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The Politics of Imagining and Forgetting in Chinese Ethnic Minority Museums

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Abstract

Through an exploration of the representation of ethnic minorities in the museums of Kunming, Yunnan Province of China, this article discusses the active role that museums play in the processes of memory and identity engineering, whereby museum images and narratives are used to support collective imagination about ethnic minorities' identities and past.

Drawing from a comparative analysis of museum displays in Kunming, I discuss how the image of ethnic minorities is conveyed through a selective process of i) remembering and emphasizing specific cultural elements, ii) forgetting other elements, and lastly, iii) modifying the perception of ethnic minorities relation to the Han majority.

By revealing the extent and modalities through which museum representations manipulate ethnic minorities' identities in China, the analysis aims to contribute to our understanding of the multiple ways in which museums act as sites for the enactment of collective memory and imagination.

The visitor of museums of ethnic minorities¹ in China might be easily struck by the homogeneity of displays in the museums of the various Provinces of the country. In Beijing as in Shanghai, in Chengdu as in Kunming, museums of ethnic minorities display arrays of colourful ethnic costumes, textiles and embroideries, cooking and smoking tools, and musical instruments. The visitor will learn that a certain ethnic group wears a certain kind of clothes, consumes a certain kind of food, and is 'good at' a certain kind of music,

¹ My use of the term 'ethnic minority' (*minzu*) is not meant to subscribe to the definition of a group by means of its relative, subaltern position to another group. Rather, it is simply meant to conform to the terminology used in the labels, panels and texts of the museums that I have analysed.

dance or performance. Overall, it will be emphasized that all Chinese ethnic groups are equal, actively contributing to the prosperity of the country and living in harmony, faraway.

Museum visitors will also, most certainly and quite rightly, be impressed by the skills deployed by the artifacts: the ingenuity of working tools, the intricacy of embroideries, the vibrant colours of textiles and the unique forms of musical instruments. Yet despite this 'enchantment of technology', it is striking the extent to which such displays are reminiscent of 16th and 17th century cabinets of curiosities. In that setting, European aristocrats proudly displayed arrays of variants of the most peculiar botanical and zoological specimen, the most extraordinary shapes of exotic shells, or the most colourful feathers. These aristocrats liked to think that they were showing 'the World' and its wonders to the privileged viewer, but in the process, they were actually displaying their own capacity to appropriate that 'World', to classify it and ultimately to dominate it.

Museums are unique sites where the dynamics of memory, identity-formation and imagination converge in a mutually constitutive relation. I will use as case study three museums of ethnic minorities in Kunming, Yunnan Province of China, to illustrate this assertion and to show how museum displays may selectively evoke memories to uphold specific understandings of identities in a process that both requires and informs collective imagination.

Through a sapient juxtaposition of objects, images and words, museum displays create meanings that are likely to shape collective memory and imagery. We know that this is chiefly the result of the historically and culturally informed scientific and political authority of museums. However, the strategies that museums deploy to achieve this result are far from obvious and deserve therefore our attention.

The study is based on a total of four months' ethnographic fieldwork in Kunming between Spring 2006 and Spring 2008 as part of my doctoral research on museums in China. The research for this paper focused on a sample of museums including the Yunnan Nationalities Museum, the Museum of Anthropology of the Yunnan University, and the Museum of the Yunnan Nationalities University. Methodologically, direct observation of museum exhibitions provided the basis for a semantic and discourse analysis (Bal 1996) of displays and museum texts. These findings were then put into perspective through in-depth interviews with museum curators and museum scholars in Kunming.

Drawing from the above mentioned case studies, I will show how the concoction of ethnic minorities' identity involves equal amounts of remembrance (of some cultural elements), oblivion (of other elements) and imagination (expressed and invoked by the creative alteration of specific features of ethnic minorities' identities). The analysis of the processes of remembering, forgetting and imagining as they take place in a museum, calls for a re-interpretation to adapt them to the medium of museum displays. Notably, I have interpreted the act of remembering in museum displays as a combination of emphasis and repetition of certain elements which, one can assume, may have the effect of fixing images and ideas in visitors' minds. Conversely, I have interpreted the absence of some elements as having the effect of easing their fading from collective memories. Lastly, I interpreted specific modalities of representation as bearing a performative character insofar as they aim at modifying the perception of ethnic minorities' subjectivities, notably with regard to their position vis-a-vis the Han-Chinese majority. By revealing the extent and modalities through which museum representations manipulate ethnic minorities identities and past,

the discussion casts light on the ideological tenets underlying the Chinese government politics of ethnic difference. The reflection attempts however to transcend the peculiarities of the Chinese case study and contribute to an enhanced understanding of museums' agency in mobilizing memories and in subtly guiding visitors' imagination in ways that influence their perceptions and interpretations. In so doing, this article also aims to assert the suitability of museums as sites for the enquiry of the politics of memory and imagination.

Remembering and imagining through museum objects

Increasingly, the acts of remembering, constructing a sense of identity and imagining the unknown are being conceptualized in the literature as collective and inherently social activities (Middleton and Edwards 1990, Halbwachs 1992, Zemon Davis & Starn 1989, Hallam & Ingold 2007). In this light, the pertinence of using the museum as a window-frame for this kind of analysis becomes apparent: museums are by vocation sites where collective ideas are formed, nurtured, validated, and at times also disrupted and contested. In other words, they act as sites of both memory and *counter-memory* (Zemon Davis & Starn 1989).

What makes museums special repositories of memory is the presence of objects. Objects transform museums into treasure houses secreting stories and remembrances, evoking emotions and dreams. Museum objects bear the potential to act as sensory, cognitive and emotional catalysts. Encapsulating time, materializing identities, interwoven with words and images, museum objects constitute a composite, fertile substrata acting as both an anchor and a springboard for the work of memory and imagination (Gregory and Witcomb 2007: 263). In this respect, the scholar Susan Crane reminds us that “being collected means being valued and remembered institutionally; being displayed means being incorporated into the extra-institutional memory of the museum visitors” (2000: 2). However, we should be careful not to assume the existence of stable, ‘institutional’, or ‘objective’ memories. We all know that the process of remembering is subjective and malleable. Memories are not monolithic but layered, and as such they can be overwritten: the memory of one event, for instance, can easily be displaced through the superscription of the memory of another event. It is also possible to alter the perception of events by disrupting temporalities. This process may be either geared to accelerate/dilate the perception of the succession of historical events, or to place a specific event or subject in an altogether different temporal framework (as we shall see, this is the case of ethnic minorities in the museums of Kunming). The conceptualization of memory as subject to variation *over* time (superscription) and *in* time (coexistence of different temporalities) should not however displace the centrality of continuity in these processes. Memories are nurtured and woven together thanks to a sense of continuity which bestows cohesion to narratives and enables us to make sense of fragments of recollections; upon this basis we can construct our understandings of the past and future. But again, continuity and discontinuity can be artificially created or disrupted – Hobsbawm’s and Range’s ‘invented traditions’ (1983) probably represent the most iconic example of how an appearance of continuity may be created out of a process of change.

If the process of collective remembering requires some form of expression or representation to be consequential, the reverse is also true. As Elizabeth Tonkin aptly

notes (in this volume), “representation requires remembering”. Indeed, it could be argued that representation is *constitutive* of specific memories, since representation translates otherwise abstract and fluctuating notions of the past into tangible items and readily accessible images. Relevantly to our discussion, representation is also revelatory of the multi-layered, plural character of memory enactments, as these become visible through the bias, the inconsistencies and discontinuities of museum narratives and images.

No doubt, the images created by museum displays require an effort of imagination to be accepted, as much as they require an effort of imagination to be composed. Since “memory operates under the pressure of challenges and alternatives” (Zemon Davis & Starn 1989: 2), memory enactments demand a degree of imagination in order to operate choices, selections and prioritizations among those challenges and alternatives. Diana Drake Wilson aptly notes that “remembering is understood as not only the passive recall of representation of events gone by, but also a creative action instantiating the present and prefiguring the future” (2000: 116). In this regard, museums act as imaginative affordances that enable us to mobilise our imaginative capacities, and yet believe in a ‘pure’, ‘un-mediated’ process of remembrance. In so doing, museums provide us with the apparent assurance that memories are grounded in an objective past, lulling us in the comfortable thought of stable, fixed, unshakable memories, protected from the fluctuating and irrational workings of imagination.

We can think of museum displays as artificial assemblages “of people, things, ideas, texts, spaces, and different media” (Macdonald and Basu 2007: 9) which bear the “capacity, through the studied manipulation of the relations between people and things in a custom-built environment, to produce new entities that can be mobilized – both within the museum and outside it - in social and civic programmes of varied kinds” (Bennett 2005: 5). By removing objects from their original context and locating them in an artificial, *ad hoc* environment, museums alter the perception of objects, their meanings, as well as the interrelations among objects, and between objects and persons (Bennett 2005: 4ff). For instance, we shall see that in the museums of Kunming, the effect of decontextualisation is enhanced by specific display techniques that establish cross-cutting associations among similar objects belonging to different ethnic groups.

It can be argued that memory and imagination are mutually constitutive and that they concur to the process of interpretation of the objects on display. However, crucially, such interpretation is also informed by museum’s agency. By putting specific objects on display and by interpolating them through narratives, museums contribute to shape individual and collective understandings of the past and future. This implies that museums can shape memories also through what they *do not* display: in the framework of museum exhibitions absence, omission, obfuscation and deformation become approximations of oblivion. Borrowing from Jacques Derrida, we could say that absence can be as eloquent as the presence of signifiers (see Porter 1991: 106). If we move further along these lines drawing a link between absence and forgetting, we can infer that forgetting can be as performative and consequential as the act of remembering. The point I wish to emphasise here – joining the position of Maya Melzer-Geva (this volume) – is that through images, objects and texts, museums do not simply preserve and re-enact an ‘objective’ past, but they deploy both agency and creativity in manufacturing memories and in laying down metaphoric landscapes for the paths of imagination.

Assessed the malleability of the acts of remembering and imagining, and determined the agency of museums in informing these enactments, it is now time to set these processes in the specific framework of China, and Chinese museums.

Memory and imagination in Chinese museums of ethnic minorities

The context of the 'new museology' (Vergo 1989), with its self-reflective approach, critical engagement with museums' political and scientific authority, and emphasis on the transparency in museum narratives' authorship, has provided the impetus for a gradual but profound transformation of museum practices, most notably in the domain of the representation of the past and of collective identities. Sheila Watson (2007) has shown for instance how the writing of historical narratives in a local history museum, rather than the fruit of curators' archival research (at best including some interviews with local elders), is the outcome of a collaborative effort of local communities, actively engaged in the process of creation of a collective memory through personal and community recollections. As a corollary to such inclusive approaches, scholars are increasingly advocating the efficacy of experiential and immersive museum experiences (Chakrabarty 2002) where the senses and emotions play a central role in (re-)shaping the relations between museums, objects and communities (Gregory and Witcomb 2007).

In counter-tendency with these approaches, in China the museum representation of the past and of subjectivities appears to be firmly enshrined in the logic of State-controlled univocal grand narratives. This is not to deny the agency of non-State actors, or to imply that such narratives are not being contested, discredited, ignored, or even scoffed at, in other contexts. Yet they arguably remain authoritative within the museum walls (Varutti 2008b). This is all the more the case for the representation of ethnic minorities, which, albeit often presented as an exercise of scientific rigour, is very clearly a political matter.

In part, the criteria that inform the museum representation of ethnic minorities' past and identities may be understood at the light of the relevance of the past in Chinese cosmology. Without attempting to discuss this important subject in Chinese studies, I will confine myself to provide a few elements likely to cast light on the relevance of the past in the context of museums.

According to the museologist Wang Hongjun², remembrance is one of the most important functions attributed to museums in China. Professor Wang holds that the idea of *remembering* the past (more than preserving) has always been a central concern to Chinese culture. Remembering is considered a 'Chinese tradition', intimately linked to ideas of knowledge, cultivation and to Confucian principles advocating the respect for the past and attention for the lessons that can be learnt from it. On these bases, one might speak of an imperative of memorialisation in China, which frames museums as '*lieux de mémoire*' *par excellence* (Nora 1989). This combines with a tight State control of the

² Prof. Wang, now retired, is the former director of the Chinese Cultural Relics Bureau, member of the Committee of Chinese History Museums, former professor at the department of history of the Peking University and honorary member of the Chinese Society of Museums. Personal communication, February 2004.

interpretation of the past in general, and in museums, specifically. As Rubie Watson noted, “Mao Zedong created the terms of political discourse – created correct thought – by transforming his reading of the past into the only possible reading” (1994: 2). In this sense, Mao's reading of history is similar to the narratives that the scholar Steven Knapp defines as bearing a 'collective authority', that is, narratives that “provide criteria, implicit or explicit, by which contemporary models of action can be shaped or corrected or even by which particular ethical or political proposals can be authorized or criticized” (1989: 123). But remembering in China can also be framed as a ritualistic, collective activity whereby, as Vera Schwarcz (1994: 52) has noted,

inspiration, especially at the collective level, invariably carries normative expectations for the individual. In China, where the state has been the main arbiter of communal remembrance, these normative expectations have been particularly obvious. Both imperial and communist China bore the burden of such didactic manipulations of the past.

Museums have been instrumental in such manipulations. From Imperial collections to revolutionary memorabilia, Chinese material culture has been the object of governmental policies aimed at upholding and strengthening the legitimacy of political authority (Varutti 2008b). The objectification of the past has been further made possible by the fact that memory in Chinese museums is not so much thought of in reference to the person or historical events, but rather as embodied and materialized in the object. In line with Marxist-Leninist theory and with historical materialism, museum objects are perceived as scientific evidence, as material traces of the past – the object is supposed to encapsulate history and carry an ‘objective’ memory (Su 1995: 71-72). In museum displays of ethnic minorities, such a positivist approach to objects combines with what Pierre Nora has defined as a “general perception that anything and everything may disappear” (1989: 7). This anxiety for the potential loss inherent in any process of social transformation, which moves us to attempt to grasp the past and fix it in appropriate sites (*lieux de mémoire*), is particularly pronounced in the case of museums of ethnic minorities.

The representation of ethnic minorities in China is deeply informed by a concern for the 'vanishing', 'traditional', 'authentic' and allegedly 'unspoiled' ethnic Other. As Louisa Schein has pointed out “the suppressions of the Cultural Revolution [...] combined with the perceived emptiness of imported culture from abroad seem to have left a void at the core of Chinese ethno-nationalism, leading individual and state culture producers to turn to minority cultures as reservoirs of still-extant authenticity” (1997: 72). The official view of ethnic minorities frames them as formally enjoying an equal status with the Han majority, and constituting China as a ‘unified, multinational state’ (*duominzu guojia*). However, public authorities’ ‘civilizing mission’ (Harrell 1995) aiming at ‘freeing’ ethnic minorities from their ‘backward’ social structures (Dikotter 1996: 591) reveals an attitude that has been described by China scholars as ‘internal colonialism’ (Jonsson 2000: 74) and ‘Chinese Orientalism’, implying varying amounts of exoticisation (Gladney 1994) and essentialisation (Dahl and Stade 2000: 159) of ethnic minorities.

Not surprisingly, the representation of ethnic minorities in Chinese museums is heavily imprinted by such views. The ethnic minority is talked for, staged, defined by the museum’s narrator voice. The minority tale is not emanation of the minority itself, nor is it the fruit of a collaborative project. Rather, it is the unilateral vision of a group of actors – Chinese public authorities – mediated by the museum. Yet this does not imply that

such unilateral vision of ethnic minorities does not entail imagination. On the contrary, it seems that imagination is at the centre of museums' efforts in representing ethnic minorities in China. Drawing from Benedict Anderson's seminal theory (2006), a parallel can be drawn between the public press and museums. Likewise the press, museums act as media that enable us to imagine the nation and its collectivity, they provide an objectified basis for the process of imagination. In our case, they provide for instance, the Beijinger who has never visited Southern Yunnan the possibility to imagine the Dai ethnic group inhabiting this area and its relative position vis-a-vis the other ethnic groups and Han majority. Let us see how this is made possible in museum displays in Kunming.³

Crystallizing memories through the inhibition of oblivion

As mentioned, the construction of ethnic minorities' past and identities entails three parallel processes: remembering some cultural features, forgetting others, and imaginatively altering the perception of ethnic minorities subjectivities and past.⁴

The image of ethnic minorities as it appears through museum displays in Kunming is characterized by the recurrent presence of a corpus of features, whose repetition in the various museum displays points at a clear and stable visual and conceptual museological pattern. In what follows, I discuss the ideas that museum displays, through repetition and emphasis, bring the visitor to remember – or not to forget – about ethnic minorities.

Ethnic minorities are 'ancient'

Defined in museum texts as 'living fossils' (see also Harrell 1995: 16), ethnic minorities are depicted as ancient, almost ageless entities, whose history delves its roots in an undetermined, remote past. This approach is in line with Henry Morgan's theory of social evolution (1985 [1877]), according to which ethnic minorities can be located at an early phase of development along an evolutionary path leading from primitive to slave, feudal and capitalist societal forms. This construct is particularly intriguing when set against the fact that ethnic minorities are actually denied an historicity of their own: their non-Han, pre-Communist past being simply omitted in displays, and thus in the long term, erased from collective consciousness. The existence and recollection of ethnic minorities' past is then conceded to the extent and condition that it upholds the arguments of ethnic minorities' antiquity, and longevity and continuity of the Chinese nation. Yet, the same recognition is denied in its main conceptual implication: that ethnic minorities have historically enjoyed varying degrees of cultural independence from the Han-Chinese.

³ The elements in museum displays upon which I base my arguments have been discussed more extensively in Varutti 2008b.

⁴ I introduce such distinction for purely analytical purposes, fully aware of the complementarity that exists between remembering and forgetting. As Nathalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn have provocatively asked "isn't forgetting only the substitution of one memory for another; don't we forget to remember, or remember to forget?" (1989: 2).

Ethnic minorities' culture equals folklore

With remarkable consistence, exhibitions of ethnic minorities are structured around the following object categories: costumes and textiles, musical instruments, everyday tools, ritual objects and masks. This taxonomic system reveals the realms in which cultural difference is allowed to be 'safely' expressed without threatening the centrality of Han's cultural system, whilst at the same time instantiating the 'Chineseness' that all ethnic minorities are supposed to share. Emphasizing specific cultural features such as music and dance, and proposing a great number of images of members of ethnic groups playing instruments, dancing and performing (the number of photos of this kind tends to outnumber the items on display), museum exhibitions contribute to reinforce the stereotype of ethnic minorities seemingly constantly engaged in religious rituals and celebrations, festivals and other leisure activities. By establishing cross-cutting associations among items of different ethnic groups, this kind of layout creates a framework for comparison and hierarchization. Forcing cultural variation into pre-established object categories equals forcing difference into ideological moulds, uniforming and ultimately domesticating it. In short, focusing exclusively on material culture, essentializing and folklorizing ethnic groups, museum displays reduce cultural complexity to its minimum terms, reinforcing through reiteration, the reductive association object–ethnic minority.

Forgetting through absence and omission

Next to the above mentioned elements which are reiterated and emphasized in museum displays, are others which are neglected. This leads me to consider what museums do not display, hence what they invite us to forget about ethnic minorities.

Forgetting a non-Chinese past

In line with the representation of ethnic minorities as ageless entities deprived of history, historical references to events prior to the creation of the People's Republic tend to be omitted or discounted as a 'dark era', associated to a 'feudal system of oppression'. Museum representations do not simply disregard ethnic minorities history; what we are confronted with is rather a systematic and selective omission of reference to ethnic minorities non-Chinese, pre-Communist past. In this sense, the partial museum representation of ethnic minorities' past may be interpreted as an attempt to bridge the gap between memory and history by transforming selected and partial memories into official history (see Nora 1989: 8).

Forgetting undesirable cultural practices

Museum displays overlook the cultural elements that the Han-Chinese majority tends to dismiss as 'superstitious' practices, 'remnants of primitive societies'. These may include specific marriage practices (such as the 'walking marriage' practised among the Mosuo ethnic group), funerary rites (such as the celestial burial practised by the Tibetan), or shamanistic practices. This approach echoes and complements the above mentioned emphasis on material culture and folklorisation of ethnic identities. Only the cultural practices that suit the official discourse and image of ethnic minorities are acceptable, whilst others are excluded from museums' selective representations. Forgetting specific,

undesirable cultural features seems then to be the condition to be collectively remembered and incorporated in Chinese History.

Forgetting the present

Consistently with the representation of minorities as ancient, static entities, any index of change and hybridization is largely overlooked to the benefit of a crystallized, fixed image. For instance, museum displays of ethnic minorities usually include a section devoted to 'traditional techniques of production'. In such displays, the material culture of ethnic minorities is presented as frozen in time: the visitor is brought to think that all ethnic groups make daily use of manual mortars and hand-made wooden fish-traps, rely on oxen and slash-and-burning farming methods and dwell in bamboo, wooden or clay shelters. The 'real', 'authentic' ethnic minority – exhibitions seem to tell us – only exists within the walls of the museum. What is left out of the picture are present conditions of poverty, illiteracy or discrimination. These are simply evacuated to the benefit of sanitized narratives.

Forgetting individuals

People usually feature in staged photos as illustration of 'typical characters', but their voices are almost absent from displays. As a result, ethnic minorities are being 'replaced' by their artifacts. Objectification also looms from specific display layouts. For instance, in the case of ethnic costumes, the dress styles of the various ethnic groups are almost invariably presented through an array of identical, face-less, plastic mannequins – a vision that, in an uncanny way, succeeds in conveying an idea of equality but also of anonymity. In the same vein, the descriptions of ethnic minorities in museum texts and panels tend to construct ethnic groups as an aggregate subjectivity, identified by the (capitalized) expression 'Yunnan Ethnic Groups'. These elements suggest that the artifact becomes a synecdoche not only of the specific ethnic group who produced or used it, but also of all ethnic minorities, grouped into an organic, undifferentiated cultural Other. In this sense, both display techniques and discursive practices concur to reinforce the idea of ethnic minorities as a homogeneous, collective entity. The process of assimilation of ethnic minorities rests here on the non-recognition – via forgetting – of cultural specificity and the annihilation of the individual as an agential subjectivity.

Forgetting individual creativity

Mostly, museum displays frame ethnic minorities' objects as artifacts rather than as art works: objects are denied artistic value to the benefit of the utilitarian dimension. The fulfilment of utilitarian purposes is, for instance, one of the criteria that inform acquisition policies at the Anthropology Museum of Yunnan University.⁵ This suggests that the object suitable for collection is a priori 'thought of' as utilitarian. Whenever in the museums considered, I found mention to art, this referred more specifically to the notion of 'folk art' (such as paper cutting, wood carving and embroidery) understood as a minor,

⁵ Ms Li, curator at the Museum, explained to me that acquisition policies request that the object be still in current use in the society that produced it. Personal communication, March 2008.

popular form of art (as opposed to the High Arts practised by the Han-Chinese: calligraphy, painting and poetry). As a corollary, and consistently with the non-recognition of the individual, the question of objects' authorship is thoroughly disregarded in displays.

Imaginatively altering the perception of ethnic minorities

I have looked at some of the areas of ethnic minorities cultural identities upon which museum displays have an impact – inviting memorialization or oblivion. I wish now to focus more closely on two strategies specifically geared to alter the perception of ethnic minorities. These strategies operate either modifying ethnic relations transversally, among ethnic minorities (through the establishment of an idea of harmonious, fraternal relations) or vertically, implying a hierarchization of ethnic groups, and their collective subordination to the Han-Chinese. These discursive and representational strategies are relevant to our discussion since, both in their realisation and reception, they involve some degree of imagination.

Collective portraits and narratives

In the museums of the sample, displays endeavour to create collective narratives that include virtually all ethnic groups through the medium of large wall paintings and murals. In such collective portraits, the various ethnic groups are depicted as entertaining harmonious relations, whereby no tension, prevarication or friction exists, to the benefit of an imagined (and artificial) sense of social cohesion. These tableaux collectifs are a good illustration of the notion of assemblage introduced earlier in the text. In this instance in fact, these collective depictions alter not only the perception of ethnic groups and their cultural saliency, but also the relations existing among ethnic groups and between the ethnic groups and the Han-Chinese majority. Moreover, in line with the effacement of both individual and group specificities, these collective representations contribute to collapse cultural differences, to merge them into a single constituency no longer composed of a plurality of Others but constructed as the Other – a collective, indistinct aggregate counterpart of the Han-Chinese.

Disrupting temporalities: today's minorities are yesterday's Han

We have seen how museums construct ethnic groups as both ancient, a-temporal, and as a-historical, deprived of a history of their own. When set one against the other, these constructions produce an artificial disruption of temporalities, whereby ethnic minorities and Han-Chinese are located on unequal temporal, and social levels. Again, these narratives can be understood at the light of the theory of social evolution of Henry Morgan (1985 [1877]) embraced by the Chinese Communist Party. As mentioned, according to such theory, social development occurs in stages, each stage corresponding to a specific social system – primitive, slave, feudal or capitalist. The extension of the Morgan's theory to Chinese ethnic minorities implies that each ethnic groups occupies a specific position along a scale of development, at the apex of which are the Han-Chinese. Museum narratives are therefore constructed on the assumption that ethnic minorities are 'backward'

and thus represent Chinese Han's past. These narratives use the so constructed ethnic minorities' 'backwardness' as a counterfoil to Han-Chinese modernity.

Forgetting ethnic culture, imagining a Chinese identity

As we have seen, in considering the museum representations of ethnic minorities in Kunming, we are confronted with a selective and systematic omission of reference to ethnic minorities cultural specificities and historicities. I have shown that this process is achieved through specific display methods that overlook some cultural elements whilst others, instrumental to the construction of the ethnic minority as culturally and technologically inferior to the Han-Chinese, are over-emphasized. Such narrative and representational strategies deploy museums' creativity in weaving objects, images and words in ways that underscore the divide between ethnic minorities and the Han majority.

These considerations remind me of the words of Sally Price commenting on Western approaches to 'primitive art': "once having determined that the arts of Africa and Oceania are produced by *anonymous* artist who are expressing *communal* concerns through *instinctual* processes based in the lower part of the brain, it is but a quick step to the assertion that they are characterized by an *absence* of historical change" (1993: 52, the emphasis is mine). The similarities with the treatment reserved to ethnic minorities in Chinese museums are striking, and lead me to wonder whether ultimately ethnic minorities are for the Han Chinese what the societies from which 'primitive art' emanates are for Western art connoisseurship: an object to be appropriated in its material, conceptual, artistic, political, emotional and symbolic properties.

Through the act of exhibiting artifacts from different ethnic minorities in the same setting, classifying them in homogeneous categories, and juxtaposing and comparing them with one another, museum displays communicate an artificial sense of equality and belonging to the Chinese nation. Transforming selective memories into history, and arbitrary images into crystallized identities, museums contribute to the institutionalization of a national identity (and a national past) in which all Chinese are bound to identify themselves; failing to do so implies alterity and non-recognition. In this sense, museums homogenize ethnic minorities' identities in order to create a common history and a shared Chinese national identity.

This hinders the possibility for ethnic groups to imagine their own 'ethnicity' as disjunct and independent from Chinese national identity. Denying the possibility to ethnic minorities to recognise themselves, their culture and their history in the material culture on display, also means denying them the possibility to rely on museums and on their collections to imagine themselves as self-standing cultural constituencies within the Chinese arena.

This denial is however highly revelatory. Mieke Bal writes "exposition is always also an argument. Therefore, in publicizing these views the subject objectifies, exposes himself as much as the object; this makes the exposition an exposure of the self" (1996: 2). Through its representation of ethnic minorities, the Chinese government is actually revealing itself, its position, its priorities and values. Museum representational practices of ethnic minorities' identities and past reveal in fact the ambivalence of a process of nation-building that, given the ideological crisis of the Communist régime, relies on the

manufacturing of collective memories and identities to fuel a sense of belonging to the Chinese nation and support a vision of its future that ultimately appears crucial to its very permanence.

The process through which museum displays aim at shaping ethnic minorities' identities and memories via selective remembering and forgetting and by disrupting temporalities as a means to substantiate cultural, social and political dichotomies casts light on the use of memory in museums as a strategy to legitimize the political authority of the Chinese government over ethnic groups. By arbitrarily selecting, interpreting and displaying (or omitting) aspects of ethnic minorities' identities and history, museums displays create an artificial convergence of collective memories and imagery, which are thus institutionalized.

Through representation in the authoritative framework of the museum, ethnic minorities' past is being transformed to integrate it into Chinese national history, and ethnic identities altered to nurture the collective imagination of a shared, if factitious, national identity.

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