Bridging the Ocean

Professor Jack Lohman, Chief Executive, the Royal British Columbia Museum,

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British Columbia is Canada's Pacific province. It shares a history with China; Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, is the second oldest Chinatown in North America. Chinese immigrants came looking for gold here in the 19th century and built the famous railway across Canada. Today, the economic links between China and British Columbia and indeed Canada have never been stronger. But what should our cultural relations look like? What should the objectives of our cultural policy focus on and specifically museums? Professor Jack Lohman outlines some thoughts for discussion.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to start by showing you a photograph I really like.[1] It was taken at the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria, where I am Chief Executive and where in 2013 we created a wonderful exhibition called *Tradition in Felicities.* The exhibition celebrated 155 years of my city's Chinatown. Working closely with the Chinese community, we showcased the history of the area and showed how it was a gateway between Asia and North America, and an important site for Chinese-Canadian community development. We had interviews with elders,

1 See penultimate exhibition photograph: http://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/about/explore/centre-arrivals/chinese-canadian-history-british-columbia/tradition-felicities (accessed 14 July 2017).

and Chinese families. The display was swathed in red lanterns. We won the international Keck Award for our live conservation project of a large, elaborate Chinese Freemasons' Lantern, which featured moving horsemen and illuminated scenes of Chinese boats, birds and crabs waving their pincers in a friendly fashion.

It was enchanting and we had a great response from visitors. Chinese guests were pleased to see their heritage on display. And many other visitors too were keen to learn about the historical links between China and Canada.

Beyond that success, you can see in this photograph that final element that is so often missing from cultural displays, however excellent. People enjoyed it. They had fun. These children, standing in front of these large paper lanterns, were really having a good time. You can see it in their faces. It makes me happy to see their happiness.

And I like the fact that they are just there, in their hooded tops and their blue jeans. They're regular Canadian kids. They're Chinese kids. There's no saying where one part of their identity ends and another begins. It is important, that.

And it's why I want to talk more today about this very complexity of who we are and, when it comes to culture, what are the important stories we can tell.

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1. MASTER NARRATIVE

We're here today to discuss, among other topics, cultural contact, and I want to begin by looking at a dominant mode in museums. What I mean by that is the way in which a museum talks to its audience: what objects it puts on show, what it says about them, what story is told through this combined, often highly sophisticated display of research, design, architecture and material culture.

What you find in a lot of museums is what I would call a Master Narrative. Small museums tend towards a single, specialized topic. Mid-sized museums work harder to pull together a number of strands within a larger theme. Even our largest museums, while attempting to explore any number of issues, usually bring those issues together under a larger rubric: the history of a nation, or a particular timespan or historical epoch. There are vast museums devoted a particular technology or branch of science. There are countless museums that serve as monuments to war.

Some of these museums do a fantastic job. The Capital Museum in Beijing tells the story of one city. The District Six Museum in Cape Town records the memories of Black South Africans forcibly removed from the area under apartheid. Others, like the Nanjing Massacre Memorial, recall a tragic event in history.

The Master Narrative works. Perhaps (and I'll return to this in a moment) it works too well. And let us not forget that the efficacy of the Master Narrative isn't simply a question of artefacts and words. Through-designed museums insist that every visitor follow the curatorial path: there is no deviating from what they want you to learn. The grand architecture of some museums is likewise domineering. If we think of architect Antoine Predock's powerful design for the Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg, it is filled with architectural effects that reinforce in some parts the terror and darkness, which that museum wants visitors to understand.

And let us also not forget a last element we are sometimes reluctant to discuss: the influence of the rulers of culture—governments who pick up the bill for museums and cultural institutions, private sponsors who donate but leave a few

clauses in the contract about what they would, and more often would not, like to see. Even architects are sometimes insistent that no sign or food stall or postcard seller sully their beautiful atrium or grand stairwell. It can seem as if museum designers prefer their limestone walls to those annoyingly various and casually dressed elements: the people you built the museum for.

We can understand why such museums come about. Strongly determined cultural forms give out clear messages. It may seem, at first glance, that China and Canada have very different histories on this front, and I wouldn't for a moment want to diminish those differences. But there are remarkable similarities. If we look at museums of the 19th century, when the whole idea of public museums begins to take root, Canada and China show just how tricky the Master Narrative can be. One of the earliest museums in mainland China was set up by French missionaries—already an uneasy start. The Zikawei or Heude Museum in Shanghai had marvellous specimens of natural history. It was a proper study collection for scholarship. Chinese history was also represented by a collection of antiquities. That too sounds good, but as the scholar Tracey Lu points out (and I quote):

> the exhibitions of Chinese antiquities and the samples of Western science and technology in the Heude Museum together constructed a discourse of an obsolete "Chinese

> past" versus a "European modernity". . .
> [This became] a lasting discourse in the following decades in all museums in mainland China.[2]

Canada was no stranger to such ideological de-formation. The historian Daniel Francis notes that the earliest collecting of First Nations artefacts effectively treated them as remnants of a dead culture, stripping out those cultures rather than looking out for them as living things.[3] Elsewhere he writes of a similar process with the curation of French-Canadian culture, which was treated, by the dominant English, as a kind of curiosity. As he writes sharply (and again I quote):

> The "folklorizing" of [Quebec's] rural society played right into the stereotype of a picturesque, priest-ridden, economically backward people, admirable for their naive *joie de vivre* and their hooked rugs, but marginal to the development of modern Canada. The "folklorizing" of Quebec provided a comfortable way for outsiders to . . . incorporate it as a kind of colourful "theme park" into their view of Canada.[4]

But even today's museums show more of this thinking than you might expect. Canada recently opened a high-profile display in Ottawa in the newly renamed Canadian Museum of History. Canadian History Hall, at first glance, proposes to

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2 Tracey Lie-Dan Lu, *Museums in China: Power, Politics and Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2014; pb 2015), p.26. Known from 1868 as the Zikawei Museum, it was renamed the Zhendan or Heude Museum when it merged with Zhendan University in 1930.

3 Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), pp.103–5.

4 Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), pp.104–5.

tell Canada's history through a multiplicity of perspectives—French, English, First Nations. And yes, those varied interpretations of the past are there.

But as its architect Douglas Cardinal admits, Canadian History Hall has a "strong symbolic form" that is "the backbone and the hub [of the Museum], presenting our whole history as a nation."[5] Really? Do we close the doors on history and do a bit of dusting and that's that? The dominant mood of the space is one of pride, even if it is the pride of confessing one's errors. No bad thing, you might say, but I am not sure that museums should be evoking a sense of pride. We need only look to war museums, which are particular good at driving a feeling of national superiority. But not perhaps for the best reasons.

And hasn't the world changed? Canada has enjoyed a long period of stability, peace and abundance, as indeed have many parts of the world. Should we not be seeking to evoke emotions other than pride? Isn't drum-beating and nation-building anachronistic, even harmful? Should we not be finding ways of fostering peace and co-habitation? We can still be local and national and particular. We can still be different. But it need no longer be a question of victory. Surely the

5 Quoted in Éliane Laberge, "Behind the Scenes of the Canadian History Hall Project with Architect Douglas Cardinal", Canadian Museum of History Blog, May 19, 2015.

nature of globalism has altered to an extent that difference can co-exist on equal terms. Surely what we need is a museum of sharing.

I think this already happened, and many of us in the culture sector at least—I wouldn't want to cast any aspersions elsewhere, however tempting—need to catch up. The young students I talk to speak of post-nationalism. And it's how they view their world, one that is seamlessly connected through, among other things, a global economy and the internet. There may be stumbling as that world evolves, but the parity of access to different cultures is not going to go away.

You could see it round the edges of the recent celebrations marking 150 years since the confederation of Canada. There was a flatness about the events at times, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say an uncertainty. Critics were quick to attack. But I saw it as a positive sign. A reluctance to mark nationhood may be a sign not of weakness, but that the nation itself is growing up: a youthful "Look at me" replaced by a more grounded and mature, "Well, here we are."

As this relates to cultural organisations, I do wonder if politics needs to take a back foot once and for all. No more imperial ideology. No more ra-ra shouting

how glorious each nation is. Perhaps the stories need to be more like plays in a theatre, able to discuss politics but independent of them.

The largest problem of all may be that we have been deceived into thinking museums—and by extension many cultural forums—are good at storytelling. But what Master Narratives do is mislead. They give us stories of war and nationalism. They are victorious. They fail to capture the complexity of lives of people, and families, and communities in favour of a unified idea of nation. It is an idea so large it obliterates, and few individuals see their particular experience borne out in the highest forms of cultural representation. And yet whose history is it, if not theirs?

So I want us to consider the premise that museums are poor at narrative, and that it's time to rethink what stories we tell, and how we tell them—on our own, or using new forms of collaboration.

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2. OTHER STORIES

If we forego our model of a Master Narrative, one which frequently aligns itself to an older political model of nationhood, where do we look for new models? You'll be relieved to know that I don't have a comprehensive answer. You don't have to sit there for the next few hours and listen. But I would like to suggest some starting points for rethinking what we do with culture and why that matters, whether separately in our own countries, or together, as part of new ways of working.

Let's start with a few examples from China. Canada and China both face the challenge of vastness. How can one contrive a single identity out of such a range of people and places? How can one ever hope to make sense of such divergent cultures? The point may be not to try. Rather than assuming it can be done, why not assume it cannot be done? Then we can hold open the door and welcome every distinct group in and say: yes, this too is China, or this too is Canada.

The National Museum of China in Beijing has, I feel, had some success with this. Yes, it tells a large over-arching story, but it leaves space for the local. Time and again I find in the museum the nuances of provincial difference or regional style. It's a start, and it makes me wonder what other Chinas we might begin to

explore. Where is the museum that will explain the “One belt, one road” policy? It is now, and will be, an essential way of understanding China today. It draws on the past and looks to the future. But is it only to be found in the pages of newspapers? There is a great debate to be had about its impact and its relevance. Thinkers such as the Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel argue that monetizing our understanding of culture changes how we value it. In his phrase, financial motives “crowd out” other motives, ones which we in the culture sector might value more highly and assume had priority.[6] Will this be one of the side effects of the “One belt, one road” policy? I’d like a museum to tell me.

And let us not forget the importance of intangible culture. I have been speaking of material artefacts, but museums are becoming much better at collecting cultural forms that only exist as practices: dance, singing, cooking, ritual. Technology has made this easier and we have not begun to explore the rich possibilities it affords. The Royal BC Museum has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Nanjing Museum. We arrange staff exchanges so that each institution benefits from the other’s expertise, whether in conservation or international marketing. In February this year we repatriated a Manchukuo library of books from our museum in Canada to the Nanjing Museum. The

6 Michael Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p.122.

Nanjing Museum also keeps the region's UNESSCO register of Intangible Cultural Heritage. It's impressive, and I'd like to see more of that done elsewhere.

In Canada, the models are different and could certainly be applied more widely. A country almost embarrassingly youthful when set next to the long, long cultural heritage of China, Canada has some of the benefits of a New World approach. We are perhaps more conscious of our shifting identity as a blend of the indigenous and the immigrant. I spoke at the start of my museum's exhibition on the Chinese community. It is one of many. We also have a major project on the Punjabi community from northern India and Pakistan. Using photographs, film and oral history, the project evokes an aspect of Canada everyone should know about, but would not find in the official museums. We want to change that, and we think others should too.

By extension, there are great stories to be found in cultural contact. If our world truly is post-national, then we need to find a language to discuss that. There's no point raising awareness of cultures by putting them in separate boxes: Chinese over here, Punjabi over there. I have worked all over the world: in South Africa and South America, in Poland and Sweden, in London and of

course now in British Columbia . One of the things I love about Canada is—and again I land on this word—the uncertainty of cultural identity. One of the our great young writers at the moment is a woman named Madeleine Thien. Her parents are Chinese—her father from Malaysia, her mother from Hong Kong—while she was born in Vancouver and has spent her life in Canada. She's won a string of prizes for her novels. But what is her identity. Chinese? Malaysian? Canadian? I'm inclined to say: does it matter? She's none of those things, and all of them. (Well, to be honest, she's so successful we'd like to keep her for Canada.)

I could cite examples from any number of fields. Chinese-Canadian architects and designers (they're having a big impact on what is some of you will know as Hongcouver), biologists and businessmen, economists and athletes. Their identity is, you might say, of our time, both national and global. And they suggest to me that cultural practitioners need more wide-ranging models. I've already proposed economics. What about literature? Or television? There is now no one coming into a museum who didn't grow up with television, let alone computers as will soon be the case.[7] And yet museums remain locked in a pre-

7 Madeleine Thien makes an analogous point about technology and social change in her recent novel about China. What distinguishes the younger generation of Chinese musicians is the presence of sound recordings, which transcend national boundaries. "The ubiquity of recording had made them all equal . . . They heard what an American or a

televisual way of thinking. You should see the fear in curators' eyes when you mention adding audio-visual material to their gallery. "A moving object? Film? Sound? Holograms?!" They're terrified.

More widely perhaps we should consider landscape as a way of discussing culture that is not defined by rulers or governments, but by place. Both China and Canada are strong supporters of their UNESCO World Heritage sites. So perhaps we need to carry those ideas forward, not just looking outward to present heritage sites to visitors, but to bring place inside, to nurture in every museum cultural understanding through land and sea and mountain, so much a feature of British Columbia where I live, so much a feature of the great poetry and painting of China. A sense of place is fundamental to everyone's understanding of who and where they are.

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3. WHAT CAN WE DO?

Human experience Spiritual life Humour Emotion Selection Risk

Frenchman or a German heard. Geography, ethnicity or nationality were not the determining factors" (*Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (2016; London: Granta, 2017), pp.224–5).

Collaboration

Allow me then to raise a series of points that suggest what we might do in the world of culture and by extension areas such as tourism or social policy.

We need, first and foremost, to ground our displays in human experience. The further you get from that, the less interested people are. I recently read the second volume of Da Chen's memoir about growing up in China.[8] He was born in Fujian in the south, but later moved north to Beijing. The book, *Sounds of the River*, is full of the freshness of experience: of one's first snowfall, of eating fermented tofu, of measuring distance not in miles, but in days. We know about that in Canada, and reading the book opened up for me a sense of how cultural discussion might begin with those experiences every visitor has: of distance, of food, of weather. Instead of showing people a beautiful porcelain bowl, why not start with the feeling of the clay as one picks it up in one's hands?

As the Chinese poet Yang Lian once wrote, "The map of your palm holds all the stories."[9]

8 Da Chen, *Sounds of the River: A Memoir of China* (London: William Heinemann, 2002).

9 Yang Lian, "Personal Geography", trans. Antony Dunn in *The Third Shore: Chinese & English-Language Poets in Mutual Translation*, ed. Yang Lian & W.N. Herbert (Bristol/Shanghai: Shearsman Books Ltd/East China Normal University Press, 2013), pp. 82-3. Also available at yanglian.net/yanglian_en/translate/etranslate_c2e_06.html

Missing too from so much of our cultural practice is a discussion of the spiritual life. We struggle with this in Canada because so much of what we need to learn about the history of First Nations, lost or otherwise, centres on spiritual beliefs. We have a lot more to understand. To further understanding, museums need to devote space to spirituality, and encourage visitors to feel comfortable expressing their beliefs and acknowledging those of others, whether similar or not. There are good examples round the world: Te Papa in New Zealand, Bunjilaka (part of Museums Victoria) in Australia.[10] Here we are in Dunhuang, a great centre of Buddhist thought and belief. How could one not feel moved to discuss religion? Artefacts—a mask, a musical instrument, a sculpture—can only carry visitors so far. People are hungry to understand the spiritual life, the cornerstone that for many gives life meaning.

And if we are to set our ambitions high, let's not exclude other features of what it means to be human. You will look far before you find the slenderest of jokes in a museum. Humour is tricky: we have different ideas and find different things funny. But is the solution to avoid humour entirely? How sad. Our lives are not like that. We all share a joke now and then. But that's what museums have done. Maybe we need to change.

10 The Deep Listening multimedia space is particularly effective. Koorie people between the ages of 8 and 72 speak about their culture, land, families and identity, and how they all interconnect. They share personal stories of resilience and pride.

You might also ask: when was the last time you cried in a museum? In the cinema, perhaps. But in a museum? We imagine our stories are deeply moving, and they could be if we allowed a greater emotionalism in. But we don't. We keep our words academic. We use designs that are chic and rather cold. I'm not saying those things are bad necessarily. But surely we can produce other spaces, and other words, too; words that express more personal views, approaches that encourage an emotional or spiritual response rather than an intellectual one.

There are then some practical things we can do. One of them is to be more selective. Museums are so often weighed down by wanting to be comprehensive. It is an inescapable outcome of curation. To study 10, let alone 200, warrior's shields is to understand their minute differences, and to want to share the knowledge. But how monolithic it all becomes, both too detailed and too similar. We need to make better choices about what we show. Maybe we need layers of information, more mixing of ideas and objects and lines of reasoning. Museums are not encyclopaedias, you cannot include everything. So let's stop pretending. I'm arguing here for something more variable, more

changeable, more modern. The internet moves fast. Young thumbs fly across their smartphones. There is an expectation of change and we need to get on it.

We need too to take risks. Canada would say that it is keen to promote cultural pluralism, and yet the word Islam does not appear in most Canadian museums. Islamophobia is a problem: in Canada, in China, just about everywhere given the highly charged religious politics of our age. It is just one example, but an important one. If we cannot inform and debate, what are we doing with our cultural bastions? Hiding? We should be bolder, for our humane purposes are very much to build a better world and celebrate all that is human.

A final practical call is for more collaboration. Like China, Canada has very isolated museums. They do wonderful things for their communities, but they struggle. It is why I am so pleased to be speaking here today. We can share knowledge. We can promote greater exchange. We can take practical steps to create new collaborations, across the ocean and within our own countries. The Royal BC Museum has many ties with China. Our exhibition on the Gold Rush in British Columbia opened in Guangzhou last year and is now touring to seven venues around Guangdong province. We produced an exhibition of historical photographs for the metro in Guangzhou which was seen by 70 million people.

We are currently working with Sichuan Province on a joint exhibition about the city of Chengdu.

You will all have your own projects and plans, and I look forward to learning about them. But I hope at the very least you will pause, if only for a moment, and ask yourselves in each case: this project is good, but is it good enough?

CONCLUSION

Museums are heading into a complicated future. A future of shopping malls, and virtual reality. A future of technologies in which we lose ourselves, and abundant online communities we cannot begin to define. The culture of the past has great authority and great power, if we are creative in how we use it. To be relevant is to grab people's attention and to make meaningful to people now what was full of meaning in former times.

That might mean doing something traditional, but it might mean telling new stories or telling old stories in new ways. We have to take risks. We have to face the challenges of our time. If I may quote the great 8th-century Chinese poet Li Po:

Hard is the journey,
So many turnings . . .

So when a breeze breaks waves,
Bringing fair weather,
I set a cloud for sails,
[And] cross the blue oceans.[11]

Today let us bridge that ocean together, not just among ourselves, but for everyone.

11 Li Po (Li Bai), "Hard is the Journey" in *Li Po and Tu Fu: Poems*, trans. Arthur Cooper (New York/London: Penguin Books, 1973), p.136