Although the preservation of cultural heritage has always been a primary task of cultural policy in many countries, the idea of combining digital technology and cultural heritage was almost entirely unknown as recently as 1990. It is undeniable that digital technologies have played an important part in our lives. In the case of Taiwan, the government has been working on digitizing cultural heritage by launching National Digital Archives Program since 2002. Most scholarship has focused either on technical practices or the economic value of such practices. Scanty attention has been paid to the relationship between digital cultural heritage, cultural citizenship, and one's imagined community. In other words, the application of digital technology onto cultural heritage has been largely unmapped in terms of identity formation. This study explores the social and cultural implication of the combination of technology and heritage. When heritage meet contemporary technology, how does it shape and what does it implicate for one's cultural identity and imagined community?

INTRODUCTION

To speak of the digital is to engage with the impressive array of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media, global interconnectivity, and all their multifarious applications. It is only recently that the UNESCO responded to the ongoing development of applying

digital technologies to cultural heritage sector by articulating the *UNESCO Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage*.¹

In the case of Taiwan, cultural heritage preservation becomes an important issue started from the late 1980 and the need for documenting cultural heritages digitally is increasing recently (Chiu, 2007: 230). Taiwan government has been working on digitizing cultural heritage by launching National Digital Archives Program since 1999.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-037-2.ch007

The purpose is to provide users access to museum database via internet browser, making it easier for users to utilize information and resources and to learn, understand, and share history and culture.² Although the cultural heritage sectors acknowledge that digital technology poses new challenges, many philosophical, social, historical and cultural issues have not yet been critically explored.

When digital technology has been applied to cultural development or cultural preservation, most scholarship has focused either on the economic value of this practice or on technical considerations of such practices. Scanty attention has been paid to the relationship between digital cultural heritage, cultural citizenship, and one's imagined community. In other words, the application of digital technology onto cultural heritage has been discussed from economists and information scientists' perspectives, while how it implicates for one's identity formation left largely unmapped. If previous discussions illuminate the economic and technical dimensions of the use of digital media in the (re)production of art works and in the acquisition, representation and conservation of heritage, this study explores the social and cultural implication of the combination of technology and heritage. Heritage on display or in exhibition is regarded to consolidate national identity (Dicks, 2003). Yet when heritage meet contemporary technology, how does it shape and what does it implicate for one's cultural identity and imagined community?

Heritage was once regarded as heredity, a form of inheritance, and possessions bequeathed from the heir, today it implies roots, identity, and sense of place and belonging (Hoelscher, 2006: 200). Despite its aged lineage, it is described as "a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 7) and has become a specific way of interpreting bygone times that links individuals with a larger collective. Heritage is not just a thing displayed in the museum, but is also bound up with the understanding of objects outside the museum and

of the nature of the subject and subjectivity. It informs not just how we see what is in them, but also how we see what is outside and how we see ourselves. In this sense, it can be said that heritage holds the nexus of identity, and cultural politics.

Material representation of national lineage is deeply related to one's identity formation. The display of heritage objects is not only the staging of history, but also helps to know one's own history and thus confirms one's own "roots" (Beier-de Hann, 2006). But when traditional exhibitions are transformed into digital form, the visitors are freed from given definitions and interpretational frameworks. That is, the practice of displaying objects in showcases along with written information ceases to dominate how something is to be interpreted. How does the connection between the individual and a larger common ground change when individuals are encouraged to view things and history in their own way?

This question will be analyzed with Taiwan's National Digital Archives Program executed by National Palace Museum and National Historical Museum in which artifacts, paintings and calligraphy, documents, publications and films are primary objects and users who have used this program. By examining the characteristics of the digital project, this study argues that when these artifacts are displayed in public museums, their implication for imagined community is based on ethnicity. Yet when cultural heritage is digitized, viewed through technological lens, using digitized heritage program offers a new way of imagining one's own community by cultural participation.

This study will firstly introduce Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Community* which combines technology and cultural transformation in terms of identity. The study will proceed under this theoretical framework with the discussion of more advanced technology--digitization. Secondly, it will introduce the history of Taiwan's National Palace Museum and National History Museum, and delineate how the roles of these museums are changing partly in accordance with the policy of

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