

## From Material Collection to Ideological Presentation: A Paradigm Shift in Museum Practice

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### Abstract

Under the impetus of the New Museum Movement, the definition of museum has been updated. Museums are no longer merely places of “collection, storage and exhibition”, but also have functions of “research, education and pleasure”. Although “comprehensive and scarce” collection is important, it is no longer the only standard for museum exhibition. At the same time, new ideas have emerged that emphasize “human” subjectivity, multiple expressions, and situational narratives. As a result, the paradigm shift from material collection to ideological presentation has become a specific direction for museum practice in China today.

**Key words:** Museum history; Paradigm shift

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### 1. REVIEW: HISTORY OF EARLY CHINESE MUSEUMS

To trace the history of museums in China, we must first explore how museums came into being. Due to the different definitions of the concept of museum, there are also different views in the academic community on the origin of museums. After the Renaissance, the citizen stratum sought not only to break the feudal theocracy and

demand political power, but also to break the monopoly of knowledge held by the upper echelons of society. A new type of intellectual popularized knowledge and enlightenment, seeking to break with the traditional notion that private objects were not necessary to be open to others. 1638 saw the establishment of the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University, marking the birth of the modern public museum.

Museum awareness in China also emerged early. As early as the Shang Dynasty, a large number of treasures were stored in royal and noble palaces and tombs. The rise of epigraphy in the Song Dynasty raised the level of antique collection from simple collection to academic research. From the Song Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, a large number of antiquities were collected and inherited from generation to generation, which on the one hand provided a material basis for the emergence of modern museums; On the other hand, as an elegant playthings of intellectuals, antiques collection often carries a symbol of identity. The tradition of keeping secret and belonging to private individuals has hindered the transformation of antiques collection into a museum in the modern sense, and antiques can only flow in a small range.

The germination of modern Chinese museums developed in the period of the Reform Movement of 1898. At the same time, the introduction of Western museum ideas also prompted enlightened intellectuals to consider the importance of museums to the opening the wisdom of the people. Generally speaking, the Nantong Museum in 1905 is considered to be the starting point for the establishment of museums by the Chinese people on their own. Cai Yuanpei, Yang Zhongjian, Kang Youwei and others made outstanding contributions to the construction of Chinese museums and the development of museology. In particular, Cai Yuanpei has always grasped the assertion that museums are educational institutions, and elaborated on the types and main businesses of museums. (Xu, 2007, p.78)

After the revolution of 1911, the imperial system ended. In 1925, the Palace Museum was established and opened to the public. The idea of national public ownership has replaced the traditional idea of private ownership of antiquities, and museums are increasingly accepted by the Chinese people. Under the unstable situation, museums such as the National Central Museum and the Museum of Western China have been established one after another, greatly promoting the development of modern Chinese public culture. (Xu, 2015)

After 1949, the museum became the front of revolutionary propaganda, showing distinct ideological characteristics. After the reform and opening up, museums began to show the characteristics of diversified development.

## 2. UPDATE OF MUSEUM DEFINITION

In 1971, Duncan Cameron, curator of Brooklyn Museum in the United States, once asked in his famous paper, "Is the museum a temple or a forum?" (Cameron, 1971) The metaphor of "temple" and "forum" actually implies the problem of the definition of museum. Furthermore, this question asks how the museum should be positioned, even how to establish it.

### 2.1 Two Aspects of the Museum—The Opposition Between "Temple" and "Forum"

The "temple" represents an unquestionable will. Further, it represents the unquestionable will to build temples or priests. It governs everyone who enters the temple with solemnity. The forum is different, it is open, it is a platform for people to discuss. The forum focuses on the participants. Without the discussants, the existence of the forum will be meaningless.

After interpreting these two metaphors, we further discuss the two aspects of the "temple" and "forum" of the museum.

Museums must be supported by collections (in various senses). It uses collections to show the diversity of the world, and to a great extent satisfies the curiosity and pursuit of beauty of viewers. However, the collection and selection of collections show the will of the museum owners, or the "taste" of the museum exhibitors. Coupled with the solemnity and grandeur of the traditional museum construction, the museum itself declares its "unquestionable". Thus, the museum represents correct and elegant taste, and the collection becomes an example of this "elegant taste". It forms a solemn whole with its collections, which makes people accept the ideas of the museum imperceptibly.

On the other hand, museums are places where materials are stored, and collections are these materials. It is the same as a museum library in a sense. Books and other documents and museum collections are all records of past existence. Both books and other documents and

museum collections are records of past existence, and although museum collections cannot be borrowed to the same extent as library books, the collections themselves are unreserved to the viewer. Viewers can freely get the information they want by viewing and analyzing the collections, so their understanding of museum collections will tend to be divided due to various factors such as knowledge background and ideology. Therefore, the museum itself can be a place to exchange views, and the materials provided by the museum can be used to confront each other's views and seek consensus, thus forming in-depth discussions. In this sense, the museum has the appearance of a "forum".

A museum is a place for people to view and admire, and collections are displayed in museums. Therefore, the museum has the appearance of "temple" and "forum", both of which exist simultaneously. But in fact, traditional museums appear more as "temples". Through the transformation of time and space scenes, museum displays often present a simple and linear story, and the viewer is often immersed in the great artistic creations or natural beauty of multiple eras, unconsciously accepting the museum exhibitor's construction of this story. It is true that the viewer receives an immersion in the virtues or their awareness of the richness of the world in the process, but their space for reflection and discussion is unknowingly compressed. In addition, museum collections are indeed difficult to compare with the information-intensive nature of books, and the cursory appreciation of the viewer is often vague, with only a superficial impression of the "temple".

### 2.2 Reorientation of the Museum

Temples are for worship, which is a one-way act of information transfer. While the visitor passively receives the oracle or revelation, the "temple" aspect of the museum suggests that the visitor is in a sense a passive recipient. The richer the concept, the more it serves as a footnote to the "temple" aspect of the museum. Because of the long-standing monopoly of the intellectual class on social thought and historical records, and with the help of enlightenment and scientism, the "temple" aspect of the museum has been taken for granted for a long time. This ideology has a strong historical inertia that is still in evidence today. The narrative of the museum display was packaged as a public opinion that "this is what the public wants to say" and continues to influence subsequent visitors.

After World War II, people began to reflect on the rationality of the museum's "temple" facade, and this phenomenon has to be examined in the context of the entire era. Whether the independence movement and racial equality movement in the former colonial areas are in the ascendant, or the strong voice of French postmodernism in 1960s, many inducements are impacting the sublimity of the museum's "temple" facade and criticizing the

museum's existing exhibition and management mode, all of which are guiding the museum to reposition itself.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM), the largest international non-governmental organization in the museum sector, originally defined museums as collections and conservation institutions parallel to libraries and archives. However, in 1951 the organization added recreation to its definition; In 1974, the organization defined the museum as “a museum is a permanent non-profit organization that serves the society and its development, is open to the public, and collects, keeps, studies, communicates and displays material evidence of human beings and their environment for the purposes of research, education and pleasure”. This change in definition demonstrates ICOM's attempt to reduce the “guiding” role of museums in terms of one-way exhibition, i.e., their “temple” aspect—the new trend is a decline in the importance of “collection, conservation, and display” and an increase in the purpose of “research, education, and pleasure”. (Anderson, 2004, p.2)

Not only ICOM, but also museum-related institutions in the United States, Europe, and Japan have expressed similar views, while the Soviet Union, which was relatively detached from this transformation process, declared as early as 1930 that “the element in display is not the physical element, but the law of dialectical development” —this definition no longer emphasizes physical collections, showing the propaganda and education function of museums beyond the material level. Unfortunately, however, the strong ideologization also limited the diversity of expression in Soviet museums. In any case, the new museum movement after World War II drove a paradigm shift from unidirectional to interactive, from monolithic to pluralistic, and from static to dynamic participation in museums.

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### 3. TRANSFORMATION AND PRACTICE OF WESTERN MUSEUM THOUGHT HISTORY UNDER THE NEW MUSEUM MOVEMENT

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As noted above, the definition of Museum has changed. Under the guidance of the new definition transformation, we can further explore the specific paradigm transformation of museums.

#### 3.1 The Transformation of Material Culture in Museums: The Necessity of the Existence of Collections

The “object” of “museum” refers to the museum's collections, and the New Museum Movement's deconstruction of traditional museums begins with the collections. Traditional museums take “comprehensiveness” and “rarity” as important criteria for collecting collections, but the new museum movement

directly challenges the status of concrete collections. Whether measured in terms of “comprehensiveness” or “rarity”, the physical collection is a record of the traces of the past. For the viewer, the collection is just a kind of image information. It is difficult for the viewer to empathize with the hardships and anecdotes behind the collection, and the image information is completely replaceable, and all the museum curator has to consider is how to express and interpret the image information rationally. Thus, expression and interpretation have replaced material absolutes as the core of museums.

Conversely, physical objects can also be used as evidence of the existence of traces of the past. In this sense, it seems too radical to question the physical collections. If there is no need for evidence of past existence, and everything exhibited inside the museum can be fictionalized, and the museum is just providing virtual scenes, then the “objects” of the museum are in danger of losing their authenticity. The museum is in danger of losing its authenticity. Therefore, in this sense, museums have to rely on “things” to exist. This finally formed a compromise. For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, the American Association of Museums revised the constraint that museums should have collections and instead recognized that educational and popular science galleries without particularly rare collections were also museums.

After the discussion on the necessity of the existence of collections, the dominant position of physical collections has been greatly impacted. From the perspective of social function or knowledge structure of the museum, the physical collection only acts as a medium under the New Museum Movement, and the plurality of materiality became noteworthy. In fact, if we reflect on the museums and their physical collections before the New Museum Movement, it seems that the rigid understanding of the concept of material leads to obstacles to the understanding of museums—it is still necessary to explore the deep meaning and value of material. The New Museum Movement was not about denying collections as the basis of museums, but about how to interpret them. Shen Chen and others believe that the material has agency, that is, the collection's “inherent ability or energy”, which keeps the inherent state of the material, and it will change to some extent due to the change of the scene. (Chen & Shang, 2022, p.9) With the introduction of this concept, the relationship between people and objects is no longer dichotomous, and the study of “objects” is no longer object-centered, but object-driven, entering the historical context and human connection through objects. (Harvey, 2018, p.2)

As the historian Robin Collingwood said, “All history is the history of thought”, and the natural changes related to social changes and human behavior are all centered on people's thoughts. In other words, the change of people's thoughts leads to the development of society, so does

the study of material culture. Due to the introduction of human factors, it is required that the research paradigm of material culture must gradually give up the traditional descriptive and appreciative perspective, and turn into the observation position of multi-interaction, situational and historical particularism; From simple “what is it” to guiding viewers to think about “why” and “why is it here”. And guide the viewer into a long period of development, and introduce the viewer into the diversity and complexity of history as much as possible, so as to surpass the simple and superficial linear narrative.

### 3.2 Reorganization of Museum History

The previous section discussed the necessity of the existence of material in museums, but the material in museums should be human-centered, which liberates the bondage of “material”, and then specifically shows the hypertext of material.

The hypertext of material emphasizes that the status of material has been shaken, and the selection objects of material are moving towards diversification. As has been pointed out above, the intellectual class has monopolized culture for a long time. In fact, the cultural expression itself is one-sided and tendentious, which obviously cannot be compatible with the call for diversity. In fact, not only that, from literature to archaeology, from paper records to oral history, all show the material hypertext. All these have broken the monopoly of the intellectual class, so the groups that produce materials tend to be diversified. People of different classes, religions, or other cultural backgrounds can be called the creators of the text. Then, this has caused the decline of the ideological history — the grand narrative and heroes have been deconstructed and replaced by a “situation” jointly created by people with and without culture, and people with and without power. The exhibition of the museum really focuses on “people” rather than who they are. The power symbol behind the culture are dissolved.

The material hypertext and the deconstruction of collection attribute mean the impact on the museum, the symbol of material collection. In the past, museums focused on how materials were displayed. The exhibition space is only a background. The relationship between people and museums is one-sided and isolated, and the dynamic status of people is not even mentioned.

However, the renewal of museum definition under the New Museum Movement changed this situation. Museum is not only the concrete material and space, but also the abstract knowledge and mechanism. The museum is not defined by material, it defines material collection, and the museum has become a place to express certain ideas.

Further, museums also have to face the pressure of external currents of thought. That is, whether museums are the vane of social civilization, or whether they are institutions that use a certain kind of power to construct knowledge. In this sense, the museum is in opposition

to popular culture, and thus in contradiction to its public nature. The solution to this contradiction lies in who has the power to judge. The museum must give this power to the public. In line with Roland Barthes’ famous assertion that “the author is dead,” the New Museum Movement has proposed the concept of “the curator is dead”. In addition, museums must be linked to popular culture, incorporating psychological, anthropological, and sociological theories and methods into museum studies, so that a holistic perspective of cultural studies can be applied.

## 4. PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE MUSEUMS: A SITUATIONIST NARRATIVE

Through the discussion in the previous section, we can learn that the single-line narrative model of museums has gone bankrupt, and that objective narratives appear too thin for museums to reveal a specific law, but rather to restore museum narratives to specific historical situations as much as possible. This approach is also known as museum situationist narrative, and it foreshadows the direction of the Chinese museum enterprise.

### 4.1 Expression of Multiple Clues

Content pluralism has been proposed and discussed as late as the late 19th century. By content pluralism, we mean that the museum as an encyclopedic educational place, the classification of museum collections represents the body of knowledge. If the content of the museum is to be diversified, the museum’s collections, exhibition formats, and governing bodies can be diversified. This pluralism will eventually lead to a plurality of museum expressions, thus breaking the parallel and juxtaposed pattern of pluralism under the old paradigm, and the boundaries of museums and their contents will become blurred, depending on the context.

Early Chinese museums showed a relatively diversified pattern. After 1949, however, due to specific historical scenarios, the meaning of the pluralistic pattern was different, and the revolutionary collection and the collection of traditional transformation occupied the mainstream. Therefore, publicity, revolutionary education and other functions became the main purpose of museum management. The acceptance of other cultures after the reform and opening up also indicates that Chinese museums are developing towards a complex and diversified pattern.

### 4.2 The Reciprocation of De-contextualization and Re-contextualization

Context is the core concept of a museum. As a kind of evidence, it is true that the collection should try to fit the plurality of the society and to show the pluralistic pattern. However, the situation corresponding to the evidence at that time can never be considered. In addition,



as the museum is a place for exhibition, the transfer of material as evidence into the museum must undergo “de-contextualization” and “re-contextualization” to become an organic part of the museum. All these material collections go through the cycle of “de-contextualization” and “re-contextualization”, and the boundary of material combination is no longer obvious. Then the space and landscape of the museum will also be newly created or transformed, so as to reverse the reconstruction of the collection. It is foreseeable that China’s future museums will also break the established boundaries and open up to the dynamic interaction with society. (Xu, 2016, p.20)

#### **4.3 Farewell to Flat Collections and Exhibitions, Towards Poetic and Holistic Museum Exhibitions**

As a result of the above discussion, the material collection and the museum are developing in an overall direction, while the museum is moving towards the society. Then when it comes to the expression of the museum, it requires that the narrative of the museum must be a kind of situationalist narrative. From the above discussion, it is true that the collection of the museum is material and past, which to some extent reflects the will of the museum curators. But after leaving the flat, straightforward narrative, museums must move toward a “poetic, holistic” narrative, that is, how to make the viewer accept, or hand over the power of acceptance to the viewer. In other words, how the museum presents itself. Poetic and holistic narratives, interactive and educational functions, are most directly expressed in permanent and temporary exhibitions. It can be said that the temporary exhibition focuses on specific historical events, while the permanent exhibition shows concern for a long period of time and historical structure.

Under the New Museum Movement, the museum is not simply a place to display the past, but is integrated with its exhibits and becomes a human-centered work.

Materiality, space, and landscape are no longer detached, and the museum has stepped down from the temple and given itself over to living people.

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