

The New National Museum of China: The Shaping of China's Self Image

By Dr. Victor Rabinovitch

**Fellow and Adjunct Professor Queens University
(President emeritus, Canadian Museum of Civilization)**

On a very cold night January night more than 85 people were treated to an excellent visual and intellectual tour of the Beijing's new National Museum of China.

Dr. Rabinovitch's lecture started with a description of the symbolic nature of its physical location on the east side of the iconic Tiananmen Square across from the Great Hall of the People and south of the gates to the Forbidden City. Its location signifies its importance as a key part of China's cultural and historical face to the world - in much the same way as does the location of the Smithsonian museums on the Washington Mall.

The new National Museum was deliberately designed to be the largest single museum building in the world. It greatly expanded an earlier museum building which had been opened in 1959 as one of China's Ten Great Buildings initiative. The Ten Great Buildings were constructed to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The original building actually housed two museums: the **Museum of the Chinese Revolution and the National Museum of Chinese History**.

In 2003 the new **National Museum of China** merged the two original museums into a single institution, although echoes of these origins are still evident in the divergent approaches that are now seen in major exhibitions on ancient and on modern Chinese history. In 2011 after a huge four- year construction project, which retained the original 1959 façade, the museum reopened with 28 new exhibition halls, more than triple the exhibition space, state of the art installations, research facilities and meeting rooms that are used for hosting VIP delegations from China and around the world. For more information you can go to the museum's web site at

<http://en.chnmuseum.cn/> .

Dr. Rabinovitch took his audience back to the 2005 and 2006 period before the renovations began. At that time the old museum could be described as a bit bedraggled, old fashioned, dirty, and potentially unsafe, even using fluorescent lighting in some exhibits. The highlight in the Museum of the Revolution was a display of wax figures showing important figures in the Chinese revolution such as Chairman Mao and the leaders of the Peoples' Liberation Army.

The unification of the two museums into the National Museum brought a new organising concept, - China and its relationship to world civilisation. This significantly changed the orientation and character of the museum's exhibits. To illustrate the new approach Dr. Rabinovitch took the audience on a visual tour of three of the principle galleries: first, "Masterpieces of Modern Chinese History", second, "Ancient China", and third, "The Road to Rejuvenation".

"Masterpieces of Modern Chinese History" is a mid-sized gallery that displays paintings of events and iconic scenes in the recent creation of modern China. These images present the founding myths of China's revolution. It is a much-visited gallery, notably popular with Chinese

visitors who crowd around large paintings, taking photos of themselves and friends. People point and discuss episodes, while parents and grandparents are often seen explaining past events to their youngsters .

A second major installation, called “Ancient China”, is a massive set of galleries that extend over three floors of the museum. It begins in prehistory and ends in 1911-12 with the fall of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republic. It presents a comprehensive and comprehensible story of the evolution of mankind and China’s long history across a broad sweep of geography and time. Using displays of spectacular ancient artifacts and well composed text in Chinese and English, the exhibits depict China’s historic construction of a multi-ethnic country through a process of dynastic changes and evolution. In some periods, exchanges with foreign countries were a significant factor and helped to spread the technical and cultural achievements of the Chinese people. This historical exhibition presents a panoply of images of how the Chinese wish to think of themselves, featuring treasures and images that instill pride in past accomplishments.

A third major installation, titled “The Road to Rejuvenation”, is the successor to the Museum of the Revolution. It is an explicitly political exhibition and its purpose is described as “stimulating the love of Party, the country and socialism with Chinese characteristics”. Visitors are told that the content and style of the exhibits have been reviewed and approved by multiple layers of institutions including the Communist Party of China, the People’s Liberation Army and current government. Like the product of any consensus process, the results tend to lose their crisp impact and the exhibition expresses the self-appreciation of the country’s leadership.

This installation is filled with paintings, photos and text panels that highlight the heroes of the revolution from Marx and Lenin through to contemporary leaders. There is virtually no mention of issues such as the great famine or the effects of the Cultural Revolution. The focus is on progress made the central style is didactic. The stated goal is to teach the masses, especially the young, about the struggles and accomplishments of the revolution.

The new National Museum has numerous other dimensions. It has a dynamic exchange program with leading museums in Europe, the Americas, Africa that bring high quality temporary exhibitions to Beijing. There is an intensive research program which includes major archeological work. There is also a wide array of specialised installations covering subject such as Chinese bronze, currency, jade, calligraphy, and design. The Museum is also an important reception venue with many meeting rooms for hosting delegations, thus providing an opportunity for informing foreign dignitaries about China’s culture.

In his conclusion Dr. Rabinovitch noted:

- The new National Museum is central, ceremonial, grand and formal,
- The narrative style of the exhibitions aims to create a cohesive story of China’s past and its recent growth.
- There are tensions between scholarly and political approaches, with the scholarly taking the lead in the “Ancient History” installation while the political takes the lead in “The Road to Rejuvenation”.

- The new National Museum is in part a “soft power” initiative by the Chinese government, projecting a cultural image of China that both domestic and foreign visitors may find attractive and positive.
- Chinese visitors have been flocking to the museum in very high numbers..
- Foreign visitors are most likely to enjoy the “Ancient History” exhibition because it combines remarkable artefacts, clear texts and accessible explanations.
- These are early days for the museum. Over time the staff will develop innovative ways to use the immense spaces and facilities.
- The new National Museum of China is clearly becoming one of the world’s great museums.