

Nationalism with Shenzhen Characteristics: The Narrative of the Shenzhen Museum

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The museum is a powerful site for communicating ideas and beliefs in combination with objects that help reinforce a particular narrative. Because museums are concerned with preservation and education, they are intimately intertwined with history. However, unlike formal history education, which is generally aimed at school-going children only, a museum is in the special position that it is open to a much wider audience. This creates an opportunity for a government to present an official view of the nation's history, culture, and identity to not only its own citizens, but also to the outside world. Museums are not bound by written text, which makes them a useful tool in circumventing sensitive subjects, for example by using more fluid concepts such as 'memory' and 'heritage'.¹ The museum creates a performance of reality that often closely resembles theatre. However, as Simon Knell points out, 'one is merely a work of fiction which we can like, love or hate as we please; the other purports to be a work of fact and while we can also love or hate it, we also have the option to believe it (or not)' (Knell 2011, 7). Because of the high level of professionalism and the presence of research departments, museums are generally *imagined* to be neutral, authoritative, and trustworthy.² In reality, every museum's narrative serves a purpose, be it political, commercial, or otherwise. The way in which museums represent the past changes continuously, revealing as much (if not more) about the present as the past.

Relatively little has been written about the role of museums in China by Chinese and non-Chinese scholars alike. Chinese museums, historic sites, and monuments are occasionally included in literature about Chinese heritage and nationalism, but their relation to politics and society is limited (Varutti 2014, 5).³ Local museums have received even less attention when their themes are not directly linked to an event considered of national importance. The Shenzhen Museum, in the eponymous southern Chinese city, is one of these local museums that has not received any meaningful attention from scholars. In fact, little research has been done about Shenzhen beyond topics relating to economic development and urban planning. Shenzhen, one of China's first Special Economic Zones, is often seen as the success story of China's reform policies that were initiated by Hua Guofeng in the late 1970s, and popularised by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. It is also representative of the ideal of a new, modernised, and

economically strong China. The communist ideals of the Maoist era have long been pushed aside to make way for newer ideologies such as ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’, or, more recently, Xi Jinping’s ‘Chinese Dream’. These shifts in ideology have had a significant influence on the identity that the Chinese state wishes to convey to its citizens and beyond. Alongside a national identity, many Chinese regions and cities develop a local identity that distinguishes them from others. Shenzhen is no exception. The Shenzhen Museum plays an important part in communicating the city’s identity and its position in China as a model city both to the local population and beyond. Shenzhen illustrates that the way we perceive nationalism has to change in an ever-globalising world, where major cities within a nation can play as large a role in defining the nation as the country at large.

This paper highlights some of the findings of a larger research project undertaken at the Shenzhen Museum, China, which explores the following research question: how do national and regional identities and their subsequent narratives interact or conflict in the permanent exhibition of the Shenzhen Museum?⁴ The national narrative is based on the National Museum of China in Beijing. The project combines both textual and non-textual discourse analysis to examine how museums play a role in reproducing a certain view of history. A museum is by definition a multimediatic site that combines text, objects, lighting, sound, etc. The non-textual elements are as meaningful as the *literal* messages of the text panels and narrated films.⁵

China’s historical narrative at the National Museum of China

Since the establishment of China’s first public museum in 1905, this institution has been associated with the various nation-building efforts and the country’s modernisation (Shao 2004, Calypool 2005). Museums exhibit the modern nation not only to the outside world, but especially to the nation’s own citizens. As Carol Gluck points out, “‘modern’ is a temporally slippery concept, connoting a chronological period that began several centuries ago as well as the sense of ever-changing up-to-dateness of the contemporary era”(Gluck 2011, 678). As ideas of national identity and political ideology evolved, so did the museum. China’s current national historical narrative places the beginning of modernity as a temporal concept in the mid-nineteenth century at the start of the First Opium War, which marks the so-called ‘Century of Humiliation’. This event also marks the beginning of China’s ‘modernising attitude’ (*Ibid.*), which is characterised by technological, industrial, and economic development foremost.

The national narrative that is presented at the National Museum of China (NMC) emphasises China as a victim of ‘feudalism’ and ‘imperialist aggression’ that rose from its dire situation owing to the CCP’s endeavours. The pre-CCP period is described with negative emotional terms and phrases such as ‘humiliation’, ‘the nation’s dignity’, and ‘the people’s misery’. Throughout the exhibition the CCP is portrayed as the protagonist of the narrative, who has the people’s best interests at heart. Part Three of the exhibition explicitly states the

party's heroic role in its title: 'The Communist Party of China takes on the historic burden of making the country independent and liberating its people'.⁶ In fact, the first text panel in this gallery boldly states that the founding of the CCP was an 'earth-shattering event' (*kaitian pidi* 开天辟地), placing the CCP on par with Pan Gu 盘古, the creator of the universe in Chinese mythology. The vocabulary becomes more hopeful and positive in tone; words and phrases such as 'victory', 'tower of strength', 'liberation', and 'progress' are used. More traumatic periods of CCP history are glanced over quickly or ignored. The exhibition creates an evolutionary story of success – a mission that is 'carried on the shoulders' of the CCP – into the present that promises an undefined, but utopic future, where there is no place for the negative effects of events such as the Cultural Revolution or the Tian'anmen protests.

Above all, the NMC's Road of Rejuvenation exhibition is about legitimising CCP rule in China. As other scholars have pointed out, museums further removed from China's political centre are deviating from the national narrative as it is presented in the NMC (Denton 2014; Varutti 2014); perhaps none so boldly as the Shenzhen Museum.

Shenzhen as the epitome of the nation

Shenzhen is a place like no other in China, if only because it is a city where nearly everyone (95 percent) is from somewhere else. Shenzhen's identity is characterised by urban and economic development, and 'the shared sense of being away from home' (Bach 2011, 414). The city is proud of its achievements and eagerly promotes its *rags-to-riches* success story, as well as its disposition to welcome migrants with open arms. However, as the city has a growing number of 'Shenzheners', it has tried to create an image of itself as being more than a 'migrant city' where people come only to work. The city's cultural heritage has become an important part of its identity narrative. The government has invested heavily in developing tourism and culture. The 'cultural city' strategy was initiated in 2003, which has attracted many cultural and creative industries (Shenzhen Government 2014). Furthermore, many cultural heritage sites have been listed on the government's protection list and are being preserved and restored, such as Dapeng Fortress and the walled city of Nantou.

Shenzhen portrays itself as a modern cosmopolitan city of endless possibilities, prosperity and cultural wealth. In order to be all it aspires to be, Shenzhen must also show its ambitions to the outside world. Exhibiting one's success is as important as success itself. This has resulted in Shenzhen realising prestigious projects such as organising the 2011 Summer Universiade, and planning to open a branch of the Victoria and Albert Museum in the Shekou district in 2017. It is this image of openness and success, combined with a cultural heritage that can be traced to ancient times, that is promoted and exhibited in the city's history museum, the Shenzhen Museum.

According to the foreword of the Shenzhen Museum's permanent exhibition catalogue,

the four exhibitions (Shenzhen Folk Culture, Ancient Shenzhen, Modern Shenzhen, and Shenzhen's Reform and Opening-up History) are a permanent monument that records the more than 7000 years' history of Shenzhen and its historical development (Rong 2010, 1a).⁷ The aim of this exhibition is to create and record a collective memory (*jiti jiyi* 集体记忆) that will bring the citizens of Shenzhen closer together and make everyone of this 'migrant city' feel at home (Ye 2010). My analysis demonstrates that the Shenzhen Museum's curators have framed a narrative that takes migration as the main theme of Shenzhen's ancient past and uses the Reform and Opening-up exhibition to illustrate an historical continuity in which migration is still key. The collective memory that is created by the museum is as much local as it is national.

The museum tells the story of Shenzhen within the context of China's national history. In fact, the museum claims that Shenzhen's history is the epitome of the Chinese nation's history (Cai 2010, 1). Although the outline of the Shenzhen Museum's narrative coincides with the national narrative, historical events are approached from a different angle. Instead of placing humiliation and misery in the foreground, the Shenzhen Museum stresses the people's perseverance and heroism. An example of this can be found in how the Shenzhen Museum and the NMC deal with the Opium Wars. Shenzhen and the NMC both display a diorama that shows brave soldiers loading canons to be fired at the British fleet. The former's diorama depicts the Battle of Kowloon (1839), which is seen as a victory in Chinese historiography;⁸ the latter's diorama depicts the Battle of Canton (1841) that was won by the British. Whereas the NMC accentuates defeat, the Shenzhen Museum stresses victory. To reinforce the idea of the Battle of Kowloon being a success that can be attributed to Shenzhen, a large showcase is dedicated to the local hero Lai Enjue from Dapeng, who lead the Qing forces to 'victory'. Some of his personal belongings are also displayed to give this hero a personality. In the next gallery more successful achievements are presented, such as photographs and documents that illustrate how the British failed to occupy Shenzhen.

The CCP plays a far less prominent role in the narrative; Shenzhen is the subject, not the party. The museum and the city are inextricably intertwined, with a clear role for the museum to 'show off' Shenzhen. The narrative aims to demonstrate that the Shenzhen region's historical events, from the first human settlements in prehistoric times to today, have culminated in the metropolis' inevitable success. The Shenzhen Museum displays all the city's successes and 'firsts', and is proud to present Shenzhen as a 'window' and 'testing ground' for the rest of China.

These metaphors that are used to describe Shenzhen reveal the freedom the city has to try out new ideas and policies. This freedom is also extended to the city's museum, where, unlike in most other government-sponsored museums, the Cultural Revolution is openly criticised without this causing objection from the government. The gallery dealing with the pre-Reform

and Opening-up period opens with the following introduction: ‘In the late 1970s, after China had undergone the catastrophe that was the Great Cultural Revolution, [the country] found itself at an important historical juncture to set things right’.⁹ However, it must also be noted that the liberties taken by the Shenzhen Museum are limited and are aimed at boosting Shenzhen’s image. A more cynical view of the museum’s criticism of the Cultural Revolution would be that this is merely a rhetorical device to accentuate Shenzhen’s ‘miracle development’ of the past three decades. Furthermore, the museum leaves little room for alternative interpretations of Shenzhen’s history by leading visitors on a fixed route through the exhibitions, and presenting the narrative in an uncritical and easily digestible manner through unequivocal text panels and dioramas. Environmental and social problems are not addressed critically, if at all. The narrative demonstrates Shenzhen’s exemplary role. Ultimately, the Shenzhen Museum’s ‘heroic’ narrative and the NMC’s ‘victim’s’ narrative are two sides of the same coin; they give rise to a binary view of history that ignores any form of critical discussion.

As the city is maturing and approaching its fortieth anniversary, the museum also aims to present a Shenzhen identity. This identity is not only presented to outsiders, but, most importantly, is also communicated to the city’s citizens. Because everyone in Shenzhen is from somewhere else, much more visibly so than in most other cities where people’s families might have resided for several generations, drawing people together to form a collective identity has required a very specific narrative. The two key elements in creating Shenzhen citizen’s identity are migration and (Han) Chineseness. Shenzhen presents itself as a place that has historically always accepted migrants who are claimed to have coexisted peacefully (predominantly Hakka and Cantonese people). These migrants are connected by their descent from the Han Chinese of China’s Central Plains. Individuals and ethnic, cultural, or other groups are homogenised into a new category, ‘the migrants’, which is subsequently transformed into ‘Shenzheners’, creating a perceived unique and local culture.

Conclusion

The Shenzhen Museum presents the city’s history as an improved version of the nation’s history. At first glance the Shenzhen Museum may seem to separate Shenzhen from the Chinese nation, by emphasising its own achievements and its unique position as a Special Economic Zone. On the contrary, the museum presents the city as the embodiment of China’s national policy of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ and equally strives for a ‘moderately prosperous society’. Not only is Shenzhen seen as the epitome of China’s history, but also of China’s future. The exhibition aims to demonstrate that the city is very much a part of China and plays a role in reinforcing the CCP’s political agenda by being an experimental field. Despite the increasingly popular notion of a globalised world, we can still hardly imagine it without nations; in many parts of the world national boundaries are being reinforced with walls

and fences (Wittenberg 2013). Given the amount of literature being produced by scholars, nationalism does not seem to be in decline either.¹⁰ Furthermore, as Rosmarie Beier-de Haan points out, '[i]f it is true that nation-states lose significance in a globalized world, then this should be reflected in how history museums view themselves, and should be especially evident in newly established museums' (Beier-de Haan 2006, 188). The case of the Shenzhen Museum demonstrates that nationalism is still a relevant topic that needs a new approach; not only from the nation at large, but also from a more local level, such as the city. Large urban centres can play an important role in representing the nation. In China, events such as the *Beijing* Olympics, the *Shanghai* Expo, and the *Shenzhen* Universiade were important events that promoted and exhibited the nation through the hosting city. Even though nations might not be disappearing, their inner structure is certainly changing. People's increased mobility has transformed both rural and urban landscapes and their subsequent identities. In a country as vast as China, local or regional expressions of nationalism may be a more effective way of creating a unified nation. As Prasenjit Duara already noted in 1995, 'nationalism is rarely the nationalism of the *nation*, but rather marks the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other' (Duara 1995: 8). Instead of 'contesting' and 'negotiating' different representations of the nation, Shenzhen's approach seems to be one of a *complementing* representation. Besides the city's unique character, all its citizens are still Chinese. However, it is important to note that the cities promoting China most prominently are those situated in the eastern coastal area. Additional research would have to be done to find out if this phenomenon holds true for other regions and how such processes affect nationalism more broadly.

I hope this paper inspires other scholars to focus on Shenzhen as a field for new research. As I have shown, such research can yield important insights on how we research nationalism and national identity across different fields, such as history, museum studies, and various sub-fields. Nationalism, for good or ill, is still important for the way we order the world. However, competing, but not necessarily incompatible, intellectual and societal tendencies should prompt scholars to study nationalism from a different perspective.

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