

History, materiality and social practice: Spatial discourse analysis of a contemporary art museum in China

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mas**Louise Ravelli** 

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Abstract

This article explores the challenge of incorporating longer historical time frames into a social semiotic understanding of meaning-making. We focus on museums as complex, multimodal assemblages, and trace the distinct trajectory of museums and their development in China. We illustrate the key differentiating stages of museums in China, and focus on the contemporary Chengdu Tianfu Art Museum (hereby TAM), as a case study exemplifying the intertwined nature of history in aspects of contemporary museum practice. We argue that history is inherently intersected in the making of materiality and meaning, and demonstrate through illustrative Spatial Discourse Analysis how this intersection is materialized in the design and use of TAM. Our analysis shows that TAM is both continuous with, and different from, prior museum practices. In doing so, we reveal connections between semiotic change and social change, and demonstrate that history and materiality cannot be divorced from the politics of representation.

Keywords

Chinese museums, history, materiality, multimodality, spatial discourse analysis, social practice

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Introduction

Museums have long been recognized as important sites of study, not only for their cultural significance as institutions, but because they are multimodal communicative entities which are constitutive of key social practices. As multimodal entities, museums are inherently complex, their multimodality encompassing the design and layout of a museum building as a whole, the galleries and exhibitions within, specific instances of display, and broader social practices, from the selection of content to the price of admission (Ravelli, 2006). Their communicative and multimodal nature has been explored through a wide range of multimodal and social semiotic studies (e.g. Hodge, 2011; Insulander and Selander, 2009; Kress and Selander, 2012; McMurtrie, 2013, 2017; Ravelli, 2006; Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016; Stenglin, 2009; Van Leeuwen, 2000), such studies being themselves but a small contribution to the broader field of museum studies (see for example, Arnold, 2006; Bennett, 1990, 1995; Drotner et al., 2019; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, 2000; Parry et al., 2018; Prösler, 1995; Vergo, 1989 for key overviews).

Social semiotics aims to “use the material as explicit evidence for claims about the social” (Ravelli, *in press*: np), and thus calls for an explicit link between materiality and contextual interpretation. In other words, social semiotic contextual interpretation is based on (close) textual analysis, which remains somewhat lacking in the field of museum studies (Jones and MacLeod, 2016). To fully understand the meaning potential of context, the notion of history (a dynamic temporal unfolding of social relations enacted in social practice) needs to be incorporated as a fundamental dimension (Van Leeuwen, 2021). Yet, when history is incorporated into the notion of context, it becomes an immediate challenge to demonstrate an historical dimension in material textual analysis, for materiality transforms in time and space and is closely linked to the present. Thus, the two key aims of our paper are to explore how materiality, history and textual semantics can be more effectively brought together in social semiotic research, and to discuss how a balanced synergy of these interrelated concepts can inform an understanding of museums more generally.

We do so by outlining the historical trajectory of museum development in China, and then focusing on contemporary museums in China, with Chengdu Tianfu Art Museum as a case study. Through a social semiotic, metafunctional analysis, we identify how social practices are intertwined with specific aspects of social history, as evidenced in the differential design, functioning, and use of museums.

A specific focus on museums in China is timely, for “the debate on Chinese museums, both in China and beyond, is still in its infancy” (Varutti, 2014, cited in Zhang and Courty, 2021: 31) and because many contributions to global museological discourse betray an “unreflective Eurocentrism”, together with a set of implicit developmental assumptions with respect to tradition and modernity (Prösler, 1995: 23). Equally importantly, social semiotic research is yet to fully incorporate a large-scale temporal dimension in its theorization, and an understanding of history is a first step towards this. We aim to establish the inherent connections between the past and the present in semiotic analysis, and emphasize the need to interpret contemporary practices in relation to historical contexts.

History, materiality, and meaning

Our lens is that of social semiotics, based on the linguistic work of Michael Halliday (1994), image-based analysis of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021), and analysis of the built environment of (Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016).

A social semiotic approach sees communication as being shaped by social context, while at the same time, the nature of the communication construes the context. That is, there must be explicit links evident between material resources and analyses of meaning. Importantly, meaning is understood to be metafunctional, including *representational* meaning, which accounts for material reality (what goes on; who or what is enabled to act); *interactional* meaning, accounting for social reality (the roles played by the institution or individuals; their attitudes); and *organisational* meaning, accounting for semiotic reality (how the component parts of the text, again at multiple levels, are put together; what is prioritized; how elements are related to each other). The explicit links between materiality and metafunctions are described briefly in the relevant sections below, and see (Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016) for more detailed explanations.

To understand how a museum ‘means’, it must be understood as an assemblage, including ‘the social relations between the objects, institutions, people, and narratives that constitute the museum assemblage’ (Jones and MacLeod, 2016: 211). Thus, analysis revisits the same ‘text’, the museum, at multiple levels from the whole-of-institution to specific micro practices, ‘zooming’ in and out between levels or ranks as needed (Boeriis and Holsanova, 2012). We adopt Spatial Discourse Analysis (Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016) to identify key metafunctional meanings across the museum assemblage.

In social semiotics, there is an established interest in how different time frames impact the creation of meaning, as well as a more recent recognition of the need for more longitudinal studies in social semiotic theory (Van Leeuwen, 2008). In systemic-functional linguistics, for example, in order to capture the evolving nature of meaning-making across time, Halliday and Matthiessen (1999: 17, cited in Johannessen and Boeriis, 2021: 528) propose the term ‘semogenesis’. This is further described as ‘phylogenesis’ (the evolution of collective meaning potential), ‘ontogenesis’ (the development of semiotic meaning potential over an individual’s lifespan), and logogenesis (the creation and unfolding of meaning in a text of a particular semiotic event). Johannessen and Boeriis (2021: 532), citing Halliday and Matthiessen (1999: 18), elaborate the interrelationships of these time frames in two directions:

“going down, slower scales ‘provide an environment for’ (Halliday and Matthiessen, 1999: 18) adjacent faster ones: processes of phylogenetic evolution provide the environment in which ontogenetic development happens which in turn provides the environment in which logogenetic exchanges happen. Conversely, going up, smaller scales ‘provide material for’ (Halliday and Matthiessen, 1999: 18) adjacent larger scales.”

In addition to semogenesis, Halliday (1977) also proposes the term *cline of instantiation* (a cline from meaning potential to instance) to capture the evolving interrelationship of text and context across different time spans. The emergence of these concepts

and their application in educational settings (e.g. [Lemke, 1990](#); [Matthiessen, 2009](#); [Painter, 1999](#)) are reflective of an existing awareness of the dynamic nature of meaning-making in systemic-functional theory.

Yet, driven by a primary focus on linguistic concerns, these analyses are often oriented to finished and finite texts that are described in terms of systemic choices (the logogenetic time frame), whereas the larger time-frames are considered conventionalized and could thus be taken as a given ([Johannessen and Boeriis, 2021](#)).¹ Consequently, the analysis is primarily concerned with static sign systems or text structures, whereas the dynamic aspects of meaning-making are often downplayed in the analytical process, resulting in a lack of understanding of the social construction of text and their transformation as a dynamic process. In other words, in order to highlight the evolving nature of semiosis, the point of departure for analysis should be displaced from texts as static signs into practice as socially situated and inevitably transformative. A completed text provides only a punctuation of semiotic practice that gives materialization to semiosis in a specific social situation ([Kress, 2000](#)). It is only through a dynamic understanding of practice that the notion of history can be more effectively incorporated into analysis.

Our primary aim is to balance descriptive analyses and socio-historical explorations, thus enabling an exploration of the ways semiotic complexity is taken up in practice ([Van Leeuwen, 2000](#)) and its actual material and social consequences. In other words, we aim for a semantic exploration that synthesizes materiality and historicity at the same time. Additionally, we aim to move beyond a logogenetic logic to include the phylogenetic logic in analyzing social semiosis, thus highlighting the historically-situated nature of meaning making, and relating material practice to its historical contextualization. The synergy of materiality and history in semiosis is particularly important, for it enables an understanding of the meaning potential of a particular text (as a punctuation of practice), and at the same time reveals connections which are latent until the surface meaning is linked to the social and historical context. In the context of museum communication, whereby history and materiality are prevalent themes and multimodally manifested, a synthesized view helps to locate the museum as a social and cultural practice -- a dynamic construction that transcends a mere collection of objects.

Museum history in China

We use the word ‘museum’ here to refer to both museums, art galleries, and related institutions such as heritage parks, while also recognising that there are important distinctions among these. Such institutions may be conceptualized first as buildings, concrete entities, but they are fundamentally social, meaning-making institutions ([Ravelli, 2006](#)) engaged in a diverse range of social practices (curating, explaining, commercializing, for example), communicated in a variety of ways (selection of objects, wall labels, shops, for example).

In China, museum development can be roughly divided into four phases ([Varutti, 2014](#)), each bound up with specific social, historical and political contexts and contributing to the historical making of such contexts. Prior to museums being recognized as such in China, most artistic objects were privately collected in royal families and were a

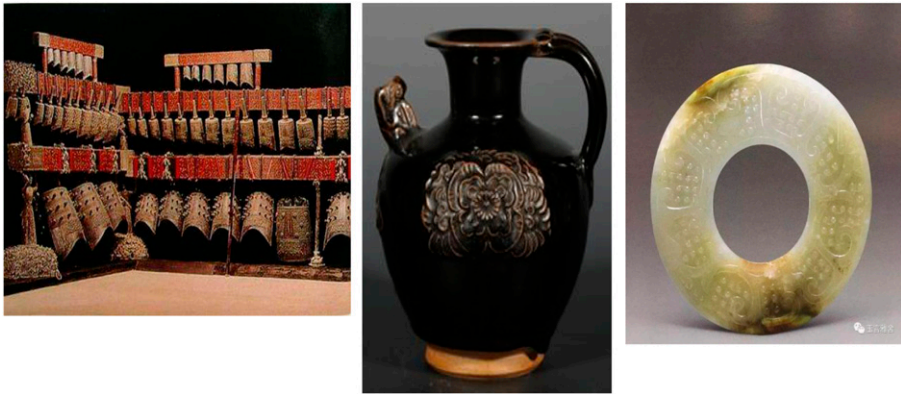


Figure 1. Objects from imperial collections (source: information collected at www.baidu.com).

symbol of power and social prestige (Figure 1). During this phase, collections were largely linked to items with ‘humanist’ features such as literature, history, ethics and philosophy. Thus, the collection practice constituted a personal and cultivated reflection on objects rather than a scientific appreciation that could be shared with others (An, 1999). “By fostering exclusivity and restricting access to the aesthetics of arts”, they represented the very system of imperial privileges (Varutti, 2014: 28). Thus, collection practices both reflected and construed imperial practices.

Alongside these practices, there was also the literati culture in ancient China where Chinese traditional paintings and calligraphy were displayed and appreciated by relatively small groups of imperial China’s administrative (and predominantly male) elite (Figure 2). The display and appreciation generally took place in the domestic surroundings of a neo-Confucian scholar’s house and garden, involving consumption of food and alcohol and set-piece entertainment (Chang, 2005: 8). The literati garden bore apparent resemblance to nature, and functioned as a ‘sanctified’ space that elevated the artistic experience to connect symbolically with a ‘natural’ order imbued with cosmic implications (Chang et al., 2015: 110). Such gatherings were expressly intended to engender “intimacy and interaction” between viewers and artworks (Chang, 2005: 9), and both reflected and construed literati practices pertaining to knowledge and aesthetics. However, literati practices represent an exclusory elitist attitude towards shared aesthetic experience and self-cultivation (Gladston and Howarth-Gladston, 2017).

The first clearly-identifiable phase of museums in China is associated with proto-museums, such as the Temple of Confucius, in Qufu, Shandong Province (Figure 3). Such proto-museums did not include scientific specimens, as was the case in Europe with the cabinets of curiosities, but were inspired by a concern for remembrance – the transmission of fundamental values for the continuity of a civilisation (Chang, 1999: 86, cited in Varutti, 2014: 9). Such emphasis on remembrance of the past was already prevalent in Chinese culture and was further linked to the importance of Confucian principles (e.g.



Figure 2. Illustrations of literati practices (source: information collected at www.baidu.com).



Figure 3. Proto-museums: temple of Confucius, Qufu, Shandong Province (source: information collected at www.baidu.com).

respecting the ancestors and learning from past mistakes) in Chinese cosmology (Wang, 2001).

The second phase of museum development in China is marked by the establishment of the first museum open to the public, Nantong Museum in Jiangsu Province in 1905 (Figure 4). Museum exhibitions at this time already manifested a systematic and coherent style (Zhou, 2013). A common exhibition practice ‘Jiejing’ (borrowing scenery -- drawing on artistic expressions through the garden scenery; conjecturally a historical legacy of literati culture) integrated the display of specimens with the Chinese traditional cultures of garden display, painting and calligraphy, based on their shared aesthetic ideology (Chen, 2013; Zhou, 2013). The exterior garden scenery functioned as an extension of indoor exhibitions and integrated with them to construct a holistic artistic experience. Heavily influenced by evolution theory, museum collections in the second phase were also object-oriented, and exhibited as taxonomic representations of nature, history and art, in an interrelated manner and chronological order (Zhou, 2013). There are parallels here with developments in the west, Bennett noting that the public museums of the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe embodied “an organization of space and vision that would allow museums to function as instruments of public instruction” (Bennett, 1990:



Figure 4. Nantong Museum, Jiangsu province (source: information collected at www.baidu.com).

41). During this phase in China, there was a spread of public museums that accompanied the transition from the imperial to the republican system, as marked by the emblematic transformation, in 1925, of the Imperial Palace (Forbidden City) into a public museum (Varutti, 2014; see Figure 5). The concept of public museums paved the way for the dismantling of imperial collections and contributed to the establishment of knowledge as a civic right and a public good (Varutti, 2014). The museum practices in this phase reflected and construed traditional cultural practices along with new forms of knowledge, and reflected and construed reform practices along with radical social transformations.

During the third phase, mostly in the middle to latter half of the 20th century, several separate sub-stages can be further identified. In the first of these, museology was perceived as an independent science from history and archaeology. At that time, to have no museums, was to admit that one is “below the minimum level of civilization” required of a modern state (Hudson and Nicholls, 1985: x), which to some degree stimulated a mild surge of museum construction in China. In the second sub-stage, and in the context of Communist China, museums came to be largely utilized as propaganda tools. Aligning with Mao’s focus on modernity, museum activities were performed under slogans such as ‘stress the present, not the past’ and ‘make the past serve the present’. Against this background, museums were seen as the emblems of a backward society (Varutti, 2014). In the next and third sub-stage, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), artistic production and cultural expressions not of a propagandistic nature were considered obsolete, the remnants of a social system based on the exploitation of the working classes (Varutti, 2014). Many museums were destroyed and closed down. In the fourth sub-stage, after the cultural revolution, the collection and preservation of cultural relics was prioritized, followed by education and, lastly, scientific research (Varutti, 2014). In 1982, China became a member of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Once again, these practices reflected and construed progressive social reforms in China.

The fourth phase (from the 1990s) has witnessed an extraordinary museum boom in China: each year, around 23,000 exhibitions are held, 600 million visits are made, and 35,000 archaeological objects are excavated nationwide (Feng, 2016). As Zhang and Courty note (2021), this museum boom is also manifested in terms of museum size (the space allocated to museums has been sextupled); expenditure (expenditure on museums is



Figure 5. The Forbidden City, Beijing. (source: information collected at www.baidu.com).

greater than GDP growth), accessibility (the number of local museums has more than tripled), and affordability (admission fees have been greatly decreased).

From the late 1990s, China has been well immersed in the development of ‘new museums’², typically characterized by ‘iconic’ architecture, either entirely new or incorporating dramatic renovations of established institutions. Again, this parallels developments in the west. According to [Message \(2006\)](#), new museums “are defined primarily against a highly self-conscious image of ‘newness’” (p. 604). There is “a strong emphasis on aesthetics” in new museums ([Varutti, 2014: 39](#)), both of the building, the exhibition spaces, and what is included within them. But this ‘newness’ is not just a reinvigoration of architecture nor a focus on aesthetics ([Varutti, 2014](#)). Rather, new museums have redefined “their functions in and for communities by renegotiating the processes of narration and the museal codes of communication with the public” ([Andermann and Arnold-de Simine, 2012: 3](#)). In other words, visitors are no longer ‘told’ what to know, but are invited to consider multiple possibilities and voices, which have been shaped in partnership with the museum’s informing communities (e.g. owners of specific cultural knowledge, artists).

Contemporary Chinese museums have encountered “a shifted focus from the displayed objects” to “the subjective negotiation of meaning as a determinant of the experience” ([Uriely, 2005: 200](#), cited in [Fu et al., 2015: 287](#)). Yet, this shift is not absolute, for there is a parallel development and co-existence of conventionally pedagogic exhibitions (often object-oriented) and aesthetic exhibitions (often human-oriented) geared towards entertainment and a taste for nostalgia in contemporary China ([Denton, 2013](#)). As van Leeuwen has noted (2008), diverging trends tend to overlap, rather than replace each

other. The museum practices in this fourth phase exemplify diversified social practices, including but not limited to new senses of accessibility and engagement, entertainment, literati culture, and pedagogy.

In the current ‘new museum’ phase in contemporary China, and particularly for artistic exhibitions, the ‘white cube’ has become the dominant paradigm of display (Chang et al., 2015). In resisting the international dominance of this trend, an alternative mode of artistic display named ‘yellow box’ (Chang, 2005) is emerging in China, with an attempt to promote “modes of visual expression prevalent traditionally within Chinese cultural contexts” (Chang et al., 2015: 103). These exhibition practices evolved from an independently coherent ‘culture of connoisseurship’ -- the Chinese traditional literati practice (see above), and are tailor-made to accommodate Chinese traditional literati aesthetics (Chang et al., 2015: 106). This exhibition practice can also be seen as an attempt to cultivate positive appreciation for Chinese cultural identity. However, an elitist contextual framing materialized in the yellow box remains highly problematic, for it harks back to aristocratic rules and compromises the artistic democracy that it sets out to promote in the first place (Gladston and Howarth-Gladston, 2017). Overall, however, in this fourth phase, museum exhibitions in contemporary China largely break away from revolutionary narratives and embrace cultural nationalism, while also embracing international trends (Varutti, 2014).

Chengdu Tianfu art museum

The focus of our discussion is Chengdu Tianfu Art Museum (TAM), in the Jinniu District of Chengdu, Sichuan province. Officially opened to the public on 6 November 2021, TAM is operated and managed by Chengdu Art Museum and is fully funded by the Chinese government. The museum is located within Tianfu Art Park, a large and beautiful public park, sited by a lake and surrounded by residential areas. This location dissolves the boundaries between art and life for it incorporates a neighborhood experience into artistic practices, and enables the permeation of art in the everyday life of Chengdu people, which is further reflective of an increasing demand for museum service for pleasure (Figure 6, top left). Located in the Southwest part of China, it also represents a new cultural context and geo-cultural relationship that has arisen since the late 1990s, challenging Beijing as the sole artistic center.³ The museum’s mission is to create “a cross-domain, multi-dimensional and high-level super-fusion by means of comprehensive art exhibitions.”⁴ Such fusion aims to break boundaries and cross borders, by incorporating Chinese and international art. It also symbolizes the vitality of contemporary art creation through its rich and diverse exhibition contents as well as the grandeur of the exhibition architecture. The museum is built to represent a new image that resonates with China’s drive to modernization and internationalism.

The overall exterior shape of Tianfu Art Museum is shaped like a lotus flower -- the city flower of Chengdu (Figure 6, top left). The curved metal petals represent tolerance and the humanistic spirit intertwined with Chengdu people’s art and life.⁵ The overall building is well-designed with an aesthetic look in a way that decreases visible functionality and

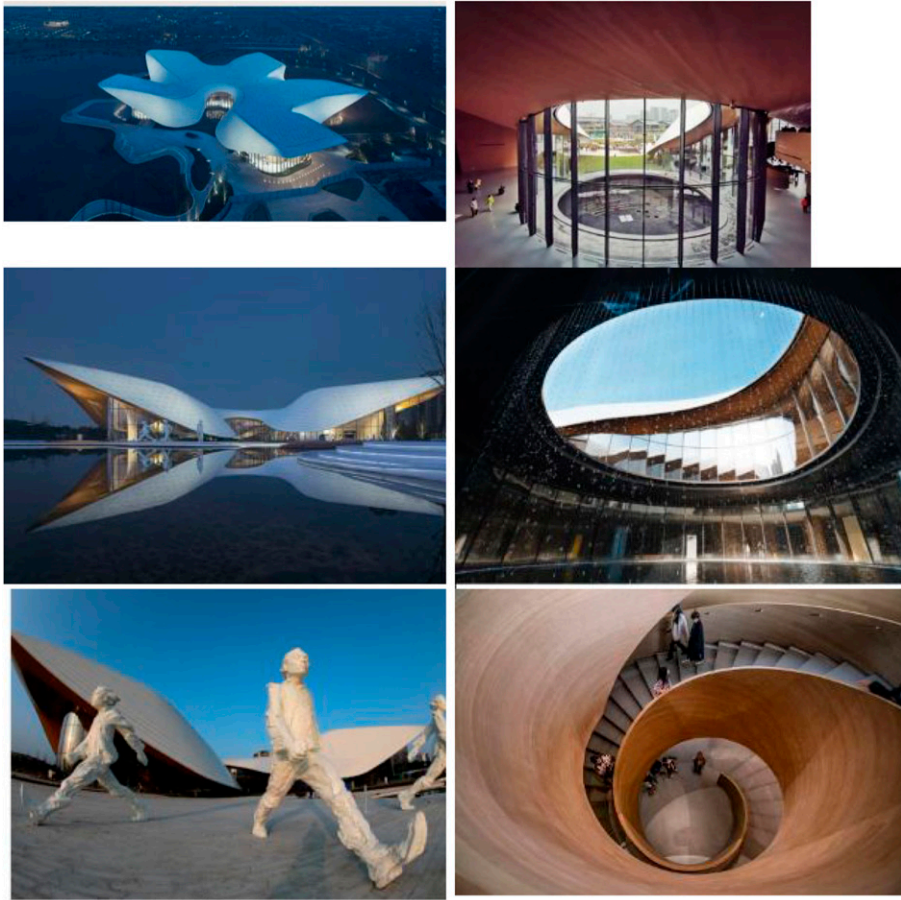


Figure 6. Overview of Tianfu Art Museum, exterior (left) and interior (right). (Official museum photos, used with permission.)

creates instead a visual sense of appeal and invitation.⁶ The physical design vividly articulates that part of the artistic experience is visual pleasure.

As visitors approach the museum, they encounter striking sculptures in the forecourt, including the ‘Walking Man’ (Figure 6, bottom left). The entrance opens to an expansive and light filled foyer, encircling an exterior, glass-walled pond, with the petals of the main structure reaching down to the water and creating the effect of an exterior atrium. Exhibition galleries branch out through the floor plan created by the petals. (Figure 6, middle left).

Tianfu Art Museum has a total area of 40,000 square meters, with an exhibition area of 13,000 square meters. The opening exhibition of Chengdu Tianfu Art Museum, “Super Fusion - 2021 Chengdu Biennale” was sustained for nearly 5 months and visitor numbers

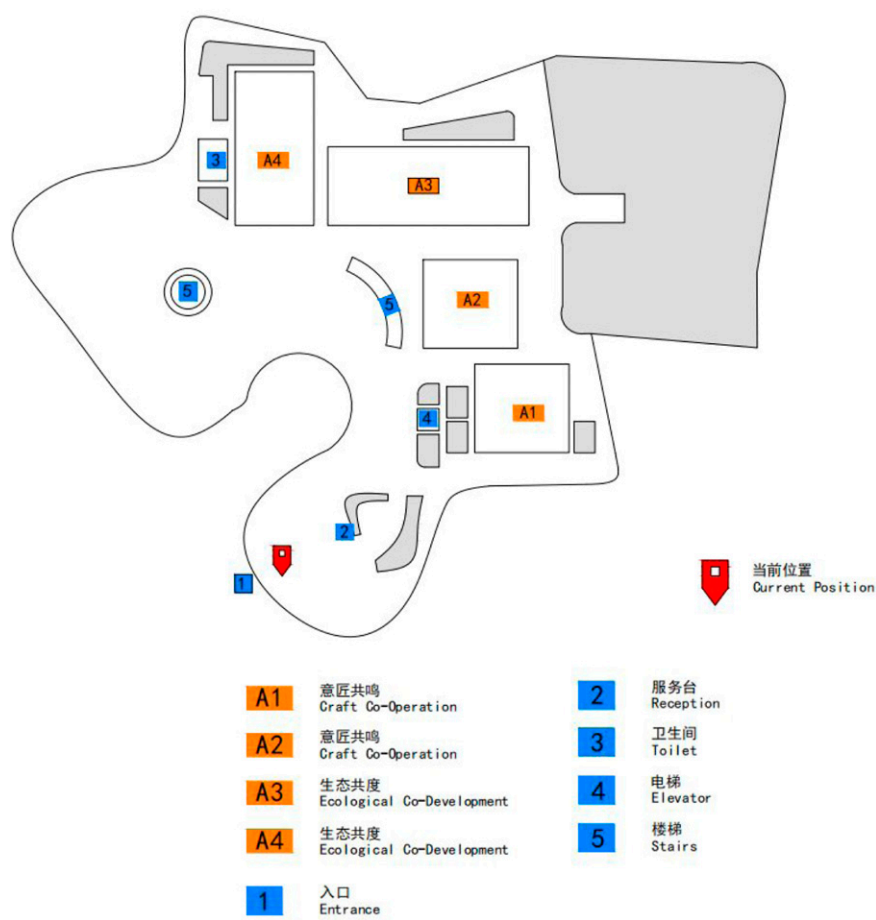


Figure 7. Floor plan of the museum.

exceeded 500,000. As a phenomenal large-scale art activity, this Biennale consisted of eight themed exhibitions, including Artistic Co-inspirations, Ethnic Co-creation, Ecological Co-development, Craft-Cooperation, Technological Co-respondence, Polymorphic Co-existence, Urban Co-habitation and Zeitgeist Co-evolution. In order to sharpen our focus, we will refer to only two of these: Ecological Co-development (Figure 7) and Craft-Cooperation (Figure 8). Ecological co-development has an international focus, meaning that both domestic and overseas artworks are displayed. Consistent with ‘new’ museum practice, the emphasis is largely placed on the aesthetics of objects rather than their pedagogic functions. The exhibition is designed in ways to position visitors to simply explore and appreciate the artworks, without necessarily the need to learn and obtain knowledge. As such, minimal labels are provided. In contrast, Craft Co-operation has a more national resonance where almost all of the displays are domestic. Once again,



Figure 8. Exhibition: ecological co-development (official museum photos, used with permission.)

the emphasis is placed on the aesthetics of objects, with minimal pedagogic intervention. As noted in the exhibition overview, this exhibition is designed for visitors to appreciate the wisdom and craftsmanship of ancient Chinese people, thus cultivating a sense of national pride for domestic visitors and aligning international visitors towards a positive portrait of Chinese cultural identity.

A full analysis of this complex institution is evidently not possible within the scope of this paper. We aim, then, to highlight the intersection of history, materiality and practice in TAM, that is, how aspects of history are intertwined in contemporary museum practices and materialized in the building, especially its exterior design, and in selected exhibitionary practices.

In spatial texts, and in terms of the building as a whole, representational resources include the overall materials, finishes and shapes of the building (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021), especially their denotative and connotative meanings (Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016). Representational resources also include the functionality and use of items (e.g. are there chairs to sit on?), as well as the roles enabled for social actors (e.g. can visitors interact with an exhibit, or only look? do museum assistants patrol exhibitions, or stand in one place?), and whether any hybridization (multifunctionality; Stenglin, 2004) occurs (e.g. does the museum host concerts?). The overall connotations of shapes and nature of

the inclusions can be evaluated in terms of whether they evoke static (conceptual) or dynamic (narrative) processes (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021; Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016).

When TAM is seen from above (Figure 6, top left), the exterior design shows a roof with five large protrusions emanating from a central, circular shape. This overall shape has explicit resonance with the petals of a lotus flower, the symbolic representation of the city of Chengdu. When seen from the side (Figure 6, middle left), the petals have dynamic upward vectors, and give the impression that the building is floating on the water, just as a lotus flower floats on water, with its petals pointing up and out. Even though the building is large and heavy, the dynamic vectors give an impression of lightness, contributing to its aesthetic appeal. The close physical relation of the building with the water, as well as the fact that the land the building sits on is part of a larger park, resonates with traditional 'jiejing' practice and aligns with an important traditional cultural concept in China, namely the importance of being in harmony with nature. Combined, the nature of the building and its location indicate an orientation to aesthetics and symbolism, in some ways continuous with the literati focus on aesthetics.

At the same time, the 'walking man' statue outside with its dynamic vectors, and the originality of the building design itself, signify the current social trends in China more broadly of embracing and having a positive orientation to contemporary practices. The rough texture of the walking man is also symbolic of the hardship that the Chinese nation endured in the past, which is illustrative of a consistent emphasis on remembrance in traditional Chinese culture. The very location of the building in the heart of a cultural playground of the city (lake, gardens) indicates that the institution is to be understood as contributing to aspects of cultural pleasure, rather than just knowledge or appreciation, commensurate with the literati practice where pleasure is explicitly emphasized as 'wanshang' practice (play appreciation – the admiration of art for pleasure and knowledge). Importantly, the absence of an admission fee indicates that visitors of different social groups are welcome, and the presence of activities oriented to children (e.g. school visit; facilities designed for children) indicates that all ages are welcome too. This is in marked contrast to some of the preceding museum phases in China (e.g. the imperial and literati practices).

For representational resources used within the exhibitions, we see the artworks of both local and international artists selected for display. Thus, the museum is 'about' both of these, and neither excludes nor exalts one or the other. Additionally, the very selection and display of contemporary art of diverse kinds demonstrates that a museum in China *can be* about something other than objects of ancient or reverential value. Thus, what is being represented is both a local and an international perspective on museum and art practice. At the same time, as Johnson Chang has noted (2005), the very size of the contemporary 'white cube' space, much larger than traditional modes of display, challenges Chinese artists to adapt their artistic practices – to create works that suit these larger spaces. This highlights that the design of spatial texts both shapes meaning-making practices as well as being reflective of them. It also reflects the presence of a contemporary aesthetic that is at once global and draws from the local inspiration, highlighting the co-existence of national and international experience in contemporary Chinese museum practice.

For the building as a whole, interactional resources include the ways in which its exterior and interior design enable relations between different users (including the institution itself as a discursive entity; representatives of the institution who work there; and visitors), as seen through the dimensions of Power, Contact, Social Distance and Involvement (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021), as well as Control (Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016).⁷ The materialization of these dimensions results in a delicate balance of variables. The Power of the institution is evident in the great size, unusual architectural shape, towering entrance, and beautiful finishes of the museum (Figure 6, left). At the same time, the visitor is welcomed through a particularly engaging entrance (Figure 6, top right), and is able to make direct Contact from the outside, and vice-versa, via the vast expanses of glass. The visitor is afforded some detachment upon entering, via the oblique angles of internal elements (such as the galleries, front desk) branching out from the foyer, but as noted elsewhere (Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016), such 'detachment' can in fact be a less-confronting form of engagement for many visitors. Control is evident through a clearly-designated entry way, staff desk, and surveillance by staff within the interior, but these strategies are minimized and not intrusive. Within the exhibitions, most of these variables are maintained with the same effect. Visitors perceive the potential to engage with numerous exhibits through varied oblique and frontal angles, that is, positioning themselves in different ways in relation to the artworks, further underscoring the large degree of Control afforded to them by the selection and placement of exhibits (such that the visitor can circulate around, under or behind (Figure 9, left).

Interpersonally, there is an embracing of contemporaneity manifested as a dialogic and democratic relationship with visitors in museum practice. Not only are all visitors welcomed by the absence of admission fees, but TAM provides diverse agentive roles for those visitors through the minimised Control over their behaviour within the museum. While many exhibits are for viewing only, there are emerging technical designs that facilitate visitor interaction with the exhibits. Arguably, this emphasis on contemporaneity in TAM is reflective of the new museum practices taking place in China and around the world, which is further indicative of the emergence of an increasingly globalized standardization in Chinese museum practice.

Despite this vastly more inclusive and more egalitarian relation with visitors, it is nevertheless the case that the power and dominance of the institution continues to be asserted through the size, scale, and quality of the architecture and interior design, and also through the maintenance of these to a high standard (*cf* McMurtrie, 2017). In this way, the museum both reflects and contributes to ongoing social change in China: its authority as a cultural institution is maintained, but the pleasure and open-ended nature of the visitor experience indicates a rupture with some aspects of traditional Chinese museum practice (e.g. the imperial practice) where art was not accessible to the general public and the pleasure of art was only afforded to a selected few.

Semiotic resources which construe organizational meanings in spatial texts pertain to the systems of Salience, Framing, Information Values, and Navigation (Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016). For TAM as a whole, its large size, distinctive shape, and location within an important leisure park give the institution strong salience within the city and underscore its importance. Between the exterior and interior, while the roof is opaque, the

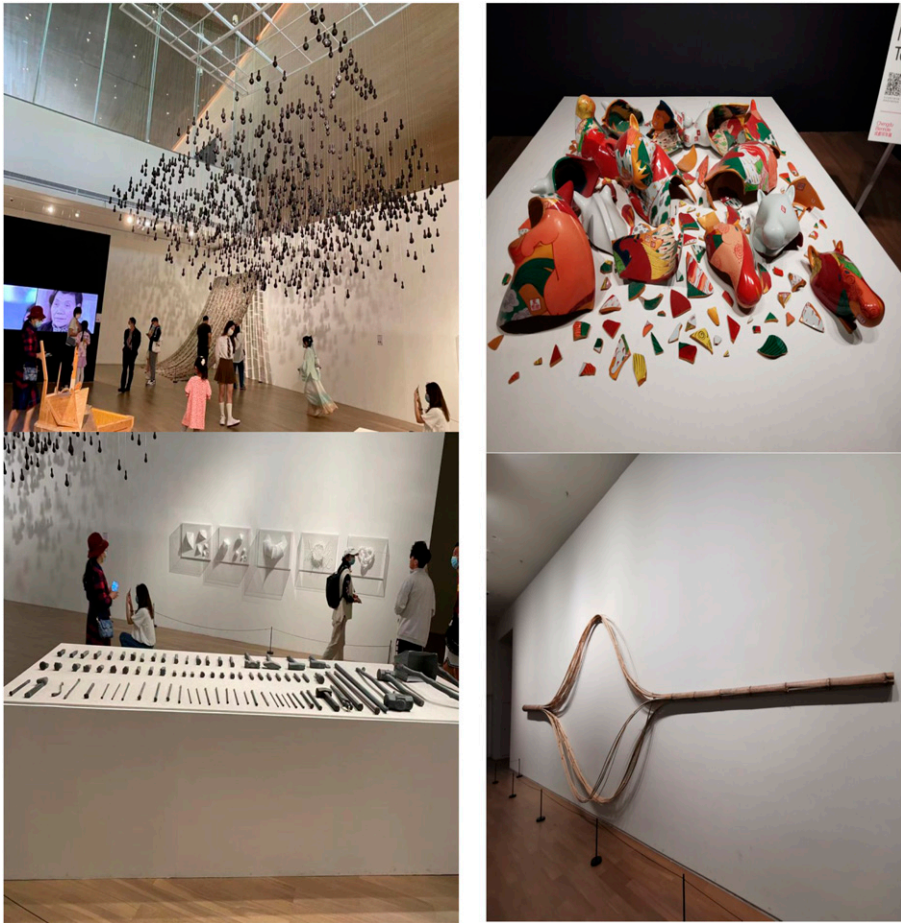


Figure 9. Exhibition: craft co-operation (official museum photos, used with permission.)

walls are made almost entirely of glass, and the frame between inside and out is thus permeable (Boeriis and Nørgaard, 2013). This permeability is emphasized by the open roof above the centre of the flower; one side of this, adjoining the interior, is framed by floor to ceiling glass; the other side, adjoining the exterior, is framed by cascading water (Figure 6, right). The framing practices used in TAM thus materialize the dissolution of boundaries between inside (art) and outside (nature), and reflect the important Chinese concept of the dissolution of boundaries between art and nature.

This connection with nature is reinforced by the exit from each gallery, which returns the visitor to the main circulation space, from which the outside view is clearly visible. The design of the building thus draws upon, and sustains, ongoing cultural conceptions. The framing of TAM in such a continuous way with the outside and hence, with the city, combined with its visual salience and symbolic value as a flower, suggest that in terms of

information values, TAM as a whole is symbolically Central (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021; Ravelli and McMurtrie, 2016) in relation to the city – or at least this part of it – and that other experiences, such as visiting the park, are somewhat marginal. In other words, it is the overall *experience* of visiting TAM which is particularly important. The art exhibited within is somewhat at the Margins compared with the overriding dominance of the institution itself. This resonates with the aesthetic mode of exhibition in contemporary China where the experience is highlighted and the pedagogic function of the museum is downplayed.

In the interior of the building, a bird's eye view of the layout (Figure 7) would indicate that the functional components of the building (reception, stairs, elevator) are located closest to the literal 'centre' of the flower shape, the point from which the petals branch out. However, other organisational resources suggest that this is not in fact the informational Centre of the building. Firstly, the galleries have functional salience in the context of a museum, that is, they are the (assumed) focus of a visit. Secondly, the framing between galleries is both strong and weak: each gallery is distinct, being separated by walls and by different exhibitions; but permeable boundaries (such as openings between walls), as well as the open pathways afforded to visitors, bring the different galleries together as part of the same experience. Through the salience and framing of the galleries, they thus operate together as the symbolic Centre of the visiting experience, with circulation spaces and other functions, such as the shop, operating at the Margins. Thus depending on the rank of analysis, the notion of Centre shifts: from the building as a whole as the point, to the art within. Noteworthy, even though art is construed as the Centre within the building, only minimal labels are provided, so once again the pedagogic function of the museum is downplayed in the visiting experience.

The relatively open navigation pathways also contribute to organizational meanings: visitors can make their own choices about what they choose to see, and in what order, rather than this being prescribed for them. This reinforces the accessibility and equality afforded the contemporary visitor, as just discussed. In many respects, this is true of any 'new' museum around the world. However, in consideration of the particular museum history in China, we would argue that the social and cultural permission for all to both value and enjoy art marks a new phase in the development of museums in China. Across the metafunctions, then, we see "on the one hand, the pull towards the outside and the willingness to open up, and on the other, the firm focus on national values and the strengthening of Chinese cultural identity, which also gains definition through encountering other world cultures" (Varutti, 2014: 42). As a new museum, TAM eludes easy classification: it is both continuous with, and different from, prior museum practices.

The above analyses show how the choices made in the design, the exhibitions, and the running of this museum take on particular values in relation to its broader history. In places such as TAM, the social practices of asserting contemporaneity, representing a distinct and also diverse culture, inviting participation, and differentiating 'now' from 'then' are evident. When history is incorporated in the contextual interpretation of museum design and exhibition practice, it is evident that on the one hand, TAM is commensurate with similar practices of 'new' museums in the west; on the other, it has

characteristics distinct to Chinese experience, and thus makes a specific contribution to contemporary Chinese culture.

Conclusion

Spatial Discourse Analysis in relation to Chengdu Tianfu Art Museum illustrates how aspects of spatial design, materialized in a range of practices from the level of the whole building to the way visitors move within it, can be seen to give tangible forms to social practices old and new. The analysis is intended to be illustrative only, not comprehensive, but highlights how a wide range of practices, such as social reforms, aesthetic traditions, or new appreciations of aesthetics and pleasure, can be continuously present and materialized in the design and use of a contemporary institution. Our emphasis on history and materiality combines logogenetic and phylogenetic perspectives, and thus aims to make visible the ways in which historical meaning is made and remade. By tracing aspects of the historical development of museums in China, and by reflecting on this history in a Spatial Discourse Analysis of a new museum in China, we demonstrate that historicized meanings are made and remade in the transformative materiality of the museum design and exhibition practice.

We are fully aware that our approach is primarily conducted from a production perspective, and does not account for how such meanings may or may not be taken up by visitors. In other words, we have not yet accounted for the inter-subjective aspect of meaning-making to investigate how visitors bring history to their subjective engagements with museum objects, space and time, and how such interactions might contribute to their own individual visiting experience.

Nevertheless, our analysis of TAM provides several insights. Firstly, it illustrates the transformative nature of the museum as a practice in which the meaning of the past is continuously negotiated and transformed in the context of the needs of the present. The recurrent manifestations of literati aesthetics in Chinese exhibition practices across different historical phases is illustrative of how similar exhibition practices can take on different contextual framing across time periods for different purposes. Secondly, the analysis shows how a new museum as a complex assemblage can challenge an elitist idea of museums in China, thus enacting museums as a democratic force contributing to the democratization of culture and society. Given that the meanings of the past are always intertwined with the present, such transitions are not absolute, resulting in a co-presence of institutional authority and shared power with the general public in museum practice, as well as a co-existence of pedagogic exhibition modes alongside aesthetic modes. Thirdly, the analysis shows that only by incorporating the notion of history, can we comprehend the real significance of culture-specific responses to an increasingly globalized world. As Denton (2005) says, “new developments in Chinese exhibitionary practice might converge to a degree with global trends, but local constraints, cultural traditions and political social considerations preclude homogenization” (p. 575).

Our paper shows how a dialogue between social semiotics and museum studies can be mutually beneficial, for the dialogue enhances the contextual and historical aspects of social semiotics, and at the same time strengthens the semiotic aspect of museology. On

the one hand, this integration moves thinking about the museum away from its static objects and typologies towards its social and cultural context and significance in relation to its historical shaping and reshaping. This contributes to a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the museum as a political, cultural and social phenomenon (e.g. [Bennett, 1990](#); [Jones and Macleod, 2016](#); [Prösler, 1995](#)). It also enables us to expand the limiting notions of history from evolving and competing museum functionalities such as education and entertainment to engaging with the museum as practiced, thus providing an expansive understanding of the museum in general. At the same time, social semiotics provides vigorous frameworks and methods such as Spatial Discourse Analysis to examine the nuance and specificity of the production of museums in relation to concrete social practices and specific historical contexts, thus demonstrating the imperative that history and materiality cannot be divorced from the politics of representation. In this way, social semiotics can serve as an effective meta-discourse to guide subsequent museum practices, not just as delineated themes but as nuanced and active thinking, reflective of both new ideas and established canons.

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Notes

1. Notable exceptions to this include linguistic studies of scientific language over time (e.g. [Banks, 2005](#); [Halliday, 2016](#)).
2. ‘New’ museum is a well-established term in museology ([Message, 2006](#)), and the inverted commas indicate that the new practices may be present in very well established institutions, and/or in old buildings.
3. Beijing in North China has long been regarded as the power center of the state, so museums and other institutions there received priority in terms of funding and research. From the late 1990s, with the enactment of market reform and Dengxiaoping’s inspection of South China, attention has also been cast to South China, challenging Beijing as the sole artistic center.

4. Information collected from the mission statement of TAM at https://mp.weixin.qq.com/mp/profile_ext?action=home&__biz=Mzg4NDY3NzMyMA==&scene=124#wechat_redirect. Translated by author.
5. Information collected from architectural comment of TAM at <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1727273284022800075&wfr=spider&for=pc>. Translated by author.
6. Information from the museum website, collected from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/mp/profile_ext?action=home&__biz=Mzg4NDY3NzMyMA==&scene=124#wechat_redirect
7. Additional interactional resources of Binding and Bonding (Stenglin, 2004) and Validity (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021) are relevant but will not be addressed here for reasons of scope.

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