

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE PUBLIC

Term Paper for the M.A. in Comparative and Public History

Course HIS 5515B –

Special Topic in Public History (Archaeology)

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Preliminary

In connection with the MA course HIST 5515B on the Topic Studies in Public History: Archaeology, this term paper is prepared to discuss the relationship between archaeology and the public, in particular the general public in Hong Kong.

The Nature of Archaeology

Archaeology is generally defined as the study of the past human activities through recovery of their material culture and analysis of their environmental data including artifacts, architecture, biofacts and cultural landscapes which have left behind by them. In the past, archaeology was mainly concerned the finding of material culture, nowadays it is more concern about the understanding of how material culture works and why it works. While one of the major tasks of archaeology is the study of artifacts and remains of materials made by human, it aims to provide knowledge and understanding of the past activities of our ancestors and their past society. Hodder stated that “the aim is to meet the challenges posed to archaeology by a recognition of the importance of cultural meaning, the active individual and history.”¹ In sum, he referred to three important issues and questions of archaeological research and study, which are (a) the relationship between material culture and society – how material culture related to people, (b) the cause of change – what causes social, economic and cultural change, and (c) epistemology and inference – how archaeologists interpret the past. This has been the wider scope of archaeological work.

On the other hand, while early archaeology was largely an attempt to uncover spectacular artifacts and features, or to explore vast and mysterious abandoned cities. Trigger² further pointed out that while traditionally archaeology has been equated with the recovery, analysis, and interpretation of the material remains of the human past, the goals of

¹ Ian Hodder, *Reading the past – current approaches to interpretation in archaeology*, Cambridge University Press, 1986

² Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, University Press, Cambridge, 1989

Archaeology should be:

1. To explain the archaeological records.
2. Study of a general science of material culture, past and present, that would complement social and anthropology.
3. The subject matter of archaeology is the relationships between human behavior and material culture in all times and places.
4. As a means to study human behavior and cultural change in the past.

While human being is always interested in their past, it was until 1784 that Thomas Jefferson, the third US President, conducted the first scientific excavation in Virginia and began the history of archaeology. During 19th Century, archaeology became an independent discipline of study. It was a time when the archaeologists spent most of their efforts in the study of chronology and field dating and that archaeology largely was the works of expertise only. The history of archaeology then developed to new thoughts of processual archaeology and the post-processual archaeology in the 20th century and beyond. While we are not intended to go into details of the development of archaeology thoughts in its history, it is obvious that the discipline of archaeology should no longer be a subject of study and knowledge owned by expertise in the field, nor should it be the luxury of archaeologists merely. Instead, it should belong to the common people and involving the general public.

Public Involvement in Archaeology

As a matter of fact, the general public usually fascinated by exciting movie and films, such as Indiana Jones, Tomb Raider and interesting stories, e.g. King Solomon's Mines, the Mummy etc about the discovery aspect of archaeology when we talked about the work of archaeology. Moreover, archaeological excavations and discoveries of the mysterious ancient civilizations, likes the lost Maya cities in Mexico, Valley of the Kings and the tomb of Tutankhamun in Egypt, the Terracotta Army in China and the finding of the oldest remains of our human ancestors in Tanzania also attracted the attention of the public and become the hot attraction of visitors and tourist to the sites.

Fagan³ however pointed out the crux of the issue of public involvement in archaeology that “a great deal of the effectiveness in protecting archaeological sites depends on public attitudes towards the past. The basic question is easily stated: Is the public benefiting in practical ways from the expenditure of enormous funds on archaeology? Many people think of archaeology as a luxury and wonder how much taxpayer money is spent on cultural resource management. They are ambivalent about protecting the past, let alone spending money on it. Yet, thousand of other interested citizens have joined amateur archaeological societies in many parts of the country.” The trend of development is partly due to the reason that we are always curious about ourselves and our past. There is a great desire to know where do we come from, who was our ancestors and what had they passed to us? This curiosity of the general public has also lead to the development of the public archaeology and archaeological studies would need to take care of the wider interests of the common people and the general public.

Walsh went further to say that “Something as important as the preservation and presentation of material culture should be regarded as a ‘public service’, the preservation and presentation of material culture as something which is important in itself, not because of its revenue-generating potential. By public service, I mean a provision which is deemed as essential, so essential that it is crucial to the quality of life in any given, from health and rescue services, to the provision of education. It is as a form of educating experience that the representation of the past should be considered.”⁴ The idea of public service would definitely give a new role and responsibility for the archaeological work, in particular when the sum of public money spent on it is enormous.

³ Fagan, Brian M., *In the Beginning – An Introduction to Archaeology*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 2001, p.508-509.

⁴ Walsh, Kevin, *The Representation of the Past – Museum and heritage in the post-modern world*, London and NewYork, 1992, p.178

Public Archaeology

The term of Public Archaeology was first appeared in 1972 in the publication of the book “Public Archaeology” written by McGimsey⁵. It was referred to the cultural resource management and not the academic archaeology. Yet, its importance lies on the increasingly concerns that the general public had to be involved in the service of archaeology, if archaeological sites were to be protected or responsibly investigated. On the other hand, it also relied on public support to convince law maker, the government and the private developers to protect the archaeological sites.

Public archaeology therefore emerged as the archaeologist is an agent act on behalf of the public for preservation of the past in cultural resource management. In recent years, archaeologists have spent great efforts in informing the public about archaeology by mounting public-outreach campaigns and a movement of public archaeology. This involved using public media, such as press releases, television, public talks, public exhibitions and displays, special archaeology week in museum and even internet which open up the various channels to out-reach the general public and common people. This movement allows a greater involvement of the public in future conservation and preservation of our archaeological sites and heritage. In fact, it helps to secure the funding resource for archaeological research and excavation from the government and the public. The establishment of amateur archaeological societies also attracts many interested people to join the movement.

The movement of public archaeology would help preserve archaeological sites through educating the public and enhancing their appreciation for the importance of archaeological heritage. The movement seeks to combat looting and taking illegally artifacts from protected sites. The public is also alerted the threat of looting at the archaeological sites. The arrangement of school field trips to sites under excavation by teachers and archaeologists would enable our next generation well aware of the need to preserve the valuable heritage passed down from our ancestors. Public education of the importance of archaeology often leads to improved protection from unnecessary development or other avoidable threats, such as urban development and construction works of roads and buildings over an archaeological site.

⁵ McGimsey, C.R., *Public Archaeology*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1972

Local community projects of excavation also facilitate the public to increase their awareness of archaeological sites and knowledge of heritage. In USA, the Department of Agriculture, Forest Service operates a volunteer archaeology and historic preservation program called the Passport in Time. Volunteers join hands with professional archaeologists for archaeological projects in American national forests. They are involved in all aspects of professional archaeological works under expert supervision of the archaeologist. In the UK, there are also popular archaeology programs such as Time Team and Meet the Ancestors for involving the local people and have attracted great public interest.

As a matter of fact, archaeologists now realize the value of local knowledge and assistance in finding local archaeological sites and expand public involvement in more local community projects. The local archaeological organizations also allow more provisions for public involvement and outreach in larger projects operate within the community archaeology framework. As a result, community archaeology projects are starting to become more common, particularly when professional archaeologists have limited resource or funding.

The problem facing Public Archaeology

The discipline of archaeology does face a crisis of rapid destruction of important archaeological sites by modern development, urbanization and industrial development. There are the threats of looting and treasure hunting. In addition, there is also the pseudo-archaeology of telling stories of lost world or sunken continents, and ancient astronaut from outer space. Above all in the public archaeology, the problem of who interpret the past and the archaeological finding is one of the concerns. While archaeologist's view of the past is ever changing due to new evidence being found or re-interpreted old evidence by the archaeologists themselves, the greater involvement of the public in archaeology would pose a further problem of interpretation of the past.

Although most archaeologists strive to be objective about the past and about what has actually happened, yet the past human activities can only be an interpretation based on a number of factors, such as cultural,

political and individual background. Since the 19th century, attempts have been made by archaeologists to assess their findings in scientific ways, including devising tests for the archaeological data, e.g. replicative experiments, use-wear analysis, and experiments to see whether supposed ‘artifacts’ are the products of human action or natural forces. There are bounds of constraints and limits in giving a more objective interpretation of the past from the public angle, even though the study of archaeological evidence was based on scientific methodology. Renfrew and Bahn described it as “Some of the ideological questions raised by the public presentation of the past were noted earlier: nationalist aims, sectarian objectives, and political agenda are often served by the partisan interpretation and presentation of what is alleged to be the cultural heritage. But there are other issues here beside nationalistic or religious sentiments.”⁶ Hence, the public archaeology should be more watchful for the risk of being subjective, though archaeology is itself a product of social and economic change.

Thomas⁷ has tried to find an appropriate solution on the debates in public archaeology about the questions of who has rights to own and interpret the material remains of the past by putting forward the idea of facilitator in helping the public to understand the past in his report of the work of the English Heritage, the state agency responsible for archaeology in England. Nevertheless, the findings of archaeology, even though subjectively interpreted, have enabled us to have a picture of our history and our relationship to nature and can provide a growing number of insights into our future.

Tourism and Archaeology

Another major concern of public archaeology movement is the increasing

⁶ Renfrew, Colin and Bahn, Paul, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods, and Practice*, 5th ed. ,Thames & Hudson, , 2008, p. 571.

⁷ Thomas, Roger, “Archaeology and Authority in the Twenty-first Century” in Merriman, Nick, ed., *Public archaeology*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004

interests of the general public, which lead to the massive development of the archaeology tourism. All over the world, tourism has played an important role in both conservation and destruction of archaeological sites and heritage, depending on the careful management of this influx of people and money. As a matter of fact, the package tours have made archaeological tourism a big business. Nowadays, not only the wealthy and privileged people can take a trip to Pyramids of Giza in Egypt, the Parthenon in Athens in Greece or to explore Maya civilization in Teotihuacan in Mexico. Almost everyone can afford to visit to these fascinating remains of our past in various ways and even for those less famous local heritages. Walsh pointed out that “Between 1976 and 1989, visitors to English attractions rose by 31 per cent..... As the more popular attractions were swamped by tourists, many people wanted to visit something new and smaller; less well-known sites increased in popularity.”⁸ He further pointed that “The heritage and museums are undoubtedly a crucial part of the wider attraction of Britain for overseas visitors. But also heritage and museum visiting is an important leisure activity for a substantial proportion of the British public.”⁹

As a tool of the government, archaeology is seen as a means of generating income as well as strengthening the indigenous identity of the people, and money for the support of archaeological research. In China, the Terracotta Army in Xian has become a major tourism attraction to hundred thousand of local and foreign visitor each year. This will threaten the conservation of the original archaeological sites, as huge visitor centre is built upon it and be maintained for the display of the Terracotta Army for tourist. Nevertheless, the huge income from tourism industry provides also not only financial support for archaeological research, but also leads to the development of a city of Xian, including construction of luxury hotels, local roads and transportation links to other part of the country and overseas. On the other hand, the tourism brings also adverse effects. Bahn referred to the danger of “loving archaeology to death” and that “The ever-increasing numbers of tourists are causing immense, and often irreparable, damage to many sites through pollution, body-heat,

⁸ Walsh, Kevin, *The Representation of the Past – Museum and heritage in the post-modern world*, London and New York, 1992, p.123

⁹ Walsh, Kevin, *The Representation of the Past – Museum and heritage in the post-modern world*, London and New York, 1992, p.123

condensation, and general wear and tear, quite apart from accidental damage, vandalism and theft.”¹⁰ The following are two case that the attraction to tourist, as well as the general public, have come up with special presentation programmes in the archaeological sites and heritage:

(a) In Britain, costumed interpreters are used increasingly in archaeological site interpretation. “Growth in the use of human interpreters on archaeological sites in Britain may be attributed to a number of influences not least of which are the increasing interest of the public in their origins and the desire to establish some kind of historical context for them. This interest has been variously ascribed to the breakdown of family and social units and to modes of living which separate people from life processes.”¹¹ While this trend would allow a better education of the public in archaeology, it would have to be balanced on the goal of serving the public and preservation of the archaeological site and heritage.

(b) While the surviving sites from the Bronze Age in Yorkshire consist almost exclusively of burial mounds, in order to present an interesting archaeological finding, the idea of Time Travellers¹² was used in a live interpretation programme using two characters for a Bronze Age day at the Sheffield Museum in South Yorkshire, Britain, based on the archaeological evidence available from Yorkshire. The public programme would certainly satisfy the interests and need of the general public and the tourists who come to learn and amused by the live performance of the time travelers. Again, this would be a matter of balance between preservation and education under the public archaeology movement.

¹⁰ Bahn, Paul G., ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History - Archaeology*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p.368

¹¹ Elaine Sansom, “Peopling the Past: Current Practices in Archaeological Site Interpretation”, p.118, in Paulette M. McManus, ed., *Archaeological Displays and the Public, Museology and Interpretation*, University College London, London 1996

¹² Jon Price, “A Live Interpretation of the Early Bronze Age in Yorkshire”, p.138, in Paulette M. McManus, ed., *Archaeological Displays and the Public, Museology and Interpretation*, University College London, London 1996

Public Archaeology in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, there is a local Hong Kong Archaeological Society which was formally founded in 1967. According to the Archaeological Society¹³, their objects are : (a) to bring together all those Interested in archaeology in Hong Kong, (b) to carry out excavations, (c) to co-operate with the Government and other bodies in preserving Hong Kong's archaeological heritage, (d) to co-operate with the Museum of History in building up a collection, and (e) to publish a journal.

The Society has carried out a number of major excavations, the most important of which was at Sham Wan in the 1970s, the major salvage projects, including the Chek Lap Kok site, before the construction of the new Hong Kong international airport in the 1990s and others in Yung Long, excavations on Kau Sai Chau, Chan Ka Yuen Site in Ha Pak Nai. In 2000s, excavations were conducted in Wong Tei Tung Site in Sai Kung and Luk Keng Tsuen in Lantau.

The Hong Kong Archaeological Society's work are published in its Journal of Hong Kong Archaeological Society, which includes site reports, research articles, contributions from overseas and Mainland China. A series of monograph are also provided to detailed excavation reports; including the 300-page monograph on the Sham Wan site excavation in 1978, which revealed important evidence of occupation of human in Hong Kong during historical, Bronze and Neolithic Ages, including a new "Middle Neolithic" phase dating to about 3800 BC - 3000 BC and reports on the two phases of excavation in Wong Tei Tung Site near Sai Kung, a quarry site and over 6,000 stone artifacts were discovered, some of them are adopted the techniques of Late Paleolithic Age.

In addition to its excavation and publications, the Hong Kong Archaeological Society also organizes lectures on archaeological subjects, workshop sessions are also held to analyze the excavated materials and field trips to sites of interest. The Society has a small library for its member's use. Unfortunately, according to the society, its membership

¹³ http://www.hkarch.org/en_main.html

stands at about 200, including ordinary, Student, life members and honorary advisers. In view of the large population in Hong Kong, the membership size of the Hong Kong Archaeological Society is surprisingly low; in a way reflect the unpopular of interests in local archaeology for the general public of Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong SAR Government has all along been contributed to the conservation of archaeological investigation in collaboration with the local Archaeological Society and preservation of the heritage in Hong Kong. However, the Government has recently faced a greater pressure from a group of local activists for more involvement in the conservation and preservation of local heritage. There has also been a wider interests and demand from the general public for preserving the so-called 'collective memories of the past', as outburst in a few social incidents of urban renewal and development.

There are enacted legislative laws and regulations for the protection of historic sites and local heritage, including the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance, the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance, Heritage Impact Assessment, Urban Renewal Authority Ordinance, Town Planning Ordinance, Buildings Ordinance etc. The Antiquities and Monuments Office under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department has been responsible for the related works for conservation and preservation of local heritage, including built heritage (1,440 historic buildings), 94 declared monuments around Hong Kong.¹⁴ The Leisure and Cultural Services Department also operates the Museum of History and the Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Centre.

In addition, the Government regularly organizes educational and promotional activities to the public, including exhibitions, lectures, guided tours, archaeological workshops, setting up heritage trails, publishing pamphlets and booklets by the Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Centre. In addition, the Antiquities and Monuments Office also collaborates with local organizations in holding thematic activities and programmes, such as Hong Kong Heritage Awards and Friends of Heritage, to raise the public awareness of the importance of Hong Kong's heritage and to educate the future generations to cherish local heritage.

¹⁴ <http://www.amo.gov.hk/en/main.php>> 26 June 2010

On the whole, efforts have been put on the protection of existing local heritages and education of the general public from the official side. Yet, the participation of the common people, citizens of Hong Kong, is fairly limited and restricted to a small group of local archaeologist or social activists. While the public archaeology needs a wider and deeper involvement of the general public in archaeological research and study, it seems that its development in Hong Kong still has a long way to go, given the special circumstances in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

What will be the future of public archaeology? No doubt, it must be supported by the public and get the common people involved, as people are always interested about their past and archaeology is the only discipline that can shed light on the past of human in time. Support from the Government is also a must for, not only the provision of sufficient budget and resources for archaeological studies, but the provision of law for the conservation and preservation of archaeological sites and remains of heritage, protection against looting and illegal destruction of the archaeological remains, management of the ever-increasing demand of tourism on our archaeological sites and heritages. There is certainly a hope for brighter future, as long as we have greater public interests in archaeology and their awareness that archaeology should be belong everyone in the society.

(END)

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