



Exploring How to Tell the Story of Historical Museum Exhibitions

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ABSTRACT.Based on the research on the narrative of history exhibitions in contemporary Chinese museums, this paper summarizes the main shortcomings that still exist in the narrative of contemporary Chinese history exhibitions, including the weaknesses of the exhibition narrative, the contradictions of history exhibitions themselves, and some problems in museum research. Telling a good story is both a necessary path for the development of museum exhibitions in China and a rocky road that is currently being crossed. In response to the question of how to optimize the museum's storytelling, curators should start from the macro level by reconstructing the information about the artifacts in a deconstructive way, proposing ideas that resonate, and guiding the audience to a comprehensive understanding of the story in a process-based solution.

Keywords: Museums; History-based Exhibitions; Exhibition Narratives

1 Introduction

The museum exhibition narrative in China is currently in a major transition stage. On the one hand, with the popularization of history and culture and the dissemination of information in multiple ways, more and more museum exhibitions are coming into the view of the masses, and corresponding to this is the expectation of the audience for exhibitions in museums. They want to see a different approach to the exhibition than just a display of artifacts, a shift in perspective from appreciating the treasures to

understanding the story, and expect to have a wonderful experience while learning something new from visiting the museum. On the other hand, as museum research progresses and museum exhibition design becomes more and more modern in line with foreign countries, practitioners are constantly exploring the search for new forms of narrative. As the country's cultural fervor grows, Chinese museums are charged with the responsibility of enhancing the country's cultural soft power and are faced with the multiple tasks of interpreting history, aiding education, and enriching cognition. Researchers also need to find better ways to tell stories and make cultural relics 'alive'.

Museum exhibitions have undoubtedly become a bridge between curators and audiences, and a focus of research. The current research on museum narrative mainly focuses on relatively microscopic exhibition design, such as selecting some case studies for analysis, and rarely discusses how to tell a good story on a macro level, especially the research on narrative design of historical exhibitions. In terms of research on the content design of historical displays, Liu Jiaying and Song Xiangguang analyze the constituent elements and composition forms of historical exhibitions and distill four narrative modes, but the overall narrative mode is still from point to line[1]. Wang Siyi believes that under the current development trend, the thematic dual narrative structure of historical displays and the deepening of the interpretation of people's lives should become the focus of the renovation, and takes the newly renovated "Wu Xing Fu" basic display of Huzhou Museum in 2016 as an example to provide a better case study[2].

Although selecting individual exhibition cases for analysis has detailed strategies and problem-specific, it lacks macro comparison among exhibitions and cannot find relatively universal models and laws from a single case, which is also an important part missing from domestic research nowadays. Xu Jie proposes three ideas on the rhythm of display, the collection of phenomena and memories, and the enhancement of storytelling in the general process of narrative exhibition construction, and suggests the applicability of the timeline as the top level of exhibition organization[3]. Zhang Xiaoqing intervenes from the thinking of "independent narrative", "narrative thread" and "narrative space" to the concrete material presentation of the exhibition[4]. In the study of the narrative principle of the display design of the historical museum, Gao Teng introduced three narrative design techniques of museum display design in recent years, namely, time organization technique, space sequence technique and humanistic perception technique.

Compared with the traditional treasure display, the narrative structure of historical exhibitions in China has been improved to a certain extent, and the conscious narration and the discussion and thinking of narration have been increased. However, the current research still stays in the summary of narrative mode, and there is still a certain distance from the new attempt of narrative mode in the digital age abroad. From the planning perspective of exhibition narrative, this paper attempts to analyze the problems existing in the narrative of historical exhibitions in the transitional stage from traditional narrative to high-tech introduction, and puts forward the exhibition optimization method of telling good stories.

2 The Dilemma of Museum Exhibition Narrative in China

2.1 Disadvantages of Exhibition Design

Divided by permanent exhibitions and temporary exhibitions, there are two more common problems in the design of museum history exhibitions in China.

First, the permanent exhibition is old and lacks timely updates with museum collection research. The museum's permanent exhibition is a concentrated expression of the results of the museum's operations based on the study of its collections, and is the key to the museum's dissemination of scientific and cultural knowledge and to its existence as a second classroom for education and a popular cultural point for citizens[6]. With the development of technology and the renewal of narrative forms and the deepening of collection research, in museum exhibition design, one must be bold, courageous and good at making updates to permanent exhibitions.

Second, the lack of interest in temporary exhibitions and special exhibitions, the lack of audience-based narrative perspective of thinking, some designs only floating on the surface, the abuse of multimedia equipment and other issues more common. China 's temporary exhibition started late, and it is normal to encounter problems in exploration. The main problem of the current temporary exhibition is that it is unable to balance the attraction of the audience and the rich content. It often introduces some novel ways and means to make efforts in publicity and high-tech multimedia. It lacks attention to the content of the exhibition itself and relies on ' treasures ' to find the audience. This incorrect way reflects the lack of museum exhibition planning experience.

The narrative content is the theme or idea that the design work is intended to convey, a translation of meaning. The act of narrative refers to the linguistic expression of design, i.e. how the theme or idea of a design work is conveyed through narrative[7]. It is one of the responsibilities of museum exhibition design to make a good exhibition narrative, to understand what the audience wants to see, to precisely perform the educational function of the museum and to meet the needs of the audience.

2.2 The Contradictions Themselves of Historical Exhibitions

China's long history and rich physical testimonies have made history exhibitions a mainstream exhibition form in Chinese museums, a display category containing a large number of cultural themes and lines of development, i.e., a systematic presentation of the historical development process and view of development of a country, a place, an event or a field through artifacts and supporting exhibits[8]. Presenting the development of human society from a historical dimension, the core of its display is the changes in the state of human society at all levels. This historical perspective means that the exhibition itself carries the attributes of a narrative rather than a mere presentation of physical objects, which poses a challenge to exhibitions based on physical exhibits. Narrative is no longer just a way to construct content for presentation, but has become the content itself. From this perspective, as the objects lose the influence of their related environment in the museum, the originality of the exhibits is destroyed to a certain extent, and their mere narrative is difficult for the audience to see the logical relationship of historical development, that is, the mere display of exhibits can hardly achieve the purpose of the exhibition, which needs to be told through other information media and the curator's reconstruction of the objects.

2.3 The Current Problems of Museum Research in China

This part actually contains two different perspectives on the issue, one is exhibition research and the other is audience research.

For the study of museum narratives in China, exhibition narratives are not a new perspective in museology's previous studies; researchers have conducted rich research at the intersection of history, visual arts, journalism and media, and anthropology, analyzing the overall direction of exhibitions, specific displays, and interactive

approaches from multiple perspectives. However, scholars have focused their attention on micro areas of exhibition content and design cases, and have rarely conducted macro studies on overall domestic museum trends, or analyzed how they should be done in such macro narratives, or conducted overall comparative analyses of different exhibitions.

The problem for existing audience studies in China is that quantitative methods are used significantly more than qualitative methods. Although quantitative methods have been valued by domestic researchers, their application has not been satisfactory. Compared with foreign systematic and standardized research models, the use of quantitative methods for domestic audience research still has many problems: first, the purpose of audience research is not clear enough, and second, it lacks relevance and logic[10].

When comparing domestic and international studies, it can be found that domestic museum research lacks the part that summarizes audience research with narrative research and the research that summarizes the research into a generally applicable model. Professors John Falk and Lynn Dirkin of Oregon State University analyze the structure, causes and effects of the museum visitor experience and propose a contextual model of visitor learning[11]. In a 10-year survey of visitors to its museums, the Smithsonian's research team identified four dimensions of the visitor exhibition experience[12]. Meanwhile, in integrating audience studies and narrative studies, John Falk has continued his exploration in the field of audience studies for over thirty years and has now published books such as *Museum Experience*, *Learning in the Museum: Audience Experience and the Making of Meaning*, *Identity and Museum Audience Experience*, and *Museum Experience Revisited*. The main ideas are the three models systematically presented in the above work, namely, the Interactive Experience Model, the Contextual Learning Model, and the Museum Visitor Experience Model.

At present, China 's research in the multidisciplinary and detailed issues of the exhibition narrative research done well, in the case analysis also raised some of the problems of China 's current exhibition. However, compared to find out the problem analysis problem, we have to do more is to come up with solutions.

3 How to tell a good museum story

Nowadays, China's museums have planned a number of programs for the story of cultural relics launched "National Treasures" and the documentary "If National Treasures can talk" for the living anthropomorphism of cultural relics, and even in "I repair cultural relics in the Forbidden City" for the restoration staff of cultural relics, so that the general public has a deeper understanding of the knowledge of cultural relics. But as an important way for the audience to contact with real cultural relics - history museums, how to make the museum exhibition alive, there are few in-depth discussions.

Telling a good exhibition story is an important way to do this. A rich story can bring a multifaceted experience to the viewer, and now the publicity effect on the Internet can easily enliven a distinctive exhibition.

In classical narratology, narrative point of view refers to the perspective from which the narrator or characters view the story. As with writing a novel, in the prep work for an exhibition, perspective is the beginning of the entire narrative. Perspective both determines the way we see things and shapes the relationships between them. Perspective in an exhibition is as much about the narrator as it is about the viewer; it is as much about the seeing and feeling of the scene as it is about the meaning and organization of things. To a large extent, the narrative design about the exhibition is based on the dispersion of perspectives[15].

In the narrative perspective of the exhibition, the perspective bearer of a narrative text is often a concern, i.e. who perceives the whole story. And telling the story of an exhibition and who will be the interpreter of the exhibition is also worth being noticed. In historical exhibitions, the direction and presentation of the entire exhibition usually rests on the curator. Regarding the curator's perspective, we often experience a non-focused perspective, which is also called "God's perspective"[16]. In an exhibition where the breadth and depth of knowledge coverage reaches a certain level, the intellectual scheduling for the exhibition is a very hectic task. They are confronted with a huge amount of material and an in-depth study of objects, how these should be interpreted, i.e. to solve the problem of who should see the exhibition and also how to see it. Telling the museum story needs to be done in the following ways.

3.1 Interpreting and Reconstructing Heritage Information

The current situation of curation in China's domestic museums is that curators of history exhibitions are basically served by relevant researchers in the museums, who have in-depth knowledge of exhibits and focus on research, which coincides with the high requirements of curators' cultural level and professional knowledge for history exhibitions. When authoritative researchers do exhibition planning, they usually have a strict logic for the exhibition, which can serve to answer questions and guide the audience.

In 2013, selected as one of the top ten national excellence awards, Guizhou Provincial Museum of Ethnicity, "Nuo soul charm - Chinese Nuo opera Nuo mask art exhibition" as an example, the exhibition is divided into "preface", "Nuo from ancient times to today", "the flavor of Nuo - Nuo opera art", "Nuo expression - Nuo mask art" and "concluding remarks" five major parts, a total of 475 pieces of various precious cultural relics on display, to the audience a comprehensive display of the introduction of Nuo culture.

For example, in the update of the Nanjing Massacre historical facts exhibition in the Nanjing Museum, we can also see that the curatorial focus on the heavy historical materials into the exhibition script, grasp the exhibition narrative perspective and narrative logic, explore the value of cultural relics, through the depth of the historical materials, the framing of the small objects in the big background, the "small people" in the big history, to find empathy with the audience, from the simple display of historical materials to seek empathy with the audience, the curatorial focus still stands on the construction of the real history, but emphasizes the audience perspective, with the appropriate way to convey the message to the audience [17].

3.2 Story Intention of The Exhibition

In addition to rigorous logic and intellectual communication, the interpreter must also propose a new idea, a new concept outside of a conventional proposition, or an unprecedented new proposition, and use it as a starting point to develop the narrative.

New ideas and new concepts are often associated with shaping the audience's recollection of memory. Susan Crane argues that national history and personal memory are sometimes at odds, and that museums can rethink the relationship between personal memory and history by focusing on individual narratives. Therefore, the stories told by museums are not just stories, but exhibitions can also

serve as "memory sites" that can reconstruct, transmit and store multi-dimensional historical memories, pass new memories to the audience, and provoke the audience to empathize and think about this memory.

Founded on March 5, 1917, the Imperial War Museum in London houses 23,000 hours of images, 11 million photographs, more than 15,000 paintings, drawings and engravings, and more than 30,000 posters. In addition, the museum has proactively attempted to record the memories and voices of those who experienced it. The Imperial War Museum strives to collect a wide range of items related to World War I, including everything from aircraft, armored fighting vehicles, and naval vessels to uniforms, insignia, personal equipment, medals, and decorations, as well as a rich and detailed collection of documents, printed books, and images, aiming to present a more human story through the collection of private objects and oral histories. Personal objects materialize all the suffering of war, making personal emotions vividly visible to the viewer. For example, a wooden card made by British soldier Henry Hulse for his family in faraway Kent. The four- or five-inch-sized card depicts a British soldier with a rope around the neck of a German soldier and reads, "With this only I wish you a Merry Christmas from the front." The protagonist of the story, Henry, like thousands of soldiers who fought in the war, did not reunite with his family in the cold winter of 1914, but survived under fire. The narrative of this object breaks away from the grand discourse of nationalism and instead focuses the story on the private emotions of individuals. In contrast to the traditional values of patriotism, the museum shows the love of individuals for their families by tapping into individual narratives, and in doing so, triggers the audience's empathy[19].

Telling a good story, the story based on the emotional resonance of the audience on the profound conception, can help the audience better understand in history, focus on ordinary people flash. Whether it is the people in the history presented in the exhibition or the contemporary audience, the humanistic feelings in the story composed of historical relics are the focus of the exhibition.

3.3 Leading the Story's Thread

Unlike ordinary storybooks, exhibition stories usually rely on physical objects in their narrative. The arrangement and combination of historical artifacts ultimately make up the story as a whole, and the text is merely a tool to aid the viewer's understanding. To link up a whole story, the exhibition planner needs to choose a suitable way to lead

the audience to go deeper layer by layer and open up the whole exhibition by pulling out the threads.

Wuhan's Zhang Zhidong Museum theme exhibition uses a novel exhibition planning perspective to resolve the paradox of the attribute that history is the past and the audience is contemporary.

The curators link the dilemmas and problems faced by Zhang Zhidong back then with the real-life issues of today, and look for topics from the past that are relevant to today, so that the audience can learn and feel more from them, which is conducive to making history resonate with today's audience. To make up for the lack of visitors being able to experience history first-hand, the exhibition chooses to use theatrical experiences to guide the audience. Visitors are more likely to enter the narrative context of the exhibition because of this theatrical form, and some exhibits can guide visitors to experience the content from a first-person perspective. For example, when observing the city profile is the perspective of monitoring ; visiting the prison is the perspective of the jailer ; experience Zhang Zhidong in the face of the difficult situation is Zhang Zhidong 's own perspective.

In addition to this, efforts have been made to explain the text of the exhibition and the content of the display. The modern materials involve many written texts, similar to letters, documents, speeches, and other types of physical materials. The exhibition is very careful, and the topics and titles of the exhibition, as well as other explanatory texts appearing in the exhibition, are presented in a way that is consistent with today's language, and in many places the audience is "invited" to participate in the dialogue or encouraged to form their own judgments, and new ideas are proposed on some detailed points, leaving room for reflection. Guiding the audience well in the details, using novel ways to put them into context, breaking through traditional textbook ideas of historical figures, linking the past and the present, and understanding the motivations and influences of ancient people's actions. By guiding the audience in this way, the content and characters familiar to the audience are transformed into a three-dimensional story.

4 Conclusion

Telling the history museum exhibition story is the only way for the development of museums in China. In order to tell a good story, contemporary museum curators need to have a compound design thinking of " Tao " and " skill. " They should not only

master the " narrative way " containing culture and life philosophy, but also have " narrative skills " in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary fields, explain cultural relics information to the audience, select themes, and connect stories.

Although today 's museum exhibitions have various problems in narrative and narrative research, in the post-epidemic era, the digital museum gives China an opportunity to connect with the world 's museum research. Even if the research foundation is relatively weak, we can still see the vitality of Chinese museum research.

The development goal of Chinese museums is to seek truth from facts and continuously explain and spread the value and significance of Chinese excellent traditional culture. Improving the level of storytelling and perfecting the narrative mechanism of exhibitions have become the direction of continuous efforts of major museums. This is a clear and correct road, which has important enlightenment and guiding significance for people to scientifically understand the past, grasp the present and plan the future.

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