QiVMDL - Towards a Socially Constructed Virtual Museum and Digital Library for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage: A Case of the Chinese “Qipao”

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ABSTRACT

Museums and libraries are treasure houses of human history and knowledge with rich repositories on cultural heritage. With advanced technological developments in digital libraries and Web 2.0, cultural institutions are beginning to explore new forms of universal and dynamic accessibility. Using a case example of the Chinese “qipao”, this paper proposes a socially constructed virtual museum prototype incorporating interactivity of Web 2.0 to promote cultural communication and exchange while improving user interaction and participation. In this paper, the authors describe the design, prototyping, and evaluation process of QiVMDL (Qipao Virtual Museum and Digital Library). The paper concludes with implications for digital library research and development supporting virtual museums for the preservation of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Chinese Clothes, Cultural Heritage, Digital Collections, Preservation, “Qipao”, User Experience, Virtual Library

INTRODUCTION

The significance of cultural heritage is the knowledge about the historical and cultural background in the traditional values that have great influence on world society throughout its history. It has been playing a vital role in the development of human civilization. Every nation has its own unique traditional culture that cannot be replaced by another. “Libraries, museums and galleries are repositories of huge cultural heritage which when made
accessible through digitisation and organised in databases become educational resources” (Bang, 2008, p. 2).

Libraries record human knowledge in paper or a variety of electronic formats. Museums reflect human culture through the display of works of art, architecture, and scientific expositions of the development of human civilizations. At this point, attention can be drawn to the similarities between museums and libraries because they have missions and goals in collecting, preserving and providing accumulated knowledge for the good of mankind. As the treasure houses of human history and culture, museums and libraries deserve to be supported for the range of benefits they bring to our society.

However, museums with physical buildings have limitations. Exhibitions located in specific locations can only be available to limited number of visitors in one place at one particular time.

As the World Wide Web continues to gain popularity and becomes an important resource in our lives, cultural organisations understand the importance of making their collections to digital recourses and providing online access to the public. Cultural organisations are developing digital museum projects at a rapid pace as they realise that digital museums are Web platforms in support of the cultural communication and educational activities (Fink, 1997; Agosti & Thanos, 2002). With increasing ubiquity of high-speed connections and richness of Web applications and streaming media, the Internet is no longer a place where visitors look at pages that contain static content. Emerging Web 2.0 technologies and their propagation through up-to-the-minute information sources such as blogs, Wikis, RSS feeds and social-network sites have enormous potential for collaboration and sharing of information. These on-going transformations have been influenced and made complex by the functional convergence of digital museums, libraries, and archives, and the changing information needed and expectations of museum visitors (Marty, 2008; Appen, Kennedy, & Spadaccini, 2006).

Using a case example of the Chinese “qipao”, this paper proposes a socially constructed virtual museum prototype incorporating interactivity of Web 2.0 to promote cultural communication and exchange, hence attempting to improve user interaction and participation. As there are no universal prescriptions/guidelines or best practices on how to build a useful and usable digital museum, this paper describes a systematic approach to identify system requirements, eliciting interactive features for a virtual digital museum. The paper concludes with implications for digital library research and development supporting preservation of cultural heritage.

**CASE STUDY: THE CHINESE “QIPAO”**

The “qipao” is widely regarded as traditional Chinese costume, better known in the western countries by its Cantonese name “cheongsam”. It is a figure-delineating side-fastening woman’s dress with a high-necked collar and slits on both sides, assuming the status of the Chinese national dress during the twentieth century. In its original form, it is a formal garment of Manchurian women in the Qing Dynasty. Later, its design and style had been altered by Han women after continual improvement and evolution with western clothing styles.

Now it becomes a fashion statement and a symbolic expression of Chinese, Chinese values as constitutive parts of ‘Asia values’ (e.g., Steele, 1999; Yang, 2003; Chua, 2003; Rowley & Jefferies, 1999). The “qipao” has its unique national style and oriental artistic aesthetics as the cultural heritage (Liu, 2009). This research project is supported by the Singapore Fashion Designers’ Society and Northeast Normal University (China). It is motivated by the need to make resources on “qipao” accessible to more people, and provide interactive ways of learning about “qipao” over the Internet.

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