

A Shared Authority: The Public Participation in Representing Taiwan at the National Museum of Taiwan History

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Biography

I am a PhD student at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester. I hold a MA and BA degree in history from National Taiwan University. Based on my academic training of historical studies, I take the newly built National Museum of Taiwan History as a case study for my PhD research in which I discuss about how Taiwan history, constructed as a new national history presented in the museum. For the research interests in historical narratives in museums and exhibitions, what I concern is not only the presentation of museum's professional and academic historical knowledge, but also how people's narratives, as a new historical data are used in the construction of museum's narratives.

Abstract

Attempting to be a 'museum for people', the National Museum of Taiwan History has devoted to tell Taiwan's story by 'looking after both sides of scholars (elites) and the people', which signifies that the making of museum's historical narrative should consider both academic history and how the 'unofficial sources of historical knowledge' especially people's memories and life experiences enter into academic historical narratives. On this premise, this paper suggests that in modern democratic, multicultural, social inclusive, and community-oriented museums, people's narrative and the 'materials from everyday people, including emails, photographs and paper communications' are indispensable historical data in constructing an inclusive historical story; in the meantime, the situated nature of knowledge and the political positioning of museum authority, which can be challenged by the experience, beliefs, and emotions that visitors bring with them.

Keywords

National Museum of Taiwan History, shared authority, multiculturalism, identity, people's narrative

Introduction

I.

In October 2011, a new national museum opened in Tainan, Taiwan. The subject of much debate concerning Taiwan history and Taiwan identity, the National Museum of Taiwan History (國立台灣歷史博物館) has been attracting considerable public attention. As a museum of collecting, studying, and displaying Taiwanese past, the establishment of the museum reflects the achievements of Taiwanese democratisation since the 1970s which encouraged 'Taiwanisation' or indigenization (*Bentuhua*¹ 本土化) – a discourse sought to distinguish this island people from the mainland Chinese. With the progress of *Bentuhua*, 'Taiwanese identity' had become the mainstream in the past 20 years (Wu 2008: 106). According to Wu Nai-Te's (吳乃德) survey on the inclination of people's identity from 1991 to 2004, 'the percentage of "I am Taiwanese" had increased continually while the percentage of "I am Chinese" has descended. In this period, the percentage of "Taiwanese identity had reached the peak of nearly 60%' (Wu 2008: 103). This survey illustrates that in Taiwan, the concept of 'Taiwanese' presents inclusive and does not discriminate between Taiwan's diverse ethnic groups and cultures. Towards to a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society, the identification with Taiwan and Taiwanese has gradually become mainstream since the 1990s.²

In order to respond the social needs of this new identity, the National Museum of Taiwan History takes diverse historical narratives in creating a mutual world in which

¹ The term *Bentuhua* is used to refer to the ongoing process of recovering Taiwanese local culture, including literature, language, and history.

² This survey also reveals that 'there is still nearly one-third people identify with Taiwanese and Chinese at the same time' (Wu 2008: 103).

different voices from different ethnic groups can be found. Although it is understood that the museum as an organic body will transform its works and targets, the original interpretation of the museum's meaning and missions is still significant for us to know the relations between the museum and its historical context. Its first director, Wu Mi-Cha (吳密察) (the tenure of office is 2007-2008) describes the museum's philosophical basis as follows:

The National Museum of Taiwan History must display a kind of Taiwan history, which emphasises diverse ethnic groups, diverse culture, and self-identifies an immigrant nation formed by constitutional democratic principle. Therefore, the National Museum of Taiwan History will not be a museum of historical antiques or a museum of local culture whose connotation is local anecdotes. The National Museum of Taiwan History must conform to the spirit of the age and its national narrative must respond to the Taiwanese people's need for identity: A nation with diverse ethnic groups, which is built according to a constitutional democratic principle. This historical narrative will see Taiwan as a geographical area and assimilate different ethnic groups' (including native and immigrants) experiences and culture (Wu 2009: 291).

Wu's argument directly told us that the National Museum of Taiwan History is a political and social product, which reflects some new important ideas such as 'diverse ethnic groups', 'immigrant nation', 'identity', and 'constitutional democratic principle' that emerged in the past decades in Taiwan. It is suggested that with developing of political democratisation and *Bentuhua* in the past forty years, Taiwan history, as a synthetic expert knowledge has been a new national discourse which been empowered governmentality in providing a new way of understanding the past, valuing the present, and planning the future of this island and people who are living here. Representing this historical discourse in museum's public sphere, the National Museum of Taiwan History is the first national museum that bears the political mission in transmitting a new multi-cultural national identity to the people and responding Taiwanese political and social needs for new identity.

On this premise, the main purpose of this chapter is to examine the nature of Taiwan history – the concepts and methods of a new 'national history' and to see how the new Taiwan-centred historical discourse presents as a contesting and challenging history to the traditional Chinese-centred master narratives. In dealing with the

questions of *why* Taiwan society needs a new Taiwan history, *what* Taiwan history is and *how* Taiwan history is constructed, the National Museum of Taiwan History, as the kernel of intellectual network of Taiwan history, using various new historical methods, new historical source materials, and new historical outlook in collecting, researching, displaying, and educating Taiwan history for the public, provides as a starting point in understanding the concerns of Taiwan history in nowadays Taiwan for my discussion.

The core works of the museum, according to the *Annual Report of the National Museum of Taiwan History 2012* (國立台灣歷史博物館年表 2012 年) (2014) indicates are:

1. The investigation and study on overseas historical materials about Taiwan.
2. The research on modern public history, mainly people's viewpoints beyond master historical narratives.
3. The interdisciplinary South Taiwan studies.
4. Studies on museum's collection to create new research area of Taiwan history.
5. The comprehensive study on historical maps in order to establish geographic historical knowledge.
6. The publication of Taiwan historical materials

(*Annual Report of the National Museum of Taiwan History 2012*, 2014: pp. 29-39).

From the outline of museum's research works, it is clear that the shaping of historical knowledge in the National Museum of Taiwan History is on the basis of the searching for new historical materials and the concerning on diverse history marginalised in the traditional master narratives.

The permanent exhibition, '*Our Land, Our People: The Story of Taiwan*' (斯土斯民：台灣的故事), is a good example to show new challenges to traditional master historical narratives combining with diverse approaches and voices.

The history presented in this exhibition space applies amount of historical materials and evidences about ordinary people, ethnic groups, women, and foreigners that are excluded

from traditional official history. This story empowers these marginalised groups and attempts to construct the interaction between people and land. The exhibition provides visitors the impulse of new viewpoints and let visitors rediscover themselves by knowing the panorama of Taiwanese past. The exhibition also attempts to make visitors understand and identify Taiwanese diverse historical culture and achieves the aim of creating a coherent society (*The Annual Report of the National Museum of Taiwan History* 2012: 24)

The purpose of historical narratives presented in the permanent and temporary exhibitions in this museum is to empower marginalised groups, such as aboriginals, women, and immigrants. This empowerment of diverse groups in the writing of national history is a different approach from the traditional Chinese national history in Taiwan. Following the approach of the writing of de-centred history, this chapter attempts to know the diverse and inclusive essence of the new history by combining the new aspects of historical studies, including the narrativity of history, story-telling and meaning making, memory and oral history. It is suggested that all these new debate on historical knowledge form the theoretical basis for the new de-centred historical narratives presented both in Taiwan history and the historical display in the National Museum of Taiwan History.

As German historian Stefan Berger said, ‘the more the official memorial culture of nations was challenged by diverse public memories coming from the midst of a highly diverse civil society, the more it became impossible to write a unitary history of national memory’ (Berger 2014: 142). In modern democratic and plural Taiwanese society, various voices from different social groups or individuals will continue challenge the single-viewed official history. In museums, the concept of ‘challenging history’ reminds researchers that the museum’s power of interpretation is not always absolute and can be challenged by visitors’ individual meaning-making activity (Kidd 2014). On the basis of the interrelationships among the museum, as a historian-author, the museum exhibitions, as historical texts, and museum visitors, as readers, the imperative aim of the new history approach is to examine the meaning-construction process both of museum curators and individual museum visitors. It is important to bear in mind that ‘Communities, groups, visitors, societies, publics and constituencies, are heterogeneous and incongruent’ (Kidd 2014: 12). The concept of ‘public’ is diverse and alive that an understanding of this heterogeneous public ‘can help us to critique the modernist, traditionalist museum as a project of “nation”, as celebratory in tone and unifying in purpose’ (Kidd 2014: 12).

In *Beyond the Glass Case: The Past, the Heritage and the Public in Britain* (1991), Nick Merriman argued that there exist cultural barriers between museums and the public. The ways of seeing, understanding, and telling the past of ordinary people are very different from the museums' way. Merriman suggested that how people beyond the wall of museums see the past can provide professional/academic museum historian-authors diverse understanding of the historical past. In order to meet the diverse social needs, museums 'need to look at ways in which the past is experienced in non-museum ways to see what they teach us' (Merriman 1991: 95). Berger, Kidd, and Merriman's critics of the traditional one-centred grand historical narrative, no matter in historiographical or museum context, can be regarded as the core idea of the new history this research uses. Following this approach, it is suggested that although museum visitors, as readers who read the same text in the same space, each of them will construct their personal meanings concerning the past according to their intimate private memories, life experiences, ethnic, educational, and cultural background. It is a critical view that even the museum creates a story space, which implies author's specific epistemological, ethical, political, and ideological choices (Munslow 2007), museum visitors have their own way of interpretation in the forming of their understanding of the past, present, and future. Through this process of meaning-construction, the power of the historical discourse in the museum will be weakened, especially in a democratic and plural society like Taiwan.

II.

Under the challenges from post-modernism and linguistic turn, the writing of history, in some degree, could be seemed as a making process in which no matter professional historians or ordinary people create their own story spaces through the process of meaning-making. Similar to professional historians, every person has his/her own narrating activities to tell individual unique history story space (Munslow 2007: 53). In this sense, The positive role of narrators in meaning-making process empowers ordinary people or marginalised minority groups to tell their own past story, create their specific story space using unofficial materials such as memories, life experiences, family history, etc. This history facing to the people has been termed as public history and presented in various aspects such as family gatherings, historical novels, films, history museums and historic sites. As public historian Paul Martin said, 'public history outside the academy and speak to a personalized, experiential or

autodidactic knowledge that informs the individual on history's role in shaping their present. It is public history also because in its recognition it empowers the individual in their sense of its ownership and as contributors to what history is and how it is made' (Martin 2013: 2). It is public history that diverse, democratic and de-centred historical narratives could be shaped and continues challenging and criticising academic historical narratives.

Within this intellectual context of public history, It is now well established within the field of new history and its theory that the interpretation of the past is not the absolute privilege of professional historians but that 'history is owned by those whose past is described in the narrative because that story, their own version of it resides in their memories and establishes their identities' (Archibald 1999: 155). The stress on public involvement in history-making illustrates that people can do history in their daily life using the similar way with professional historians. In this sense, people will become positive and creative history-makers rather than consumers of history (Kean 2013: xv).

In responding to the new development of history facing to the public, since its preparatory period, the National Museum of Taiwan History has been devoted to the works of collecting people's stories and ordinary life objects in attempting to 'represent diverse viewpoints' through opening up materials for history (Kean 2013: xxii). Like the using of new materials such as maps and Western literature forms one important part of diverse viewpoints from others, the museum also dedicates to tell Taiwan history by 'looking after both sides of scholars (elites) and the people' (Lu 2010), which signifies that the making of museum's historical narrative should consider academic research achievements and 'accumulate un-official data for the setting of new issues' (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 30). In this sense, the museum should consider how ordinary people (non-historians) deal with their intimate past and how these 'unofficial sources of historical knowledge' (Samuel 1994: 15) enters into academic historical narratives, especially in museums where appear to contain 'authentic objects from the past' and people think they can learn 'real or true history' from visiting museums and historic sites (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998: 19).

In order to build a 'museum for people', the museum's collection policy focuses on 'collecting the key material evidences and oral history of Taiwan historical culture; the objects that can present the issues of Taiwan diverse historical culture and social interactions' (National Museum of Taiwan History 2012: 176). According to this

principle, the museum on the one hand applies the approach of oral history in rediscovering 'marginalised and hidden people's viewpoints and the characteristics of local communities' (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 30), and on the other hand 'reinterpreting Taiwan's past from museum's material cultural studies that is different from the traditional literature-based historical writing' (National Museum of Taiwan History 201: 38).

The purpose of oral history, as Paul Thompson said is to discuss the relationship between history and community. By the practice of oral history, history becomes a new public involvement. Oral history empowers people to tell their own story and gives them confidence for the construction of historical consciousness. Through the combination of memory and narrative, people's life stories become meaningful through narrative 'just as the historian emplots the collective past as history, individual lives again shape and meaning through the life stories we create about ourselves' (Thompson 1994: 103-104). Through collecting personal memories, oral history offers not only new source materials and story-lines in constructing Taiwanese collective memories, but also as a theoretical and practical approach, locates personal memory in historical narratives, 'recovers hidden histories and empowers people to make their own history' (Thompson 2012: 33).

Taking oral history project as the core work in collecting marginalised and hidden voices from personal memories, the National Museum of Taiwan History had launched many monographic projects to construct modern Taiwanese people's memories through oral history and video recording. Since 2007, the museum had carried out the *Research Project and the Plan for the Website of Taiwan Women* (臺灣女人網站內容規劃與研究計劃) (2007) which provided a public forum for scholars and the public to concern on the issues of women and their life experiences. Reconstructing past through oral history, the main purpose of this project is to record Taiwanese women's war and colonised experiences. These stories, it is considered, are useful for the 'accumulation and research of Taiwan women historical data'. Through conducting in-depth interviews, the museum 'preserves ordinary women's voices and in shaping new issues of women studies from the historical angles of women's life experiences in Japanese period' (National Museum of Taiwan History 2012: 161). The intellectual achievement of this monographic research project contributed to the

temporary exhibition of *'Taiwan Ordinary Women Life'* (台灣女人, 非常好) opened in 2012. Through creating a public sphere for dialogue between micro-history and macro-history, the museum attempted to bridge the distance between the museum and the public by telling Taiwan women life history that closely links to people's life.

From October 2008 to April 2009, the museum executed the *Project of the Investigation and Research of Oral History and Video Recording of the Wushe Incident*³ (霧社事件口述歷史調查研究與影像記錄計劃) in which the museum conducted oral interviews with the tribe people related to the *Wushe Incident*. From the insights of communities, gender, public, and tribe viewpoints, this project reconstructed the historical truth of the *Wushe Incident* from the viewpoints of the indigenous tribes. These oral data and video recording offer people's voices marginalised and hidden in Japanese narratives of the Incident (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 143). The oral and video data of the *Wushe Incident* contributed to the temporary exhibition *'Listen for Voices: The Special Exhibition of the Eightieth Anniversary of the Wushe Incident'* (聞眾之聲：霧社事件 80 週年特展) opened in 2010. At the same time, in order to collect data for the temporary exhibition *'Taiwanese people in the Second World War'* (二戰下的臺灣人), the museum attempted to use the collecting and recording of Taiwanese people's war memories in reconstructing the images of Taiwan during the WWII (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 143).

Besides the three research projects above, in studying the issue of ethnic interactions the museum also applied various approaches in inviting the public to participate in the history-making process. As a core research theme of the museum, the rediscovery of *Pingpuzu* history not only offers diverse and decentred historical insights beyond traditional Han-centred narratives of Taiwanese ethnic interactions but also opens a possible multicultural and multi-ethnic understanding for Taiwan

³ Began in October 1930 and was the last major uprising against colonial Japanese forces in Taiwan. In response to long-term oppression by Japanese authorities, the *Seediq* indigenous group in *Wushe* (Musha) attacked the village, killing over 130 Japanese. In response, the Japanese led a relentless counter-attack, killing over 1,000 *Seediq* in retaliation. The handling of the incident by the Japanese authorities was strongly criticised, leading to many changes in aboriginal policy (*Wushe Incident*, Wikipedia).

history (Chang 1995). In collecting the material sources for the studies on the ethnic interactions between *Pingpuzu* tribes and Han people, the museum applies oral history, field research, and workshop to ‘discover un-written historical material sources and then to understand history in its environmental context’ (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 37).

In choosing the research issue, for its location in Tainan and its mission to establish the centre for Taiwan history research in South Taiwan, the museum specifically focuses on the ethnic interactions between Han society and South Taiwan *Pingpuzu* tribes. In 2009, the National Museum of Taiwan History cooperated with the Department of History, National Cheng-Kun University held ‘Historical Field Research Workshop: Ethnicity, History, and Culture’ (走入歷史田野工作坊-族群、歷史與文化) in which the workshop ‘conducted oral interviews with the old men and the residents of the tribes and video recording for the discussion on the differences between history and anthropology’ (National Museum of Taiwan History 2012: 160). The using of field research and workshops play essential role in the connecting and interchanging with local communities. Through the investigation and oral historical data collecting in the local area of Tainan, the National Museum of Taiwan History has gradually ‘increased people’s identity and encouraged public engagement of local communities’ (National Museum of Taiwan History 2012: 132).

Besides the collecting and narrating the past from oral historical data and field research, the perspective of public history at the museum could be examined from its collection policies. Based on the three core projects, Taiwan international relations, Taiwan ethnic interactions, and Taiwan modernisation, the museum collects tangible and intangible cultural heritages such as literature, folklore, and ordinary life objects, which could ‘represent the value of ordinary people’s life memories and the transformation of historical periods of Taiwan’ (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 53). The main aim of the collection of people’s objects is to ‘collect the life and memories of Taiwanese people; through material and non-material evidences in telling history and stories in order that people can find their memories in the museum; meanwhile it is hoped that the museum could represent different viewpoints in this polyethnic land’ (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 54). Under this collecting aim and policies, the museum investigates overseas literatures and data about Taiwan, builds cooperation with other museums and institutions, purchases

objects from collectors, and the most significant, encourage people to donate their life objects to the museum. In 2009, the museum had launched the system of donation based on the core value of 'People's Museum' in which the museum could construct people's lively stories different from academic history from the studies on the objects and its using context. On the basis of people's donation, in 2011, the museum curated an exhibition of '*Museum for People*' in which the museum proposes to 'appreciate the donators' support for the museum and improve people's confidence to the museum's collecting professions' (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 54). As communicating medium for the museum and the public, through the display of 'real objects' the exhibition of '*Life Memories of One Hundred Years*' (百年生活記憶特展) (2011) also provides a space in which people could find their own life memories from ordinary objects (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 93).

From the perspective of public history, the empowerment of people in telling their own history signifies that the meanings of historical construction at modern democratic and multicultural museums are treated not as 'inherent or static, but rather alive and often contested-created and modified through an interactive dialogue in many dimensions of communication' (Frisch 1990: xix). In modern democratic, multicultural, social inclusive, and community-oriented museums, traditional ideological historical narrative has gradually lost its attraction to the public. People's narrative directly derived from memory and the materials from everyday people, including emails, photographs and paper communications have been fundamental to anchoring nations in national museums' (Knell 2011: 11).

In such museums, 'the situated nature of knowledge and the political positioning of museum authority, which can be challenged by the experience, beliefs, and emotions visitors bring with them' (Golding 2013: 13). It is in this sense that the National Museum of Taiwan History attempts to build its uniqueness in 'developing public culture and the issues of ordinary people's history. By using diverse materials and unique problem consciousness, the purpose of the museum is to build up the characteristic of modern history research in order to fit the development direction of museum for people' (National Museum of Taiwan History 2013: 36).

IV.

Attempting to be a 'museum for people', the museum has devoted to tell Taiwan

story by 'looking after both sides of scholars (elites) and the people'. By collecting objects used in people's ordinary life, oral historical material sources, field research, and the holding of workshops with local communities, the museum has been trying to empowering ordinary people to participate the writing of Taiwan history and encourage the public to share authority with historians and museum curators. The shared authority between museum professions and the people signifies that the power relationship between authors and readers had been changed. From the perspective of modern public history, the personal meaning-making has been empowered in creating history as a mutual world in which academic historical research and people's narratives could dialogue equally (Frisch 1990; Straub 2005).

The empowerment of ordinary people to participate in the making of history and the emphasis on the significance of personal meaning-making process in narrating the past shows that oral history could provide diverse and de-centred viewpoints in challenging single-viewed grand narrative. However, it should bear in mind that the ways of presenting oral history accounts, as Paul Thompson argue, the original mode of oral history is 'the single life-story narrative, especially important for informants with a rich memory' (Thompson 1994: 204). As this single life-story has been collected around some common themes and entered into historical narratives and museum exhibitions, the oral data governed by the logic of the historian's own argument will be used as 'a quarry from which to construct an argument' (Thompson 1994: 204-5). That is to say, in transforming personal oral data into coherent historical narratives, historians-authors still dominate the final decision in choosing which story should be included or excluded.

The editing and emploting process in presenting oral historical data in the museum's narratives illustrates that although the museum professionals invite the public to share authorities with them, the final making of a coherent story is still dominated by curators who work in the 'back-stage area' which the public is denied access to. For the separation of the space of collection, research, and exhibition, the curators in have the right to tell history to a greater degree and become 'the source of an absolute authority and the museum the site of a monologic discourse in which the curator's view of the world, translated into exhibition form, is to be relayed to a public which is denied any active role in the museum except that of looking and learning, absorbing the lessons that have been laid out before it' (Bennett 2004: 14). Tony Bennett's critic to the disadvantages of 'dead circus' in museums reminds us that in a more diverse and social challenging society, museum's knowledge systems

and narrative presentation will be challenged continually by public diverse viewpoints.

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