

**Old is New:  
Creative Performance of the National Palace Museum  
Taipei, 2007**

LAI, Ying-Ying  
e-mail:YYL@ntua.edu.tw

Associate Professor  
Graduate School of Art-Culture Policy and Management  
National Taiwan University of Arts

## **Abstract**

### **Old is New:**

### **Creative Performance of the National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2007**

### **Author: Lai Ying-Ying**

In recent years, Taiwanese museums have worked hard to attract visitors. Showcasing blockbuster exhibitions of great masters is a technique commonly employed not only here, but also in museums all over the world. However, as such exhibitions in Taiwan are operated largely by private companies specializing in media relations, exhibitions take on the semblance of large carnival events. The inherent danger of this approach is that the museum comes to resemble a venue for the culture business, and the exhibition is operated as a profit machine. The invisible wall of the museum disappears in commercial-oriented blockbuster exhibitions, thus transforming from a cultural institution into a marketplace. Although employing sound strategies can facilitate the success of an event, organizers must never forget the core mission of the museum.

After undergoing years of renovation, the National Palace Museum in Taipei presented two major exhibitions commemorating its reopening and 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary. "Treasures of the World's Cultures: The British Museum after 250 Years," organized by the China News, was an archetypical blockbuster exhibition. All major corporate foundations and enterprises contributed substantial funds to the effort. There was an intensive publicity campaign, which led to the achievement of a record-breaking audience. The exhibition subsequently reinvigorated museum enterprises in Taiwan.

The "Grand View: Ju Ware, Painting and Calligraphy from the Northern Sung Dynasty" organized by the museum employed a different strategy. The museum reinvented its image to target international scholars and to position itself at the core of Chinese art history research in the scholarly world. The International Bureau of the Government Information Office organized and supported the publicity campaign. The museum's exposure rate increased in international media; reports worldwide have focused on its historical background, its past and anticipated future performance, and how the museum has led to increase international recognition for Taiwan.

This paper examines the recent strategy and performance of the National Palace Museum in Taipei. It demonstrates how the 'Old is New' promotional

campaign creates a fresh museum experience for the general public while providing a stage for artists to gain inspiration from the museum's rich collection to create new works of art. The museum is consequently no longer a mere arbiter of elite imperial tastes, but also the inspiration for future generations.

**Key Words:**

blockbuster exhibition, museum performance, museum experience, culture business

**The Author**

**LAI Ying-Ying** is an associate professor at the Graduate School of Art/Culture Policy and Management, National Taiwan University of the Arts. She was active as the Deputy Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei and served over 20 years as a senior curator at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Having received her MA, Ms. Lai is currently a doctoral candidate on art education and art administration at National Taiwan Normal University.

## Introduction

Reflecting upon the Chinese civilization's rich collection of artifacts , Director LIN Mun-Lee of the National Palace Museum noted that the responsibility of the museum is, on one hand, to promote the "old is new" approach in the contemporary appreciation of antiquities, and on the other hand, to support the Museum's quest to stand out as the most exquisite institution in the world. Though the masterworks of the Museum's collection are ancient, they shall always be "popular and new, with originality and value."<sup>1</sup> By the end of 2006, the Palace Museum reopened to the public after many years of renovation. In past years, the museum was a type of place that students visited once in elementary school, but most people never returned. Today, the new Palace Museum has transformed itself into a refreshing, novel place and a popular site for both international visitors and local people. This paper explores the creative agenda that the museum undertook for its reopening.

### Blockbuster phenomena: attraction or distraction?

In recent years, Taiwanese museums have worked hard to attract visitors. Showcasing blockbuster exhibitions of great masters is technique commonly employed not only here, but also in museums all over the world. In the 1990s, curators organized many international exhibitions and achieved tremendous success, such as The Golden Age of the Impression, Master works from the Collection of the Musee D'Orsay in Paris exhibition. Works by Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, and Cezanne – familiar names from any European art history textbook - were included in the show. Cooperation and co-organization of the exhibition with the media ensured that it was thoroughly promoted everywhere on the island; even patrons of Taiwan's ubiquitous 7-11 stores were not immune to the publicity onslaught.

However, the boom subsequently declined: economic stagnation; stale art; expensive ticket prices; a poor visitor experience due to overcrowded galleries; and a limited number of international visitors are likely explanations.

---

<sup>1</sup> LIN Mun-Lee, Director's Opening Remarks, Conference on "Founding Paradigms—Art and Culture of the Northern Sung",

[http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh95/grandview/proseminar/index\\_en.html](http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh95/grandview/proseminar/index_en.html), 2007/08/01

Significantly, the financial operation of the project seemed to have a negative long-term impact on the museum. The media was concerned largely with making a profit on the events, but the international exhibitions began to lose their previous popularity by the end of the decade. The overall number of museum patrons thus declined dramatically as the exhibitions lost their attractiveness.

#### International Exhibition: Culture Business or World Vision?

By the end of May 2007, "Treasures of the World's Cultures: The British Museum after 250 Years" attracted over 500,000 visitors to the National Palace Museum in just three months. Once again, people were attracted back to the museum through media publicity and by the reputation of the British Museum. Employing the 'blockbuster exhibition' strategy is a good tool to attract visitors back to the museum after many years of renovation. However, it is crucial for the museum management to create a whole new experience for visitors, so that they will return even without big name exhibitions. As museums in Taiwan are mainly public institutions, they receive insufficient funding for large international exhibitions, hence the oft-used solution of collaboration with the media. Working with the private sector to outsource high costs for international exhibitions (i.e. insurance, transportation, loans) is a strong financial incentive for museums to seek out such partners. "The British Museum after 250 Years" exhibition, for example, collected substantial contributions from major corporate foundations and enterprises.<sup>2</sup> The China Times Group organized all such sponsorships, and also handled public relations.

Publicity campaigns are a second advantage of media collaboration. Media organizations control a great deal of access to the mass media, including television, newspapers and periodicals, radio stations and websites. During the exhibition, there were news reports regarding the British show nearly every hour. Celebrities were invited to the museum, and their remarks greatly influenced public impressions of the exhibition. Here, the media not only reports the news, but also creates it. The line between news and publicity is thus blurred.

Taiwan society is deeply manipulated by the media, which not only influences but also produces the content of people's everyday lives. The media is no longer merely a mediator, but rather a manipulator of cultural events, promoting stars, and subsequently benefiting from the publicity. According to

---

<sup>2</sup> Sponsors included Powerchip Culture Foundation and Yong-Ling Foundation for Culture and Education, China Steel Foundation, Quanta Culture & Education Foundation, Taishin Financial Holdings, Chunghwa Telecom, Eva Air, and the Ambassador Hotel.

Jean Baudrillard, the media internalizes people and turns them into the extensions of the media. Yet from the perspective of the media, international exhibitions are another manifestation of the culture business, representing modern capitalist consumption logic.

Media sponsorship of the exhibition makes a positive contribution by allowing a broad spectrum of society to come and appreciate world civilization. The Taiwanese public is provided with a view of the world through the presentation of the exhibition. However, the downside to media collaboration was that the exhibition was operated as a carnival event without giving priority to the quality of the overall museum experience. Intensive news coverage turned the British exhibition into a marketable brand, placing undue emphasis on fashion and public consumerism. In the post-modern era, we face the danger that the museum comes to resemble a venue for the culture business, and the exhibition is operated as a profit machine. The invisible wall of the museum disappears in commercial-oriented blockbuster exhibitions, thus transforming it from a cultural institution into a marketplace.<sup>3</sup>

Such events do attract people to the museum. Although employing sound strategies can facilitate the success of these events, organizers must never forget the core mission of the museum.

The museum must secure public support and private resources for the benefit of the public. In this case, the museum organized educational programs in conjunction with the exhibition, holding its museum mission above commercialism. Programs included gallery talks, lectures, audio guides, and school workshops, all of which were in Chinese and focused on local visitors. A popular program among these trained high school teachers in three different cities, providing them with lectures that they could use to inspire their students to visit the exhibition. One can view the British show as creating a means for the public to better understanding our universal heritage, allowing for different views of world civilization through the conduit of the British collection.

However, as media organizations organizing the exhibition bear financial responsibility for either profits or losses, they ensured greater revenues by increasing ticket prices and selling gift shop commodities. They even set up a stall to increase their subscription rates and imbued the exhibition with a

---

<sup>3</sup> There was no audience research conducted. Aside from the show's press clippings, the documented visiting experiences of the exhibition are postings left on blogs. There was positive support for this spectacular event, yet mainly negative criticism, i.e. excessive noise and crowding outside and inside the galleries, long lines, and the feeling that the event was used to display fashion trends. There were many comments about the redundant impressions and commodification of the show, but what was lacking was a deeper discussion of the content, selection, presentation, and interpretation of the show.

commercial tint. Given the reputation of the British Museum and intensive media publicity, the newly reopened museum attracted crowds of visitors. Are the blockbuster exhibitions an attraction or distraction to the public? Will visitors return after the shows?

#### The Museum's Performance: Putting Taiwan Back on the Map

"The Grand View: Ju Ware, Painting and Calligraphy from the Northern Sung Dynasty" was another blockbuster exhibition that the National Palace Museum presented to commemorate its 80th anniversary and the post-renovation reopening. The collection of the National Palace Museum is well known for its unique features. In terms of historical scope and quantity of objects, its Sung dynasty antiquities, particularly of the Northern Sung, are unrivaled. The Northern Sung represents the pinnacle of artistry in Ancient China, and its works exerted great influence on subsequent generations of artists right up until the present. By presenting such an exhibition, the museum showcased its outstanding collection of masterworks from Chinese art history. Over 670,000 visitors from all over the world came to view and research the exhibition, which further demonstrated its power of attraction. Representing the essence of the Museum's collection of Northern Sung antiquities, this exhibition could be described as an unprecedented undertaking.<sup>4</sup>

"The Grand View: Ju Ware, Painting and Calligraphy from the Northern Sung Dynasty", a once-in-a-lifetime event, was a salute to all art lovers and museum goers. As a cultural symbol and leading public museum in Taiwan, the National Palace Museum embraced upon its reopening the goal of promoting itself as one of the most spectacular museums worldwide. This aim of achieving international recognition and popularity is essential to the long-term strategy of the museum. Programs reinforcing its global reach target two groups, namely leading scholars on Chinese art and international tourists.

The museum organized an international conference to complement

---

<sup>4</sup> Such limited collections represent scarce and precious artwork in the NPM, which can be exhibited for three years at a time, but regulations stipulate that pieces can not remain on display for more than forty days during a particular exhibition, including Fan K'uan's "Travelers Among Mountains and Streams," Kuo Hsi's "Early Spring," and Li T'ang's "Windy Pines Among a Myriad Valleys." This is subsequently why portions of the collections in "The Grand View" have been divided into A and B schedules. For example, Northern Sung Ju porcelains are regarded as the prized archetypes of all Chinese ceramics, with their lustrous sky-blue glaze that seems to capture fleeting colors after rain. Official imperial wares made over a brief time span, and there are currently approximately 70 Ju porcelains in existence, 21 of which are in the NPM collection, the largest in the world. Showcasing 24 pieces of Ju porcelain, including three loaned from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas, is thus an exceptionally monumental event.

the opening of the “Grand View” exhibition: “Founding Paradigms - The Art and Culture of the Northern Sung Dynasty.” Approximately forty domestic and international experts were invited to engage in scholarly discussion. Their contributions revealed new insights and stimulated new academic investigations into the enduring influence of Sung art and culture. By providing an open platform for communication, the museum fostered a deep and enriching atmosphere for academic research and positioned itself at the core of Chinese art history research in the scholarly world.

When marketing to the museum to international tourists, Japanese were particularly targeted as they favor Chinese antiquities and live close to Taiwan. Intensive collaboration with the Japanese media and travel agencies resulted in a 25.20% increase in Japanese tourism during the month of January, according to data from the Tourism Bureau Ministry of Transportation and Communications. The museum prepared exhibition handouts, guidebooks, and publications in Japanese for this target group. There were special guides to “The Grand View “ and the National Palace Museum published in Japan, which strongly advised readers to hasten to Taipei to visit the exhibition.

In addition to collaborating with the media and their comprehensive PR networks, the National Palace Museum also works with other private sector organizations for the purposes of publicity and financial outsourcing. Two major computer companies, BENQ and SAMSUNG, sponsored “The Grand View.” Meanwhile, as the museum is highly positioned in the government bureaucratic system, directly supervised by the Executive Yuan, it harnessed administrative recourses and secured support from different government units. In regards to publicity, for example, the International Bureau of the Government Information Office organized and supported an international press conference. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs assisted by inviting important foreign officials and scholars to Taiwan. Taiwan has subsequently gained greater global media coverage. Reports from Europe and America have focused on the historical background of cultural objects in the exhibition and discussed the past and future performance of the museum. In short, they have helped put Taiwan back on the map.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> President CHEN Shui-Bian stated his vision of Taiwan as a repository of culture, a country whose unique cultural features could gain appreciation worldwide. There are currently plans to better integrate culture and industry. The National Palace Museum is one important

Thanks to an intensive pre-exhibition publicity campaign, the museum was received over 100,000 visitors during the nine-day Chinese New Year holiday. The shows have attracted patrons who have not set foot into the museum since elementary school. By employing aggressive marketing plans and integrating different resources from the public and private sectors, the project has demonstrated how a public museum can engage in public outreach and perform to its fullest potential.

### The Museum Experience: Enlightenment for the Future

Organizing blockbuster exhibitions is a good strategy to attract people to museums, but they are only a means to an end rather than a final goal. The museum is still first and foremost a place for enlightenment. It's a place full of rich resources that can induce pleasure and a great appreciation for our historic cultural treasures, as well as give patrons a glimpse into the future. Only when people have positive museum-going experiences are they inspired to return for more. Which steps should a museum take to create new learning experiences without financial considerations overshadowing their efforts? The museum took advantage of the media's publicity machine while improving their facilities and programs to accommodate visitors. The National Palace Museum has undertaken a series of steps to retain visitors.

The NPM is targeting young people as a future audience. It has initiated marketing programs, such as a joint project with Starbucks that created "4 arts" coffee cups available in more than 200 Starbucks coffee shops in Taiwan. Meanwhile, the museum has launched online shopping by cooperating with the shopping website Payeasy to launch 3,500 exhibition ticket-kits. The kits include tickets for general museum entrance as well as "The British Museum after 250 Years" exhibition, one "buy one, get one free" Starbucks Coffee coupon, and other items. This promotional marketing program was especially popular with young Internet users.

The museum also organized intensive educational programs, which include joint projects with schools and community groups. There are also gallery talks, lectures, and family programs organized inside the museum, as well as school outreach programs, and online e-learning programs. People eager to put forth a uniquely Taiwanese perspective and world vision raised questions and made suggestions regarding the content and

---

institution in the government administration system fulfilling this dual role.

[http://www.president.gov.tw/1\\_president/achieve/subject17.html](http://www.president.gov.tw/1_president/achieve/subject17.html), 2007/08/01

perspectives of exhibitions. These educational programs enhanced audience appreciation of the exhibitions and encouraged patrons to reflect upon notions of culture and identity.

Educational programs are important, but they are not sufficient. Their style can seem authoritarian as they fail to consider the public's reception of them. Programs for the general public should be well attended and entertaining, while contemporary artists should be encouraged and inspired. In July, the museum produced a contemporary film to compete in the Rotterdam Film Festival. The museum also brought together a group of young artists working with new media to take part in the Linz Ars Electronica Festival in Austria. The museum's website was redesigned and was recently awarded the Highest Achievement Award by AAM and ICOM.

A commercial film produced by the museum is perhaps the best explanation of the "old is new" concept. It featured the young composer LIN Qiang, who has woven together the richness of traditional culture with contemporary music. The piece "Flowers' Fragrance Incenses One", dating back to 1087, is one of the oldest brushworks written by the Sung literatus HUANG T'ing-Chien(1045-1105) recording his laments regarding his age and the void of life. The work states "flowers' fragrance incenses one to break meditation, even me in a frame of mind past middle age. Poetic thoughts now come in spring not unlike the rowing of a boatman against the stream."<sup>6</sup> The author's mood resonates with a contemporary audience and fosters artistic creativity. The content of the poem, its rhythm, and even the empty space in this calligraphic brushwork inspired this young artist to create his avant-garde digital music. The universal spirit of classical poetry enlightens both contemporary artists and the public alike.

### **Conclusion: The Old is New**

Given the popularity of both "The Grand View: Ju Ware, Painting and Calligraphy from the Northern Sung Dynasty" and "Treasures of the World's Cultures: The British Museum after 250 Years," it is clear that society craves good exhibitions. While there is no museum in Taiwan devoted to world civilizations, the public exhibits a strong curiosity for them. The British show is very much like the World Expo, as it is a spectacular event for public consumption. Yet the Grand View is another spectacular show that has compressed the essence of the Chinese civilization into one exhibition at the museum. The aesthetic experience of old art intoxicates the public as it enjoys

---

<sup>6</sup> This CF can be viewed at <http://www.npm.gov.tw/zh-tw/downloads.htm>

a new experience in the newly renovated museum.

While undertaking these two blockbuster exhibitions was a strategy that attracted the general public to the museum, the goal is to entice them to become regular visitors. There are various steps that the museum took to demonstrate the new spirit of this old museum. First, it organized educational programs such as international conferences, seminars, lecture series, and gallery talks, as well as offered e-learning online courses. People can now gain access to the museum regardless of physical location or time of day.

However, educational programs are not enough. The museum must revitalize its rich resources of ancient art by continuing to invite renowned artists, film directors, designers and architects to work on museum projects, renovate the restaurant, the teahouse, and redesign the souvenirs. Five films, multimedia discs, and the museum's website were all recently selected for the Highest Achievement Award (Grand Prix in All Categories) by the International Committee of ICOM for Audiovisual, Image, and Sound New Technologies (AVICOM), the first time this prize was awarded.

The museum is no longer a mere warehouse for its collection, but rather a repository of new ideas and public spaces. By organizing blockbuster exhibitions, the museum has created a new venue for the public to discuss the role and function of this museum while drawing upon the abundant resources of an ancient culture. Only by creating a positive experience for visitors in the museum can this venerable institution continue to touch and inspire them. Today, old treasures no longer represent the taste of the imperial elite, but also represent new inspiration for generations to come.