

Using Different Pasts in a Similar Way: Museum Representations of National History in Norway and China

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Abstract

This article explores how national histories are constructed in the museums of Norway. It does so through a comparative perspective, whereby museum displays of national past in Norway are being compared to museum displays of national past in the People's Republic of China. This will involve comparing narratives, museological approaches, rationale and purposes of museum displays in the two countries.

Fieldwork research in museums in Norway and China suggests that if national pasts are obviously unique to the historical trajectories of each country, their museum renditions are structured in an intriguingly similar way. Museum displays of national pasts in Norway develop around a set of themes including myths of ancestry and descent; epics of resistance leading the embryonic nation through a dark era and towards a "Golden Age"; a core of moral and aesthetic values; notions of national modernity; and selective amnesia. I will show how similar topics can be found in museum displays of the past in Chinese museums.

The comparative perspective of the analysis enables me to assess the uniqueness of museum representations of the past in Norway and at the same time to explore analogies in the museum construction of national narratives beyond the European context, through the case study of China. This will lead me to put forward the hypothesis of the coagulation, at international level, of a canon for the museum representation of national history.

Keywords: Museums, Norway, China, national history, representation.

Introduction

Whilst there is little doubt that the manipulation of the past is crucial to the making and remaking of national identities, the ways in which the past is being edited in the specific context of museums, and the implications of this, remain partially opaque. In addition, little is known about these processes in an international comparative perspective.

This chapter explores how national histories are constructed in the museums of Norway by means of a comparative approach, whereby museum displays of the national past in Norway are compared to museum displays of the national past in the People's Republic of China.

Whilst shunning a direct comparison between the two countries, the analysis aims to elucidate the characteristics of national representations of the past in Norwegian museums by displacing them from the “familiar” national and European contexts, and setting them against a radically different case study, such as China. This approach might appear hazardous given the obvious differences between the two countries – differences of size, geo-cultural position, historical trajectories, democratic traditions, state apparatuses, demographic profiles and ideological influences, to name but a few. Yet precisely by virtue of the differences between the two countries, the existence of similarities in the way national pasts are represented and narrated raises a number of research questions: is it possible to identify recurrent themes and approaches in the way the nation is depicted in museums around the world? Are national narratives – their form of expression, if not their content – to some degree similar at international and global level? If so, what can be inferred from such a finding?

The analysis builds on fieldwork research conducted in Norway and China. In particular, in Norway, the study focuses on the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, the Museum of the City of Oslo, the Museum of Cultural History Oslo, the Museum of the Viking Burial Ships, and to a lesser extent, the Maihaugen Museum in Lillehammer. In China, the museums examined include the Museum of National History, the Military Museum, the Site of the First Congress of the Communist Party, the Shanghai Museum, the Shanghai History Museum, and the Sanxingdui Museum. These museums have been selected since they include displays that present national cultural features and historical events, and they enjoy a national status – addressing national and non-national audiences, receiving relatively high numbers of visitors, benefiting from public funds, and featuring highly in the circuits of national and international tourism.

Research methods included interviews with museum curators, as well as direct observation and discourse analysis of displays. The analysis of exhibitions focused on the comparative examination of narratives, museological approaches, rationale and purposes. Discourse analysis of displays involved approaching museum objects, texts and the overall museum environment as components of a

single composite narrative (Bal 1996) about the national past and national identity.

Using China as a backdrop for the discussion of the ways in which the national past is represented in Norway contributes to clarify the extent to which specific modes of representation are unique to Norway, and conversely, the extent to which these are shared with other country contexts. This situates Norway within a broader spectrum of approaches to national pasts at European and global level, ultimately providing a platform to explore the hypothesis that a canon for the representation of national history is gradually coagulating at international level.

The Past Made Into Heritage

Notions of the past and of heritage are often juxtaposed to complement and support each other: the past is interpreted in such ways that aim to provide a cohesive narrative and a context for the heritage, whilst the latter materializes an otherwise abstract past. Yet it is important to stress the distinction between the two. If we define the past as an account of historical events, heritage can be understood as those elements of the past that are retained and celebrated and, as a result, exert an influence on the present (Blundell 2006: 39). In other words, the past is transformed into heritage through processes of selection, interpretation, and memorialisation. These processes require a degree of creativity (Varutti 2010b) and imagination (Anderson 2006) in the way memories are acted upon, edited and reassembled in order to be transformed into powerful bonds among individuals and collectivities. The link between the past, the heritage and the nation is ideally synthesized by Stuart Hall (1999: 5) “we should think of the heritage as a discursive practice. It is one of the ways in which the nation slowly constructs for itself a sort of collective social memory.” Thus, when we examine how the past is being recollected and re-presented, we are not simply dealing with past events, but also with the series of choices, selections, and transformations that have been operated along the way and that produce real effects in the present.

Museums are key sites where such selective and transformative processes take place and are validated. If history, as the historian Bo Stråth (2005: 256) puts it, “is a translation of the past into our time, an act of interpretation”, then museum representations of history add yet another layer of interpretation, and can be understood as sites of meta-translation. From a corpus of historical data and objects, some elements are expunged, others are emphasized, yet others are altered and re-assembled to form a coherent visual and narrative ensemble. Museum objects are deployed as discrete pieces of evidence, materialized snapshots of the “authentic moment” (Clavir 2002: 32) variously interpreted by an interpolating linear narrative.

Museum displays are especially powerful memory sites since they enable the connection between individual and cultural memory. This process is particularly salient in the case of displays unfolding narratives of the nation and its past. The

anthropologist and museum professional Anthony Alan Shelton (2006: 484) noted “exhibitions [...] structure objects spatially to reactivate or create memory anew”. In the context of the display, visitors' individual memories and understandings are confronted with the memory constructed (as cultural and authoritative) by the museum. The visitor is brought to situate him or herself vis-à-vis the narrative of the display through processes of recognition and self-identification, or distancing and rejection. In this sense, museums are extraordinary laboratories where the notions of cultural heritage and cultural memory are being constantly reconfigured and re-invented.

These observations are so inherent in museums' institutional, political and intellectual remits that they defy cultural and temporal distance and can be, for instance, equally applied to museums in Norway and China. In other words, museum displays – the objects on view, the texts that “explain” them, the environment that contextualizes them – constitute a system of interpretation that can be read critically to reveal the tenets that inform it. Casting light on these aspects of museum displays and narratives in a cross-cultural perspective bears the potential to bring to the fore not only national uniqueness but also intriguing similarities and convergences at international level.

Stefan Berger's (2008: 13) argument that “inventions of the modern nation originated in North America and Europe, but colonialism exported the narrative strategies and hierarchies of European national narratives across the globe”, as well as Krijn Thijs' (2008: 71) note that “narratives of different nations can be compared on their narrative structures and on the transnational import and export of specific narrative elements”, encourage the search for analogies between countries within and beyond Europe. In the light of these considerations, it seems pertinent to contrast national narratives in a European country such as Norway, with those of an extra-European country such as China. It is worth emphasising however, that the aim of the analysis is not so much to compare Norwegian and Chinese museums as to use examples from museums in China as a counterpoint to the analysis of museums in Norway.

The question of the relations that may exist between the modes of representation and narratives of the nation traceable in museums in Norway (and for that matter, in Europe) and China is far too broad and complex to be tackled in the framework of this paper; nevertheless, the assessment of the range and quality of analogies existing between narrative structures and genres seems a pertinent starting point for such investigations. It is also important to remain alert to the risk of Eurocentric derives that such question might involve. In this respect, historian Jie-Hyun Lim (2008: 291) appropriately notes “the Eurocentric national history paradigm consigned the less developed nations to ‘an imaginary waiting room of history’ [...]. They saw their indigenous history as a history of ‘lack’ in comparison with Europe”. In the light of this observation, the juxtaposition of Norway and China does not aim to provide evidence of the transfer of European

models of national histories outside of Europe, but rather to move away from such Eurocentric understandings of national pasts by enlarging the scope of the analysis and by setting it in new analytical frameworks.

In a first instance, it might seem that museum displays of the national past in Norway and China would have little in common. Yet at a closer examination, Norway can be profitably set against China by virtue of some basic similarities between the two countries.

Firstly, likewise Norway, China was not a major colonial power. Neither country conducted major colonial campaigns during the 18th and 19th centuries; rather, they have been the object of colonization. Norway was subject to the Danish Crown until 1814 and then, following to the Treaty of Kiel, it was “transferred” to the Kingdom of Sweden from which it gained independence in 1905. A few decades earlier, on the other end of the Euro-Asiatic continent, French and British armies were forcing their way into Chinese ports imposing to the Emperor the Nanjing Treaty in 1842. However, whilst in Norway the long-term Danish presence left a profound cultural imprint, the colonial presence in China remained contained in time and space, concentrating mainly on key commercial harbours on the east coast.

Secondly, Norway became a fully independent country only in 1905; likewise, the process of formation of a Chinese national identity is relatively recent (Dittmer & Kim 1993). It could be argued that – at least over the 20th century – the nation in both Norway and China has been conceived in modernist terms, that is, as an entity characterized by territorial unity, legal enforcement, community participation, homogeneous culture, sovereignty, international recognition and a unifying nationalist ideology (Smith 2004: 15). Both Norway and China had to face the challenge to create a nation out of an ethnically diverse population, yet with a weighty ethnic majority. At their inception, both nations had to govern territories in parts still unmapped and deprived of infrastructures, services and administrative structures, and whose populations had to be “unified” in a national mould. These challenges were met through a range of strategies including relocation of population, educational, linguistic and religious policies. For instance in Norway, in the late 18th and 19th centuries, the establishment of local municipalities implementing the redistributive policies of the Welfare-state significantly contributed to nation-building. Similarly, the nationalisation of religion and the spread of Lutheran Protestantism since the 16th century, instilled and cemented a sense of shared cultural identity that would have later provided a platform for the development of Norwegian national identity (Bærenholdt 2007: 184, 206ff). With similar purposes of nation-making, in Communist China the massive resettlement of Han Chinese in the South-Western provinces mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities, bore such proportions that it has been described as a “civilizing mission” and paralleled to a form of “internal colonization” (Harrell 1996).

Thirdly, and as a result of the above, in Norway as in China museums of history tend to emphasise specific historical periods (the Viking period and 19th century Norway, and Ancient and early imperial China) which are being idealized and constructed as central to contemporary definitions of national identity. In what follows, I consider how this is done.

The Folk and the National Past in Norwegian Museums

Quite intriguingly, Norway has no museum of national history. The Maihaugen open air Museum in Lillehammer, which includes reconstructions of 200 historical and contemporary buildings, together with the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History in Oslo are probably the two sites that best approximate the idea of a Norwegian national museum of history.

Nationalist narratives in Norway develop around a set of values and concepts that can be loosely identified with the notion of folk. These values find an ideal manifestation at the Maihaugen open air Museum and the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, where the Norwegian nation is displayed in its popular, peasant dimensions. The emphasis on the folk was the result of the 19th century Romantic interpretation of national identity framing the peasant as the primordial, authentic and uncorrupted essence of the nation (Stoklund 2003: 23ff).¹ The folk culture approach in the Maihaugen open air Museum and the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History is translated through an emphasis on rural and peasant life, with its corollary of wholesome food, open air activities, and communion with the natural environment – all pervaded by a hint of nostalgia.



The Romantic, rural past displayed at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

The Norwegian Museum of Cultural History was founded in 1894. The Museum's remit as a showcase of the incipient Norwegian nation is apparent since its establishment, at "a time marked by strong national fervor and a desire for a more independent position in the union with Sweden".² Although there is no obvious narrative line informing visitors' path, the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History offers a series of images and artefacts that materialise the artistic, architectural, functional, technical achievements and peculiarities of the communities inhabiting what has come to be called Norway. The visitor walks in the natural and built landscape, experiencing the historical depth (from the 13th century Stave Church to the 20th century Pakistani flat down-town Oslo), and geographical breadth of the nation (moving from the southern coastal huts to the northern inland Sami dwellings). The prominence of the cultivated fields, the orchards, the botanic garden, and the forest in the premises of the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History are telling indications of the centrality of the natural environment in Norwegian national imagery. Folk museums such as the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History are elected sites for popular education, family outings and leisure activities. Overall, this kind of venues contributes to children's familiarization with the natural, artistic, architectural, historical, cultural and ethnic features of the nation – thus ultimately contributing to the formation of Norwegian citizenry.

The encounter with the national past in Norway is not bounded to museums. Open air staged historical representations where local actors impersonate historical figures and re-enact historical events, are very popular during the Summer months. The popularity of these historical representations might be explained by an increasing interest in local history (Gullestad 2006: 111). In most cases, these historical re-evocations propose idealized versions of the past where only the positive aspects are being re-evoked (see also Gullestad 2006: 111). These historical representations contribute to re-actualize the past and renew its links with the present; they bring history into the nucleus of society, transforming it into a family gathering and an occasion for socialization. They also contribute to the territorialisation of the past, whereby feelings of belonging to a local community are being strengthened by the commemoration of a shared past. In this sense, the accuracy of the historical representation is secondary to its bonding effect.

Nevertheless, the re-evocation of an idealized past is not without dangers in a country such as Norway that is experiencing rapid socio-cultural changes. In the turn of one generation, from the 1960s to today, Norwegian society has been radically transformed as a result of important waves of migration from South Asia, the middle-East, Eastern Africa and Latin America. Although Norway's multicultural policies aim to integrate the new immigrants into Norwegian society, inter-ethnic social relations are not always thoroughly harmonious. In this situation, the celebration of national and local traditions, myths, festivities and events may turn into instances of exclusion rather than cohesion, as they may

heighten the divide between ethnic Norwegians and newly arrived communities (see also Gullestad 2006: 119-120). Museum professionals seem to be well aware of this risk. Following the adoption of multicultural governmental policies over the last decade, museums in Norway have made considerable changes to museum practices, displays and national narratives in order to include ethnic communities and to better reflect the cultural pluralism of contemporary Norwegian society (Rekdal 2001). To summarize, it could be said that museums in Norway are key loci not only for imagining, but also for experiencing the Norwegian nation. Museum displays have actively contributed to the definition of Norwegian national identity and to its transformation from its folk, peasant, roots, to its current multicultural dimension.

These features set Norway in stark contrast with China. Here, museums have historically performed the roles of political indoctrination, patriotic education and dissemination of Communist ideology. National history in China is highly institutionalized, embedded in the formal remit of cultural institutions such as museums. Since 1949, museums have provided a unified, government-approved vision of Chinese identity, culture and history (notably of revolutionary history). Providing political legitimation, instilling a sense of belonging and loyalty, and incorporating ethnic minorities into the Han majority, have been the priorities of Chinese museums over the last decades. Political concerns continue to permeate contemporary museum representations of the national past, especially in the ideological uncertainty of the post Tian An Men, the protest and massacres in 1989. However, today Chinese museums have also become full agents in the implementation of cultural nationalist policies, as well as in the economies of culture, tourism and international prestige (Varutti 2008).

It could thus be said that in Norway as in China, museum representations of national past are in line with the respective national political projects. In Norway museums show concern with using the national past to build a shared platform from which to negotiate the changes affecting contemporary Norwegian society. Conversely, in China public museums formally adhere to the government official nationalist discourse, and thus continue to enforce predefined visions of the Chinese nation and its past. Beyond the diverse functions that museums are performing in Norway and China, it is possible to discern a pattern of similarities in the way they pursue such functions, and notably in the narrative strategies deployed in the representations of the respective national pasts.

Norwegian National Narratives as Seen From China

Historian Peter Aronsson (2010) has developed a theoretical model for the comparative analysis of national museums in which national museums' narratives and approaches are linked to the process of nation-building. On these premises, Aronsson identifies a series of criteria upon which a comparative analysis of

museum settings might be based, these include the historical establishment of an independent state; the relation between state and nation(s), the role of civil society and the public sphere; and the degree of social segmentation or cohesion. Juxtaposing Norway and China in the light of these criteria evidences that in both countries the late nationalisation of cultural heritage and the relatively late establishment of national museums were the product of the recent establishment of the nation. Significant differences, however, set the two cases apart. Whilst at its inception Norway lacked a long established tradition of royal collections, which might have acted as a core for the development of national collections, in China, the Communist Party greatly benefited from the existence of imperial collections, which were appropriated and turned into the very emblem of Chinese national heritage and of national identity. Also, in Norway one cannot find a network of national museums comparable to the one existing in China. This might be understood as a reflection of different levels of political legitimacy, whereby the relatively weak legitimacy of the Chinese government needs to be enforced through authoritative and cohesive historical narratives and representations, whereas this need is less acute in the more politically stable Norway. This point lends support to Aronsson's (2010: 49) argument that "national museums are easier to promote at the state level in a centralised state than in a more democratic and pluralistic state".

To proceed further in the comparative exercise, I borrow the methodological approach adopted by historians Stephan Berger and Chris Lorenz (2008: 4ff). Berger and Lorenz selected a series of key topics – myths of origin, "golden ages", national heroes, continuity and discontinuities in national narratives, the nation's Others and historical exclusions – which are explored in a European comparative perspective. These topics are grounded in major theoretical insights on the theories of nationalism. More in detail, the scholar of nationalism Anthony Smith (2004:17) noted that there are specific kinds of resources that can be mobilized in order to strengthen national identity and feelings of national belonging, "these include myths of origin and election, the territorialization of memories to form sacred landscapes, the shared memories of communal 'golden ages', and the ideal of struggle and sacrifice to fulfil a national destiny". It seems telling that the main similarities in the museum representations of the national past in Norway and China are precisely centred on the basic national "resources" identified by Anthony Smith. In particular, it is possible to identify analogies between Norway and China in the processes of construction of a common ancestry, and its deployment as basis for a national mythology; the formulation of an epics of national resistance to the oppressor and of final victory in the re-establishment of a national integrity, or national essence; the crystallization of a core of moral and aesthetic values inextricably associated to the nation; a tradition of "salvaging" the past from oblivion, of retrieval of valuable memories and of obviation of others; the framing of some historical events and persons through an

idealized, romantic and nostalgic perspective. In short, in Norway as in China, museum displays of the national past provide a core of cultural, historical and moral values on which discourses and enactments about national identity can be grounded. Below, I take a closer look at the main analogies in the representation of national history in Norway and China.

National Mythologies

The construction of a shared past (historical or mythical) is crucial in so far as the past becomes the purporter of the moral, social and aesthetic values of the nation. But how can the past be re-actualized and inserted in national narratives? One of the most powerful ways to deploy the past and make it effective for present nation-building purposes is to re-evoked a “Golden Age” which is depicted as a high point of civilisation and a model of moral virtue, illuminated politics, scientific advancement, and artistic creativity (Smith 1997: 40). As Armstrong (1982) has argued, the practice of selectively recalling evocative elements of the past – such as myths and symbols that have the power to heighten the awareness of belonging to the same community – is one that inscribes in the long term, thus suggesting that nations develop in the *longue durée* as a result of persistent processes of ethnic identification. Museums can actively contribute to these dynamics by re-actualizing and celebrating national myths and symbols.

Another way through which national authority legitimises itself through the past is by establishing a genealogical link with the symbolic figures or events associated with the origins of the community – that is, a founding myth (Fowler 1987: 230). As a number of historians, including Duncan Bell (2003) and Bo Stråth (2005) have pointed out, myths and traditions – even if transformed or invented (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1992) – are crucially important as discursive practices that bind together collective national identities. As Bell explains (2003:75) a nationalist myth can be understood “as a story that simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation’s past [...] they subsume all of the various events, personalities, traditions, artefacts and social practices that (self) define the nation and its relation to the past, present and future”.

Museum displays – all the more if illustrating national features and historical events – are an ideal ground for the development, crystallization and dissemination of national mythologies. Norwegian national mythologies for instance, weave together romantic notions of the natural landscape with the tough, frugal heroism of seafarers, travellers and explorers (see Aronsson et al. 2008) – the Vikings being the most accomplished expression of this archetype. However, since as mentioned, Norway does not have a designated museum of national history, its national historical narratives are scattered across diverse institutions. For instance, the exhibition *We won the land* at the Maihaugen Museum³ in Lillehammer, locates the origins of the Norwegian nation and the inception of a “Norwegian history” in the end of the ice age. In the exhibition’s narrative, the

melting of the glaciers and the ensuing transformation of the natural landscape are the preconditions for “history” to begin. In the narrative of the Maihaugen Museum, the Norwegian nation is fully entangled in the natural landscape, understood as an ideal conflation of Nature and (Norwegian) culture.

The Viking period (800–1066 AD) constitutes a pillar of Norwegian national narratives. It figures most prominently in the Museum of the Viking Burial Ships, at the outskirts of Oslo, where visitors may closely observe three magnificently preserved Viking wooden burial ships. Here, the artefacts on display are not interpolated by an explicit national narrative; rather it is the materiality of the burial ships – their majestic dimensions, technical masterpiece, and elegant shapes – that are made to speak for the seafaring culture and boat-making skills of Norwegian ancestry.

Christianity is another important page in Norway’s national history. Middle Ages, Christian Norway is recalled at the Museum of Cultural History of the University of Oslo in a gallery displaying religious paintings on wood and painted wooden sculptures. The emphasis is here on the aesthetic features of wooden sculptures. These are presented as tokens of the devotion to Christianity of rural communities in South-Western Norway since the 11th century. The subject matter of religious wooden sculptures (of which the stave churches can be considered an extraordinary extension) points at the bonds between Christianity and the Kingdom, between religious and political power, whilst sanctioning the victory over Norse paganism.



Christianity “arrives” to Norway, diorama at the Museum of the City of Oslo.

The national narrative centred on the notion of the folk that unfolds at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History provides a corollary to the narratives emphasising the bond with Nature at the Maihaugen Museum, the seafaring exploits on display at the Museum of the Viking Burial Ships, and the Christian rural Norway celebrated at the Museum of Cultural History. Taken together, these museums map a constellation of national sites and national narratives that, although not expressively interconnected, compose a grand narrative of the Norwegian Nation. Peter Aronsson (2008: 206) brings this argument further suggesting that the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, together with the Museum of the Viking Burial Ships and the National Maritime Museum constitute a complex linking the ancient Viking past and the modern present of the Norwegian nation. In other words, the heritage of the Vikings is being inscribed in the framework of a Norwegian ethos conflating peasant culture and a modernity defined in terms of scientific discovery and advanced technology applied, among other, to oil exploration, telecommunications, and the fishing industry.

If one juxtaposes the museum representations of the nation in Norway and China, one of the main shared elements that emerges is the centrality of national mythologies. However, whilst in Norway such mythologies unfold in museums through a sequence of foundational turning points such as the Viking era, the advent of Christianity, independence, the oil discovery etc. in Chinese museums national narratives are primarily concerned with communicating a sense of historical continuity. The notion of continuity in the history of Chinese civilisation is central in the political discourse on the national past. For instance, the question of the origins of the Chinese civilisation is an especially debated and politicized one. Until the late 1970s the dominant interpretative model suggested the idea of a unique settlement of civilisation – identified as “Huaxia” – situated along the Yellow River, from which populations would have later spread across the rest of China. “Huaxia” has come to indicate the ancestors of the Han, but also more broadly, Han Chinese civilisation. The concept of Huaxia has been instrumental to the discourses on the alleged superiority of the Han Chinese majority (Dikötter 1992). Since the 1980s the theory of the Yellow River has been abandoned by historians and archaeologists to the benefit of an alternative interpretation – known as theory of the “interaction sphere” (Falkenhausen 1995) – based on a plurality of settlements that, through interaction, would have lead to the spread of the population over the territory. In 1986, archaeological excavations in Sichuan Province, South-West China, brought to light cultural relics attributed to the Shu culture, estimated to date back to the XII century BC. These bronze artefacts of arresting beauty are the tokens of an advanced and culturally refined civilisation in the South West of China, independent from the Northern settlements. This represented a turnaround in the interpretation of the origins of Chinese civilisation, since it discarded the theory of the Yellow River, according to which the settlements in Northern China were the “cradle” of Chinese civilisation. The

Sanxingdui Museum, in Sichuan, celebrates the cultural and technological refinement of the Shu civilisation and firmly inscribes it in the history of the Chinese nation. Yet, the Museum of Chinese National History in Beijing – currently being revamped – continued to embrace the theory of a unique settlement, focusing on Huaxia and its alleged superiority, and presenting the history of the Chinese nation as an uninterrupted line of development from the Peking Man to the founding of the People's Republic. Conversely, one can find very little note of the Shu civilization, which is dismissed as a marginal, minor local culture. This example shows how different museums are taking advantage of historical uncertainty to unfold different and competing narratives on the origins of the nation. In spite of archaeological evidence of the contrary, the Museum of Chinese National History preferred to emphasise the aspect of continuity in Chinese history. These inconsistencies are revelatory of the ongoing process of history writing, but also of the malleability of museum representations vis-à-vis the need to disseminate powerful narratives of national unity and cohesion.

National Epics

National mythologies extend in national epics where the endurance of the embryonic nation-state is being put at hard test by natural calamities and disasters, plagues, economic crisis, and wars. From these, the narrative goes, the nation will emerge stronger than ever. It is possible to retrace such epics of resistance in both Norwegian and Chinese museums.

The exhibition *We won the Land* at the Maihaugen Museum in Lillehammer, for instance, deploys a narrative alternating lights and shadows. The representations of the Black Death in the 12th century and the subsequent Danish occupation are followed by a more positive narrative centred on the process of nation-building since the independence from Denmark in 1814 and over the course of the 19th century. Museum displays and narratives turn again to dramatic tones to describe the Nazi occupation of Norway between 1940–45, and finally they resume a positive stance to celebrate the modern, affluent and stable Norwegian welfare state in the second half of the 20th century.

A similar narrative line is also present – albeit more subtle – in the reconstructed *Apartment building, Wessels Gate 15* from down town Oslo on display at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History. The building is composed of eight apartment units. Through details of the lifestyles of their occupants, the apartments provide an overview of what life was like in different periods in the history of Norway, from the late 19th to the 21st century. Thus displays juxtapose the wit and lightness of the 1920s with the hardship of everyday life in the economic crisis of the 1930s, the approaching threats of Nazism and Fascism with the renovated hope for the future of the pop 1960s, the social protests of the 1970s with the multiculturalism of the new millennium. Implicitly, the presence of electronic devices in the apartments and the quality of home decoration become

indicators of prosperity and modernity. In spite of the modernist narrative underlying the display, this succeeds in drawing a vivid portrait of Norwegian citizenry over the 20th century.

In contrast to the linearity of national narratives in Norway, museum representations of national epics in China focus on the mid-20th century and are strictly linked to the rise of the Communist Party and the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. The development of the Communist Party, from its inception in Shanghai in 1921 (celebrated in the Site of the First Congress of the Communist Party) to the epic of the Long March, are vividly and romantically illustrated in the museums established during the Maoist era (from 1949 to 1976). For instance, the exhibition cases in the Military Museum are replete with such items as binoculars, lanterns, water flasks, and soldiers' uniforms.⁴ Similarly, the exhibition at the Site of the First Congress of the Communist Party presents as historical evidence personal belonging of the attendants to the congress, such as typewriters, wall clocks, badges, uniforms, tea sets, and even lamp switches.⁵ By illustrating the spirit of sacrifice of the Red Army soldiers and by celebrating the martyrdom of patriotic heroes, these displays are meant to provide models of citizenry, whilst instilling feelings of pride and national belonging. The dark, pre-1949 past is contrasted with the glory of the post-unification and the brightness of the Communist future. As it is the case in Norway, these national narratives emphasise the endurance of the national bond through difficult times and close on a call for the retrieval and preservation of a "national essence".

Selective Amnesia

In a museum setting, forgetting is as consequential as remembering (Varutti 2010b). Some pages of history are voluntarily omitted as part of a "strategy of forgetfulness" (Lundahl 2006: 2) that enables unpleasant historical events to be "edited out" from the main national narrative.

For instance in China the writing of official history was (and in part, still is) achieved by imposing national heroes and events for remembrance, and conversely by neglecting or ignoring others (see Varutti 2008). Historical narratives are purged from disturbing elements (events or characters) and historical or mythical figures are adapted to suit present needs. The instance of the recent surge in popularity of *Qin Shi Huangdi*, the emperor that unified China around 221BC and the commissioner of the impressive Terracotta Army, shows how an historical or mythical character is salvaged from collective amnesia, re-interpreted and cast as a national hero to support contingent narratives on the longevity, continuity, and unity of the Chinese nation (Duara 1988: 780). Significantly, such narratives are successfully exported through museums, as illustrates the popularity of the temporary exhibition *The First Emperor. China Terracotta Army* opened at the British Museum in 2007 and subsequently touring the world major museums. In spite of a renewal of interest towards the ancient

past, China's recent history is still to be written. The decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when artistic production and cultural expressions that were not of propagandistic nature were considered obsolete and unproductive, remains largely inaccessible to historians and is still considered taboo in public museum representations. The prospect of a public museum of the Cultural Revolution is still far from becoming reality; this would require, in the first instance, the coagulation of a collective and government-approved willingness to remember. For the time being, amnesia is the strategy chosen to deal with personal, collective and national loss.

Historical omissions and selective amnesia are not a prerogative of Chinese museums, they also occur in other countries, including Norway. For instance, museum displays of Norway's national past rarely explore the unexpected wealth produced by the discovery of oil resources in the late 1960s, nor do they tackle the deep impacts that this exerted on the articulation of national priorities in the political, economical, social and cultural realms. Museum representations seem to privilege a more distant, indefinite, romanticized past. Similarly, the discriminatory practices that the Norwegian government conducted vis-à-vis the Sami and some ethnic minority groups such as the Travellers until well into the 20th century, have only recently started to be addressed in museum displays. Mostly they are raised in the framework of displays dedicated to a specific ethnic or indigenous group, such as the Sami gallery in the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, or the *Latjo Drom* permanent exhibition on Travellers at the Glomdal Museum in Elverum. Even more delicate, because more recent, is the question of the "German children" (*tyske barne*), the children born of relationships between German soldiers and Norwegian women during the Nazi occupation (1940-45). The discrimination to which these children have been subject is largely absent from museum exhibitions. Similarly, museums fail to engage with the racist policies implemented during the Nazi occupation aiming to select an ideal Norwegian "racial type". This thorny issue has been exceptionally – if indirectly – acknowledged in the temporary photographic exhibition *Visions of Purity* held at the Gallery Sverdrup, University of Oslo, in Autumn 2009. Aside from these isolated instances, these difficult historical pages are only rarely and marginally referred to in museum representations of Norwegian history; definitely, they are not (yet) part of the Norwegian national master narrative.

Read against the grain, museum displays of historical events reveal a constellation of silences and omissions. Events, periods, characters are edited out from national narratives when they are difficult to come to terms with, contested, or traumatic, and would therefore jeopardize the cohesion and persuasive potency of national narratives. Interestingly, in both Chinese and Norwegian museums the instances of historical omissions mostly pertain to the recent national past – a past that has not yet been fully crystallized into history, memorialised or embedded into the cultural heritage, and thus is "difficult" to depict and narrate in museums.

It might be argued that it is a general prerogative of (national) museums to shun engagement with such recent past or, alternatively, to tackle it through tactful and *ad hoc* strategies – of which historical amnesia and selective remembrance are examples – that whilst not imperilling the homogeneity of national narratives, also reveal the political nature of museum displays of the past.

National Ethics, Values and Aesthetics

The construction of a national ethos is pursued by associating the nation with a set of values, moral codes and aesthetic canons.

In Norway, framing the nation through the folk perspective has involved the mobilization of moral values such as egalitarianism, individualism, spontaneity and integrity (the latter are often associated to childhood), as well as ideals of tradition, authenticity, cultural continuity, and love for the natural environment (Gullestad 1992; Sørensen & Stråth 1997; Garvey 2005; Børenholdt 2007). These constitute a core of recurring themes in museum displays of Norwegian national identity. For instance, the Folk Dress permanent exhibition at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History chose to focus on the artist Adolph Tidemand emphasizing the fact that he indistinctly portrayed “wealthy farmers that were member of the Parliament [...] [*and*] ordinary Norwegian farmers. [...] His models were drawn from all social levels”. Similarly, the curators of the temporary exhibition *Where is Mr Siboni?* make a point of specifying that “From the foundation of the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History in 1894, the collection of artefacts has been focused equally on urban and rural cultures. The whole life of the nation shall be represented, not only particular social classes and environments”.⁶

The importance of a high ethical profile is also apparent in the description of the occupants of the reconstructed *Apartment building, Wessels Gate 15* at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History. Despite the differences in historical period, gender, social class and background, museum panels emphasize that the tenants’ common feature was to be “nice persons and good people” (*pene mennesker og bra folk*). In a similar vein, the Museum of the City of Oslo displays a number of portraits of individuals and family groups from the Middle Ages to the 19th century. These stern, austere portraits contribute to the definition of a “Norwegian” ethos in the arts and in real life. Tamed colour tones, composed body gestures, rigorous accoutrements suggest an aesthetics of the essential, the contained, the modest and the measured. Witoszek (1997: 87) argues that there is an historical continuity in Norwegian political culture based on the individualist and egalitarian ethos which lead to national independence.



Celebrating Norwegian national independence and its heroes at the Museum of the City of Oslo.

National independence is itself a cherished national value – in part instantiated by Norway’s reluctance to join supra-national organizations such as the EU. This can be better appreciated at the light of the interpretation of the successive unions with Denmark and Sweden as colonization, and the trauma of WWII, leading to the invasion of Norway by the Nazi army. These events left an imprint on national consciousness to the effect that national independence is perceived as something that needs to be protected. The projected moral integrity of Norway is also the result of museum narratives emphasizing the fact that Norway was not a colonial power, but rather a victim of Danish and Swedish imperialism (this can be seen for instance at the Mainhaugen Museum, the Oslo City Museum and the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History). This image is being maintained and re-actualized at the Nobel Peace Center, extolling the key role of Norway as mediator in international peace negotiations and in international cooperation and development aid. As a corollary, the annual endowment of the Nobel Peace Prize by the King of Norway contributes to update Norway’s moral authority and international status of a “righteous” nation.

The crystallization and institutionalization of “Norwegian” values and moral codes appear as relatively recent processes when juxtaposed to their correspondent in China. Here, Confucian principles have historically provided a source of moral values and codes of social conduct. Today, they continue to be strongly associated to Chinese civilisation, and by extension to the Chinese nation

(Suresh 2002). Confucian principles have deeply informed social relationships by means of an emphasis on the concept of filial piety, declined in the respect for the parents, the elderly, the ancestors, the superior, and ultimately the State. The notion of filial piety finds particular application in the domain of the political relationship between the citizen and the sovereign (Bell & Ham 2003). It follows that the State is constructed as a superseding, almost paternal entity. The image of Mao Zhedong in museums (notably in the Museum of the Revolution, the Military Museum and the National Art Museum, in Beijing, and the Site of the First Congress of the Communist Party, in Shanghai) is deeply imprinted by these principles. More broadly Confucianism has significantly contributed to shape Chinese attitudes towards the past and its material manifestations by emphasizing the importance of remembrance (cfr Zhang 2003), valuing the respect for elderly and the ancestors, and the need to learn moral lessons from the mistakes of the past.

In terms of aesthetics, contemporary Chinese museums appear fully involved in a process of redefinition of “Chinese aesthetics”. The ideological transition from Communist ideology to cultural nationalism initiated in the early 1990s has found expression in museum displays in a gradual distancing from Marxist-Leninist approaches to history and the turn to the sublimation of the aesthetics of cultural relics. In contemporary exhibitions, the most salient artefacts illustrating Chinese national history are being presented through aestheticizing display techniques that invite a contemplative gaze, emphasise the formal characteristics of objects thus ultimately celebrating, and in the process canonizing, a “Chinese national style” (Varutti 2010a).

Creating a “Modern” Nation

At the Museum of the city of Oslo, historical artefacts, landscape paintings, urban miniature models, dioramas and historical photographic material celebrate the metamorphosis of Christiania from a large village into a capital over the course of the 19th century. The establishment of “national” institutions – such as the Royal Palace, the University, the Stock Exchange, the Theatre,⁷ the Bank of Norway, and the national transport, telecommunication and postal services – together with demographic increase, social stratification, urban development and a thriving economy, are the elements supporting the discourse on the modernity of the nation in the making. Similarly, at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History the visitor can walk in a reconstructed 19th century bank office in Christiania. The exhibition, financed by DnB NOR, Norway's largest financial services group, retraces the development of the banking system in Norway in parallel with the making of the Norwegian nation. In a similar vein, the Museum of the City of Oslo deploys a series of dioramas reconstructing in fine detail housing interiors from the early 19th century to today. Interior decoration becomes here an index of the transformation of the urban landscape and living units (through the appearance of

concrete housing blocks), and of families' customs and lifestyles. Similarly, the reform of the school system and the institution of a penitentiary are presented as salient facets of the modernization of Norwegian society in the Museum of the City of Oslo. Interestingly, the transformation of Norwegian society into a multicultural society is also perceived as a sign of the times, as exemplified by a diorama entitled *City Landscape* (Byskap) displaying a multicultural crowd in a central square in Oslo, and chosen to close the permanent exhibition about the history of city at the Museum of the City of Oslo.

Writing about Sweden, Peter Aronsson (2010: 42) notes that “the absence of a single, central narrator reinforces the contemporary multicultural discourse of equal individual and historical value”. It could be argued that, similarly, in Norway the absence of a single, clearly defined and powerful narrative of the nation leaves room for more open definitions of what constitutes the Norwegian national heritage and national identity, leading to the development of museum national narratives that take into account recent phenomena of migration, mobility and cultural hybridity. This is ultimately conducive to a flexible, open-ended definition of the profiles of the national body, in line with the multicultural complexity of contemporary Norway.

Conversely, in Chinese museums the multicultural character of China's citizenry – including a large Han Chinese majority and 55 ethnic minority groups – is framed as a “remnant of the past” due to fade out as Chinese society “modernizes” (Varutti 2010b). The main narratives of modernity of the Chinese nation unfolded by museum displays are linked to the celebration of the accomplishments of the Han Chinese majority, with a special emphasis on the achievements of the Communist government since its establishment in 1949. For instance, the Museum of Public Security in Shanghai depicts the history of the police service, its social function and the moral values that inform it. The efficiency of the police service is presented as the condition to build a safe, modern society based on the rule of law. The Bank Museum in Shanghai, illustrating the development of financial activities in China, provides another example of how a public service may be inscribed in narratives about the modernity of the Chinese nation. The images reproduced on the banknotes are particularly revelatory of the narratives of progress disseminated by the Communist Party. Depicting workers and peasants labouring for the nation, banknote images celebrate national achievements in the domains of mechanization, technology, scientific research etc. In the same vein, the Post Museum in Shanghai presents the development of the postal and telecommunication services as tokens of the country's modernity.

Modernisation is then celebrated in the national narratives of both Norway and China. Indeed, with the exception of multiculturalism, museum displays of the nation in Norway and China emphasise similar aspects of modernization, such as increased efficiency of public services and expansion of the possibilities of

production and consumption. However, in the two instances modernization is linked to different acting forces: in Norway, it is presented as a civic-national project, whereas in China the narratives put more emphasis on the role of the state in the modernization of the country. These examples show how modernity, understood as an intellectual tool that helps to integrate innovation and make sense of social change, can be variously framed in museum narratives to support different kinds of nation-building projects.

Conclusions

Stephan Berger and the research group working on the project *Representations of the Past: The Writing of National Histories in Europe*⁸ have authoritatively documented the parallels that can be traced among European countries in the uses of the past for nation-building purposes. In line with Berger's (2007) opening of the analysis to a global perspective, this paper has extended the comparative methodology further, to include a non-European country, such as China. The focus of the analysis was narrowed to museum representations of the nation and the examples from China were used to highlight specificities and generalizable features of national narratives in the museums of Norway. The analysis of museum representations of national past in Norway and China suggests that if national pasts are obviously unique to the historical trajectories of each country, their museum renditions point at a set of intriguing analogies in structures and strategies of historical representation. In Norway, as in China, national narratives of the past present what Anthony Smith (2004: 227) defined as the three requisites of a past that is useful to nation-building processes: authenticity, inspiration, and the capacity for reinterpretation. Museums play a key role in this respect, as displays contribute to validate the authenticity of national mythologies, to amplify and renew their inspirational potential, and to constantly reinterpret, revise, re-frame and make anew the past to fulfil present needs.

Museum displays of the nation in Norway convey a range of national mythologies, including the romantic folklorized rural past, the idealized relation with Nature, Vikings' heritage, and the salvaging role of Christianity. This suggests that national narratives are not monolithic, but segmented and composite. In China too, museum displays of the nation unfold segmented national narratives – at times these even underpin different and incongruous perspectives on the nation. In both countries, despite a stress on historical continuity, the selective amnesia applied by museums to specific historical periods and events reveals historical hiatuses and discontinuities, whilst also casting light on the engineering of collective memory at work in displays. In the museums of both Norway and China, national narratives of the past find their counterpart in narratives of modernity. In both instances, modernity is formulated in terms of the (mostly technological) modernity of national structures and services.

In sum, coherence, continuity, longevity, civilisation and modernity emerge as the foundational endowments of the nation. In particular, these may be understood as structural components of national narratives in the museums of both Norway and China – significantly, both newly established nations in need to ground their present legitimacy in a long, uninterrupted and glorious past. In both Norway and China museums (and all the more national museums) appear to have developed a comparable *répertoire* of concepts, symbols, metaphors, images, narrative modes and visual strategies that are systematically used in representations of the nation. These elements are the building blocks of national master narratives, understood in the sense of Krijn Thijis (2008: 69ff) that is, as systems of abstract structures which are variously combined in narrative templates, which are then “filled” with specific historical narratives. Such structural analogies between Norway and China lend support to the hypothesis that an international canon is in place for the representation of the nation in museums. This does not, however, affect the contents of representations and narratives, which are context dependent and bound to specific national features (modes of nation-building, political ideology, current socio-economic context etc.). This discrepancy between structures and content reveals how an established set of modes of representation of the nation in museums is variously deployed in the framework of different political agendas. Whilst no country is so cohesive as to do without the unifying and legitimizing power of master narratives of the past, the perceived need to do so, and the strategies to implement it may vary significantly from a country to another. Analogies and divergences in these processes are valuable indicators of broader historical and global dynamics of social and political change. In particular, detailing and qualifying differences and analogies in museum representations of the nation in a cross-country perspective opens the ground of enquiry to new questions. What historical and contemporary political, social and cultural factors determine convergences and divergences in the master narratives developed by different nations? If an international canon for the museum representation of the nation exists, how can this be defined? What kind of museological and nationalistic considerations inform it? How did it come into being, through which historical processes? Answering these questions bears the potential to lead to more refined understandings of the roles that museums play in contemporary societies, the various ways in which similar roles are fulfilled, their historical roots and future implications.

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Notes

- 1 Although the concept of folk lied at the core of Norwegian nationalism, the concept initially implied a reference to “the Norwegian people” as opposed to the State (Aronsson et al. 2008: 258).
- 2 Norwegian Museum of Cultural History website: <http://www.norskfolke.museum.no/en/target-groups/About-the-Museum/The-History-of-Norsk-Folkemuseum/> (last accessed November 2010).
- 3 The exhibition *We won the land* opened in 1994, when the city of Lillehammer hosted the Winter Olympic Games. Maihaugen Museum website: <http://www.maihaugen.no/en/>. A multimedia presentation of the main sections of the exhibition is available here: <http://www.randistoraas.no/eng/index.php?Side=1&counter=2> . I wish to thank Dr. Line Esborg, at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS), University of Oslo, for the insights she provided about this exhibition in occasion of a seminar presentation she gave at the IKOS in November 2009.
- 4 Military Museum, Beijing. Visited in May 2006.
- 5 Site of the First Congress of the Communist Party, Shanghai. Last visited in April 2006.
- 6 All quotations in this paragraph are from exhibition panels at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History. Last visited, January 2010.
- 7 In the winter 2009-10, the Museum of the City of Oslo hosted the temporary exhibition *In the spotlight. The theatre history of Oslo and its performing arts*. The exhibition explored the development of theatre performances in Norway as part of the nation-building process – from the creation of the Christiania Norwegian Theatre in 1854 devoted to the presentation of Norwegian plays in the new national language (the new Norwegian based on rural dialects), up to contemporary performances revisiting classics such as Ibsen in a cross-cultural, creative fresh perspectives.
- 8 See http://www.uni-leipzig.de/zhsesf/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1

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