

Chinese museums' tradition and changes

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1. Introduction

In order to understand the museums of a country, it is important first to know more about the historical background of that country. I shall begin, therefore, by outlining the historical context of museums in China.

The first museums in China were during the colonial era. The last Chinese Emperor opened the nation's doors after the Sino-British Opium War of 1840. After that, many empires, such as the United States, France, Germany, Russia and Japan, invaded China by force and took a foothold in the country. After the China-Japan War of 1894, China became a kind of semi-colony because so many foreign forces ruled over the country. In 1912, the Republic of China was finally established, but a struggle for power between the warlords, supported by foreign forces, continued for many years. In 1937, Japan undertook a surprise offensive that extended throughout the whole of China until in 1949, Chinese Communists liberated the whole country, repelled all the imperial forces and freed the people from the dominion of the oppressors, establishing the People's Republic of China. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, China had been ruled as a colony or semi-colony, but the second half of the twentieth century heralded a new, post-colonial era for the country. Chinese museum history can therefore be divided into two periods - before and after 1950 - according to the modern Chinese historical context.

I would like to deliver a brief speech on the historical tradition in Chinese museum and issues they currently face.

2. The first museums in China came into being during the colonial era, and built up the revolutionary tradition during national liberation

Colonial settlers were interested in building museums in their colonies during the nineteenth century. Examples of these are the Calcutta Museum in India (1814), the National Museum in Brazil (1818), the Natural Museum in Argentina (1823), the South Africa Museum (1825), the Australian Museum in Australia (1827), and the Egyptian Museum, established by French archaeologists in Egypt in 1863. Many such museums, including the Golden Museum and the Diamond Museum, were established during colonial times.

During this period, China was controlled by many foreign forces, which competed amongst themselves to build a museum of their own. These include Musée Heude, built by a French priest in Shanghai in 1868; Shanghai Museum, built by the North China branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in Shanghai in 1874; Jinan Museum, built by a British priest in Shantung Province in 1904; Haongho-Paiho Museum, built by the British in Tianjin in 1904; and North China Museum, built by French priests Emile Licent and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in Tianjin in 1923. The Japanese invaders

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also built several museums in northeastern China. The museums built by the imperial powers for colonial purposes were an important part of colonialism at the time.

It was only in 1905 that the first museum built by the Chinese - Nantong Museum - was created. Nantong Museum was a pioneering museum for colonial peoples building museums for themselves in their own country. During this period, the Chinese nation was at the height of its national liberation movement and the Chinese people were working together to fight for freedom from imperialism. The most crucial factor in this movement was the progressive growth of culture. Museums were taken as the cultural instrument of what were called the “enlightening thoughts for saving the Chinese Nation”. There was no dispute between the Revolutionaries and the Reformists, as they both called for the building of more museums. Many museums were built by the Chinese from then on. A new age in the history of museums was hailed, and Nantong Museum was named the first Chinese museum in China.

Chinese museums were born amidst the anti-colonial revolutionary storm, and were intimately related to the revolutionary movement. Museums were totally engaged in the struggle for political and cultural independence, and this was the beginning of the revolutionary tradition of Chinese museums.

As the first Chinese museum, Nantong Museum was not only of historic and political significance, but also important in providing a Chinese national model. This model had national, scientific and public facets and was different from its western counterparts. In my opinion, Nantong Museum began from a very high cultural starting point. Mr. Zhang Qian, the founder of Nantong Museum, was a distinguished politician and educator, and a very able businessman in his day. By comparing Japanese and European experiences, Mr. Zhang created a new museum concept, which combined traditional garden cultural elements alongside modern museum exhibitions of living and dead specimens; historical exhibitions according to modern museum practices alongside Chinese traditional collections of metals and stones; and modern gallery displays alongside traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. Mr. Zhang created the first typically Chinese museum. From 1905 to 1949, China had been in the throes of national liberation. Museums from this special period carried forward the revolutionary tradition and took the historical mission of “enlightening thoughts, saving the Chinese nation”.

3. After the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, Chinese museums continued to contribute to social change and development.

In 1949, China founded a new country led by the Chinese Communist Party: the People’s Republic of China. The new nation began to fight against US-led imperialism, which was interfering in Chinese domestic affairs, and began a vigorous socialist movement. Chinese museums inherited and carried forward the country’s revolutionary traditions, and fully engaged in the cause of social reform and development. At the time, even the Palace Museum, which is a treasure of world heritage, still held several exhibitions, such as *Comparing the Life of the Emperor and the Peasant*. Other museums held political exhibitions, such as *Labor Creates the World*, *Exhibition against US Imperialism*, etc. We call these kinds of exhibitions “political topic exhibitions”. The Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Government took the protection of cultural heritage and building of museums very seriously. A movement to collect cultural relics was initiated throughout the country. Many leaders of the Central Government, such as Chairman Mao Zedong and Zhu De, donated/contributed to the museum with collections of their own or money. Premier Zhou Enlai and the China State Council took the movement to collect cultural relics across the country. This helped swell the museums’ collections and provide solid foundations for their work. Museums were changing at a quite unprecedented pace.

In 1956, the first National Museum Conference was held in Beijing. The conference provided a theoretical definition for museums, and established the three key features and two main tasks of museums. These were:

- Museums are a kind of scientific institution;
- Museums are a kind of educational institution;

- Museums are centers for collecting material, spiritual remains and natural specimens.
- Museums serve for scientific issues;
- Museums serve for the population at large.

These principles provided a brief theoretical generalization on the basic properties of museums and their key goals.

It is interesting that China's museum professionals made a statement of their basic mission as early as 1956. Since then, the country's museum professionals have always borne in mind the historical mission of their institutions.

Cultural independence is a serious topic for newly independent nation-states. The people from independent states better understand the importance of cultural independence, and that there can be no political independence without culture independence. Building a museum is an important factor in continuing national cultural traditions and rooting out colonial cultural influences.

However, neocolonial culture still expanded in post-colonial years. Economic integration was quickly followed by cultural Gleichschaltung/integration, which combined and coordinated diverse elements into a whole. This is typical of cultural hegemony and imperialism. In my opinion, cultural hegemony has mutated from colonial culture in post-colonial times, and many nation-states resist this trend. Even a dominant country like France has tried hard to carry forward and cultivate its national spirit to resist cultural Gleichschaltung/integration.

In 1982, the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Government announced a national policy "to build a socialist country under the rule of law, to build socialism with Chinese characteristics". In 1992, the Chinese Society of Museums held its annual conference, where the key topic was "how to build museums and museology with Chinese characteristics". At this conference, Chinese museum professionals discussed the theory and practice of museology with Chinese characteristics from 1982 to 1992. I summarized the conference in the paper "On Museums and Museology with Chinese Characteristics", and advocated that building museums with Chinese characteristics is a way of feeding internal demand for cultural independence.

From 1993 to 1994, I had the welcome opportunity of discussing the same topic with Dr. Peter van Mensch, who was the President of ICOM at the time, and with Dr. Martin Scharer. Dr. Peter van Mensch said that "there is no way of having a theory of museology with particular characteristics". Dr. Martin Scharer gave the same answer: "it is impossible to build a particular kind of museology for one state or one area, because there is only one science/discipline, or it would not be called a science. But it would be all right in practice on a lower level."

Frankly, I believe that although the common characteristics of museums must override individual characteristics across the world, only national characteristics can decide a museum's fate. In practice, individual characteristics override common characteristics. This may not work in theory, so it needs to be discussed in future.

In summary, Chinese museums have always been a kind of "missionary museum". They belong to an important part of Chinese revolutionary culture during the anti-colonialism movement, and are now actively involved in social change and development. Chinese museums have never abandoned the historical mission conferred upon them by the Chinese nation. Hence, the Chinese government attaches great importance to museum affairs, and the Chinese museum has become closely and widely identified with its society. There are more than 2,400 museums in China today, and China has already taken some international initiatives. ■