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ABSTRACT: This article follows the alterations in the National Museum of China from its creation at the beginning of the Republican period until the present. It focuses on intertwining historical and museological events in order to illustrate the strong ties between national identity, the museum, and shifts in the socio-economic and socio-political spheres.

National identity plays an important role within contemporary society in that it allows collections of individuals to be part of an inclusive group, defined traditionally by the geographic boundary of the nation state, a nineteenth century construct.

This type of identity continues to play a major role in how individuals perceive themselves, specifically by framing their position in comparison to “difference” that can be seen in other nation state populations (Macdonald, 2003, p. 2). This can be understood as a recognizable difference, framed with a common construct, but maintaining a varied history and culture from the rest. The specific focus of this article is the display of this history and culture in what can be seen as a national theatre for the presentation of identity, the museum. Specifically, this work will look at the comparison between historical and identity shifts as can be perceived in the National Museum of China.

Museums, as stated by Brown and Davis-Brown (1998, p. 19), “help to preserve a collective national memory and thence to constitute a collective national identity”. This illustrates the importance of the museum as not only a center of identity but also of memory. However, this memory is problematic due to the fact that “any process of perception and representation is a process of constructing reality from a given observer’s social position and point of view” (Brown and David-Brown, 1998, p. 22). It can be understood, then, that the national memory, which informs the identity portrayed within a museum, is a dictated one that does not necessarily include all members of the nation state, especially those considered cultural outsiders. This can especially be seen in the methods utilized to exhibit or eradicate the presence of these outsiders, most often cultural or ethnic minorities. Museums, as a bastion of national memory, often exclude or minimize these groups who fall outside of the rigid definition of national identity. This causes particular problems in societies that profess themselves to be multicultural or contain a fairly significant population of minority communities. However, as can be seen in the case in China, it is possible to use history as the force behind national identity in order to avoid ethnic or cultural-based schisms.

China has a population of approximately 1.34 billion people with 91.5% listed as ethnically Han Chinese and the other 8.5% as a member of an ethnic minority community (CIA, 2011). While the vast majority of the population can be seen as sharing an ethnic, and thus partially cultural, background, the minority percentage is fairly significant given the actual population of the country. Furthermore, China, as Gladney (1994, p. 96) notes, considers itself multicultural,

much like India or the USA, which requires a different approach in regards to representations of national identity particularly in the context of the national museum, which acts as a cultural representative for not only the Chinese population but also for international visitors, who will understand that which is in the museum to be a symbol of “Chinese-ness”. In order to understand the phenomenon of Chinese national identity in the museum, an analysis of the contemporary history intertwined with that of the museum must be undertaken. Only then can a study of current representations of identity be developed in order to ascertain alterations within the conceptualization of identity.

On January 1, 1912, the Republic of China was founded, officially ending the long history of imperial rule in the country and instating a new democratic system. Seven months following this dramatic political alteration, the preparatory office for the new National Museum of History was opened on July 9, 1912, and official opening of the National Museum of History occurred fourteen years later, on October 1, 1926. This shift in the political sphere also caused dramatic alterations within the cultural one, specifically in the manner in which identity was perceived.

“Only in the early years of the Republic did intellectuals begin to associate chung-hua min-tsu (Chinese as an ethnic category) with chung-kuo jen (citizens of China). This association was meant to consolidate the diverse constellation of people within territorial China into a single nation”. (Chun, 1996, p. 114)

The political changes required identity changes due to the alteration of the Chinese state into one that could now be recognized by the rest of the world as a modern, democratic, nation state. However, due to the lack of a concrete unifying identity prior to the Republican period, one had to be constructed, and, thus, it is significant that a National Museum of History would be constructed during this period. This museum would have served as a means by which to illustrate the validity of the new nation state by illustrating a geographically shared history.

The Republic of China existed for only thirty-seven years and succumbed to socialist domination after an extensive civil war. This occurred in part due to the population’s dissatisfaction with the system that began to crumble economically during and after World War II, which was mainly due to the decimation of the Chinese economy by the Japanese. On October 1, 1949, Mao Tse-Tung declared the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, which in turn led to the renaming of the National Museum of History to the Beijing Museum of History. This illustrates the shift away from the Nationalist dictated history. In fact, in 1950 the preparatory office of the National Museum of Revolution was established to proclaim the importance of the new socialist society. In August of 1958, it was decided that a new National Museum of Chinese History was to be built along with the first official construction of the National Museum of Chinese Revolution. It is important to note that from 1958 to 1961, China experienced the Great Leap Forward, which was a movement to rapidly shift from a large agrarian society into a mainly industrial one. This social experiment was a large failure and resulted in many deaths within China. The decision to construct new museums while simultaneously beginning a new social experiment indicates, in this instance, the importance of the new within Chinese society. In this sense, identity became one of modernization with a newly dictated socialist discourse. This is specifically seen in the opening of the National Museum of Chinese History on October 1, 1959 wherein the most important exhibit was General Chinese History. The usage of a broad, dictated historical discourse within the museum reinforces the idea of a geographically based, historically unified population. This only

solidifies the ideas originally supported by the Nationalists regarding the importance of the nation state as a boundary for national identity as opposed to an ethnic one.

Identity shifted again with the second great social experiment implemented under Mao's leadership, the Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 until Mao's death in 1976. During the Cultural Revolution, there was a sincere effort to erase aspects of both culture and society that were not exclusively Maoist in nature. Furthermore, there was an attempt to force homogeneity upon the population in an effort to weaken the strength of traditional cultural practices as well as forcing the assimilation of minority groups in order to create one unified socialist culture. During this period, in September of 1969, the two museums, the National Museum of Chinese History and the National Museum of Chinese Revolution, merged into one institution called the National Museum of Chinese Revolution and History. While this may appear to be a simple merger, it, like the creation of the museums originally, occurred during a very important event in modern Chinese history. The merger of these two museums appears to emphasize the Revolution as historical event instead of just as a social one. However, the greatest alterations in national identity within the museum started to occur after Mao's death with the power passing into the hands of Deng Xiaoping. This was, in part, due to the gradual shift away from a pure socialist model towards a more mixed economic system. Additionally, the Cultural Revolution caused great turmoil within China, and thus has been viewed as a negative aspect of Party history. As such, a shift away from Maoist dictated national identity was seen, specifically a movement away from a unified socialist identity towards one based in nationalism. This is particularly evident in the fact that "many new museums and memorials sites were built to restore waning socialist values and increase patriotism and nationalism" (Denton, 2005, p. 568). The existing museums were also altered; in our case, the National Museum of Chinese Revolution and History was split again and would not be re-merged until February of 2003.

Several years after the re-merger, the now newly named National Museum of China underwent renovations beginning in 2007 and completed in 2010 with a public reopening in March of 2011. Following the economic shift away from pure socialism towards a more market-based economy, the national identity portrayed within the National Museum of China has also altered. The reopening of the museum included the creation of a new permanent exhibition entitled "The Road of Rejuvenation" which begins its story in the Opium War of 1840 and continues until the present day. The exhibit is described as showing "the consequential downfall into an abyss of semi-imperial and semi-feudal society, the protests of people of all social stratum who have suffered, and the many various attempts at national rejuvenation - particularly the Communist Party of China's fight for the people's liberation and independence of every ethnicity" (National Museum of China, 2011). While the exhibit still emphasizes the importance socialism within the context of Chinese society, it is no longer seen as the leading national identity; instead the shift is towards nationalism based in overcoming adversity. The Chinese struggled to pull themselves out of the mire of imperialism, and "the [Chinese] people chose Marxism, the Communist Party of China, socialism, and the reform and opening-up policy"(National Museum of China, 2011). It is no longer a story of the Party rescuing the people of China from imperialism and economic turmoil, but it has instead become a discourse on the Chinese people, the nation, pulling themselves out of decrepitude towards a brighter future of happiness and prosperity. The emphasis has shifted to the nation, pride in the struggle of the nation, and the importance of the individual.

It can be seen that national identity, as displayed within the context of the National Museum

of China, has altered in parallel with shifts in political power. While it has continued to serve a role as a “pedagogical tool for the teaching of Party history to the masses” (Denton, 2005, p. 567), the history itself alters to suit the needs of the contemporary situations. As history has been used as the core for Chinese national identity since the creation of the Republic, it can then be understood that the national identity is as fluid as the interpretations of history are. An interesting extension of this research could be in the analysis of the disconnects between official dictated national identity and personal identity shifts throughout these periods. Furthermore, a more in depth study involving the alterations within the museum exhibits themselves could shed further light upon the more subtle changes in political national identity discourse. From the Nationalists to Mao to the present day, the dictated national identity within the National Museum of China has worked to unify a multicultural nation through different methods, and it is these methods, which are exemplified by their historical periods.

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