

National Museums and the Articulation of Cultural Identity: A Comparative Study

Cheng Zhang¹

¹ The University of Melbourne, Australia

Correspondence: Cheng Zhang, The University of Melbourne, Australia.

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Abstract

This paper explores the application of digital technology in the creative industry, focusing on the case study of Dunhuang Mogao Caves. The study examines the role of digital technology in preserving and promoting cultural heritage, as well as its impact on the development of creative industries. The paper is organized into five chapters, including a literature review, methodology, discussion on cultural heritage, digitalization, and creative industries, a case study of the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, and a conclusion highlighting deficiencies and future trends. The findings suggest that digital technology plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and promoting the growth of creative industries, with the case study of Dunhuang Mogao Caves serving as a prime example.

Keywords: digital technology, creative industry, cultural heritage, Dunhuang Mogao Caves, preservation, digitization, cultural and creative industries, case study

1. Introduction

National museums' role in establishing a sense of national identity has attracted more attention in recent years. The key artefacts and collections that reflect and shape national identity are kept at national museums, which serve as cultural repositories. They are essential platforms for societal ideals, historical stories, and a sense of identity. These institutions serve a complex and usually polarising role in the contemporary world, characterised by multiculturalism and global interconnectedness. This article examines national museums' evolving function and crucial elements in the twenty-first century using case studies of the British Museum in London, the United Kingdom, and the National Museum of China in Beijing, China.

Both museums offer a unique method for displaying and interpreting cultural material firmly anchored in their historical, political, and social contexts. China's lengthy history of civilisation and political philosophy are reflected in the National Museum of China. And the British Museum, the offspring of a mighty empire and home to a sizable international collection of artwork and antiquities offers a worldwide viewpoint. These methods represent current museum viewpoints on questions of ethnic and cultural identity. Throughout this article, we will examine how the two museums handle the challenging work of conveying national histories, engaging with various audiences, and resolving contentious issues like the return of relics. Through a comparative analysis, we aim to highlight the different

strategies employed by the different museums in their mission to educate, engage and inspire the public and the impact of these strategies on our understanding of national identity and cultural heritage in today's globalised world.

2. National Museum and Cultural Identity

A national museum is essentially an institution dedicated to preserving and displaying cultural objects essential to the country's history and culture. Museums are privileged sites for the representation of the nation because they illustrate the nation as cultured, sophisticated, inclusive and paternal, and they are the guarantors of national identity.¹ National museums are knowledge-based social and political institutions representing and legitimising the state.² The establishment and dynamics of national museums are linked to the trajectory, context and timing of the nation and state-building process.³ The last few years have seen significant change and reorganisation in museums.⁴ This change has seemed unprecedented, unexpected and unacceptable, but museums have always had to change how they work and what they do according to the context.⁵ However, their primary purpose of preserving the national heritage remains the same.

A key aspect of heritage conservation is how national museums reflect and construct cultural identity. According to Varutti: "Museum representations supply miniatures of culture".⁶ The portrayal of national identity is a sensitive issue for many museums, especially those of national stature.⁷ The challenge is to balance and promote national unity amid so many

different identities.⁸ National museums have evolved considerably from the nationalist and self-educational aims of the 19th century.⁹ They are now intertwined with the social and political goals of the 21st century.¹⁰ In this era, national museums increasingly represent the nation's diversity and participate in the politics of recognition.¹¹ They also respond to multiculturalism, women's movements, gay and lesbian issues and respect for the environment.¹² Museums have responded to these challenges in various ways, and by studying these processes of adaptation and negotiation, museum professionals can better manage these differences.¹³

Today's national museums have a diverse range of roles. They have always served as important hubs for the formation and development of nation-states, effectively engaging diverse groups such as researchers, art enthusiasts, the general public, taxpayers, policy influencers and tourists.¹⁴ As well as being stewards of the national heritage, they act as research and education centres, attracting visitors through various exhibitions, educational programs, and interactive displays. Museums provide a valuable service to the community and have immense educational value.¹⁵ National museums are considered symbols and cultural constitutions of the state, intertwined with identity politics and nation-building.¹⁶ The differences in the performance of national museums demonstrate the plasticity of cultural institutions.¹⁷

However, national museums often face challenges and controversies. The nation-state identity of the past is becoming less and less critical, and new identities are being created.¹⁸ In an era where traditional national identities

¹ Marzia Varutti, (2014). 'The Nation in the Museum', in *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation after Mao*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 77, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unimelb/reader.action?docID=1272725&ppg=90>.

² Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius, (2014). 'Introduction: Making Museums and Nations', in *National Museums and Nation-Building in Europe 1750–2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change*, 1st ed. London: Routledge, 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315737133>.

³ Aronsson and Elgenius, 1.

⁴ Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, (1992). 'What Is a Museum?', in *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1, <http://cat.lib.unimelb.edu.au/record=b5494135-S30>.

⁵ Hooper-Greenhill, 1.

⁶ Varutti, 'The Nation in the Museum', 77.

⁷ Fiona McLean, (2005). 'Museums and National Identity', *Museum and Society*, 3(1), 1.

⁸ McLean, 1.

⁹ McLean, 1.

¹⁰ McLean, 1.

¹¹ McLean, 1.

¹² McLean, 1.

¹³ McLean, 1.

¹⁴ Aronsson and Elgenius, 'Introduction: Making Museums and Nations', 2.

¹⁵ Hooper-Greenhill, 'What Is a Museum?', 2.

¹⁶ Aronsson and Elgenius, 'Introduction: Making Museums and Nations', 7.

¹⁷ Aronsson and Elgenius, 7.

¹⁸ Sharon MacDonald, (2003). 'Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities', *Museum and Society*, 1(1), 1.

are under scrutiny, the function of museums is pivotal.¹ Museums can embody identity and serve as battlegrounds for identity conflicts, but we must understand that our perceptions of specific identities are historically and culturally determined.² Furthermore, the question of the origin and restitution of cultural objects, especially those acquired during the colonial period, is a controversial issue facing many national museums, such as the British Museum and the Louvre. There have been debates in Britain about the imperial past and its legacies, and calls for the decolonisation of museums are gaining momentum.³

3. Case Study

3.1 *The National Museum of China, Beijing, China*

Located on the eastern side of Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the National Museum of China is one of the largest museums in the world. This sprawling museum was created in 2003 due to the merger of the National Museum of Chinese History and the National Museum of the Chinese Revolution.⁴ With collections that comprehensively depict China's history from its earliest periods, the NMC houses over 1.4 million objects, including ancient and contemporary relics, rare and ancient texts and works of art.⁵ The museum has endeavoured to collect tangible examples that reflect China's revolutionary and progressive modern culture.⁶ The NMC holds permanent, unique, and temporary exhibitions covering history and culture, selected artifacts, archaeological discoveries, modern fine arts masterpieces, specific regions' cultures, and international communication.⁷

The National Museum of China promotes Chinese culture and facilitates cultural exchanges with other nations.

It acts as a crucial institution for reiterating the state's tenacity and legitimacy.⁸ They are

predicated on ideas of unity and continuity determined by a political viewpoint and a particular cultural and historical context.⁹ Its exhibitions emphasise the continuity and unity of China's history and culture to foster a sense of national identity among visitors. The museum's exhibits, like "Ancient China," trace China's political, economic, cultural, and social evolution from the Palaeolithic Era to the Ming and Qing dynasties. The tremendous accomplishments and contributions of the Chinese people to human civilisation are emphasised.¹⁰ At the same time, collaborative projects between Chinese and international museums have been steadily increasing.¹¹ The Chinese government aims to consolidate its international status by building solid cultural ties with overseas nations and increasing the global visibility of Chinese culture.¹² China is increasingly hosting exhibitions devoted to non-Chinese cultures and civilisations, some of which may have political undertones.¹³ For example, in 2022, the National Museum of China hosted the "Tota Italia: Origins of a Nation" exhibition. It aims to maintain a close exchange with Italian cultural institutions and demonstrates the commitment of the Chinese and Italian governments to work together to preserve cultural heritage.¹⁴

Building and supporting a cohesive and continuing Chinese national and cultural identity is crucial for the National Museum of China. It promotes the idea that China is 'eternal' and has no beginning in its carefully crafted narrative and chooses to ignore the country's discriminatory past.¹⁵ The museum's exhibition highlights the vision of an ancient civilisation that still exists today, absorbing other peoples and cultures on the way to appear to honour and accept the contributions of other

¹ MacDonald, 1.

² MacDonald, 1.

³ Tristram Hunt, (2019). 'Should Museums Return Their Colonial Artefacts?', *The Guardian*, 29, 5.

⁴ 'About the NMC', National Museum of China, accessed 31 May 2023, http://en.chnmuseum.cn/about_the_nmc_593/about_the_nmc_594/201911/t20191122_173221.html.

⁵ 'About the NMC'.

⁶ 'About the NMC'.

⁷ 'About the NMC'.

⁸ Varutti, 'The Nation in the Museum', 77.

⁹ Varutti, 77.

¹⁰ 'Ancient China', National Museum of China, accessed 31 May 2023, http://en.chnmuseum.cn/exhibition/current_exhibitions_648/201911/t20191127_174983.html.

¹¹ Varutti, 'The Nation in the Museum', 84.

¹² Varutti, 84.

¹³ Varutti, 84.

¹⁴ 'Tota Italia: Origins of a Nation', National Museum of China, accessed 31 May 2023, http://en.chnmuseum.cn/exhibition/exhibition_series/temporary_exhibitions/international_exhibitions/202207/t20220712_256700.html.

¹⁵ Sheila Watson, (2020). 'The Older the Better: Pride and Politics', in *National Museums and the Origins of Nations*, 1st ed. Routledge, 176.

ethnicities.¹ But narratives that emphasise ethnic integration risk overshadowing the unique cultural identities and histories of China's many ethnic minority groups. In addition, the concept of 'state' or 'nation' that the museum presents bears the imprint of modern political ideologies. The state promotes a "patriotic education", and museums help to foster socialist values and love of the country.² But the National Museum of China exhibits unity, continuity and manifest destiny. It presents to Chinese nationals and tourists a virtually uninterrupted history of 'Chineseness' in all the territories China currently controls.³ And those who are not Chinese in the sense that they do not have Chinese cultural practices and thinking are often seen as 'Other'.⁴ This approach subtly reinforces the dominance of Han Chinese culture.

The National Museum of China, like many museums in the country, continue to rely heavily on state funding, and its exhibits tend to reinforce state ideology.⁵ It is thus becoming a critical tool for nation-building and maintaining social unity. Despite these criticisms, the museum's strategic narrative construction effectively contributes to a strong sense of national unity and continuity among Chinese nationals and tourists, presenting an almost unbroken history of Chinese civilisation. The National Museum of China celebrates the contribution of all areas of modern China towards the great China national project.⁶ It shows how multiculturalism moves in time towards creating a united Chinese nation-state with common cultural characteristics.⁷

Regarding its impact on education and tourism, the museum attracts millions of visitors from within and outside China each year, significantly contributing to Beijing's cultural tourism industry. Its educational programs, including guided tours, museum-school cooperation and education activities, are designed to foster a deeper understanding of

Chinese history and culture among its visitors.⁸ For example, the "Cultural Tours" education activities designed for adults with different cultural backgrounds aim to broaden their global vision, develop interests in art, and provide a better understanding of traditional Chinese culture and civilisation.⁹

3.2 *The British Museum, London, the United Kingdom*

The British Museum is the world's first national public museum, founded by Act of Parliament in 1753.¹⁰ It was soon augmented by acquiring Sir William Hamilton's classical vases and antiquities, the Townley Marbles, the Phrygian Marbles and the notorious Elgin Marbles.¹¹ The museum's collections were among Europe's most extensive and valuable by the mid-19th century.¹² The museum houses a vast collection of global art and artefacts representing over two million years of human evolution.¹³ Its most famous exhibits include the Rosetta Stone, the Elgin Marbles, the Egyptian Mummies and the Benin Bronzes.¹⁴ These collections offer a global perspective, emphasising the interconnectedness of world cultures and civilisations throughout history.

Nevertheless, the British Museum's ownership of an extensive collection of global artefacts is controversial. The process by which these ancient treasures were collected is highly controversial, with nations such as Greece, Egypt and Nigeria demanding the return of these historical pieces to their rightful territories.¹⁵ The museum's approach to its collections can be seen as a reflection of Britain's colonial past, perpetuating a Eurocentric

¹ Watson, 177.

² Kirk A. Denton, (2013). 'Introduction', in *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*. University of Hawaii Press, 9, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824840068-002>.

³ Watson, 'The Older the Better', 182.

⁴ Denton, 'Introduction', 9.

⁵ Denton, 9.

⁶ Watson, 'The Older the Better', 184.

⁷ Watson, 184.

⁸ 'Education', National Museum of China, accessed 1 June 2023, <http://en.chnmuseum.cn/education/>.

⁹ 'Education'.

¹⁰ 'The British Museum Story', The British Museum, accessed 1 June 2023, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story>.

¹¹ David Rodgers, (2003). 'London, British Museum'. Oxford University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780198662037.013.1500>.

¹² Rodgers.

¹³ 'History', The British Museum, accessed 1 June 2023, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-history>.

¹⁴ 'Collection', The British Museum, accessed 1 June 2023, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>.

¹⁵ Emily Duthie, (2011, January 1). 'The British Museum: An Imperial Museum in a Post-Imperial World', *Public History Review*, 18, 12, <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.958068559914063>.

narrative that marginalises the voices and perspectives of the cultures of origin. For example, the Rosetta Stone, initially owned by the French, was handed over to the British after Napoleon's defeat, signifying the transfer of power and control.¹

In the 1800s, the British Museum was a meaningful symbol of British rule.² The transfer of artefacts from colonised regions to the central power demonstrated a shift in their interpretation and symbolised the idea that London was the nucleus of the empire.³ It has also reinforced a narrative of continuing historical injustice and violent aggression and a specific and limited system of knowledge, aesthetics and values.⁴ Despite this criticism, the British Museum is a global heritage centre and a crossroads of cultural convergence, housing classical antiquities worldwide.⁵ The museum's position is that the countries of origin of these artefacts cannot correctly preserve and manage them, suggesting that London is a more competent guardian of ancient antiquities than Greece.⁶ It reflects an element of paternalism rooted in colonial history.

Ancient art was so popular in the British Museum that expeditions regularly travelled to the Middle East to bring back biblical antiquities, and the British Museum's entire cache of art from Britain and Gaul could be displayed in just four cases in one room.⁷ Artefacts from antiquity play a crucial role in constructing historical and national narratives in the countries of their origin and discovery.⁸ But as the social environment has changed, there is an urgent need to make collections like the British Museum more accessible worldwide. The concept of 'universal' museums is increasingly

being questioned. Collections that embrace the world must be made available to the whole world and seen in many places because they will mean different things.⁹ The principle of an ethical obligation to repatriate exceptionally valuable or important cultural objects is increasingly accepted.¹⁰

Therefore, institutions like the British Museum must ensure the world has access to these global cultural resources to explore relevant issues and foster global citizenship. It calls for increased cultural exchange and accessibility and the promotion of more inclusive narratives representing multiple perspectives. With its rich historical background and extensive collections, the British Museum is a powerful symbol of Britain's cultural heritage and its historical role as a global power. Although it is a former colonial museum, it reflects the mindset and ethics of its colonial founders by retaining its original values and principles.¹¹ However, it has also evidenced controversial issues of cultural property and representation. Future action by the museum to address these issues will significantly influence the global debate on the role and function of national museums in contemporary society.

4. Conclusion

In an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, the role of national museums as protectors of national identity and cultural heritage is changing. As we have seen through the case studies of the National Museum of China and the British Museum, these institutions have distinct histories and agendas that reflect their respective countries' unique national narratives and cultural discourses. Each museum balances the delicate task of preserving and presenting a national identity while coping

¹ Christine Sylvester, (2008). 'Cultures, Nations and the British Museum', in *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It*. Taylor and Francis, 27, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unimelb/reader.action?docID=4186311&ppg=34>.

² Duthie, 'The British Museum: An Imperial Museum in a Post-Imperial World', 15.

³ Duthie, 15.

⁴ Karen Exell, (2016). 'Universal Art Museums in the Arabian Peninsula', in *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula*, 1st ed. Routledge, 94, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315641102>.

⁵ Duthie, 'The British Museum: An Imperial Museum in a Post-Imperial World', 20.

⁶ Duthie, 21.

⁷ Sylvester, 'Cultures, Nations and the British Museum', 35.

⁸ Duthie, 'The British Museum: An Imperial Museum in a Post-Imperial World', 22.

⁹ Neil McGregor, (2009). 'Global Collections for Global Cities', in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence, The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson Miegunyah Press, 136, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unimelb/reader.action?docID=5752360&ppg=127>.

¹⁰ Hui Zhong, (2017). 'Evolving Social and Ethical Norms: Practice of Individuals, Private Museums, and Auction Houses', in *China, Cultural Heritage, and International Law* Routledge, 164, <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/unimelb.edu.au?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.taylorfrancis.com%2Fchapters%2Fmono%2F10.4324%2F9781315106960-7%2Fevolving-social-ethical-norms-hui-zhong%3Fcontext%3FDubx%26refId%3Dde37b5cd-7621-4763-823a-5365d892565f>.

¹¹ Duthie, 'The British Museum: An Imperial Museum in a Post-Imperial World', 23.

with the complexities of globalisation, multiculturalism and political change. Deeply rooted in the nation's ideology, the National Museum of China presents a carefully curated narrative of Chinese history and culture that reinforces unity, continuity and a sense of shared Chinese identity. By contrast, the British Museum is the product of an empire with enormous global reach and a repository of world culture. However, their collection raises questions about cultural ownership, restitution and the legacy of colonialism.

Assuming their dual responsibilities as stewards of national heritage and gateways to the broader world is crucial for these institutions' future. This entails having frank conversations about the origins and significance of their holdings, encouraging cross-cultural interaction, and eventually using their position to encourage respect for and knowledge of local, regional, and global cultural heritage. These case studies highlight national museums' difficulties and possibilities in the twenty-first century. Their goal is to educate, engage, and inspire audiences by sharing gripping stories about our shared human past, shaped by various civilisations and experiences, despite the diversity of their collections and narratives.

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