

# Museums and the Public

---

## Visions for Museums in China

---

*Na Li*

**ABSTRACT:** Museums have grown exponentially in China in the span of approximately 110 years. How does one design an exhibit for a better-informed public? What kind of interpretive space is needed to engage the public? How do museums function as sites of public history? This article traces the genealogy of museum development in China, and argues that the birth of the modern museum in China is a product of the radicalism of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Embedded in the subsequent one hundred years of development are a changing definition of “public,” a remodeled idea of “history,” and an evolving relationship between museums and their public. Within this context, the “Museums and the Public: Urban Landscape and Memory” project explores how the public interprets history and landscapes through exhibits, and if or how the exhibits reflect their memories. The analysis raises three possibilities for museums in China.

**KEY WORDS:** “Museums and the Public,” China, public history, interpretation, participation

From the appearance of the first public museum in China in 1905 to the more than 4800 museums registered with the State Administration of Cultural Heritage in 2016, the number of Chinese museums has grown exponentially. At first glance, the speed and scale of the development seems startling. Despite the diversity of public missions and social obligations of these museums, they remain largely controlled by the state. Thus, the efforts to better communicate the artifacts to a broader public remain inadequate and constrained. How does one design an exhibit for a better-informed public? What kind of interpretive space is needed to engage the public? How do museums function as sites of public history? This article addresses these issues in the Chinese context.

This article begins by tracing the genealogy of museum development in China. The analysis, both conceptual and historical, focuses on how the state has intervened in and controlled the cultural enterprises that influence the public consumption of history. The analysis takes us back to the turn of the twentieth century, and argues that the birth of the modern museum in China is a product of the radicalism

---

**THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN**, Vol. 42, No. 1, pp. 29–53 (February 2020). ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576. © 2020 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2020.42.1.29>.

of the time. Embedded in the subsequent one hundred years of development are a changing definition of “public,” a remodeled idea of “history,” and an evolving relationship between museums and their publics.

This provides the context for the second part, an in-depth case study arising out of the “Museums and the Public: Urban Landscape and Memory” project. This was an institutional collaboration between Chongqing University and the Chongqing Three Gorges Museum (referred to as the 3GM). The project explores how the public interprets the history and landscapes of Chongqing through exhibits, and analyzes if and how the exhibits reflect their memories. The project team used oral history interviewing as its primary methodology. The final section summarizes some of the important findings from project. These suggest three important lessons learned that could shape new approaches to and new visions for museums in China.

### Genealogy

Artifact collection, as a habit or a hobby, is clearly nothing new to the Chinese. Since the Shang Dynasty (approximately 1523–1046 BCE), considered the time of the emergence of Chinese civilization, royal families and aristocrats have collected jade, pottery, and bronze ware, among a diverse range of fine ornaments. This was a time when Chinese civilization started to emerge, embryonic as it was. The Shang and Zhou (approximately 1046–256 BCE) governments, as archaeological evidence indicates, consisted largely of warrior landlords with aristocratic lineages, and the distinction between the rulers and the ruled, the nobly born and the common people, was perpetuated through ownership of prized objects. The kinds of object collected gradually expanded to include historical drawings, portraits, imperial seals, and sacrificial vessels of various kinds. These collections, which were a symbolic embodiment of imperial power and authority, remained exclusively for the upper-classes, and were not publicly exhibited. Artifacts, especially bronzeware, which was mostly preserved in the ancestral temples, embodied a yearning for continuity and immortality. Collecting became the hobby of emperors and intellectual elites in the Song dynasty (960 CE–1279 CE), especially during the Zhenghe Period (1111 CE–1117 CE). Later, the study of epigraphy thrived, reaching its apogee during the Qing dynasty (1616 CE–1911 CE). However, the birth of the museum in China is not an extension of the collection mania inherited from the imperial period. It is, paradoxically, a product of the strong foreign influence and intercultural exchanges. The process is part of a general climate of reform after 1840, the year China signed the Nanjing Treaty with the United Kingdom, ending the First Opium War and forcibly establishing a foreign presence within its borders.

To use the year of 1840 as the cut-off date is entirely arbitrary. Any established political system possesses huge inertia that resists change, yet when such an ancient and proud civilization as China feels marginalized, reforms become inevitable.

From 1840 to 1895, China experienced increased international trade and interaction. Some members of the Chinese elite took advantage of their new ability to travel and study abroad and gained access to the ideas and institutions they observed in Europe and other parts of Asia, including museums.<sup>1</sup> Exposure to new cultures and ideas helped create a free, liberal, and receptive milieu that prevailed in the late nineteenth century and evolved into the early twentieth. Many of those who took part felt compelled to share the ideas they encountered in their travels or education with their countrymen and women. Educated outside of China yet feeling permanently attached to their native land, they returned to awaken, enlighten, and change. The idea of museums became one of many Western imports they wholeheartedly embraced, especially the public and social function of museums in these countries—education, entertainment, and enrichment. Integrating historical and cultural artifacts into civic education represented a profound difference from the traditional Chinese approach to collections.

Fitting with Chinese philosophy, most advocates of new kinds of museums supported gradual, rather than radical, change, integrating new approaches with Chinese tradition. The Reform Movement, or the Hundred Days Reform, of 1898, led by a group of progressive intellectuals, including Youwei Kang and Qichao Liang, advocated for establishing museums, especially folk museums. Conservatives in the government prevented the museum project from moving forward. However, Zexu Lin, Ju Xu, Jishe Xu, Yin Yao, and Tingdan Liang, among others, persisted. The word “museum” was first mentioned and expounded in *The Encyclopedia of Geography*, written and compiled by Yuan Wei.<sup>2</sup> The Reform Movement initiated a different school system and encouraged students to study abroad. A number of high-ranking officials, sent by their equally open-minded superiors, traveled internationally, and came back with passionate descriptions about museums that they visited in Western countries. For example, Jian Lin went to visit and work in the United States, and helped introduce museums to his fellow countrymen. Another prominent intellectual, Liancheng Guo, wrote in elaborate detail about museums he experienced in Italy, including “exhibition halls,” “antique exhibitions,” and “curios.” Although using different terminology, Guo described what was later known as the comprehensive museum. The experience, eclectic and refreshing, provided further impetus for establishing museums in China.

Before Jian Zhang (1853–1926), a well-known intellectual, industrialist, and reformer, established the Nantong Museum, he had visited Japan and was deeply impressed by its constitutionalism. Zhang became a strong advocate for museums. He believed that industrialism and education complement each other and help to

<sup>1</sup> Including Britain, France, Germany, the United States, Japan, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Russia, Spain, Ireland, Vietnam, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.

<sup>2</sup> The *Encyclopedia of Geography* (*Hai Guo Tu Zhi*), one of the first comprehensive treatises in world history and geography, was written and compiled by Yuan Wei between 1841 and 1847. The work was commissioned by Zexu Lin. Its core concept was that China needed to learn the advanced technologies of the West in order to resist the invasion of the Western powers.

create a prosperous nation. He saw education as the only way to salvage China from its national crisis—industries would financially support education, which, in a roundabout fashion, would improve industries. In his proposal to the imperial court, he argued for the educational, the social, and the public mission of museums. Education happened beyond the limited walls of schools; libraries and museums provided alternative forms of education, as Zhang convincingly argued in the *Proposal to the Educational Ministry for Establishing Museums*. Influenced by his experience with the Kyoto Imperial museums, Zhang began working to convince the imperial government to establish museums.

Though Zhang's first attempt to win government support for his museum project failed, he was not discouraged; rather, he began work on the project with his own resources. In 1905 when planning a public arboretum for Tongzhou Normal College, Zhang purchased approximately 35 $\mu$  of land,<sup>3</sup> removed hundreds of tombs, filled the land, and built structures for different uses. The project lasted for four months and, in 1906, he turned the arboretum into a museum, known as Nantong Museum. Artifacts from five continents, ranging from animal and botanic specimens, tablets with inscriptions, curios, classic literary works, rare drawings, calligraphies, massive inscriptions, iron Buddhas, weapons, and minerals, to name but a few, were collected, categorized, and presented in the key exhibition halls. The buildings were beautifully nestled in the natural environment. The outside space accommodated a spectacular range of plants, flowers, birds, and other animals, making it just as cosmopolitan as the historical and cultural artifacts presented inside.

Formerly designed as a practical training base for the students from Tongzhou Normal College, the museums assumed their public and educational mission from the beginning. The objects were not separated from visitors by glass boxes; nor were the visitors bored by jargon or narrow, specialized knowledge. Interpreters were trained to guide visitors; Chinese, Japanese, and Latin were provided on the labels, to make the exhibits accessible to the general public. Nantong Museum, part of Zhang's effort to modernize China, paved the way for Constitutionalism, and played a prominent role in shaping the public consciousness. The museum also pioneered ways for core concepts such as public ethics and civic virtue that would impact the public through later museum development.

The evolution of museums in China corresponded with the undulating landscape of reform at the time. Fifteen museums were established by Western founders from 1840 to 1895 in trading port cities such as Shanghai, Hongkong, Yantai, Qingzhou, and Beijing. Almost all museums were science-related in nature, and were strongly influenced by their Western founders. The number of the museums doubled from 1896 to 1914, expanding both geographically and in terms of subject matter. Among the fifteen museums established from 1840–95, fourteen were natural science museums, and another one remained unidentified. From 1896 to

<sup>3</sup> 1 $\mu$  = 666.67 square meters.

1914, only eleven were natural science museums, whereas the number of social and history museums and comprehensive museums grew.<sup>4</sup>

The New Cultural Movement, or Chinese Enlightenment (1915–23),<sup>5</sup> assumed that “the Chinese past can be reconstructed according to the historical model of the West.”<sup>6</sup> This assumption has its origin in the New History, advocated by the contemporary cultural and intellectual elites. Eminent historian Qichao Liang was one of the key proponents. The New History advocated a moral ideal of collectivity, a society with “a high level of autonomy and freedom, and a bottom-up structure, with the moral principles appropriate to this kind of civil society. Here, the collective, or society is . . . a mode of social construction.”<sup>7</sup> With a profoundly revolutionary and humanistic spirit borrowed from the West and having the aim of reinventing China, the New History praised history from below, or grassroots history. Beginning in this period, Western ideas replaced the past as a new frame of reference. These ideas challenged institutional sameness, provoked a radical mentality, and thus became “iconoclastically anti-traditional.”<sup>8</sup> As a result of the New Cultural Movement, more museums, especially historical and cultural museums, opened. Among fifty-seven museums established from 1915 to 1936, thirty-one museums fell into the social and historical category, with only twelve natural science museums.

In 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power and founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the official record showed only twenty-five museums in existence, a result of the war with Japan (1937–45) and the civil war (1945–49). Under strong Soviet influence, the CCP nationalized all cultural institutions to build the ideology of state socialism, and established an official presentation of the nation’s history through museums and memorials. The Museum of the Chinese Revolution was an early example of this policy. The subsequent political upheavals dominated the historical landscape, with the Great Leap Forward (1958–62), and the Cultural Revolution (1967–76) as pivotal events that led to both the creation and destruction of museums on the CCP’s political whim. When Mao Zedong, the CCP leader, visited Anhui Museum in 1958, he declared that the major cities in all provinces should build a museum similar to it. It was urgent and critical that the people (renmin) learn about their own history and creative power.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, however, museums were also demonized as sites for harboring the “four olds” (customs, culture, habits, and ideas) during the Cultural Revolution.

4 Jun Chen, *The Historical Analysis of Museums in China 1901–1911* (Beijing Higher Education Publishing House, 2007) 175–83.

5 Duxiu Chen, eds., *The New Youth* (Shanghai, 1915–1926).

6 Ying-shih Yu, “The Radicalization of China in the Twentieth Century,” in *China in Transformation*, 125–50, esp. 131.

7 Qichao Liang, *Zhongguo Lishi Yanjiufa Zhongguo Lishi Yanjiufa Bubian* (Zhonghua Shuju, 2015), 4, 8–9, 180, 224, 230–32, 191–92.

8 Ibid.

9 Source: “The Major Events of Chinese Museum, 1949–1990,” in *Chinese Museum Records*. <http://www.sach.gov.cn/>.

Since the 1980s, the Open-Door policy, also known as the Open-and-Reform policy, has led to a prodigious jump in the number of museums in China. The policy was officially announced at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in 1978. The tenets of this policy included a reform of the governing of rural villages, a greater opening-up to the outside world, and the establishment of a market economy under the socialist political system. During this period, the government promoted the role of museums in enhancing spiritual and cultural civilization, and in 1982 passed the *Law of Cultural Relics Protection of the PRC* among other laws and regulations aimed at protecting China's cultural heritage.<sup>10</sup>

Museums continued to develop at an accelerated speed after 1980, under the slogan that “every city should have its own museum.” The state has drawn upon the pedagogical and ideological powers of museums. Museums have been booming recently because they are seen as critical sources of China's soft power.<sup>11</sup> When Chinese president Xi Jinping called in 2013 for systematic work on traditional cultural resources, including cultural artifacts locked in secret and forbidden palaces, heritage sites dotted across vast landscapes, and words inscribed in the ancient works, he did not mince his words.<sup>12</sup> *Systematic* is the important word here. Since 2013, museums across China, big and small, have been motivated politically to engage in large-scale exhibit redesign. Museums have helped the CCP boost China's global image and win admiration for Chinese culture. Privately owned museums have also risen steadily from 2006. In 2013, there were 811 privately owned museums, approximately 19.4 percent of the total 4165 museums.<sup>13</sup>

The past one hundred years have been complex and sometimes contradictory for Chinese museums. The numbers and kinds of museums have expanded and contracted, depending on the political climate. Kirk Denton underlines the importance of politics in Chinese museum development when he writes, “from their beginnings, modern museums in China were closely associated with nationalism and the ideology of nation building.”<sup>14</sup> In the twenty-first century, technology has changed how people access information, and subsequently, the very concepts of “public” and “history.” The tension between government-controlled cultural enterprise and the public consumption of history fluctuates. Recently, there seems to be a loosening of authority, a more liberal social environment, and a better-informed reading public. Both the government and the public seem to engage with museums, as part of China's soul-searching. On the other hand, the balance between rapidly expanding collections and public interest fluctuates. This effects a profound

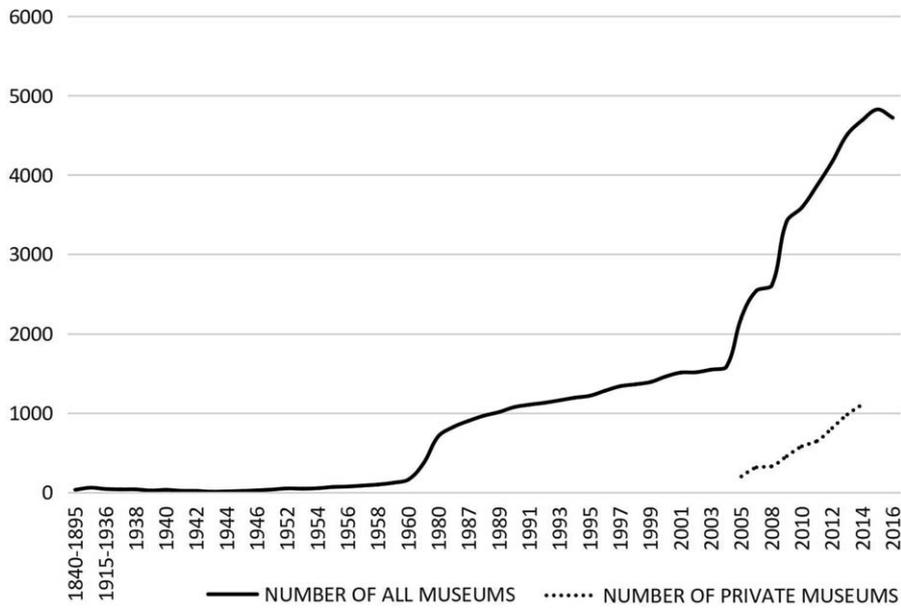
<sup>10</sup> *Chinese Museum Records*, <http://www.sach.gov.cn/>.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). Nye defines soft power as the way nations exert their influence through cultural means rather than by force.

<sup>12</sup> *Xinhua News*, December 30, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> *Chinese Museum Records*.

<sup>14</sup> Kirk A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Post-socialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 16–17.



Numbers of museums in China. (Data source: *Chinese Museum Record*, <http://www.sach.gov.cn/>)

cultural change. What follows is a case study that explores the intersection where an inward-looking museum culture focused solely on collections and an outward-facing public culture focused on communicating with the public converge.

#### The “Museums and the Public” Project

Born as a collaboration between the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Chongqing University and the Three Gorges Museum, the “Museums and the Public” project aimed to incorporate multiple perspectives into the exhibit development process. The project started in 2015 during a conversation between the author and the curators at the 3GM about the redesign of the exhibit *Journey towards a City*. Public history, as an innovative intellectual framework for understanding how the public uses history and how that may inform exhibition redevelopment, caught the attention of the leadership of the 3GM. With academic backgrounds in history, archaeology, archives management, and museums studies, the leadership and the designated curators demonstrated both the capabilities and a desire for change. They were receptive to learning or, at least, trying to learn how a public history methodology could improve their exhibit. Our team addressed questions of audience reception, including whether the current exhibit represented visitors’ experience of urban history; how effectively the artifacts communicated concepts to the audience; in what way did artifacts evoke memories for local people; how did visitors learn about the historical landscapes of Chongqing through the exhibits; and to what extent did that representation collide with their

knowledge about or memory of the city. These questions revealed a genuine interest in learning more about visitors, which remains rare in China. Fortunately in this case, the sparks gradually fired into a blaze.

The project (2015–16) studied three groups of individuals: museum professionals including researchers, exhibit designers, and public educators; volunteers; and visitors. A total of seventy-eight interviews were collected, transcribed, and divided into the three groups listed above. For the first two groups, we conducted oral history interviews in the designated space at the 3GM, with lengths ranging from thirty minutes to sixty minutes. For the visitor group, we used generic questions and extrapolated from them using the logic of probability sampling (that is, the idea that a sample will be representative of the population from which it is selected if all members of the population have an equal chance of being selected in the sample). We randomly collected twenty to thirty minute interviews from forty visitors in the four permanent exhibition halls.<sup>15</sup> The interview was designed with eight open-ended questions, each with two-to-three sub-questions probing various aspects of the generic questions.

Although visitor surveys may be familiar in the Chinese context, this project introduces the methodology of public history to study multiple publics and to generate policy advice for redeveloping exhibits. Whereas traditional questionnaire-type surveys tend to reduce visitors to passive observers, devoid of complex emotion and ambivalent psychology, oral history interviewing seeks out emotional behavioral clues from the visitors. This often demands substantial amounts of time in the field, including learning from visitors and their motivations, aspirations, and (dis)satisfactions.

Within the Chinese academy, public history remains mysterious. However, in the wider field of history, the climate is more generous and welcoming, and I sought to take advantage of that openness to publicize the project. For example, I gave a lecture at the museum titled, “Public History and Museums: The Practice of Oral History.” A good mix of audience members, including approximately twenty professionals from different departments of the 3GM, along with twenty-six junior students from Chongqing University, attended the lecture. This lecture introduced the idea of public history and discussed the practice of public history in the 3GM setting, the characteristics of urban space and the role of urban museums, ethics in exhibit design, and oral history as a methodology.

The second part of the lecture focused on the rationale, process, and methodology of the project, and also considered lessons learned. The lecture inspired some fruitful exchanges among the audience. The professionals provided structured feedback that centered around what they would like to improve in the exhibit,

<sup>15</sup> The interview data were transcribed by the twenty-six class participants from the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Chongqing University in 2016 and organized and compiled by Ting Zhang from the Department of History at Zhejiang University in 2018. The quotes come from the interview surveys, with page numbers specified from the transcription. The oral histories and transcripts are now archived at the Center for Public History, Zhejiang University.



The training program on museums and public history, and a seminar discussion on the “Museums and the Public” project, April 19, 2016. (Photo credit: Department of Public Education, the Three Gorges Museum)

and how. The dialogue proved critical in the questionnaire design, adjustment, and implementation. As a result of feedback, the scope of the project eventually expanded from one to four permanent exhibits.

Formerly known as the Southwest Museum (1951), and the Chongqing Museum (1955), the 3GM is located in Chongqing, one of four municipalities in China.<sup>16</sup> It boasts a wide range of collections including antique chinaware, paintings and calligraphy, Chinese zithers,<sup>17</sup> and ink drawings preserved in Chongqing during the Anti-Japanese War. In 2000, the Three Gorges project gave the 3GM a fresh impetus. Historically, the Three Gorges area is where the Kingdom Shu was located. A large number of Shu relics were identified and interpreted. Underwater inscriptions also tell, quite convincingly, a story of hydraulic development. More recently, after more than forty years of geological surveying since 1950s, the central government selected Sandouping as the site for a major dam project and invested RMB 200 billion to build it, which became known to the rest of the world as the Three Gorges Project.<sup>18</sup> The project, one of the most ambitious hydroelectric

<sup>16</sup> The four municipalities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing.

<sup>17</sup> A traditional Chinese musical instrument.

<sup>18</sup> The granite at the dam site was formed by magnetic condensate crystalline at the depth of the shell. The lithology is uniform, and rock masses are integral with high mechanical strength and

projects in Chinese history, started in 1994 and spanned seventeen years. Geographically, the project spills over into neighboring regions, and it carries unequivocal national significance that China is eager to demonstrate. With flood prevention, hydroelectric power, and water transportation as three primary goals, the project has submerged approximately 120 towns, more than 500 rare species and plants, and numerous historic sites and cultural landscapes along the Yangtze River. More than one million residents were dislocated. The ecological and cultural impact upon the local communities remains difficult to assess.

With a new mission to preserve the heritage of the Three Gorges project, the 3GM was expanded into four locations, including the key exhibition hall in the core city of Chongqing, the White Crane Ridge (Baiheliang) Underwater Inscription Museum, the Defending China Alliance Headquarters (Song Qingling's Former Residence Exhibition Hall), and the Tushan Kiln Site, all of which are located within approximately one hundred kilometers of the city core.

Thus the former local urban museum acquired national status, despite its somewhat disadvantageous location. As the "comprehensive museum," a term coined by the State Council, the 3GM collects, preserves, studies, and exhibits historical, social, and cultural artifacts that, as it claims, represent the essential character of Chongqing, although what constitutes that character remains vaguely and arbitrarily defined. It also functions as the city's National Patriotism Education Demonstration Base, the National Juvenile Education Base, and the National Scientific Education Base. The newly revamped key exhibition hall opened to the public on June 18, 2005. The permanent exhibitions include the "Splendid Three Gorges," an overview of the history, geology, and culture of the Three Gorges region; the "Ancient Bayu," a chronology of premodern history of Chongqing; the *Journey towards a City*, which traces urban evolution of Chongqing; and the "Sculpture and Art of Han Dynasty," a presentation of pottery works, foodways, and stone works of the Han dynasty (202BC–202CE), all of which were designed more than a decade ago, and needed refurbishing.

Take the *Journey towards a City* exhibition as an illustration. It presents a panoramic view of how Chongqing evolved from a small town into a vibrant municipality in China. As the capital of the Kingdom of Ba (circa 1100–316 BCE) during the Zhou Dynasty, Chongqing became a regional political and military center after 316 BCE when the Qin Kingdom replaced the Ba. Centuries later, in 1890, the city took a new direction after China and Britain signed the *Amendment to Yantai Treaty* in Beijing, under which Chongqing became a bustling trading port along the Yangtze River. It was not until 1929 that Chongqing officially obtained "city" status. In 1937, during the 1930s war with Japan, the capital Nanjing fell and became the seat of the collaborationist government. In 1939, under the political contingency, Chongqing was designated as a municipality, and in 1940, the nationalist capital. The

---

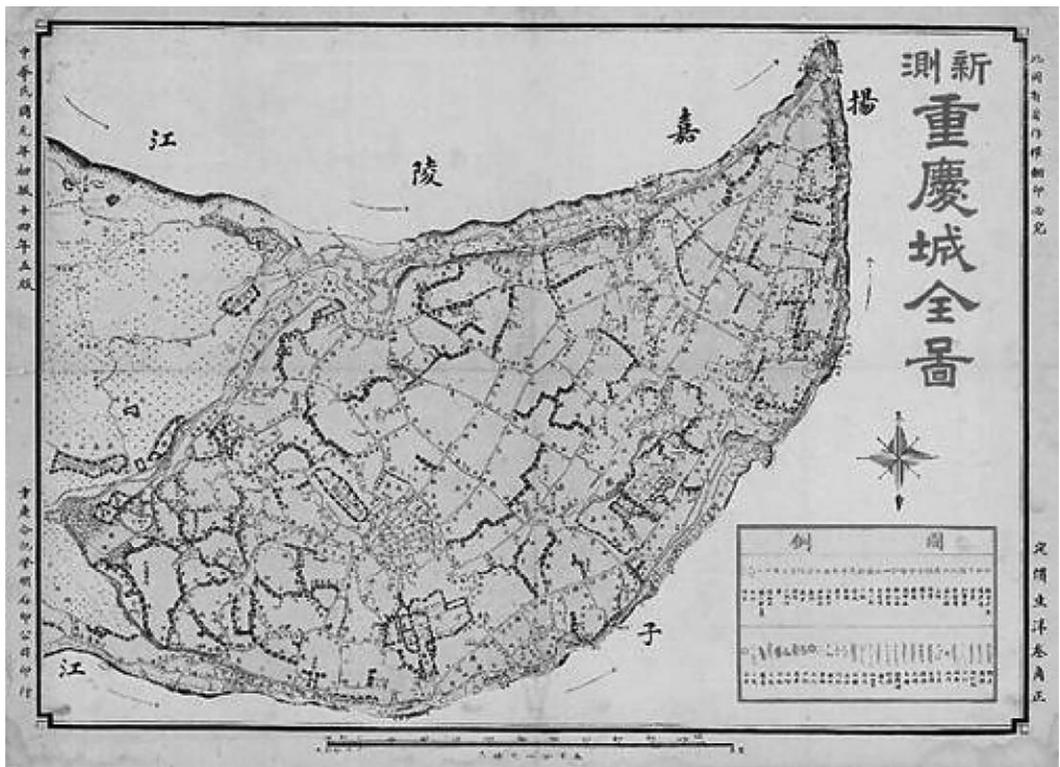
slightly poor permeability. The dam site is a rigid section with high stability. It is suitable for the construction of high concrete dams.



The main entrance to the Three Gorges Museum, with the red banner indicating the Museum Day of 2016: Museums and Cultural Landscapes. (Photo by the author)

war-capital quickly became home to approximately four hundred factories and one million immigrants. The best technology, industry, human talent, and political capital rapidly accumulated in the city, bringing energy and prosperity. The upgrade of the city to national status also influenced its urban structure and planning. The municipal government busied itself building roads, ports, and factories and redesigning the city into a tripartite pattern with the old core, the rivers, and the riverbank remaining intact.

On November 30, 1949, the new Communist government took over Chongqing. The Southwest Bureau of the CCP Central Committee entered Chongqing, which directly managed the local party organizations at all levels, and the city became the political, military, and economic center of the southwest region. After the establishment of the Southwest Region in 1949, Chongqing became a municipality under the direct jurisdiction of the central government. In 1954, the Southwest Region was abolished and Chongqing was placed under the authority of Sichuan Province. Chongqing maintained two years of status as a municipality (under the direct authority of the central government) until this privilege was revoked by the Southwest Military Commission in 1954.



Map of Chongqing. (Source: Chongqing Archives)

The broad strokes of the city's history is similar that of other urban areas in China. Unlike many other cities, however, Chongqing does not boast about its ancientness. Historical records mentioned that the city was first built during the Qin Dynasty, and expanded in the Three Kingdoms Period (220–280 CE). It was later constantly rebuilt during the Ming Dynasty when the basic city layout, including the Eight Diagrams of nine palaces, came into existence. The city did not embrace modernity. The gaudy cylinder-block high-rises in the downtown core and the equally garish streetscapes, against the skyline the color of unpolished pewter, all seem tastelessly bland. Even when it was upgraded to the status of municipality in 1997, it was difficult to get rid of its parochialism.

The city's history as wartime capital continues to shape urban landscapes and local identity. The State Council and the Central Committee has peddled Red Tourism (tourism associated with China's Communist revolution and the establishment of the Communist government) as part of national patriotic education, and the creation of the Red Crag Circuit, which connects two major museums, the Red Crag Revolutionary Memorial Hall cluster and the Gele Mountain cluster, among other scattered revolutionary sites in and near Chongqing, is part of this initiative. The interpretative labels at these sites, riddled with inaccuracies, false memories, and self-serving distortions, are meant to create nostalgia for the revolutionary era.

*Journey towards a City* attempted to interpret and present the city's tumultuous history, urban landscape, and revolution-era identity in a structured public space. The exhibit faced two major challenges in doing so. First was the decision to primarily follow a thematic structure, making the chronology of events unclear. A frequent criticism from the professionals within the 3GM lay in the fact that the exhibit lacked a clearly defined chronological line and seemed "too scattered without a chronological order to tie the pieces together."<sup>19</sup> Dominated by poorly interpreted artifacts, the exhibits leave the audience with a muddled grasp of urban history. A second concern was about the balance between visitor engagement and protection of the artifacts. As one observer stated, "many reenacted scenes were designed with the original artifacts, and we have to exercise certain level of protection. . . . The 'no touch' warning notice did not work for the crowds." An example of the tension between public engagement and artifact preservation was the adobe house on display. "We are worried when such a crowd flows in, it will gradually be deteriorated. But many visitors are curious, and they want to touch the house," one museum professional noted. He wondered, "What about an interactive space for such experience? Or we could design some models?"<sup>20</sup> In contrast, advocates for participation believed that artifacts that are not touched are unloved. The exhibit redesign sought to tackle problems associated with exhibit labels, public space, service, guides, and communication between the 3GM and the public. With such an ambitious project, the museum had to justify that the new plan had clear advantages over the old one. This meant an inevitable clash between the new and the old.

### Issues and Analysis

Many stories, memories, insights, and lessons came out of the fieldwork, and it is worthy to point out two of the most important ones. The first one is familiar to public historians: despite a desire to identify and convey history accurately and clearly, the past is multi-faceted, complex and sometimes conflicting. By trying to reduce history to a simple and single narrative, museums can reduce richness and complexity of historical experience, and create a contrived interpretation that does not communicate well with some visitors. The second one is that although most visitors want to be engaged by and participate in museum exhibitions, they interact with the artifacts and interpretive media based on their interest, experience, and learning style. Below, I will further explain three aspects of these issues.

### Interpretation: The Holy Grail of Authenticity

The word "authentic" is derived from the Greek *authenikos*, meaning original, genuine, and principal, and entails a sense of authority. In modern use, authentic,

<sup>19</sup> Feedback A from professionals to author's series lectures on public history and the museums on April 19, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Feedback C from professionals to author's series lectures on public history and the museums on April 19, 2016.

defined as trustworthy and reliable, implies that something corresponds to the facts and is not fictitious. We encountered an overwhelmingly positive response to the ideal of authenticity in our field research at the 3GM, but different groups interpreted the word differently. For museum professionals, authenticity, which is associated with authority, becomes a benchmark of their trade: authenticity is an integral part of their professional identity. The data reveal, however, that they understand that absolute authenticity is not attainable. As one museum professional acknowledged, “We select artifacts to present, and interpret artifacts selectively. The material culture does not talk literally, so it cannot, in and of itself, reflect an absolute authenticity. It may touch a scrap of it, yet not tell a complete true story. Interpretation strives after authenticity, yet it is limited by various implications. The result? A limited, tortured, and sometimes misleading version of history.”<sup>21</sup>

Professionals and visitors seem to have a different view about the use of replicated objects. As long as the artifacts deliver the intended historical information, it matters little to the professionals if they are replicas or originals. Visitors, however, come to museums for the originals, which is the very virtue for visiting a museum. Why bother to travel to see replicas? At the same time, visitors are aware that artifacts are open to interpretation and can tell more than one version of historical truth.

How does one interpret multi-faceted history to or with the public? How do a museum space and its exhibit labels function as a contested terrain? How should a museum approach particularly contentious past events? One example concerns Chongqing’s wartime history, which has always been ideologically contested. As one volunteer noted, the city’s history during the revolution is:

Important, but complicated. Let me give you a story of my own family. My uncle harbored an untold motive for joining a northern expedition during the revolution, during which he was designated as a hero. Our textbook today paints a rosy picture of the revolution, in which everyone eagerly joined to fight for a better nation. My uncle, however, happened to offend the local landlords, so he fled to join the army. He was also struggling for three meals every day . . . What is a true history? You cannot simplify history by unselectively labeling these big words. People are complicated.<sup>22</sup>

Sometimes volunteers and staff advocated for compromise with “pure” authenticity in display. One volunteer noted, in reference to the collective burial in the Ancient Bayu exhibit:

The bones are real and therefore thrilling in a way. However, traditional Chinese culture emphasizes having one’s bones buried for eternal peace.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with museum professional A, transcript, 131.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with volunteer A, transcript, p. 355.

Exposing the skeleton out in the public seems disrespectful. Moreover, the exhibit embeds the bones beneath the ground, so everyone will step on it for a closer view—this seems ironically degrading.<sup>23</sup>

Visitors, for the most part, seemed to embrace the idea of authenticity. As one stated:

When I was about five to ten years old, the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party were fiercely fighting. But I have never had a chance to learn the details, rather a skimpy description from a text book. Where is the true history? What is missing? The history textbook stated, “China is one of the best nations in the world.” After travelling all over the world, however, I find the statement may not be completely correct. There are many excellent nations, and China may not be the “best.”<sup>24</sup>

Many echoed this interest in authenticity and the importance of the truth by acknowledging the role of interpretation. Part of the *Journey towards a City* exhibit presented the war with Japan in an ideologically biased light, blurring the line between facts and ideas, which aroused some criticism. Our respondents were not comfortable with presentations that seemed prejudiced, but they were open to complexity and uncertainty in historical interpretation.

#### Presentation: Engaging or Alienating the Audience?

Traditional exhibit design in China rests on the assumption that visitors come to museums as passive recipients of information, ready to absorb whatever is presented. In this thinking, as long as the artifacts are effectively presented (which often means using the latest gadgets and technologies) museums serve their purpose. Our project revealed the flaws in this assumption. Exhibitions, regardless of whether they are well-researched, text-heavy, or visually appealing, fail if they do not engage with what the visitors bring to the museum. Often visitors’ interest in coming to the museum stems from very personal reasons, or as Freeman Tilden stated, “whatever touches his personality, his experiences, and his ideals.”<sup>25</sup>

The *Journey towards a City* exhibit records changes in the urban landscape and in doing so triggers local memories and collective nostalgia. In the past two decades, frenzied construction has dramatically reshaped the city, altering original street patterns and people’s way of life. Traditional houses perched on elevated topography have long given the city a unique look and locals believed that they should be

23 Interview with volunteer B, transcript, 311.

24 Interview with visitor A, transcript, 170.

25 Tilden was inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The world exists for the education of each man. There is no age, or state of society, or mode of action in history, to which there is not something corresponding in his own life.” Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 36.

preserved. At least some visitors reminisced with fondness about the past look of the city:

The seemingly untidy streetscape, well-spaced buildings, and sun-flooded flora, gave us a pleasant space to reminisce. . . . The real change started in 2004. The local government took care of urban infrastructure, construction went well with historic preservation. You could feel, smell, and witness the change (of the urban landscape) even from ordinary landscapes such a sycamore-coned street. Old times.<sup>26</sup>

The challenge lies in creating a narrative that pulls together discreet information and seemingly unrelated artifacts to reveal the soul of the city, not just presenting an inventory of the facts. In this case, the public cares about changes in the urban landscape, and they come to the exhibit to remember and to learn. As the only exhibition in the museum that attracts mostly local residents, *Journey towards a City* has inspired many intimate experiences and personal stories, our data shows. In the surveys, visitors described local memories, even those only dimly recalled, with a firm sense of ownership. A few visitors noted, however, that incorporating some more recent artifacts into the exhibition would help it more effectively interpret postwar urban development and make the experience feel more relevant.

The question of how museums can make exhibits feel more relevant generated fruitful conversations from our respondents. One notable example comes from discussions about decontextualizing artifacts in the museum setting, focused on the inscriptions on the tablet located at the entrance of the Splendid Three Gorges exhibit. This particular inscription, elegant in style and accompanied by substantial textual documents, offers a glimpse into the history of the late Song dynasty, especially the epigraph of the “Eulogy of Holy Virtues of the Song Emperor” originally located on a high cliff.<sup>27</sup> The experts found it difficult to perform rubbing work in situ, as they would have had to climb high to reach the top and, worse, find and use paper adequately large enough for rubbing. Outsourced to a cultural heritage company, the original inscription was cut into several parts, taken down, and then pieced together in the museum.

The removal of the epigraph from its original location to the 3GM jeopardized its spatial integrity, as decontextualized artifacts can hardly inform the audience about specific geographical locations. However, most of our respondents viewed this as the best alternative preservation strategy as it allows visitors to appreciate the magnificence of the original inscription. Even in the museum setting some deterioration is inevitable, although placement there slows down the weathering process.<sup>28</sup>

A second significant question concerns how exhibit can accommodate diverse and contested voices. What if voices from members of the public do not agree with

<sup>26</sup> Interview with visitor B at the *Journey towards a City* exhibition hall, transcript, 363.

<sup>27</sup> *Huang Song Zhong Xing Sheng De Song*, the title of the epigraph.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with volunteer C, transcript, 276.



Sculpture about Three Gorges Immigration Project, with the inscription stating: Sacrifice the small families (the individuals) for the big family (the country); we salvage the Three Gorges wholeheartedly. (Photo by the author)

mainstream opinions? “The Splendid Three Gorges” exhibition, which presents the story of the creation of the Yangtze River and the unique landscape of the Three Gorges, represents a lost opportunity to provoke audiences. The residential buildings, which were designed for the mountainous topography, were built on stilts and supported by wooden or bamboo pillars, embodying the Chinese notion of a harmonious relationship between people and the environment. But the project actually produced considerable disruption. The issue of large-scale out-migration as a result of the Three Gorges Project remains contested and unresolved, and the effect is lingering. An original resident noted:

As an original resident of the Three Gorges area, I feel personally connected with the immigration project. I am not displaced (because our dwellings are located at a higher latitude which would not be inundated), but most of my relatives were. Separation carries the kind of weight that we are still digesting after all those years. We have lost contact with many old friends . . . it is the simplicity of old-timely neighbors that draws me back. Their minds were not cluttered with monetary profits.

Our project specifically aimed at unearthing the untold stories of the Three Gorges Project, and reactions were decidedly mixed. Some commented on the Three Gorges Project positively, while others clearly disagreed; still others recollected the project more measuredly. With such strong differing interpretations, the issue for the museums is how to present many complex and contradictory points of view. As one respondent noted:

People are displaced, and they have to move to other places because their houses are destroyed. So, it is not good. But maybe it is inevitable in a big project like this, you know. It is important for flood control and power generation. . . . sometimes we find out sacrifice maybe not so good. Their house will be destroyed—not good, but inevitable, and understandably a benefit to the whole country; it happens in other countries also.<sup>29</sup>

The *Roaring Bashu* exhibition<sup>30</sup> offers another site of contention. One visitor was quite critical, asserting that “the exhibits definitely downplay, if not altogether ignore the role that the Nationalist Party played during the war. Here we have a carefully selected presentation, a tortured version of history.”<sup>31</sup> These competing viewpoints underscore how contentious presentation of the past can be. Is it possible to present history in a way that does not demonize one side, and deify the other? Who controls what to present and how? Because the museum attempted to shy away from controversy and therefore sometimes ended up displaying a limited, if not an entirely false, version of the past, these questions went largely unanswered.

A third issue concerns technology and access. Most respondents did not embrace digital technology and new media uncritically. They agreed that, used wisely, technology can enrich the exhibit, yet asserted that all forms of media, old or new, should blend into the exhibit. For example, the “My Wartime Life” landscape and documentary painting that combined voice, light, and electronics was attention grabbing, yet the form took over the content. Many visitors left the exhibit with very little knowledge or memory of the city’s wartime history, and instead only remembered the flashy painting. In this case, the museum would have benefited from input from visitors.

Material culture, rather than electronics or text labels, offers the most opportunity for learning and interaction for audiences. Artifacts are more open to multiple interpretations than text labels. When visitors bring their own experience to bear on their interpretation, curators can avoid taking sides in political debates by demonstrating more than one way of looking at the artifact. Designing an exhibit based on artifacts might seem to restrict focus to specific social groups; however, in a culture where censorship is still in place, material culture can be more persuasive

29 Interview with visitor C at the “Gorgeous Three Gorges” exhibition hall, transcript, 273. This piece of oral history involves an interesting cross-cultural perspective.

30 The exhibit focuses on the war period in China (1937–1945).

31 Interview with visitor D at the “Roaring Bashu” exhibition hall, transcript, 177.

than written sources. Thus investing more in interpreting artifacts to present a richer narrative to the public, instead of engaging in divisive political debates, offers a glimpse of hope.

In various exhibitions, from collections and archives to labels and exhibit space, we asked what was missing and what truly matters. If an exhibition offers a playground that invites different voices, exhibit design and presentation should work as an organic whole. At the 3GM, where the research department is responsible for reviewing text for quality, it is mainly up to the designers to write the scripts narrating the exhibitions' stories. Our data reveal a broken link. Occasionally, visitors come primarily for information, but most of the time, they yearn for something deeper that lies behind factual statements. Isolated names or uninterpreted artifacts may enter into visitors' eyes, but psychologically, they rarely enter into visitors' hearts. These exhibitions fail to reach visitors on an emotional level. Unfortunately, the researchers at the 3GM rarely get involved in public education as intradepartmental dialogues are unusual. Part of the reason is that each department is evaluated differently, and partly it is because museums mimic the academy with self-imposed disciplinary or departmental barriers. The gap here is unfortunate but hard to bridge. Information is part of any interpretation, but good interpretation must go beyond factual statements. Turning a *mélange* of information into interpretive strategy requires a collaborative joint venture.

#### Authority and Authority-Sharing: Public Service, Culture, and Education

With social relevance at their very core, “the goal of the museums was to bring people into contact with new, educational, and potentially inspiring experiences.”<sup>32</sup> Spencer Crew and James Sims connect authenticity with authority, writing:

Authenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority. Objects have no authority; people do. It is people on the exhibition team who must make a judgment about how to tell about the past. Authenticity—authority—enforces the social contract between the audience and the museum, a socially agreed-upon reality that exists only as long as confidence in the voice of the exhibition holds.<sup>33</sup>

How effectively, or ineffectively, does the 3GM function as a site of public history?

When Harold Skramstad analyzed the evolution of museums in the twentieth century, he found that there had been “a gradual yet profound cultural change as museums shifted the direction of their energies from public education and inspiration toward self-generated, internal, professional and academic goals. Museums began to see their primary intellectual and cultural authority coming from their

<sup>32</sup> Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 163.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

collections rather than their educational and community purpose.”<sup>34</sup> He observes that the dominant focus of museum culture for most of the twentieth century remained the accumulation and management of museum collections and the professionalization of museum workers and museum work. The above analysis of the museum development in China shows that this professionalism has too often widened the gap between museums and the public who use and support them.

Let me start with the public and social mission of the museum. It is not enough that we preserve and conserve. We need to think about how to use our institutions for the public. The social function of historical artifacts has long been undervalued, however, in Chinese museums. Moreover, museums seek to quell concerns about abuse or commercialization of objects that can lead to the instinct to lock artifacts away, thereby limiting their public utility. And further, the question of how *public* is *public* has been debated. The public mission represents a key difference between museum education and academic education. Museum-based research is different from scholarly research in focus, method, audience, and impact. Visitors approach the artifacts as an interactive platform, or a bridge linking the past and the present. Generally this involves three aspects. First, visitors look for historical information and knowledge. Second, visitors engage in emotional communication, or a dialogical process. This works particularly vividly in ancient history. Visitors come to talk with those who have long passed away, out of admiration or respect. Third, the museum acts as a source of cultural creation. When information is absorbed, knowledge is enriched, and emotions are communicated, one reconstructs one’s knowledge structure and emotional world.

In our project, some individuals commented on the connections between museum education and exhibits; some view public education and exhibitions as unrelated, and others considered exhibitions as but another approach to and form of education. All activities count and are integral to the social function of museums. Viewed through this prism, educational activities, based on exhibits, complement one another. Authority is the key here: Chinese students are taught to respect teachers’ authority, while museum education focuses more on creativity, interaction, and analytical thinking.

A second take-away is that visitors focus on participation. Many agree that the museum is part of civic education. When young students come in, they are thrilled to interact, touch, and explore in their own way. Exhibitions should accommodate this particular group of visitors. For example, artifacts should be displayed so that they can easily view them to attract their interest. The same goes for interpretation. The kinds of words or language we use can reach a wide range of interest groups with different attention spans. Hoping to do just that, our project created the 123 Creative Workshop for the museum based on the themes of the four exhibitions. The Workshop combined visual and architectural cues to create an aesthetic spatial

<sup>34</sup> Harold Skramstad, “An Agenda for American Museums in the Twenty-First Century,” *Daedalus*, 199 (1999).



The 123 Creative Workshop, located at the core of the first floor of the 3GM. (Photo by the author)

experience, and valued active learning from curiosity and exploration, allowing visitors to connect the artifacts to contemporary life. When cultural artifacts are linked to the present, tradition and culture become a living reality. The Workshop encouraged multi-sensory engagement that allowed visitors to associate the artifacts with a broader context and with personal experiences. Ultimately, the visitors viewed the exhibitions through their own eyes, not the interpreters', and became what Nina Simon calls "cultural participants, not passive consumers."<sup>35</sup> A sense of getting involved enhances and enriches the experience, and the corner-space is transformed into a creative terrain, waiting for the visitors to be provoked and inspired, and to leave with wonder and awe. As one of the professionals interviewed noted, visitors "do not come to the museum to be indoctrinated; they come to get informed, inspired, or even challenged. Aside from the attractiveness of the artifacts present, the interpretation entailed, stories elicited, and field experience shared, also play a crucial role."<sup>36</sup> Thus, the 3GMs should accommodate diverse learning patterns.

<sup>35</sup> Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Museum 2.0, 2010), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with professional C, transcript, 45.

A third issue raised by our research concerns volunteering. In a culture without a volunteering tradition in public institutions, what are the motivations of those who volunteer at the 3GM? The data revealed a personal connection, a sense of ownership, and a genuine pride in the two-thousand-year history of Chongqing, as well as the hope of having an opportunity to have an impact on visitors. Volunteers have given extensive time and energy to their work at the 3GM without any monetary return. Many expressed an intense gratification, on both personal and professional levels, from volunteering experiences.

#### Visions for Museums in China

The “Museum and the Public” project is significant in three ways. First, it presents the idea of a comprehensive museum that strives to be inclusive and representative. This type of museum, which is strategically located in the center of a city, or often in the capital of a province, opens up a window to urban history, landscapes, and political memories. The scale and location of the 3GM represents the general situation of public museums in China and could serve as a model for other similar museums.

Second, it is the first interaction between public history and museums in China, both of which were imported from the West, and struggle to survive and thrive in the Chinese setting. The collaboration is challenging in that it requires political maneuvering, scholarly patience, and attention to multiple stakeholders. Museum studies scholars in China, isolated and restricted, rarely step across self-imposed boundaries, and museum professionals speak their own languages in their own limited circles. The willful blindness to the very public that museums serve seems unfortunate. A collaborative project such as this becomes both a result of and an agency for change.

Third, the visitor survey has long been part of the contemporary museum culture, although traditional surveys tended to collect cold numbers, unwilling words, and machine-like responses. These surveys, which were designed from professionals’ instead of the public’s perspective, assumed visitors, at best, were passive receivers of information, not active participants in museums. Technology and social media in the past two decades have added extra layers of sophistication to visitors—they arrive at museums to consume, participate, and be inspired, not to be indoctrinated. Our method of interviewing with open-ended questions served to animate the artifacts, and to create an interactive space for creative and genuine discussions.

The project offers three lessons for museums in China. First, interpretation is hugely important. In order to serve the needs of visitors better, museums must move beyond detailed, factual information about objects or simple narratives and get at something larger and deeper. They must reflect the multi-faceted experiences of people and their communities. Our project qualitatively reveals a missing link between the professionals and the public, and interpretation should fill this void. In a museum, zoo, park, or heritage site, interpreters “translate” artifacts, collections,

and physical resources into a language that helps visitors make meaning of these resources.<sup>37</sup> In his classic *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Freeman Tilden defined interpretation as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”<sup>38</sup> In many museums in the West since the 1960s, curators have taken an active role in exhibition development. Now they often work as or with interpretive planners and text writers to create the storylines for displays. Exhibitions in Chinese museums, however, rely primarily upon collections, and seeking to assemble unique collections often takes priority over interpretation. Interpretation has played, if any, a marginal role, as if artifacts announce their histories, values, and stories in bold terms.

However, artifacts do NOT talk themselves; interpreters do. What is informative does not always overlap with what is interpretive. Quite often, the interpretive labels appear either as skimpy generalizations, or as half-or-overbaked research statements filled with academic jargon. Both care little about the visitors as complex human beings who enter the museum with personality, emotion, experience, and education (not necessarily formal training in the museums or the subject areas), intelligence, and aspiration. The rationale seems that visitors come to be educated, and the museum assumes the sole authority. As our project demonstrates this is wrong on many levels.

When researchers become intoxicated by a welter of details about certain artifacts and fill their narratives with indigestible facts, they do not reveal something larger or deeper, and they do not interpret; they just inform. This is why, during our project, consciously or not, the professionals expressed some frustration with the public. Of course some visitors can be difficult, but most come to be provoked and are anxious to learn; that is, they are “in a receptive mood.” Instead of overwhelming the visitors with simple facts, plain numbers, and drab statements, interpreters engage the visitors’ “mindsight” with storytelling, satisfy their mood and emotion with sympathy.<sup>39</sup> The audiences responding to our interview survey carry complex motives and emotions.

Any interpretation should be grounded in solid research; good interpretation reveals something larger and deeper than superficial material appearance. A good interpreter is a skilled storyteller. In this light, an ideal interpretive space is where objects, ideas, and people meet in a kind of narrative form. Within that space, diverse voices clash and intertwine, creating a historical ambiance, with artifacts

37 Credit for using the word “interpretation” to describe the work of exhibit designers, docents, and naturalists goes to John Muir who penned in his Yosemite notebook: “I’ll interpret the rocks, learn the language of flood, storm and the avalanche. I’ll acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens, and get as near the heart of the world as I can.” John Muir, “The National Parks and Forest Reservations,” *Sierra Club Bulletin* 1, no. 7 (1896): 271–84.

38 Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 33.

39 Mindsight is a term coined by Tilden to mean the mind’s eye. He explained that the interpreter’s task is to plant the seed of provocation and help the visitor see beyond the mind’s eye. See: “Mindsight: The Aim of Interpretation,” in Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 161–65.

carefully arranged and properly interpreted in order to invite engagement. Consider the landscape-documentary painting in the *Roaring Bashu* exhibit. The painting, which captures and reenacts a historical scene, provides ample space for reflection, and for analytical thinking. An engaging space always has an eye on experience, design, and delivery, as the 123 Creative Workshop well demonstrated.

Second, exhibition teams must strive to create more open-ended, participatory exhibitions built on public history expertise and using approaches like co-curation to incorporate communities in the creative process. If interpretation creates an engaging democratic public space, participation logically follows. Public needs can be effectively served by engaging in continual dialogues, and by relying on those who have lived the experience to collaborate with us in constructing the community's history.<sup>40</sup> In redesigning the exhibits, we should incorporate local stories and personal memories. These stories and memories will reinterpret and reconstruct histories.

Third, at a broader scale, museums are facing an evolving public, an increasingly demanding and thinking public that is craving history and active engagement. More educated and sophisticated audiences not only contribute important content for community-based exhibitions; some are excited about exploring contested and complicated histories. Co-curating, co-making history, and co-constructing public memory have come into play. This will require public historians to be flexible and to learn new skills which must be based on certain essential principles. One possibility seems to create exhibitions based on public history research, which has re-defined historical research in China as well as in other parts of the world. Public history research, with its attention to the common people and their everyday lives, requires a different method of inquiry simply because new questions are asked, new sources identified, and new insights revealed. Voices and insights from the eyewitnesses, the marginalized, and the overlooked should be considered.

## Conclusion

In ways similar to the liberal free-flow social ethos at the turn of the twentieth century, today's China is encountering another wave of liberal thinking. As social consumption of history expands, museums boast incredible potential as sites of public history, where people interact, engage, learn, and share. To better accomplish this mission, a new generation of public historians will need to acquire certain skills. The following four principles are essential:

1. Professional research is central to all exhibition and interpretation development. Please note this is not limited to the field of history or museum studies or any narrowly defined discipline. It refers to competency to engage in rigorous research.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 301.

2. Subject knowledge is important, but one has to go beyond the academic and professional relationship with it; one has to love it, be enthusiastic and stay curious about it.
3. One should master the art and craft of language. Establishing a genuine and trustworthy relationship with the public flows from the proper and clear use of language, and that promotes an accessible style of writing and speaking.
4. The ability to talk and work across disciplinary and institutional boundaries needs to be cultivated. It requires political savvy, patience, tenacity, and most importantly, humility.

These possibilities should show no finality, no exclusivity, and no limits. The intellectual visionaries at the turn of the twentieth century observed what their contemporaries did not. From the first public museum established in 1905, academics and professionals have explored and written about museums and museum studies has become a well-established discipline in China. Over time, unfortunately, museums have gradually moved away from a public spirit, and turned inward and myopic as a close ally to rigid academic culture.

This work is plowing a virgin field as far as the philosophy and practice of public history is concerned. The spade-work intends to provoke, and it invites further furrow.

• • • • •

*Na Li* is a research fellow/professor in the Department of History, Zhejiang University. She is editor of *Public History: A National Journal of Public History*, and international consulting editor for *The Public Historian*. She serves on the board of directors for the National Council on Public History. Her research focuses on public history and urban preservation. Her first book, *Kensington Market: Collective Memory, Public History, and Toronto's Urban Landscape* (University of Toronto Press, 2015) investigates ethnic minority entrepreneurs in one of the most diverse neighborhoods, Kensington Market, in Toronto, incorporates collective memory in urban landscape interpretation, and suggests a culturally sensitive narrative approach (CSNA) to urban preservation. Her second book, *Public History: A Critical Introduction*, surveys the key issues in public history (Peking University Press, 2019).