Research on the Publicness in the Management and Operation of Chinese Museums

Qiao Chen

Department of History, Northwest Minzu University, Lanzhou 730000, Gansu, China

Abstract: *Publicness constitutes a crucial attribute in the management and operation of museums. With increasing emphasis on cultural initiatives, the publicness of Chinese museums has rapidly advanced in recent years, shifting the focus of museum management from "objects" to "people." This transformation has highlighted their social education and service functions, accompanied by the emergence of advanced exhibition technologies and innovative concepts. However, due to the relatively late start of museum development in China, challenges persist, including imbalanced regional scales, limited carrying capacity, difficulties in balancing cultural heritage preservation with public exhibitions, and weak sustainability. To address these issues, strategies such as developing small-scale museums, refining volunteer management systems, and regularly updating exhibitions should be implemented. While advancing publicness, it remains essential to uphold the core principles of museums as public cultural service institutions, particularly their non-profit nature and academic rigor.*

Keywords: Museums; Publicness; Museum Management and Operation; Development Strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars throughout history and across cultures have offered their own insights into the definition of publicity. Jürgen Habermas, a renowned German scholar, believes that publicity is closely related to concepts such as public opinion, authoritarian or enlightened public spheres, and that publicity itself manifests as an independent realm, namely the public sphere, which stands in opposition to the private sphere [1]. Chinese scholar Zhou Fei summarizes the meaning of publicity as an overlapping consensus on fairness and justice; the essence of publicity lies in public rights; publicity embodies public space and time; and publicity is the unity of three dimensions: actors, interests, and accessibility [2]. The International Council of Museums' latest definition of a museum in 2022 states: "A museum is a non-profit permanent institution at the service of society, which researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits material and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums promote diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate in an ethical and professional manner, and offer diverse experiences for education, appreciation, contemplation, and knowledge sharing, with the participation of communities." Based on the above viewpoints, it can be seen that the concept of publicity in the field of museum management and operation encompasses the following connotations. Firstly, commonality, meaning that museums and their cultural heritage belong to all people. Secondly, openness, indicating that museums are publicly accessible realms and bear significant responsibility in public education. Thirdly, fairness, meaning that museums are open to all members of the public without discrimination based on wealth, cognitive level, geographical location, or any other criteria. Fourthly, public welfare, as museums, as public cultural service institutions, provide cultural and educational services to the public without the aim of profit. Fifthly, participation, where public engagement in museums is an expression of exercising their rights and enhances the effectiveness of museum education. Based on these fundamental theories and connotations, this paper will discuss the practice and development of publicity in the management and operation of Chinese museums, point out the challenges faced in its development process, propose corresponding countermeasures, and clarify the theories, bottom lines, and principles to be adhered to in the practical development of publicity.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLICNESS IN MUSEUMS

Since the emergence of the modern museum concept, publicness has been a crucial attribute distinguishing museums from earlier artifact-collecting institutions and was later defined as a fundamental characteristic of museums. Although publicness was emphasized from the inception of museums, it did not guide their initial developmental direction. In the case of Chinese museums, for a long period, museums were regarded as solemn and sacred halls of knowledge. Economically, public museums in China previously charged admission fees, which excluded economically disadvantaged visitors. Socially, traditional Chinese museums were object-centered, with their primary functions focused on scientific research and cultural relic preservation. Consequently, museum operations and management prioritized artifact conservation, which ultimately influenced exhibition design.

Curatorial practices rarely considered visitors' knowledge levels, enthusiasm for engagement, or physical stamina—evidenced by the lack of rest areas, prohibitions on eating and drinking, excessive use of specialized terminology in artifact descriptions, and rigid, scripted guided tours. These factors deterred many potential visitors. Museums became exclusive spaces for intellectuals rather than fulfilling their original intention of serving as public, egalitarian institutions accessible to all [3]. In recent years, however, terms like "museum fever" and "cultural and museum craze" have frequently trended online, with museums becoming popular tourist destinations. During holidays, museums are often crowded with visitors, starkly contrasting the stereotypical image of solemn knowledge sanctuaries. This transformation stems from significant operational and managerial reforms in Chinese museums, driven by shifts in social functions and the goals of promoting national culture and enhancing national confidence.

2.1 Shift in Museum Focus from "Objects" to "People"

Since 2008, all public museums and memorial halls in China have implemented free admission policies, marking a critical step toward realizing museums' public nature and ensuring accessibility for all visitors. This initiative enabled economically disadvantaged individuals or those with limited initial interest in museums to step through their doors. Consequently, the focus of museum operations and management began shifting from "objects" to "people," prioritizing visitor experiences and enhancing service-oriented approaches. In recent years, amenities such as leisure cafes, cultural and creative shops, and dining areas have become commonplace in museums. Extensive rest zones, both inside and outside exhibition halls, now significantly alleviate visitor fatigue, transforming museum visits into more relaxed and enjoyable experiences [4]. Regarding interpretive materials, artifact descriptions have diversified to include both concise summaries and more specialized, detailed explanations, moving beyond rigidly formal presentations. For example, the 2023 "Golden List of Success" Calligraphy and Painting Exhibition at Wenzhou Museum, which ranked among the top ten trending museum exhibitions, adopted playful dialogues to introduce artworks and artists. The exhibition section, titled "Chit-Chat Exhibition Guide," featured humorous exchanges such as:

-Knowledgeable Bro: "This second-place scholar came from a farming and scholarly family. His father passed away early, but his mother wove cloth to support his studies. Thankfully, his uncle, a provincial-level scholar, provided one-on-one tutoring!"

-Praise Guy: "Family environment matters for academic success, but self-discipline is key. He studied diligently for 30 years, mastering 100,000 volumes of classics. Rising from humble roots—truly inspiring!"

-Calligraphy Expert: "His profound education shines through his calligraphy. His semi-cursive script is vigorous yet refined; his seal script embodies rustic elegance and rounded grace."

-Commentator: "In his later years, Yu Changlin spent 29 years compiling 19 historical and scholarly works, including The Annals of Taizhou Prefecture and Case Studies of Han Dynasty Scholars. A true literary giant!"

This section, titled "Chit-Chat Exhibition Guide," employs a conversational and gossip-style format that undeniably captivates audiences more effectively than traditional textual descriptions. It simplifies understanding, allowing visitors unfamiliar with calligraphy to grasp the essence of the artworks and their historical narratives. In terms of guided tours, docents have moved away from rigid scripts and fixed routes. Instead, they now tailor explanations to visitors' cultural backgrounds, age groups, and interests, avoiding lecture-style or didactic approaches. For instance, the World Wenzhou People Museum, which primarily serves group visitors, employs a professional docent team. Before tours, they gather information about the audience's age, educational level, nationality, and other factors to customize the experience. They selectively skip certain content, adapt their narrative styles, and engage in interactive dialogues. For visitors well-versed in modern Wenzhou history—or even those with personal connections to it—docents encourage them to contribute their insights.

Beyond traditional guided tours, technologies such as AR-guided experiences and digital navigation systems have been widely adopted by museums. Visitors can now independently select audio guides or multimedia content based on their interests. In essence, museum tours have evolved from formulaic, one-way instruction to encouraging active exploration and prioritizing visitor engagement. This shift reflects a broader commitment to fostering curiosity and personalizing cultural experiences.

2.2 Development of Social Education and Social Services in Museums

Museums have increasingly prioritized their roles in social education and community service. In recent years, the frequency of social education initiatives in Chinese museums has risen significantly, with nearly 230,000 educational activities organized nationwide in 2022 alone. Aligning with China's "Double Reduction" policy (aimed at reducing academic burden and extracurricular tutoring), many primary and secondary schools have partnered with local museums to develop extracurricular educational programs. For example, Wenzhou Museum's "Little Docent" program trains students to deliver simplified guided tours. Under the guidance of professional docents, students learn presentation skills, tour routes, and visitor engagement principles. They practice inviting audiences to listen to their explanations, fostering historical knowledge, broadening perspectives, and building confidence. This initiative also addresses staffing shortages during peak hours, enhancing visitor experiences.

As a key component of social services, volunteer programs have also been optimized. At Wenzhou Museum, due to the high volume of educational activities, staff could not oversee every detail. To address this, the museum established a dual-tier volunteer system: long-term volunteers (primarily retirees) undergo rigorous selection and training to lead and implement activities designed by the Social Services Department, while short-term volunteers (mostly university students) assist with specific tasks, providing a platform for practical social experience during holidays. The Social Services Department oversees planning and quality control, while long-term volunteers handle execution. This well-structured and specialized volunteer system allows the museum to efficiently manage a large number of programs with minimal staff, ensuring smooth operations and sustained community engagement.

2.3 Museum Exhibition Tech & Concept Innovation

Modern museums have expanded beyond traditional exhibition practices, leveraging cutting-edge technologies and cultural creative product design to amplify their cultural influence. In recent years, museum galleries have integrated numerous digital devices to display thematic multimedia content and facilitate interactive experiences, enriching conventional exhibitions with greater accessibility and engagement. Beyond physical spaces, many large-scale museums have established comprehensive official websites and adopted digital technologies, enabling virtual gallery tours online. Additionally, museum-inspired cultural and creative products (referred to as "Cultural and creative products of museums") have become vital tools for promoting cultural heritage and generating revenue. Notable examples include Dunhuang Academy's "Flying Apsaras" merchandise and Gansu Provincial Museum's "Galloping Bronze Horse" series, which draw inspiration from iconic artifacts to create distinctive, widely recognized products. These innovations demonstrate how Chinese museums are utilizing technology to enhance exhibitions and extend cultural impact beyond gallery walls. The concept of "Museum Cities" marks a significant breakthrough in museum management philosophy in recent years. Following the 2008 Notice on Free Admission to National Museums and Memorial Halls, cities and towns across China prioritized museum development, with an average of one new museum opening every three days. This surge has integrated museums deeply into public life, sparking initiatives like "Museum Metropolises," "Museum Towns," and "Cultural Capitals," propelling the "Museum City" movement to new heights. Alongside quantitative growth, cities emphasize inter-museum collaboration, with larger institutions mentoring smaller ones and diversifying collections to enrich local cultural ecosystems [5].

In summary, contemporary Chinese museum management has progressively shifted its focus from "objects" to "people," balancing artifact preservation with visitor-centric services to better fulfill their public mandate. With increasing numbers, expanded scales, diversified types, and growing cultural influence, museums are transforming from aloof cultural sanctuaries into vibrant urban "cultural living rooms," fostering inclusivity and accessibility for all.

3. CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN ADVANCING THE PUBLICNES

Currently, the Chinese government places significant emphasis on fostering national cultural confidence, positioning museums as vital platforms for promoting Chinese culture. This has spurred expanded academic programs in museology, increased local investments in museums, and the rapid rise of "Museum Cities." Many museums are actively innovating their operational and managerial approaches. Coupled with growing public demand for cultural engagement amid economic development, trends like the "cultural and museum craze," "museum fever," and "cultural creative boom" have dominated social media, transforming museums into trending tourist destinations and signaling a promising future for the museum industry. Indeed, recent years have offered substantial opportunities for the growth of Chinese museums.

However, challenges persist due to the relatively short development history of Chinese museums and the immaturity of museology as a discipline. To sustain this momentum, museums must continue exploring adaptive strategies in their operations and management to address these evolving complexities.

3.1 Imbalanced Museum Development

As previously mentioned, the "Museum City" initiative is progressing, yet China's museum landscape remains uneven. Large institutions like the Palace Museum, Zhejiang Provincial Museum, and Gansu Provincial Museum, with their vast collections, often face overcrowding. In contrast, smaller local museums, such as Yuzhong County Museum, struggle with limited artifacts, outdated management, and minimal visitor engagement. Local museums should prioritize serving their communities. For residents near major museums like Gansu Provincial Museum, accessing rich exhibitions is effortless. However, those in remote areas like Yuzhong County face higher barriers to visit such institutions, while their local museum fails to provide sufficient cultural depth. This severe imbalance in museum resources undermines the realization of public accessibility. To foster cultural confidence, residents must easily engage with local history and develop pride in their heritage. Yet large museums often focus on national or global branding, crafting cultural symbols for provinces or cities while overlooking local community needs. Despite their scale, major museums face capacity constraints, deterring nearby residents. Moreover, their geographic reach remains limited, leaving remote populations disconnected from regional history. Even the largest museums cannot comprehensively cover every community's history or every facet of regional culture. Consequently, many locals rarely visit museums and remain uninformed about their hometown's heritage—hindering cultural identity and confidence. Addressing this requires prioritizing small, specialized museums. Development should emphasize quality over quantity, focusing on "small yet refined" institutions that first serve local communities before expanding their influence. As highlighted in The Participatory Museum, foreign community museums offer a valuable model. These niche institutions enable residents to actively participate in preserving and learning about local culture, strengthening cultural identity and confidence [6].

3.2 Increased Visitor Numbers and Museum Capacity Challenges

Visitor-friendly amenities and facilities have become increasingly common in museums, but the surge in attendance has strained their capacity. For instance, Wenzhou Museum's first-floor "Leisure Café," designed as a centralized rest area, suffices during off-peak periods but becomes overwhelmed during holidays when the museum operates at maximum capacity. This imbalance between rest zone and exhibition hall capacities significantly degrades visitor experiences. Additionally, the rising frequency of social activities poses operational challenges, requiring museums to expand volunteer teams, refine volunteer systems, optimize staff workload distribution, and coordinate interactions among staff, volunteers, and visitors. To address these issues, the solutions mentioned earlier remain relevant. A single museum, regardless of size, has inherent capacity limits for rest areas, permanent staff, and volunteers. Developing satellite branches or museum clusters could alleviate pressure by decentralizing visitor traffic. Furthermore, museums should maximize existing spaces to create more visitor-centric facilities, balancing operational capacity with public demand. Finally, enhancing volunteer management systems and strengthening incentive mechanisms can attract volunteers from diverse professional and age groups, expanding teams to ensure program quality amid growing social initiatives [7].

3.3 Balancing Cultural Preservation and Public Engagement

Preserving cultural artifacts and enhancing visitor experiences are both core functions of museums, yet tensions between these priorities persist. As museums increasingly prioritize accessibility, curators are experimenting with ways to bring audiences closer to artifacts. The Participatory Museum advocates a radical approach: removing barriers like glass cases and railings for durable artifacts while using reinforced enclosures for fragile ones, coupled with reduced security presence. While minimizing physical and psychological barriers enhances social engagement, it heightens preservation risks. Touching, light exposure, and fluctuating humidity—amplified by rising visitor numbers—pose significant threats to vulnerable items like paintings and calligraphy. To reconcile these challenges, tailored conservation strategies are essential. Delicate artifacts, such as paper-based works, should be displayed in climate-controlled cases with advanced protection. Conversely, robust objects like stone sculptures could be exhibited barrier-free, allowing direct interaction. Reducing excessive security personnel also fosters a more welcoming atmosphere. Additionally, museums must implement crowd control, regulate lighting and temperature, and establish rotational exhibition systems to minimize wear. By adopting tiered protection methods and institutionalizing artifact care protocols, museums can safeguard cultural heritage while delivering

immersive, audience-centered experiences.

3.4 Sustainable Development of Museums

"Sustainable development" here refers to how museums can maintain their popularity and cultural influence, continuously attract new visitors, retain regular patrons, and cultivate stable, recurring attendance. To achieve this, exhibitions remain the core attraction. Museums should refresh displays through rotating artifacts, loan exhibitions, and thematic updates—applying this not only to temporary exhibits but also to permanent galleries—to incentivize repeat visits [8]. Second, museums should diversify leisure areas by integrating cultural and creative elements, transforming spaces into relaxed, inviting destinations akin to shopping malls. This approach encourages casual and frequent visits. Third, fostering visitor loyalty is crucial. Post-visit engagement—via emails, gifts, or exclusive previews of new exhibitions—helps maintain connections and prompts return visits. Personalized outreach can deepen ties with regular attendees. Finally, museums should implement targeted surveys to gather visitor feedback and leverage data to refine exhibitions and services. By systematically analyzing insights, institutions can adapt dynamically to audience needs, ensuring long-term relevance and growth [9].

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, contemporary Chinese museums are evolving towards a more "public-friendly" direction, transforming from lofty cultural sanctuaries into cultural "living rooms" that serve the general public. Concurrently, Chinese museology research is proposing various solutions to address specific challenges in the transformation of museums' social functions. However, as authoritative cultural institutions and academic research entities, museums must maintain certain principles rooted in their scholarly authority while serving the public. Firstly, the 2022 updated definition by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) emphasizes that museums are non-profit institutions. While they may generate supplementary income through cultural and creative shops, dining areas, and value-added services, these activities must prioritize cultural dissemination and satisfy public cultural needs rather than pursuing profit. Secondly, as authoritative academic institutions, museums must ensure content accuracy and rigor in their exhibitions and interpretation materials, even while providing visitor-friendly, diversified, and accessible educational services. Finally, although museums should serve their audiences, they must avoid excessive pandering to public preferences at the expense of their core identity as authoritative institutions for cultural heritage research, collection, preservation, and display. Museums should operate and engage with the public through ethical and professional approaches, ensuring they convey excellent culture that is truly appreciated by the public while catering to diverse interests and needs.

REFERENCES

[1] Cheng Lu. A Study on the Publicness of Museums [D]. Nanjing Normal University, 2007.
[2] Zhou Fei. "A Review of Contemporary Public Philosophy Research in Europe and America," Journal of Shanghai Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), no. 2 (2005).
[3] Shi Jixiang. "On the Publicness of Museums," China Museum, no. 3 (2008): 23-28.
[4] Liang Min. "Reflections on Enhancing Services for Elderly Visitors in Chinese Museums from an International Perspective," Wenbo, no. 4 (2022): 97-104.
[5] Song Kexin, Huang Yang, and Jiao Lidan. "Concept and Practice: Reflections on the Development of 'Museum Cities' in China," Museum, no. 4 (2022): 6-17.
[6] Nina Simon. The Participatory Museum: Stepping into Museum 2.0 [M]. Translated by Yu Xiang. Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2018.
[7] Zhao Tiantian. "Revisiting the Contemporary Issues of Chinese Museums," China Museum, no. 4 (2022): 107-111.
[8] Guo Yanmai. A Study on the Contemporary Nature of Chinese Museums [D]. China University of Social Sciences, 2023.
[9] Zhao Xingyu. Research on Museum Audience Studies and Evaluation Systems [D]. Shandong University, 2022.