

## Cultural hegemony in the museum world

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### **Abstract**

The museum is the cultural product of western history, and its concept was not domesticated by Asia until the twentieth century. This is not to say that Asia has no museum of its own; rather, the Asian museum world had not developed a westernized museum until the last century.

Regarding the National Taiwan Museum founded in 1908 or the Nan-Tong Museum in China founded in 1905, these pioneer museums in Asia were established under the atmosphere of pursuing western civilization. To some extent, they were part of the heritage of cultural colonialism.

Given the burgeoning numbers of museums in both Taiwan and China nowadays, it seems that the concept of the museum has been successfully transplanted to Asia. However, it is also worth noting that even local museums are experienced un-locally. For instance, a cultural outsider may visit the Taipei 228 Memorial Museum and find him/herself located in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.

Can the Asian museum world really off-load the influence of westernization and globalization without losing its cultural identity? This paper would suggest alternatives for the museums of our own.

*Keywords: Cultural colonialism, cultural hegemony, globalization, identity, local museums, power-knowledge*

## I. What is the museum all about?

The museum is the cultural product of western history, and its concept was not domesticated by Asia until the twentieth century. This is not to say that Asia has no museum of its own; rather, the Asian museum world had not developed a westernized museum until the twentieth century. Regarding the National Taiwan Museum founded in 1908 or the Nan-Tong Museum in China founded in 1905, these so-called Asian pioneer museums were established under the atmosphere of pursuing western civilization at that time. Objects and exhibitions staged in Asian museums showed the public what were considered the classic in the Western context. Asian museum visitors were encouraged to learn from the exhibitions so that they would be more civilized and well-mannered just as the Western population. In this regard, museums functioned as a means to civilize and institutionalize the “other” in the Western context. Museums were part of the heritage of cultural colonialism. Through ways of displaying, these early museums in Asia visually consolidated not only the dominant culture in a cultural game, but also the relation between the dominant culture and the subordinate culture.

Meanwhile, the establishment of museums was believed not only to enhance the civilization of the public, but also to construct their national and cultural identities. In his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson argued that the census, maps, and museums had changed their original forms and functioned as major institutions of power which built a group's collective national identity as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983). And among these three institutions of power, the museum was particularly employed by the colonial state to shape the legitimacy of its ancestry. Both the museum and museumizing imagination were capable of giving political implications and

making the invisible power structure in a visible manner. And through careful manipulating, they could be used to distinguish the We from the Others, the high and the low, the primary and the secondary, and so forth. Today, even though we no longer use the term colonialism, the relation of the colonial and the colonized still exists in the form of cultural colonialism which refers to internal domination by one group and its culture, ideology, value system, and so forth over others.

If we take culture as a soft power<sup>1</sup> which has significant impact on shaping ideology and identity, museums accordingly become the arena for culture wrestling. Unfortunately, there is no perpetual winner in this arena. The winning culture is always the one created by the potent power which is oftentimes politically dominant. The primary National Taiwan Museum and the Nan-Tong Museum in the early twentieth century can be used as examples here. Through contextualizing objects and texts, these museums constructed discourses and knowledge which were “politically correct.” And through opening the space of “visible ideology,” the constructed discourses and knowledge, the old National Taiwan Museum and the Nan-Tong Museum were able to educate their visitors about the values and beliefs that should be adopted. Museums became part of the state's propaganda and identity work was thus created and done in the museum setting.

The usage of museums as means to sell nations<sup>2</sup> has not changed a lot today and it is often seen in national museums. Another recent instance is the newly-opened Musee

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<sup>1</sup> Soft power is a term used in international relations theory to describe the ability of a political body, such as a state, to indirectly influence the behavior or interests of other political bodies through cultural or ideological means (Nye, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> The idea of “sell nations” is borrowed from the title, “Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Diplomacy” written by Brian Wallis in *Museum culture: histories, discourse, spectacles* eds. Sherman D. J. & Rogoff I. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

du Quai Branly in Paris, France. The Musee du Quai Branly displays the masks and statues from Africa and Oceania which impressed the Fauvist and Cubist artists in Paris a century ago; inside its Americas section, the museum also embraces pre-Columbian and American Indian art such as the totem poles and some musical instruments. Through displaying the artifacts and objects together in one public space, President Jacques Chirac of France approving the scheme for the construction of the museum in 1996 claiming that the Museum du Quai Branly is a space to promote the equal dignity of the cultures of the world. The fact that museums can be manipulated to serve the state apparatus, or political correctness, is no longer new to the ruling classes. Despite questions and challenges regarding the ways the Musee du Quai Branly displays its objects without considering their ethnographic context, the president of the museum, Stephane Martin, insists that this is insofar a way to treat non-Western art with the same deference. The opening of the Musee du Quai Branly is thus inseparable from politics. It is used not only as a cultural monument of Jacques Chirac, but also as an artistic project with the eminently political objective to proclaim France's openness to the world.<sup>3</sup>

Feminist Donna Haraway once argued that the social relations of domination are frozen into the hardware and logics of the visual technology we know as museums (Haraway, 1985). This argument may best describe how museums visualize constructed knowledge and ideologies through the power they acquire from the state apparatus. And it is fair to argue that the museum is all about power. As a young professional in the museum world, I am concerned about how Taiwanese museums position themselves in a larger global context. Being deeply influenced and culturally colonized by Western concepts of the museum, we may be skillful in introducing

new ideas to the Taiwanese museum world, but we may not be that skillful to build museums of our own. While culture diversity is highly celebrated in the twenty-first century, it is critical to reflect the culture identity of Taiwanese museums. By utilizing Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony in the following section, this paper would suggest alternatives for the museums of our own.

## **II. When culture and power go hand-in-hand**

We cannot overlook the influence brought by the interplay between power and culture. Power and culture can hardly be analyzed without considering the dimension of space; they are inherently and fundamentally spatial. Moreover, authority operates within certain spatial limits; its influence concerns certain areas or specific spatial networks. As cultural and social institutions, museums play a critical role in terms of crafting knowledge through exhibitions. Museums collect objects, select topics, and up-build discourses through exhibitions. In so doing, they become not only the staging grounds of culture (Sherman & Rogoff), but the unchallengeable authorities of knowledge. In other words, museums and their spatiality possess the power of knowledge which may further dominate the shaping of the public's ideologies and beliefs of what to be considered the "truth." As Michel Foucault argued in his writing, techniques of knowledge and strategies of power are mutually inherent. Power is based on knowledge and it makes use of knowledge; on the other hand, power reproduces knowledge by shaping it in accordance with its anonymous intentions (Foucault, 1972). Museums as a knowledge space exercise the power through creating

<sup>3</sup> *The New York Times* News. Retrieved July 30, 2006 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/22/arts/design/22quai.html?pagewanted=1&ei=5070&en=18b9a5bf174ee327&ex=1154232000> .

knowledge. They become arbitrators of knowledge and subsequently produce *hegemony*<sup>4</sup> in defining culture.

The concept of cultural hegemony initially came from the concept of hegemony. Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci elaborated Marxist thought on the concept of hegemony, proposing that dominant groups maintain power and protect common class interests, namely, wealth and ownership, through the use of cultural institutions and alliances with other members of the elite, and not by coercion. According to Gramsci, the term hegemony refers to the dominance of one group over other groups, with or without the threat of force. More broadly, cultural perspectives become skewed to favor the dominant group, and consequently, hegemony controls the ways that ideas become “naturalized” in a process that informs notions of common sense (Kachgal, 2000). Cultural hegemony also results in the empowerment of certain cultural beliefs, values, and practices to the submersion and partial exclusion of others. It influences the perspective of mainstream history, as history is written by the victors for a sympathetic readership. Accordingly, cultural institutions, such as schools and the media, create a compatible version of reality, which favors elite interests. And museums are no exceptions.

A similar script of cultural hegemony is taking place within the Taiwanese museum world. Most of the museums established in Taiwan are still deeply influenced by the cultural hegemony in the current Western museum world. For instance, if one had ever visited the Rose Center for Earth and Space in the American Museum of Natural History located in New York City, one may discover a lot of visual similarities of interior design and display between the Rose Center and the Museum of World Religions in Yungho City, Taiwan. Both museums were designed by Ralph Appelbaum Associate (RAA) which is

now the largest interpretive museum design firm in the world. Other museums schemed by RAA can still be found in Taiwan, such as the Natural Museum of Natural Science in Taichung, the National Museum of Prehistory in Taitung, and the National Science and Technology Museum in Kaohsiung, and they are more or less miniaturized museums originally designed by RAA that are found all over the world.

Despite those museums designed by hot properties in the current museum world, museums designed by local designers or architects in Taiwan can be observed as shadows from major museums of the day in the museum world. For instance, quite a few visual and spatial elements of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. are seen in the Taipei 228 Memorial Museum. Even though, the Taipei 228 Memorial Museum was designed by a local designer, Ronald Tsao in Taiwan, one can yet observe the locus of how Tsao got inspired by James Ingo Freed, the architect of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (and RAA) , when visiting the

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<sup>4</sup> The analysis of hegemony was formulated by Antonio Gramsci to explain why predicted communist revolutions had not occurred where they were most expected by Karl Marx and his followers in industrialized Europe. In Marxian terms, the dialectically changing economic base of society would determine the cultural and political superstructure. Although Marx and Friedrich Engels had famously predicted this eschatological scenario in 1848, many decades later the workers of the industrialized core still had not carried out the mission. Gramsci argued that the failure of the workers to make an anti-capitalist revolution was due to the successful capture of the workers' ideology, self-understanding, and organizations by the hegemonic culture. In other words, the perspective of the ruling class had been successfully absorbed by the masses of workers. In “advanced” industrial societies, hegemonic cultural innovations such as compulsory schooling, mass media, and popular culture had indoctrinated workers to a false consciousness. Instead of working towards a revolution that would truly serve their collective needs, workers in “advanced” societies were listening to the rhetoric of nationalist leaders, seeking consumer opportunities and middle-class status, embracing an individualist ethos of success through competition, and/or accepting the guidance of bourgeois religious leaders.

museum. Moreover, we can also observe white cubes inspired by the International Style of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in Taiwanese art museum settings. I can see how Americanized concepts of the museum have shaped our imagination of different museums to different degrees, be they science, history, or art museums. This phenomenon resonates to Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony that the dominant ideologies put forth by cultural institutions are made to seem natural and *commonsense*, so that we do not even question the given assumptions. It is apparent that Americanized concepts of the museum have been successfully transplanted to Taiwan and have dominated our perceptions of museums. And I would argue that American museums are the cultural hegemony in the contemporary museum world.

In the age of globalization, which promotes thinking globally and acting locally, culture exchange is inevitable. However, I question whose belief, whose identity, and whose value is to be chosen in the process of culture exchange. As a young professional in the Taiwanese museum world, I am concerned about a diverse and dynamic culture we already have in Taiwan may be effaced by cultural hegemony. In this regard, I side with Gramsci's analysis that prevailing cultural norms which include beliefs, institutions, and practices should not be viewed as natural or commonsense; instead, they should be critically examined and investigated for their roots in domination and their implications for liberation. Only are we aware of the domination of cultural hegemony, will we be able to identify the cultural niche of Taiwanese museums in a larger global context, and accordingly to build up museums manifesting our own cultural identities. In the last section, I would suggest some alternatives for the museums of our own.

### III. Alternatives for the museums of our own

*Globalization is in so many ways Americanization: globalization wears Mickey Mouse ears, it drinks Pepsi and Coke, eats Big Macs, does its computing on an IBM laptop with Windows 98. Many societies around the world can't get enough of it, but others see it as a fundamental threat.*

Thomas L. Friedman <sup>5</sup>

Globalization has economic roots and political consequences, but it also has brought into focus the power of culture into a global framework. With the emergence of globalization, the circulation and the flow of goods, services, capital, technology, people, ideas, culture, crime, and so forth are getting rapider and more uneven. Among others, culture is the most indefinite but influential one. Globalization promotes integration and the removal not only of cultural barriers but of many of the negative dimensions of culture. However, the homogenizing influence brought by globalization is oftentimes challenged by intellectuals and cultural workers. People concerning about the aftereffects of globalization argue that globalization may be an immensely controversial process that assaults national sovereignty, erodes local culture and tradition and threatens economic and social instability (Rothkop, 1997).

Globalization is a double-edged sword. As an individual, I do appreciate the commoditization brought by globalization; however, as a cultural worker in the museum world, I worry about how globalization which to some extent can be seen as Americanization <sup>6</sup> devours the culture in my land. And this worry becomes worse when I

<sup>5</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, Pulitzer Prize winning author and columnist for the *New York Times*.

<sup>6</sup> Americanization is the term used for the influence the United States of America has on the culture of other countries, substituting their culture with American culture. When encountered unwillingly or by force, it has a negative connotation; when sought voluntarily, it has a positive connotation.

realize that we cannot really off-load the influence of globalization and Westernization/Americanization. Instead of being anxious about the globalization phenomena and reluctantly accepting Americanized concepts of the museum as cultural hegemony in the museum world, I would like to call for awareness about reflecting a whole identity of Taiwanese museums. By reflecting on our own cultural identities, I believe that we will be able to locate our cultural niche in a larger global context without being effaced by cultural hegemony. Under this premise, I propose following two alternatives.

1. Engaging the community and building cultural identity

Museums have been active in shaping knowledge and building identity over the last few centuries. Their establishment used to begin with object-collecting and be geographically in connection with where the objects were collected from. In consequence, the director to the staff in the forefront of a museum could tell you how they felt about their collection. They could also tell stories and memories held by objects, people and many other things related with their museum. It was just like telling a story of home. However, in the face of globalization, museums are now cultural commodities that can be sold or customized in order to meet customers' needs. For instance, the Guggenheim Museum in New York City can be seen as a cultural enterprise which expands its museum business through the sale of franchises. They own branch museums in Bilbao, Venice, Berlin, and Las Vegas; they were even considering having an Asian branch in Taichung, Taiwan not long ago. Most of the collections in these transplanted museums have nothing to do with local communities they are located. Taking the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao for example, most of the exhibitions on show are

traveling exhibitions packaged in the United States. There has not been any exhibition curated by local curators or artists so far. The whole museum is a monologue of American art. Artists and critics in local Bilbao do not feel engaged with the museum. It is an art project forcibly transplanted in Bilbao and it does not reflect any cultural identities of Bilbao at all. Rather, it is a cultural mark which claims the presence of American cultural hegemony.

Museums as a cultural vehicle which shapes and further casts national and cultural identities should reflect cultural specialties of their own. To accomplish this goal, I suggest that museums should engage the local community. The term community can be generated from many kinds of interests. For instance, it can be composed of not only geographically, but also religiously, or aesthetically. Meanwhile, museums need to go beyond the immediate and practical concerns of people's lives and communities. It is significant to integrate a community's memories and experiences into the reaching of common consensus. Through closely collaborating with the community, museums will be able to develop collective cultural identities which are recognized by members of both sides. These cultural identities will function as core values held by people. And museums will provide and deliver experiences based on these cultural identities or core values. Since identity is constructed through cultural representation, a museum working closely with the local community will definitely reflect a collective cultural identity of the community. And this cultural identity will also manifest the uniqueness of a museum.

2. Embracing diversity, creating diversity

Globalization can be a threat or an opportunity. It can efface a culture; yet, it can also help to develop a culture. The reason that American museums can so far be the cultural hegemony in the museum world is

that they are aware of embracing diversity. Through the process of embracing diversities and further Americanizing diversities, American museums create new or hybrid diversities that can be marketed all over the world. To a certain degree, this manipulation is seen in RAA's museum projects. By embracing diversities or at least taking diversities into account, RAA helps its clients to synthesize these diversities in their museums.

An old Chinese saying, old wine in a new bottle, may best describe the above cultural manipulative strategy. The historical context and evolution of immigration policy have added different cultural layers on this island. Just take a look at restaurants on streets and music genres celebrating by youngsters and you will know. We do have resources in terms of cultural diversity in Taiwan and they are worth of noticing and knowing. Diversity, multiculturalism, and pluralism are not just buzzwords, and they can be found in our everyday life. We need to respect our own culture and find the extracts of it. These extracts will be seeds of our cultural identities

and accordingly, we will be able to grow the museums of our own.

#### IV. Conclusion

As a novice of the museum world, I may romanticize the idea of building museums of our own. However, I am not too naive on understanding what museums can be manipulated for. Culture can be the power to bind and to divide in a time when the tensions between integration and separation tug at certain issues. It is this impact of globalization on culture and the impact of culture on globalization that merit further discussion. The museum is the vehicle of culture and it can also function as a catalyst whether to assimilate or to dissimilate other cultures. This paper is not intended to provide a panacea for Taiwanese museums; rather, it attempts to raise awareness among museum professionals of reflecting our own cultural identities. I am haunted by the fear of losing my own cultural identities when living abroad for my doctoral study, and I hope this fear will never come true.

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### About the author

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