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Immigrant participation in heritage activities

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My thoughts on immigrant participation in activities related to local cultural heritage in host countries

In many EU countries cultural participation of immigrants and their offspring in local societies was, for a long time, not considered to be an important issue in either academia or in politics. Immigrant workers were not expected to take any interest in activities related to local culture and heritage of the host country. This is slowly changing and there is an increasing interest in approaching heritage in general, and archaeological heritage in particular, to the whole population, including migrants (ex: the recent work in Sweden published by Anders Gustafsson & Håkan Karlsson or that in Norway by Christopher Presscott). I have found that these efforts, which are now also being undertaken in Spain, are not always useful for encouraging people to participate. Some immigrant communities in several EU countries are showing

more desire to participate in cultural heritage activities and at the same time the local authorities are also making efforts to bring the immigrant communities into the fold and encourage them to be more immersed into the cultural aspect of local society, although not everybody is enthusiastic about it. Not all immigrant communities act in the same way and not everyone is willing to participate.

Chinese communities seem to be among those who rarely participate in local events. Being a Chinese myself living in Barcelona, and writing a PhD about archaeological heritage, I have started to critically think about the reluctance of other Chinese to engage in heritage activities. I have asked several Chinese friends and some people in local shops to gather some ideas as to why that is.

Most of the Chinese immigrants who came to Barcelona during the past thirty years are from a poor background. Their objective is simple: work hard and earn money. Their role in the host society is mainly economic, not cultural. Activities related to heritage can be considered as a cultural product, something that would cost time and brains, if not money. To consume cultural products it requires the “customers” to have a certain level of educational background and economic strength. However, to the majority of Chinese immigrants in Barcelona, who came here to work in restaurants or small shops, cultural products like this are something they are neither familiar with, nor interested in.

Unlike many EU countries, in which cultural activities such as going to museums have a long history of development, in China, the concept of cultural consumption is rather new, and even people living in cities only from the 1980s and 1990s have only recently started to participate in cultural activities such as tourism, museum visiting, and going to concerts. This has a historical reason. From the end of World War II to 1978, China was closed to the outside world, and its own culture has suffered turmoil during the Cultural Revolution period from the 1960s to the 1970s. This did not only negatively affect economy and material culture, but also put a chaos to the social morality and public education. More time may be needed for China to recover from that period. The generation that was born and raised during the Cultural Revolution is the first generation of Chinese immigrants to come to Barcelona and many other European cities to make a living in the late 20th century. They most likely lack the educational background to be able to easily appreciate cultural entertainments that seem a bit “foreign”. And it is not because they don’t want to. It is simply because the social context in which they were born and raised did not provide them with the chance of proper education. Therefore, it would be hard for them to even psychologically convince themselves “why should they care”, when asked to participate in a cultural activity related to the heritage of a foreign society.

Additionally, in Barcelona, like in most parts of the world, the Chinese community is not homogenous. There are different economic, ethnic and regional groups of people within the Chinese community, but activity organisers usually ignore this. I would suggest that activity organizers who find it extremely difficult to convince Chinese immigrants whose main duty is making a living and making money to participate in any cultural activity related to foreign heritage to approach Chinese students, or second-generation immigrants who are much more familiar with the host local culture. China arrived late in the international arena of cultural heritage. Cultural consumption is a habit that takes time and education to cultivate. If it seems difficult to encourage the Chinese immigrants to participate in heritage related activities now, it might not be so in 10 years time.

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