

The “Discovery” and “Reappearance” of Tso-chen Man: the Cultural Perspectives of Fossil Skull Fragments of Tso-chen Man in National Taiwan Museum

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Abstract

The Tso-chen Man is the earliest Paleolithic human fossils discovered in Tsai-liao River area, Tso-chen District, Tainan City in the 1970s. These fossils had been dated back to about 20,000-30,000 years ago, bringing Tso-chen Man the title of “the oldest human of Taiwan.” Since then, the Tso-chen Man had been the most famous and popular object of the National Taiwan Museum (NTM) collection. In 2014, NTM activated a further research project in order to re-evaluating Tso-chen skull fossils through current technology such as radiocarbon dating technology and 3D simulation reconstruction. Unexpectedly, the results indicated that the Tso-chen skull fossils are only about 3,000 years old, which might rewrite Taiwan’s prehistory. It raised media and public attention, as well as debate within different fields.

Except for the paleontological, geological and archaeological perspectives, as a museum object, the process of discovering and re-evaluating Tso-chen Man also reveals the contradictive role of museum. Thus, this essay intends to analyze the predicament of museum while dealing with the disillusion of its “superstar” collection, along with the influence of cultural conflicts, social expectations, political interferes, and media manipulations. The essay would also try to discuss the challenges and introspections between social responsibility, professional ethic, and exhibit interpretation for contemporary museums.

Keywords: Tso-chen Man, National Taiwan Museum, Museum Object