

Regional

Scholar explains recent museum boom in China

Visiting a museum is an experience that varies from place to place and from country to country. One country that has been on the fast track in developing museum exhibits is China. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville recently hosted a Chinese scholar in museum studies to better understand these developments.

Shouyong Pan was born in Zaozhuang City, Shandong Province, China. He obtained his bachelor's degree in history from Jilin University, his master's, also in history, from Nankai University and his doctorate in anthropology from the Central University of Nationalities in Beijing. He is now vice director of the Anthropology Institute and director of the museum studies program at Minzu University in China.

He said that he came to SIUE attracted by the uniqueness of the university, the museum studies program and the surroundings of the campus.

"Last night I just visited the campus and this is a very special area for me, the landscape and the heritage," he said. "It is very exciting for me to be able to view this kind of environment here."

Pan was involved in the Earthquake Memorial Museum project honoring the almost 90,000 people who died in the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan Province. That, he said, was both an excruciating episode in Chinese history, as well as a painful project on which to work.

"It was quite a while ago, but when you listen to me you can hear pain in my heart," he said. "As a professional, we should do something for the local people. We need to keep a memorial for the people. It is pretty hard for me, even now, to talk about it." You can tell from the expression on his face that the images that he put together for that exhibit moved him deeply. He was also involved in another project called the National Ecomuseum Project Commission. But, just what is an ecomuseum?

"Sometimes called an ecological museum, we borrowed the concept from Europe," Pan explained. "In 1975 a European professional team came to China to help build an open-air museum. They worked with our colleges to build the first ecomuseum in the Guangdong Province. My university is an



Picture courtesy of Michael Nathe

Dr. Pan during his visit to SIUE being interviewed for the radio show "Segue" by Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. in the studios of the Department of Mass Communications.

ethnic minority university, so I was invited to give an evaluation of the risks of human rights issues with the project. At that time I began to understand what an ecomuseum really means to the local people."

In a way he was trying to show how the local people relate to nature and the natural areas. "The ancestors create this heritage, and they share it with the next generation," he added.

As a knowledgeable person on museums both in China and the United States,

one wonders what kind of differences he sees between the museums in the two countries.

"The United States has many museums of all kinds," he said. "You have the Smithsonian Institution, which is huge. It's what we call a national level museum. It is free and open to the public. We learn a lot about that from the United States."

But like in the United States, there is also a diversity of museums in China. "I would encourage you guys to visit my

museum, the Guangxi Ecomuseum," said Pan. "I would also say the Palace Museum in Beijing." Given the explosive economic growth of China in the last two decades, one might expect that such an influx of money has helped to advance the building and expansion of museums.

"The public interest is huge," Pan said. "The Chinese government has made a lot of money and they want to give back to the public so they build a lot of libraries, museums, performance centers and also science

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

centers. It all grew so quickly that they are not only in the big cities, but also in the countryside. In the very small Anji County they built more than 50 museums in the past 10 years." Many people may not know this, but China is a very diverse country in terms of cultures, ethnic groups, languages spoken and in many other aspects.

"When I was younger I was told about what China means," Pan said. "China has a long history with splendid diversity and rich culture. We have a huge land and so many heritages. We have 55 ethnic minorities, but among each ethnic group there are more than 100 branches. Each branch can have a different dialect and a different lifestyle." One common item that is found throughout China – and which is exhibited in many museums – is jade.

"It is at least as important as Chinese bronze and Chinese paintings," he explained. "We have a discipline we call culture relics, which really focuses on Chinese bronze and paintings. Not a lot of people are interested in jade. Jade is a very special stone. We have a lot of documents about this stone. In the first Chinese dictionary we have over 100 words for jade." Another area Pan has worked on is clothing, a cultural manifestation with tremendous diversity in China.

"I would say that if people come to our campus, our campus consists of 55 ethnic minorities," Pan said. "So we have more than 100 festivals and we have at least 13 ethnic minority language centers, so the diversity is celebrated these days."

From SIUE, Pan will be traveling to Washington, D.C., where he will be visiting institutions like the Smithsonian and George Washington University.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.