

From Preservation to Participation: Cultural Memory and Community Practice in a Folk Sports Museum

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ABSTRACT

Museums are increasingly recognised as active spaces for cultural interpretation rather than passive repositories of historical artefacts. In the field of sports heritage, existing studies have mainly focused on collections, exhibition practices, and institutional functions, while relatively limited attention has been given to how museums contribute to the reconstruction of cultural memory, particularly in relation to local folk sports. This study examines the role of folk sports museums in historical preservation and memory reconstruction by proposing a three-dimensional analytical framework consisting of objects, events, and people. A qualitative case study approach is adopted, focusing on the Minnan-Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum in Liantang Village, Xiamen. Data were collected through document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and field observation. The findings suggest that the value of folk sports museums lies not only in the preservation of material artefacts, but also in the ways cultural memory is reconstructed through narrative interpretation and human participation. By conceptualising the museum as a three-dimensional memory space, this study provides insights into how folk sports heritage is sustained within community-based museums and contributes to a broader understanding of cultural memory construction in sports heritage contexts.

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Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by conceptualising folk sports museums as dynamic spaces of cultural memory.

1. Introduction

Museums have long been understood as institutions for collecting and displaying material culture, yet museum studies increasingly emphasise their role in producing cultural meaning and social memory (Karp & Lavine, 1991; Baxandall, 1991; MacLeod et al., 2012). Objects displayed in museums do not speak for themselves; rather, their meanings are shaped through exhibition, narration, and audience engagement (Crew & Sims, 1991).

Within this context, sports museums represent a distinctive form of heritage institution. International research has explored sports museums in relation to public history, identity construction, and heritage tourism (Johnes & Mason, 2003; Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005; Reilly, 2015). These studies highlight that sports heritage is closely linked to emotion, embodiment, and collective experience. However, fewer studies have examined how sports museums—particularly folk sports museums—operate as spaces of cultural memory embedded in local communities.

In China, research on sports museums has primarily documented institutional development, collection management, and policy environments (Huang & Wei, 2024; Liu & Yang, 2020). While this body of work provides valuable background, it often treats museums as static cultural facilities and gives limited attention to the social processes through which memory and meaning are reconstructed. This limitation is especially evident in studies of folk sports museums, where heritage transmission depends heavily on community participation and embodied practice.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study aims to examine how folk sports museums contribute to the preservation of historical heritage and the reconstruction of cultural memory. Specifically, the research focuses on the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum in Liantang Village, Xiamen.

Specifically, The study seeks to:

- i. Examine how objects and events related to folk sports are preserved and interpreted in the museum context.
- ii. Analyse how human participation contributes to the reconstruction of cultural memory within a folk sports museum.
- iii. Explore the relationship between historical preservation and cultural memory reconstruction in the operation of a community-based sports museum.

2. Literature Review

Anthropological scholarship has long regarded the study of “things” as a central analytical entry point for understanding the relationship between humans and society. From this perspective, material objects are not merely passive entities but are deeply embedded in social relations, cultural meanings, and systems of value. The dual concern with examining society through objects and, conversely, understanding objects through social relations constitutes the core paradigm of the anthropology of things (Marshall, 2019; Edwards, 2021). Within this theoretical tradition, museums have been widely recognized as privileged sites for interpreting the discursive power of objects, as they

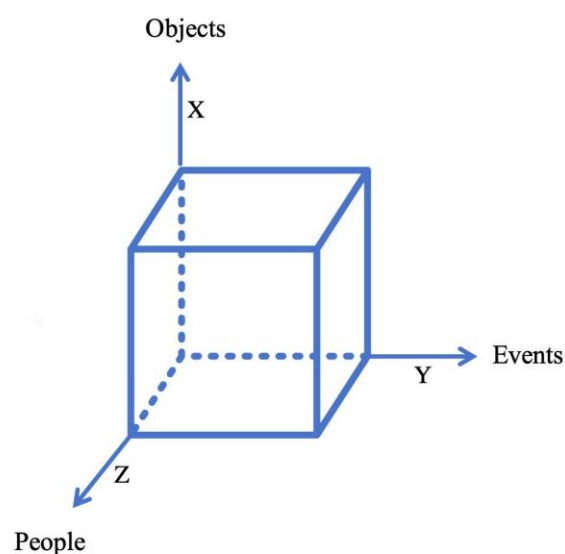
provide institutional mechanisms through which meanings are selected, stabilized, and communicated (MacLeod et al, 2012).

In museum contexts, objects themselves are inherently “mute” or “dumb,” in the sense that they do not speak without mediation. It is only through processes of collection, preservation, and exhibition that objects acquire legible meanings and become integrated into broader narrative frameworks (Crew & Sims, 1991; Ramshaw, 2010). This understanding offers an essential theoretical foundation for interpreting sports museums, where objects associated with athletic practice, competition, and ritual are recontextualized within curated spaces. It is particularly applicable to local folk sports museums, such as the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum in Liantang Village, where material artifacts, historical events, and human actors are inseparable from regional cultural traditions.

Sports museums collect a wide range of material objects, each of which carries distinct historical narratives and cultural connotations. However, the meanings attributed to these objects are not fixed. Curators, visitors, and original users or donors may interpret the same object in divergent ways. It is precisely through the interrelations and interactions among objects, events, and people that the spatial form and cultural significance of sports museums are constituted. To conceptualize this process, this study proposes the notion of a “three-dimensional world” of sports museums.

In this framework, the three-dimensional world refers to a physically and analytically structured system composed of three intersecting axes. The X-axis represents objects, the Y-axis represents events, and the Z-axis represents people. Each axis constitutes an independent analytical dimension, yet together they form an integrated and dynamic three-dimensional space in which meaning is produced, negotiated, and reconstructed. Through the superimposition of these dimensions, sports museums transcend linear or planar representations and emerge as holistic memory spaces (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Three-Dimensional World of the Sports Museum (Objects–Events–People)



2.1. The One-Dimensional World: Objects and the Natural Attributes of Sports Museums

The one-dimensional world of sports museums is centered on objects and is characterized by a static and linear form of representation. Its primary function is to foreground the natural or physical attributes of sports museums by focusing on material entities themselves. Analysis at this level concentrates on objects' material composition, form, manufacturing techniques, circulation pathways, and modes of use. It also includes basic contextual information such as provenance, historical period, and foundational cultural background.

The core objective of the one-dimensional world is to restore the physical authenticity and material specificity of objects. In the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum, artifacts such as rattan shields, iron hoes, traditional weapons, folk costumes, and handwritten formation manuals exemplify this dimension. These objects embody the tangible, material foundation of Songjiang Array culture and constitute the museum's most direct form of historical evidence.

At this level, objects are primarily treated as material carriers of information. Their value lies in their capacity to document craftsmanship, technology, and functional design within specific historical contexts. However, when isolated from the events and social practices in which they were embedded, objects risk being reduced to static relics. As such, while the one-dimensional world is indispensable for historical preservation, it represents only the initial stage of meaning-making in sports museums.

2.2. The Two-Dimensional World: Events and the Social Attributes of Sports Museums

Building upon the material foundation of the one-dimensional world, the two-dimensional world emerges through the integration of objects with the events to which they are historically and culturally connected. This dimension takes the form of a planar structure in which multiple events intersect and overlap, highlighting the social attributes of sports museums. Analytical focus thus shifts from the internal structure and function of objects to the broader social and cultural contexts in which they were produced, used, and remembered.

By narrating the historical events behind objects, the two-dimensional world restores sports artifacts to concrete social scenarios, enabling an interpretation of their narrative logic and mnemonic value. Objects are no longer presented as isolated material entities but as elements embedded in practices that combine functionality and symbolism. In the case of the Songjiang Array Museum, events such as Ming-dynasty anti-piracy military training, village temple festivals, and folk performances constitute the core content of this dimension.

Through these event-based narratives, sports museums become platforms for preserving and communicating collective memory. Each object acquires a "biography" shaped by its participation in specific historical moments and social practices. As Li et al. (2022) has noted, objects with personal or collective significance often function as triggers for memory, prompting individuals and communities to recall their pasts and reaffirm cultural identities. In this sense, the two-dimensional world enables sports museums to articulate social meanings that transcend material form.

2.3. The Three-Dimensional World: People and the Reconstruction of Memory Space

The three-dimensional world represents the full experiential and interpretive space of sports museums. Its defining feature is the active intervention of human agency, through which the planar relationship between objects and events is elevated into a volumetric space of meaning. In this dimension, people—curators, inheritors, community members, and visitors—become the central axis around which interpretation and memory reconstruction revolve.

Human actors link objects and events through processes of selection, narration, interpretation, and interaction. Curators design exhibition narratives and spatial arrangements; inheritors contribute embodied knowledge and personal memories; visitors engage with displays and generate new interpretations. Through these interactions, objects and events are transformed into symbolic representations embedded within museum space.

In the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum, this process is evident in curatorial strategies, oral explanations provided by intangible cultural heritage inheritors, and the emotional resonance experienced by local villagers and visitors. These forms of participation collectively reconstruct the museum as a living memory space rather than a static exhibition site. The three-dimensional world thus reveals the intrinsic relationship between the natural attributes of objects and their social attributes, demonstrating how memory is continually produced and reconfigured through human engagement.

Within the narrative construction of sports museums, curators play a pivotal role in detaching objects from their original life-worlds and historical contexts and re-situating them within a new spatial and interpretive framework. This process goes beyond historical preservation; it entails an active reconstruction of memory. While striving to retain historical authenticity, curators simultaneously endow objects and events with contemporary cultural meanings through interpretation and narrative design.

Guided by the anthropology of things and grounded in the dual attributes of sports museums—natural and social—this study adopts the three-dimensional world as its core analytical framework. By focusing on the interrelations among objects, events, and people, it examines how historical preservation is achieved and how sports-related cultural memory is reconstructed through diverse interpretive practices. The Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum thus serves as an empirical foundation for understanding the dynamic processes through which local folk sports museums transform material heritage into living cultural memory.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach. A qualitative approach was selected because the research aims to explore processes of cultural memory construction, community participation, and interpretive practices in a folk sports museum, which require in-depth contextual understanding rather than statistical measurement. A case study approach is particularly suitable for examining

complex social and cultural processes within a specific context, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of interactions among objects, events, and people.

3.2. Case Selection

The research was conducted at the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum located in Liantang Village, Xiang'an District, Xiamen, Fujian Province, China. This site was selected as the research site for three main reasons. First, the museum focuses on a representative form of local folk sports with a long historical tradition. Second, Songjiang Array culture is closely linked to community rituals, embodied practice, and intergenerational transmission, making it a suitable case for examining cultural memory reconstruction. Third, the museum's involvement in cross-strait cultural exchange provides a broader social context for understanding the contemporary significance of folk sports heritage.

3.3. Data Collection

The study population consisted of museum curators and officially recognized inheritors of Songjiang Array as intangible cultural heritage, as well as local participants involved in museum activities. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to recruit individuals with direct knowledge and experience of Songjiang Array culture. In total, eight participants were interviewed, including two museum curators and six cultural inheritors or practitioners. The sample size was determined based on qualitative research principles of information richness and data saturation, whereby interviews were continued until no substantial new information emerged. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person at the museum site, each lasting approximately 30–60 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with written field notes to ensure accurate documentation of responses.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed and coded to identify recurring concepts related to objects, events, and people within the museum context. The analysis followed several stages: (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading; (2) initial coding of meaningful segments; (3) grouping codes into broader thematic categories; and (4) interpretation of themes in relation to the three-dimensional analytical framework proposed in this study. Coding and organisation of themes were conducted manually through iterative comparison of interview data, field observations, and documentary sources.

4. Findings

While the three-dimensional world of sports museums provides a theoretical framework for understanding memory construction, its analytical value ultimately lies in empirical application. This chapter examines how the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum concretely constructs a three-dimensional memory space through the coordinated presentation of objects, the narration of events, and the active participation of people. By analyzing exhibition content, spatial organization, and participatory practices, the chapter demonstrates how historical preservation and memory reconstruction are realized in practice within a local folk sports museum.

4.1. Object-Centered Display and the Material Foundation of Memory

As the material foundation of the museum's three-dimensional world, objects constitute the most visible and tangible carriers of Songjiang Array culture. The Minnan-Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum houses a diverse collection of artifacts, including traditional weapons, rattan shields, farming tools adapted for military training, costumes, flags, formation diagrams, and handwritten manuals. These objects collectively document the material conditions and technical characteristics of Songjiang Array practice across different historical periods.

In exhibition design, the museum prioritizes the authenticity and integrity of objects. Artifacts are displayed with detailed captions introducing their materials, functions, and historical backgrounds, thereby restoring their original practical meanings. For example, rattan shields and iron hoes are not merely presented as symbolic relics but are contextualized as multifunctional tools used in both agricultural labor and militia training. This dual functionality reflects the close integration of military defense and everyday rural life in the historical development of the Songjiang Array.

At this level, objects primarily serve as material evidence of folk sports history. Their role is to anchor memory in tangible form and to provide visitors with a concrete point of entry into the cultural tradition. However, as emphasized in the three-dimensional framework, objects alone cannot fully convey the cultural significance of Songjiang Array practice. Without connection to events and human experiences, their meanings remain partial and static.

4.2. Event Narration and the Historical Contextualization of Objects

To transcend the limitations of object-centered display, the museum integrates artifacts into broader event-based narratives that reconstruct the historical and social contexts of Songjiang Array culture. Through thematic panels, multimedia presentations, and spatial sequencing, the museum narrates key events such as Ming-dynasty coastal defense against Japanese pirates, village-based militia organization, temple festivals, and cross-strait cultural exchanges.

By embedding objects within these narrated events, the museum constructs a two-dimensional memory plane in which artifacts acquire narrative coherence and historical depth. For instance, formation diagrams and training manuals are presented alongside accounts of military drills and ritual performances, allowing visitors to understand how technical knowledge was transmitted and embodied through collective practice. In this way, objects are transformed from isolated exhibits into narrative elements within a broader historical storyline.

Event narration also enables the museum to highlight the continuity and transformation of Songjiang Array culture. Rather than presenting the tradition as a static or fossilized heritage, exhibitions emphasize its adaptive character—from military training to folk performance and cultural symbol. This narrative strategy reinforces the museum's role as a mediator between past and present, linking historical events to contemporary cultural identity.

4.3. Human Participation and the Activation of Memory Space

The full realization of the three-dimensional world depends on the active involvement of people. In the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum, human participation takes multiple forms, including curatorial interpretation, the embodied practice of inheritors, and visitor engagement. These forms of participation transform the museum from a static exhibition site into a dynamic memory space.

Curators play a central role in shaping the interpretive framework of the museum. Through narrative selection and spatial arrangement, they guide visitors' understanding of Songjiang Array culture while balancing historical authenticity and contemporary relevance. Their curatorial decisions reflect an active process of memory reconstruction rather than neutral representation.

Equally important is the participation of officially recognized inheritors of Songjiang Array culture. Through live demonstrations, oral explanations, and training activities, inheritors introduce embodied knowledge that cannot be fully captured by material displays alone. Their presence reactivates objects and events, enabling visitors to experience Songjiang Array as a living practice rather than a distant historical phenomenon.

Visitors, particularly local villagers and members of Songjiang Array teams, further contribute to memory construction through emotional resonance and personal interpretation. For these participants, the museum functions not only as an educational institution but also as a space for recalling shared experiences, reaffirming cultural identity, and strengthening community cohesion. Through such interactions, memory is continuously produced and renegotiated.

4.4. Cross-Strait Exchange and the Expansion of Memory Boundaries

A distinctive feature of the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum is its emphasis on cross-strait cultural exchange. Dedicated exhibition areas and archival displays document interactions between Minnan and Taiwan Songjiang Array teams, including joint performances, academic exchanges, and cultural festivals. These practices extend the three-dimensional world of the museum beyond local boundaries, situating Songjiang Array culture within a broader transregional context.

Cross-strait exchange events enrich the museum's memory space by introducing multiple perspectives and shared narratives. Objects and events associated with these exchanges embody not only historical continuity but also contemporary cultural dialogue. In this sense, the museum functions as a platform for negotiating collective memory across geographical and political boundaries, highlighting the role of folk sports as a medium of cultural connection.

4.5. From Exhibition Space to Living Memory Space

Through the coordinated construction of objects, events, and human participation, the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum exemplifies the practical operation of the three-dimensional world of sports museums. Objects provide the material foundation of memory, events supply narrative structure and historical depth, and people activate and continually reconstruct cultural meaning.

This case demonstrates that the core function of a folk sports museum lies not merely in preserving artifacts or recording history, but in facilitating dynamic processes of memory reconstruction. By transforming exhibition space into a living memory space, the museum enables Songjiang Array culture to be continuously interpreted, experienced, and transmitted within contemporary society. This practical realization of the three-dimensional world provides empirical support for the analytical framework proposed in this study and sets the stage for a broader discussion of its implications for folk sports heritage preservation.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum illustrates how folk sports museums operate as spaces where historical preservation and cultural memory reconstruction take place simultaneously. Rather than functioning solely as sites for the storage and display of artefacts, folk sports museums actively shape the ways in which cultural meanings are interpreted, experienced, and transmitted.

By applying the three-dimensional framework of objects, events, and people, this study demonstrates that cultural memory in folk sports museums is not embedded in material artefacts alone. Instead, memory emerges through the interaction between physical objects, narrated historical experiences, and human participation. This finding supports the view that museums play an active role in the social production of memory, particularly in community-based heritage contexts.

5.1. From Material Preservation to Memory Reconstruction

Traditional approaches to heritage preservation have often prioritised the protection of physical artefacts. In sports museums, this focus is reflected in the careful conservation and display of equipment, costumes, and documents. While material preservation remains an essential foundation, the case of the Songjiang Array Museum shows that it is insufficient on its own to sustain the cultural vitality of folk sports heritage.

The museum's practices demonstrate that memory reconstruction is achieved when objects are contextualised within historical events and activated through human engagement. Artefacts become meaningful not simply because they are preserved, but because they are linked to collective experiences, embodied practices, and shared narratives. This shift from material preservation to memory reconstruction highlights the importance of interpretive and participatory approaches in folk sports museums.

From a social and cultural perspective, this finding suggests that heritage preservation should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a completed task. Folk sports museums therefore function as spaces where the past is continuously reinterpreted in relation to present community life.

5.2. Human Participation and Community-Based Meaning-Making

A central insight of this study concerns the role of human participation in the construction of cultural memory. Curators, heritage inheritors, community members, and visitors all contribute to the interpretation and transmission of folk sports heritage within the museum space.

In the Songjiang Array Museum, officially recognised inheritors play a particularly important role. Through demonstrations, training activities, and oral explanations, they convey embodied knowledge that cannot be fully represented through static displays. These practices allow visitors to engage with folk sports heritage as a living cultural tradition rather than a distant historical subject.

Community participation further reinforces the social function of the museum. For local villagers, the museum serves as a space for recalling shared experiences and strengthening collective identity. This form of engagement highlights the close relationship between folk sports museums and the communities they represent, suggesting that effective heritage preservation depends on sustained local involvement.

5.3. Local Context and the Broader Significance of Folk Sports Museums

Although rooted in a specific regional context, the findings of this study have broader implications for understanding folk sports museums in other settings. Many community-based museums face similar challenges in balancing material preservation with the transmission of living cultural practices.

The three-dimensional framework offers a practical analytical tool for examining how museums address these challenges. By focusing on the interaction between objects, events, and people, the framework highlights common mechanisms through which cultural memory is constructed across different folk sports contexts. This approach is particularly relevant for regions where heritage preservation is closely tied to community life and social practice.

In addition, the Songjiang Array Museum's involvement in cross-strait cultural exchange demonstrates how folk sports museums can extend their cultural significance beyond local boundaries. Through such exchanges, museums contribute to cultural dialogue and mutual understanding, reinforcing the contemporary relevance of folk sports heritage.

5.4. Implications for Museum Practice

The findings of this study offer practical insights for museum practitioners and cultural heritage managers. First, they highlight the importance of integrating narrative interpretation and participatory activities into exhibition design. Rather than relying solely on object-centred displays, folk sports museums can enhance their social relevance by creating opportunities for interaction and engagement.

Second, the study underscores the value of collaboration between museums and local communities. By involving heritage inheritors and community members in exhibition and educational activities, museums can support the sustainable transmission of folk sports heritage while strengthening social ties.

Finally, the findings suggest that folk sports museums should be understood not only as cultural institutions, but also as social spaces that contribute to community identity and cultural continuity.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how folk sports museums contribute to both historical preservation and the reconstruction of cultural memory through a case study of the Minnan–Taiwan Songjiang Array Museum in Liantang Village, Xiamen. By applying the three-dimensional analytical framework of objects, events, and people, the research highlights how museums move beyond the traditional role of storing artefacts to become dynamic spaces where cultural meanings are continuously interpreted and reproduced.

The findings of this study indicate that the construction of cultural memory in folk sports museums relies on the interaction of three interconnected dimensions. First, objects provide the material foundation for the preservation of folk sports heritage. Artefacts such as traditional weapons, costumes, and training manuals serve as tangible evidence of historical practice and anchor cultural memory in physical form. Second, events contextualise these objects within broader historical and social narratives. Through the narration of events such as military training, temple rituals, and community festivals, museums reconstruct the historical environment in which folk sports traditions developed. Third, people activate and reinterpret these memories through participation. Curators, heritage inheritors, local residents, and visitors collectively contribute to the interpretation and transmission of cultural meaning.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the idea that cultural memory in museums is not inherent in objects themselves but emerges through interpretive processes and social interaction. Folk sports museums therefore function as three-dimensional memory spaces, where material heritage, historical narrative, and human participation intersect. This perspective extends existing studies of sports museums that have primarily focused on collections and institutional development, by emphasising the role of museums in the social production of memory within community contexts.

From a practical perspective, the study highlights the importance of participatory and community-based approaches in the preservation of folk sports heritage. The case of the Songjiang Array Museum demonstrates that the sustainability of folk sports traditions depends not only on the conservation of artefacts but also on the active involvement of cultural inheritors and local communities. Through demonstrations, training activities, and community engagement, the museum transforms exhibition space into a living cultural environment where heritage can continue to evolve.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. As this research is based on a single case study, the findings may reflect the specific cultural and institutional context of the Songjiang Array Museum. Future research could conduct comparative studies across different regions or types of sports museums to further test the applicability of the three-dimensional framework. In addition, the growing use of digital technologies and virtual exhibitions offers new opportunities for expanding museum-based memory spaces, which warrants further investigation.

In conclusion, by conceptualising folk sports museums as three-dimensional spaces of cultural memory, this study provides a new perspective for understanding how sports heritage is preserved, interpreted, and transmitted. The interaction between objects, events, and people not only shapes the structure of museum exhibitions but also enables folk sports traditions to remain meaningful within contemporary social life.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). All participants were informed about the purpose of the research before interviews were conducted, and written informed consent was obtained from each participant.

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Conflict of Interest

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