

British Chinese Armed Forces Heritage

Symposium & Conference



Conflict and Cultural Exchange

Robert Fleming, Templer Study Centre Manager, National Army Museum

Robert Fleming will use the British Lions, Chinese Dragons keynote to introduce the topics covered by the conference speakers and how Chinese service in British units came about, and reflect upon the National Army Museum's hugely successful outreach programme conducted in parallel to the museum's major redevelopment over the past few years. He will also look at how cultural heritage is often relocated during conflict, and how sensitive redisplay of such items can inspire meaningful debate and dialogue that can create common ground in the present day.

The centenary of the First World War and bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo both fell at a time when a rare opportunity to completely redevelop the museum arose. Managing the expectations of the public at a time when anticipation was of the museum doing exhibitions focused on these two major anniversaries was hugely problematic.

But rather than falling victim to potential criticism, the museum's staff planned and delivered an exceptional programme that toured significant items from its collections to regional museums across the United Kingdom, and established a touring exhibition programme to raise awareness of key topics and dates as well – these focused on the Outbreak of the First World War, The Commonwealth and Empire contribution, Volunteers and Conscripts, the Battle of the Somme and separately also on Waterloo. The museum's outreach and learning staff also undertook to deliver a huge number of public events and activities, and schools-based learning projects to engage the wider public in finding out more about who supported Britain's war efforts in the First World War.

The museum also saw the closure as a time to reflect on who our audiences were, and how we engaged with them. Many communities with significant connections to these stories were not amongst the traditional visitors of the National Army Museum, and our research suggested there was a fairly low degree of understanding of the diversity of troops and workers that had helped Britain's war effort amongst the wider public, and within related communities.

To address this and hopefully broaden our appeal as a museum to those communities, we established several community engagement projects with the intention of raising awareness and teaching where needed, to help support community-based projects on related themes, to ask for feedback and research what community expectations and desires of the museum were, and to invite community members to engage more closely and hands-on with our collections through reinterpretation workshops.

One of the first communities to get involved was the British-Chinese community, represented largely by the Ming-Ai (London) Institute. At the time, they were working on their own Chinese Workforce Heritage Project, and there were some obvious parallels between the two projects. The National Army Museum was seeking to raise awareness of military contributions from various communities to connect those communities with the museum's collections and build new audiences, and Ming-Ai were seeking to raise awareness of the major contributions the Chinese migrant community have been making to wider British history.

Most of the Ming-Ai project participants had little or no prior knowledge of Chinese soldiers serving in British units, or indeed the hugely significant contribution of the Chinese Labour Corps during the First World War. Few within the British-Chinese community seemed to be aware of the fairly significant collections of Chinese cultural heritage also held within the museum – or British materials related to travelling and working in China that could give an insight into various historical narratives.

These facts therefore served as a crossover point to the two projects, and we undertook to deliver a series of talks about the history of British-Chinese relations, and the objects within the National Army Museum's collections that could be used to unpack this history. The outcomes were fantastic, with participants able to translate and teach museum staff about the meaning of inscriptions, identify locations in photographs and artwork, and provide personal opinion and insight into some of the items.

Alongside parallel community engagement projects working with other minority communities in the UK with backgrounds from the Caribbean, Africa, and other parts of Asia, the work with Ming-Ai formed a new perspective for museum staff on how to best make the story of past conflicts engaging for diverse audiences that might perceive those conflicts from alternative perspectives. The museum also got really interesting insights into how different communities feel about the sort of objects held in its collections.

The outcomes of these community projects helped improve understanding of our own collections, and informed approaches to displaying new narratives – including understanding the need for dual narratives or forums for debate and discussion. They also allowed the museum to feed the outcomes of the community engagement work into the new galleries going onto display within the redeveloped museum.

Finally, Robert will look at how the legacy of these past conflicts and the material now housed in museums related to those conflicts impacts upon the present, and how museums can be forums for international dialogue to create meaningful future from conflicted past through shared understanding and appreciation of those conflicts, and the related material culture now housed in museums.