

Curators As Mediators Between the Community and Museum

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The curators from the National Museums of World Culture, Sweden, Michel Lee and Aoife O'Brien, hoped to collaborate with a source community related to a part of the museum's collections, and therefore invited members of the Seediq community of Taiwan to work with them. 'Source community' here was defined as present-day groups that can trace their lineage to the groups of people who are mentioned in the archival material related to the objects explored in the project. While the curators acknowledge the complexity and unresolved questions that the term source community may raise, they believed in what this term and the associated practices can provide as part of acts of caring. They create possibilities of caring for specific cultural traditions, knowledge, and practices; they also facilitate community access to ancestral memories and to heritage. In this sense, source community work in museums was part of caring for a kin and community.

The invitation to work with the Seediq, an indigenous community from Taiwan, was framed within the *Designing Sustainable Futures* work package of TAKING CARE. The curators were interested in combining the broad concepts of care and sustainability, to explore different ways in which they could work with communities through discussion, engagement, and co-curation. This would lead to an experimental exhibition, which the curators envisaged as the starting point for long-term engagement with the community. Caring and sustainable methodologies influence decision-making processes, but also the use of resources, and how objects are displayed.

Having been a colonized people for over one hundred years, the Seediq have undergone a process of cultural revitalization relatively recently. It was hoped that the TAKING CARE Project, with its emphasis on care, could contribute to this process in some ways: cultural revitalization as care.

Fig. 1: Seediq celebration of the opening on an exhibition in Wushe, Taiwan of reproductions made based on the historic objects housed in the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm, 16 December 2022. Photo courtesy of the Seediq National Assembly.



Within the TAKING CARE project, The National Museums of World Culture, Sweden (NMWC) has worked on an experimental exhibition in collaboration with the Seediq National Assembly and the Indigenous Cultural Heritage master's degree programme at Providence University in Taiwan. The Seediq are one of sixteen Indigenous communities currently recognized in Taiwan. They were invited to become partners as they are a source community represented in the collections at the Museum of Ethnography (currently part of the National Museums of World Culture, Sweden), which manages three collections of Taiwanese Indigenous material that were all collected around the early 1900s during the Japanese colonial period of Taiwan (1895–1945). The name 'Seediq' had not previously been recorded in the museum archives or collections database. This is because the Seediq had been grouped together with the neighbouring Atayal people, another related Taiwanese Indigenous group during Japanese rule. The Seediq did not receive official recognition until 2008. It was a result of much communication with various people in Taiwan that the authors of this text realized some of the material in the collections came from Seediq communities. Having been a colonized people since around 1914, when the Japanese first established a police station in Wushe to control the 'raw barbarians' (生番)¹ liv-

¹ The terms 生番 and 熟番 can be translated as 'raw/unripe barbarians' and 'cooked/ripe barbarians' respectively. They were vague terms used in China to describe how accul-

ing in the area, the Seediq, along with other Indigenous groups in Taiwan, are today taking steps to reclaim their cultures and voices.

The official invitation to cooperate was sent to the Seediq National Assembly on 17 September 2021, and a positive response was received on 22 September, after an internal meeting of the Assembly in Taiwan. Providence University in Taichung, Taiwan was also included in the cooperation, as they have an Indigenous Cultural Heritage master's programme with a focus on Seediq culture. The Seediq Youth Association subsequently also joined the project group with much enthusiasm. For people working on the museum's side, it was humbling to understand that this cooperation is only one small part of what the Seediq community have already achieved in attempts to reclaim their heritage and voices. For example, over recent years, some within the Seediq community have worked hard to revive their cultural identity, language, songs, and dance, culminating in the establishment of the Indigenous Cultural Heritage MA at Providence University. Much of their education and knowledge exchange is based on multi-generational learning. As course director Iwan Pering explained, the elders are professors and the villages are their classrooms. It is the hope that the experimental exhibition can contribute to that cultural revival work.

In this project, the curators aimed to co-create, from a foundational level up, a digital exhibition; paying attention to Seediq voices and attempting to address issues of power imbalances using experimental methodologies, from the perspective of current organizational practices. For example, the budget from the European Union for the project was transparent for all partners, and the Seediq also had influence on how the funds were used. The decision to make the exhibition digital was decided upon in order to address questions of accessibility of the final results for the community in Taiwan. All of the information, images, films, etc., that result from the project will be handed over to the Seediq partners, so that they are able to keep the information for their future use.

One of the most important endeavours of this project has been to develop a sustainable relationship between the organization and the Seediq community that can continue even after the TAKING CARE project. As this relationship develops and there is a deeper mutual understanding for the different parties involved, further projects might be developed around the needs of the parties and the collections. It is therefore extremely important that the working methodologies are transparent in order to cultivate a relationship based on trust between the organization and the community.

turated another group was to Han Chinese culture and whether they submitted to the Chinese state. Those that were raw/unripe did not submit politically and/or culturally. Cooked/ripe peoples were more acculturated and/or submitted to the state. Use of these terms was later continued by the Japanese on Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period.

Fig. 2: A short break during the traditional Seediq music and dance course of Providence University's Indigenous Cultural Heritage MA programme held on the grounds of Meixi Shan Church of Our Lady (眉溪山地聖母堂), Ren'ai Township, Nantou County, Taiwan. Professor Obin Nawi seated in the center, 20 November 2022. Photo by Michel D. Lee.



There were various challenges while working on this project. Like many museum organizations, the NMWC endeavours to constantly update exhibitions and spaces in the museum. The organization, through the steering committee that is composed mainly of the heads of the different internal departments, decided there should be a physical exhibition to run in conjunction with the digital exhibition. Contributing funds from NMWC were allocated for this part of the project which amounted to a much larger budget than that from the EU. This raises questions and challenges about the priorities of the organization, as well as power imbalances. The original intention was to focus on the digital exhibition, as that is what the Seediq community has the best access to. In addition, some of the (experimental) methodologies that were stated at the beginning of the project changed for various reasons. In some cases, certain methods were not efficient, which was due to the difference in working methodologies between the museum organization and the community. Due to the nature of the organization, the normal exhibition process is entangled with bureaucracy that can be difficult for people working externally to understand. The community has a consensus-driven method that involves much discussion within their group, which can be more time-consuming. There were further challenges from the

museum's side as most members of the original project team had to be replaced during the course of the project for various reasons. New members had to be informed about the nature of the project and why certain methodologies are used. The change of staff within the project also sometimes resulted in unclear roles, conflicting visions, and more significantly, a privileging of individual or institutional voices over those of the Seediq.

The museum curators within this project had the role of maintaining the dialogue with the Seediq partners, acting as mediators between the community and NMWC. This role itself presented many challenges, including trying to balance the needs of the community and the needs of the museum. The curators tried to ensure that the motivations and ambitions of a state organization did not undermine the voice of a community. For the more long-term ambition of creating a sustainable relationship with the Seediq, the curators in this project needed to maintain the trust of the partners. The impacts of such mediation work undertaken by curators, and its toll both professionally and personally, can occasionally be undervalued within museums. However, such work is necessary and vital in order to ensure that openness and transparency can be achieved, as well as ethical obligations fulfilled. It is to be hoped that the trust built between the Seediq and NMWC curators will safeguard that future collaborative projects can emerge out of the TAKING CARE project.

