

Art Museum Education in China: The NAMOC Case Study

Dr. YANG Yingshi

Deputy Director

Public Education Department

National Art Museum of China

This paper examines the new trends of art museum education in China, taking the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) as a primary example. The first part discusses art museums as educators in the global context, noting the fact that the growing importance of the public educational role of museums has emerged to be a focus of wide concern among scholars, museum professionals and government officials worldwide. The second part introduces art museums as educators in China, reviewing the history of museums and art museums as well as their increasingly active roles as educators to the general public. Also touched is the emergence of art museum education as a professional field in the country. The third part gives a detailed description of the public educational programs of the NAMOC. This part particularly presents four major areas of the museum's educational work: academic and adult programs; children, school and family programs; volunteer programs; and collaboration with other institutions. The paper also points out the opportunities and challenges brought about by the free admission policy and the construction of the new museum building of NAMOC. The conclusion part shares some thoughts on art museum education in China.

I. Art Museums as Educators: An Introduction

For what purposes does a museum exist, and what is its first and primary purpose?

The most recent (2007) definition of “museum” according to International Council of Museums (ICOM) statutes is:

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM Website, 2008).

For the first time since 1946 when the leading international organization of museums and museum professionals was established, ICOM has ranked “education” as the first and primary purpose a museum serves. In the previous versions of ICOM's museum definitions – in 1946, 1956, 1961, 1974, 1989, 1995, and 2001, specifically – “education” has, since 1961, been explicitly recognized as the second primary purpose, right behind “study” and before “enjoyment.”

The development of the museum definition according to the ICOM statutes indicates a noteworthy trend in recent decades that has drastically changed the

paradigm of museum work as well as the understanding of museums. The growing importance of the public educational role of museums has emerged to be a focus of wide concern among scholars, museum professionals and government officials.

In the United States, *Professional Practices in Art Museums*, published by the New York-based Association of Art Museum Directors, states as follows:

“An art museum is a permanent, **not-for-profit institution**, essentially **educational** and humanistic in purpose, that studies and cares for works of art and on some regular schedule exhibits and **interprets** them to the public. Most, but not all, art museums have permanent collections from which exhibitions are drawn and upon which **educational programs** are based” (Association of Art Museum Directors, 2001, p. 6, emphasis added).

In China, “Temporary Regulation for Art Museum Work,” an official document issued by the Ministry of Culture in 1986 that continues to be in use today, gives this definition:

“An art museum is a museum of visual arts. It is a **state-owned non-profit institution** that has multiple functions, including collecting quality works of art, providing **aesthetic education** to the public, organizing academic research, and facilitating international cultural exchange, etc. ... An art museum is a permanent **cultural institution**” (Liu, 2002, p. 36, emphasis added).

Museum education scholar Hooper-Greenhill (1999) acknowledges that the educational responsibilities of museums involve such aspects as putting the audience at the heart of the museum’s priorities, understanding and researching the range of approaches to learning in museums, as well as facilitating and enabling learners to construct their own relationships with the collections and finding ways to extend and enrich this knowledge and experience.

Where, formerly, museum education was limited to providing specific provision for limited groups such as schoolchildren or adult touring groups, the educational role of museums is now understood much more widely, to include exhibitions, displays, events and workshops. ... The arena for educational work is no longer the “education room,” but the whole museum (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994 c, pp. 3-4).

There are two perspectives to understand the educational role of the museum: the larger “E” education, which recognizes that everything the museum does has a direct or indirect impact on educating the general public; and the smaller “e” education, which primarily involves the work of art museum educators of the education departments in museum settings (Yang, 2008 a).

In the US, the Tax Reform Act of 1969 officially began regulating museums as “educational institutions” that enjoy non-profit status (Ott, 1989; Zeller, 1989). Both the state and federal governments recognize the educational mission of museums by exempting them from taxes and allowing tax-deductible contributions to them (Zeller, 1989). In some cases, public education is an ultimate reason for museums to justify their existence and often a useful tool to secure the necessary funding for exhibitions.

Art museums in China have given increased attention to their educational role, especially since the 1980s when the country re-opened its door to the rest of the world following the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and the nation has enjoyed rapid economic growth and increased social democracy (He, 2004; Yang, 2008 a).

A new trend in the past decade is that many museums, including art museums, are opening educational departments and offer audience-specific programs to engage and educate the general public (Yang, 2006, 2008 a).

II. Art museums as educators in China

In China, the notions of “museum” (*bo wu guan*, which in Chinese literally means a venue for accumulating and displaying a great variety of objects) and “art museum” (*mei shu guan*, which in Chinese literally means a venue for accumulating and displaying works of fine art) were largely imported from the West since the mid-nineteenth century, although the practice of private or royal collecting had existed in the country for many centuries.

The first public museum in China, the Nantong Museum, in Nantong, Jiangsu Province, was established in 1905 by Zhang Jian (1853-1926), a perceptive entrepreneur and reformer who was one of the earliest Chinese citizens to realize the importance of the “enlightenment” of citizenry through education in museums (Su, 1998). The Nantong Museum was a museum of science, art and history.

The National Museum of Chinese History, now the National Museum of China, was established in 1912 as the first national museum open to the public. In the beginning, it was supervised by the then Ministry of Education, although now, as with most museums in the country, it is under the administration of the Ministry of Culture (Li, 2002).

It was not until 1925, when the royal collection of the Qing Dynasty was turned into the Palace Museum in Beijing, that China had its first public museum of ancient art, although the museum did not claim to be solely an art museum (Liu, 1986, 2002).

The birth of art museums in a stricter sense in China was a result of the enthusiastic advocacy of intellectuals and educators like Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), Zhou Shuren (Lu Xun, 1881-1936), Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), Xu Beihong (1895-1953), Yan Wenliang (1893-1990) and Yan Zhikai (1894-1942), all of whom had studied in Europe, the U.S., or Japan (Liu, 1986; He, 2004; Li, 2007; Yang, 2008 a).

In Cai’s famous speech in 1917, “On Replacing Religion with Art,” published in the influential magazine *New Youth*, the philosopher and educator stressed the importance of “pure aesthetic education” in nurturing human feelings, noting the fact that private and public collections of art treasures were “open to the public” in Western countries (Liu, 1986, 2002).

In 1926, artist and art educator Yan Wenliang established the first private art museum, the Suzhou Art Museum, in Suzhou of East China’s Jiangsu Province. In 1929, the Tianjin City Art Museum was opened in the port city adjacent to Beijing, with artist and art educator Yan Zhikai as the first director. It was the first public art

museum in China. In 1936, the National Art Exhibition Hall was established in Nanjing, then capital of the Nationalist government, but without any permanent collection.

Because of the wars and social turbulences in China in the first half of the twentieth century, the number of museums built that survived during that period was small. Statistics indicate that only 21 museums existed by the time the civil war came to an end in 1949. Three of them were in Beijing (Wang, 1995; Liu, 2002, 2003; Li, 2007; Yang, 2008 a).

The majority of museums (including art museums) on the Chinese mainland were built since the Communist takeover in 1949. Among the leading art museums built by the Chinese government in this period are the Shanghai Museum (1952), the Jiangsu Art Museum (1956), the Shanghai Art Museum (1957), Tianjin Art Museum (1957), the National Art Museum of China (1963), the Guangdong Museum of Art (1997), and the Shaanxi Art Museum (2000).

In recent years, some private art museums were built in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, often funded by private collectors, entrepreneurs or international institutions. Among them are the Today Art Museum (2002) in Beijing, the Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art (2004), and the Zendai Museum of Modern Art (2005) also in Shanghai.

A new wave of museum construction and expansion is underway all over the country thanks to the economic and social development of China. The total number of museums in China is expected to reach 3,000 by 2015 (***the fact is that the number has exceeded 4500 by 2015, according to the Chinese Association of Museums -- note added in November 2015***), according to the Chinese government's plan (Yang & Wang, 2004).

Some early art museums offered educational services when founded. The Tianjin City Art Museum, for example, had no more than a minimal collection of replicas of European sculptures as well as a handful of works of Chinese paintings and calligraphy by living artists at its founding in the 1920s. Soon after its opening, the art museum began offering various art classes in the museum to the public and organizing life-drawing activities and exhibitions of the collections of art lovers in the city (He, 2004).

While early Chinese museums were largely founded as educational institutions to nurture new citizenry, museums of the People's Republic of China (1949-present) have long been categorized as "cultural institutions" that serve political propagandistic purposes, apparently influenced by the former Soviet Union (Fan, 2007 a; 2007 b).

For many years, the primary form of educational activity available in Chinese museums was highly didactic tours given by specially trained docents or staff members of the museums.

After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), art museums in mainland China received a new lease on life, as the nation turned its focus from political movements

to economic development and social democracy (He, 2004). The authorities and the public have increasingly realized the importance of the educational, or social educational, functions of museums and the importance of specific educational programs in enriching the experience of museum-goers (Yang, 2004).

A recent trend is that art museums in China have begun to establish education departments and offer educational programs to the general public (He, 2004). Among the most active are the Shanghai Art Museum, the Guangdong Museum of Art, the Millennium Art Museum, and the National Art Museum of China. Private museums that have emerged in recent years have paid even greater attention to education and audience development.

Lectures, docent tours, symposiums, and other public and educational services are becoming increasingly popular in Chinese art museums to engage the general public. Much closer attention has also been given to the presentational aspects of exhibitions, with interpretive labels, signage, and exhibition catalogues and brochures more available in art museums (Fan, 2007 a; Li, 2007).

In recent years, the Chinese government has asked museums nationwide to open for free to the general public. This policy has raised debates on how to guarantee and improve the quality of learning experiences in museums.

Art museum education as a professional field is still yet to take shape in China although the increasing educational services of art museums have drawn much attention to this need in the Chinese society in recent years (Li, 2007; Yang, 2008 a).

Very few Chinese scholars or museum professionals have published on museum education. Most of the writers on the topic of museum education or art museum education focus on practice, instead of the theoretical and conceptual aspects. These museum professionals are largely from major art museums.

Leading institutions such as the National Art Museum of China and Teachers College, Columbia University, have been distinctive in fostering the development of art museums education in China, on both national and international fronts. In June 2008, “Art Space for Education’s Sake: China-U.S. Conference on Art Museum Education,” the first of its kind, was co-organized in Beijing by the National Art Museum of China and Teachers College, Columbia University, with generous support from international institutions such as the Asian Cultural Council and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NAMOC,2008).

The first graduate course in art museum education at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing has been taught by this author (Dr. Yang Yingshi) since 2009. The course, “Art Museum Education: Research and Practice”, attracted over 40 students from the Central Academy and other universities in Beijing in 2012.

III. The National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) as Educator: A Case Study

The National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) is a national-level museum of visual arts that primarily collects, studies and exhibits Chinese art since the 20th century. It is a public cultural institution and one of the three major national museums

directly under the Ministry of Culture (NAMOC Website, 2013).

As one of the 10 “Great Constructions” of Beijing in the 1950s, it was established in 1958 and opened to the public in 1963. After 50 years of development, NAMOC has become a supreme palace of art of the nation, for the art circles and the general public. It has over 100,000 works in its collection and presents over 120 exhibitions each year, attracting more than 1 million visitors a year. The museum has about 150 full-time staff members in its 19 departments.

The Public Education Department of the museum was established in late 2004, starting work in 2005. It has continued expanding by fully making use of the museum’s collection, exhibition, research and other resources for public use. The department has organized educational programs of great diversity for the general public. Currently the department has 6 staff members and over 120 volunteers. The department accepts about 20 interns each year, each working full-time for 1-3 month. The museum’s space for educational activities includes galleries, a seminar hall, a classroom, a library, a lobby, and other public space.

This paper particularly presents the explorations of four major areas of the museum’s educational work: academic and adult programs; children, school and family programs; volunteer programs; and collaboration with other institutions (Yang, 2011).

1) *Academic and adult programs*

Academic and adult programs offered by the education department include lectures, docent tours, audio guides, gallery talks, conversations with artists, art salons, workshops, seminars, conferences, and symposia. Among the most widely recognized and systemized are lectures and art salons given by artists, curators, art historians or critics. The topics are often related to current exhibitions at the museum or to trends and issues in art and art history. For example, a most recent art salon on the creation, appreciation and education of Chinese calligraphy on the opening day drew wide press coverage because, for the first time, it replaced the traditional opening ceremony of the annual calligraphy exhibition of NAMOC. Instead of cutting ribbons and giving speeches, calligraphers and scholars sat together and conversed with hundreds of children, school teachers, volunteer docents, college students and ordinary visitors in the gallery. Remarkable for China, the education department of NAMOC has also initiated and organized several national and international symposia on art museum education, including “Art Space for Education’s Sake: China-U.S. Conference on Art Museum Education” in June 2008 and “Audience Development in Museums” Workshop in May 2010.

2) *Children, school and family programs*

Children, school and family programs began with the establishment of the Public Education Department. These programs take the form of hands-on workshops, theme-based art appreciation classes, gallery visits, guided tours, drawing books/packets for children, art summer camp, children’s art exhibitions and other specially designed interactive programs (He, 2007). Such programs are often arranged in response to specific exhibitions. Each year about 50,000 children, together with their family

members, participate in those programs (Fan, 2007 a). Among them the most well known programs is “*I Paint at NAMOC*” which is in its 9th year now. The 8th program drew almost 20,000 children and parents. Other educational programs offered by the department include school visits and classes in the galleries, gallery talks and training workshops given to teachers, etc. The museum has also started building a website for children and providing educational resources for children, parents and teachers. In June 2012, a national conference on “Art Museum and Children Education” was organized in conjunction with a travelling exhibition of children’s art to the Zhengzhou Art Museum.(NAMOC Website, 2012)

3) *Volunteer programs*

With the limited number of staff members in the education department and the lack of art museum professionals, the museum relies heavily on volunteers from different walks of life who give tours and help with other educational programs. The education department works with the research and curatorial staff from the museum and scholars/curators from outside to train the docents, before or during the special exhibitions. Such training workshops usually include lectures and/or gallery walks. Information packets are prepared for the docents. Regular training workshops and lectures have also been arranged on a year-on-year basis. The department also arranges site visits to other museums for the volunteer docents (He, 2007). Currently the museum has over 120 volunteers. They offer gallery tours to adults, children and international visitors. They also assist with organizing lectures, conferences, and other educational programs. Most recently, the NAMOC took the lead to organize the 2013 “Volunteers and Art Museum Public Cultural Services” Annual Conference and the “Managing Volunteers in Art Museums” Workshop. The events, the first ever in China, attracted more than 150 participants, including officials, scholars, museum professionals, volunteers, graduate students and journalists from all over China (NAMOC Website, 2013).

4) *Collaboration with other institutions*

The Public Education Department of NAMOC has established and maintained collaboration with more than 40 universities and research institutions in Beijing and overseas. It also works closely with the China Children Center, more than 20 children’s palaces, and the teaching research centers and schools of all regions of Beijing. Teachers and students are encouraged to make use of the educational resources of the museum in their classes. For instance, in the past three years, the Public Education Department accepts about 20 interns each year from universities in Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Australia, Britain, the United States, Italy, etc. They work with the education staff on planning and implementing educational programs. One good example is that, since 2009, the Taipei University of Education has sent 20 students in 5 groups for a one-month winter internship at the NAMOC in Beijing. The Public Education Department has also collaborated with community centers to organize public and educational programs in communities, hoping to attract more local residents to walk in the art museum and feel the appeal of art with their own eyes. During a 2006 exhibition of shadow puppets in the NAMOC collection, the museum invited residents in the surrounding neighborhood to a live shadow puppet show held in the evening in the front yard of the museum. The performance attracted a crowd of 2,000 (He, 2007).

In recent years, especially after the free admission policy was introduced in March 2011, the National Art Museum of China has made remarkable efforts to upgrade its public educational services in order to meet the growingly diverse needs of the audiences which are increasing in number and are more complicated in their background. In the past two years, the NAMOC has served about 200,000 visitors directly each year through its public educational services. In public education programming, the museum has paid increased attention to the following areas: audiences, public welfare, service, innovation, planning and sharing.

Currently the NAMOC is also planning its new building in the Beijing Olympic Park, to the north of the Bird's Nest. The 130,000-square-meter new building, about 6 times the size of current building, will be a new landscape of Beijing in the new century. The designing and planning of the new museum has also pushed its administration and staff to think hard about how to improve its educational facilities and services. Issues such as project development, educational space, educational research, training of staff, and exchange with domestic and overseas institutions have emerged to the agenda.

Like its young education department, the NAMOC's educational programming is still a new phenomenon, although there has already been remarkable progress in this area. The current programs available are primarily art history-based and studio art-based, which reflect the general understanding of art museum education in China. The NAMOC is still struggling to explore various approaches and methods for its educational programming. Because the museum's collections are rarely displayed, current educational programs are largely related to special exhibitions. The short tenures of exhibitions make educational programming more difficult. A number of important areas have yet to be strengthened: the evaluation of educational services, an educational website, teacher professional development, and artists' involvement in programming. Also, educational programming at the NAMOC is hindered by space and staff limitations, which are major issues that need to be addressed in its expansion (Yang, 2009).

IV. Conclusion: Thoughts on Art Museum Education in China:

Based on the above observations of art museum education in China and the case study of the National Art Museum of China as educator, the conclusion part of this paper presents some further thoughts on the development of art museum education in China (Yang, 2009, 2011).

1) Understanding and justifying art museum education.

It is important for art museum administrators and staff members to understand the educational role of the museum: both the larger "E" education and the smaller "e" education. Ideally the museums should develop an institution-wide commitment that emphasizes the public educational role of the art museum. The museums should also define and justify the education department as an important professional planner and coordinator of audience-specific educational programs that facilitate and enhance the specific learning experiences of the public.

2) Policy dimensions of art museums as educational institutions.

Art museums in China are state-owned cultural institutions under the supervision of a vertical, centralized cultural system from the Ministry of Culture on the national level to the Departments of Culture on the provincial and local levels. Policy-wise, the official status of art museums as cultural institutions is unlikely to change in the near future in China, but it is important to recognize the recent trend in which the government has been emphasizing the role of public service for cultural institutions like art museums. It is necessary to advocate the notion that “education” is intrinsic to museums and is the “core” of public service. This shift of concept should be very important and timely for the development of art museum education in China.

3) Policy dimensions of museum-school collaboration.

There is a policy issue behind the inefficient museum-school collaboration in China. Art museums are under the supervision of the cultural administration. However, schools are under the supervision of the educational administration. These are totally different systems in China and each has limited influence over the other. It is important for policy-makers of these separate systems to realize the importance of each other and the necessity to collaborate. Advocacy for communication, collaboration and change-making on the policy level is crucial to enhance museum-school collaboration in China.

4) Professional training of art museum educators in universities.

In China, art museum education programs are basically non-existent in universities, which is in strong contrast to the rapid growth of education staff in art museums and the wide range of educational programs they offer. This has raised harsh questions on the identity of art museum education and on what should make up the academic preparations for art museum educators. With the emergence of art museum education as a professional field in China, it is also time for educators in universities and art museums to consider what kind of collaboration they can negotiate in preparing the future generations of professional art museum educators.

5) Building a professional network for art museum educators.

As more and more art museums have opened education departments and there is a growing work force in this field, it is also time to consider building a professional network for art museum educators to further explore the professional identity of art museum education. Possible initiatives include: establishing a national association of art museum educators; organizing an annual conference on art museum education; initiating international exchanges with organizations abroad; opening a website of art museum education; creating special sections devoted to art museum education in Chinese journals; publishing a journal of art museum education; and organizing the translation and publishing of books on art museums education.

It is predictable that with the rapid social and economic development of contemporary China, with public cultural services being given more attention nationwide, and with the new trends of free admission policy and museum construction/expansion, art museums in China will be increasingly professionalized,

modernized and internationalized towards “art museums for the public.” All this indicates a bright future for the development of art museum education in China.

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Biography of Dr. Yang Yingshi

Dr. Yang Yingshi is deputy director of the Public Education Department of the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing and a member of the National Advisory Committee on Public Cultural Services of the Chinese Ministry of Culture. He is an adjunct faculty member teaching graduate courses in arts & cultural administration and art museum education at the School of the Arts of Peking University and the School of Humanities of Central Academy of Fine Arts respectively. He obtained his first Master's degree in Art Studies from Peking University, a second Master's in Arts in Education from Harvard University and a Doctorate in Art and Art Education from Columbia University. In addition to organizing a large number of art museum education programs, Dr. Yang has been the organizer of many innovative national and international projects, among them "Culture Management in China: Audience Development in Museums Workshop", "Art Space for Education's Sake: China-US Conference on Art Museum Education", "Educational Outreach for Children and Adolescents in Chinese Museums" China-US Exchange, etc. He has been invited to speak and present papers in academic events including the first "International Forum on Art Museum Education" at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the second "Yeongwol International Museum Forum" in South Korea. Among his publications on art museum education are "Art Museums as Educational Institutions: A Case Study of Four Museums in New York City with Implications for China", "A Comparative Study of Art Museum Education in China and the United States", and "Building a Great Future for Art Museum Education in China". For years, Dr. Yang has also been involved in the research, criticism and curating of Chinese calligraphy and contemporary art. He is a curator of

national and international exhibitions such as “Calligraphy as Source and Resource: Contemporary Chinese Art”, “The Orchid Pavilion: The Art of Writing in China”, and “Calligraphy in Contexts”. In 2012, he co-organized the international conference “Chinese Seals: Tradition and Innovation” at The British Museum in London.

Dr. YANG Yingshi

Deputy

Public

National Art Museum of China

1 Wusi Street,

Beijing 100010

CHINA

Education

Director

Department

Dongcheng District

Tel: 86-10-6401-4035

Fax: 86-10-6403-7344

Email: yangyingshi@namoc.org

Website: <http://www.namoc.org/>

6403-7344

Cell:

6400-1787

86-13901362402

yingshiy@hotmail.com