Reframing collective memory in museums

Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.4324/9781003273417-14

Link:
Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Memory

Publisher Rights Statement:
This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge/CRC Press in The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Memory on 30/5/2022, available online: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003273417-14/reframing-collective-memory-museums-min-hsiu-liao

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via Heriot-Watt Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
Heriot-Watt University has made every reasonable effort to ensure that the content in Heriot-Watt Research Portal complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact open.access@hw.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
12. Reframing collective memory in museums

Min-Hsiu Liao

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5348-6281

Abstract
Based on a case study of a bilingual photographic exhibition on nineteenth-century China, this article explores how collective memory is constructed and translated in museums. Three pillars of collective memory were reviewed and adopted as the theoretical framework: a body of knowledge, an attribute and a process. Important carriers of memory in photographic exhibitions, including photographic images and textual interpretations, were discussed. Framing as a translation strategy is also brought into the discussion for analyzing translation shifts. To understand the process of memory construction in this exhibition, a range of data has been collected and analyzed, including the photos, the photographer’s writings, academic research on his photos, English and Chinese labels used in the touring exhibition, as well as other paratexts of the exhibition, including the prefaces in the catalogues, the interviews with the curator and the exhibition websites. The findings illustrate a process of narration and re-narration of the photos, which reflects the wishes, the ambitions and the expectations of the memory stakeholders at a different time and space as well as from different cultures. Although photos are often regarded as tangible proof of the past, they only capture a glimpse of a selective moment. How that moment is extended to the present is largely framed by the accompanied verbal interpretations. This article concludes that the past is selected and constructed in the space between the visual and the verbal, which results in an institutional narrative of collective memory.

Collective memory and museums

What has been referred to as the memory boom, that is, ‘a development in which, over the last few decades, the prominence and significance of memory has risen within both the academy and society’ (Arnold-de Simine 2013:14), has also been perpetuated by museum scholars and professionals. Over the past thirty years, museums have changed from storehouses where objects are collected and preserved to sites of memories where the past is recollected, narrated and performed (Ibid.: 1). The main function of the museum has also changed from educating the general public with their authorized version of the past, to ‘[facilitating] experiential learning, to invite emotional responses from visitors and to make them empathize and identify with people from the past or with their living contemporaries inhabiting alternative modernities in distant places’ (Ibid: 7). Through reliving past experiences, this new museology facilitates learning about the past in a less prescriptive manner.

In museums, visitors often experience the past through their engagement with the collective memory on display. ‘Collective memory’ is a term coined by the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs that may be loosely defined as ‘a set of historical narratives, beliefs, and customs shared by a social group over generations’ (Dudai 2002: 51). Collective memory entails a reflection on socially situated individuals as agents of remembrance and thus complements the concept of individual memory, a neurophysiological capacity that allows an individual to recall personal experiences in the past. The concept of collective memory suggests that individuals’ recalling of the past does not have to be based on their first-hand personal experience; on the contrary, it can be mediated in various modes of representations of the past, which are constructed by groups, communities or institutions in a given social context.
According to Dudai (2002: 51), collective memory entails three entities: a body of knowledge, an attribute and a process. A body of knowledge is ‘a cardinal element of culture’ (Ibid.) and the term ‘knowledge’ here is broadly understood as the subjective perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards the past that are shared by and characterize a given social group. These characteristic features are not static and can change over time, while the group itself can be broad (e.g. Europeans) and can be further divided into smaller groups (e.g. British, Scottish, or women over sixty in Edinburgh). An attribute is ‘the distinctive holistic image of the past in the group, an image which itself may be used as a definer of the group’ (Ibid.). Take for example the way in which US World War II veterans are referred to by some as ‘the greatest generation of Americans’ (Roediger, Zaromb and Butler 2009: 139). Finally, a process can be understood as the ongoing interaction between the individual recalling the past and the social representation of that past. On the one hand, an individual is exposed to and affected by the collective memory shared by a given social group, at a given point, and through different social distribution channels, including the media, education, and cultural institutions such as museums. On the other hand, an individual can also filter the information on offer, retaining only what they consider relevant to retain. In turn, these individual actions can potentially alter how other individuals use and acquire memory and, in the long term, can change the collective memory of a given group (Dudai 2002: 51). This dynamic process is crucial to understanding why a body of knowledge specific to a group is not static and can change over time.

The concept of collective memory has advanced the research on memory in a social context in two aspects: first, memory can transcend individuals and be shared through the framework as well as the stimulus constructed by social groups and institutions. Second, what lies between the individual cognitive ability to recall and the social reconstruction of a shared body of knowledge, are layers of re-narrations through different media, such as visual and verbal signs, sites and monuments, and commemoration rites (Assmann 2006: 27). This is where museums, as multimedia social institutions, come squarely into the discussion of collective memory.

**Narrating and translating museums**

To understand how museums can function as sites of memory that facilitate visitor encounters with the past, it is imperative to investigate first how the past enters the museum space. Museums as social institutions recollect the past through a series of museological practices. The first step is to select objects from the past that are considered worthy of being collected. Some museum scholars have compared exhibitions with a theatre stage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 3), where collective memory, as constructed by the curators, is performed for the visitors. In the museums’ performances of memory, objects are the key props on the stage that allow the museum visitors to visualize the past and to connect with the past affectively. By selecting the collections, the museums choose to visualize some, but not all, aspects of the past in the museum exhibition spaces. When an object in any medium is selected for exhibition in museums, others are excluded and forgotten. Furthermore, the very act of collecting, cataloguing and then displaying that object transforms it into an artefact with significance and value attached thereto.

While material objects are often seen as rather stable sources of knowledge or objective representations of the past, visitors’ engagement with the past through their encounter with the physical objects is not static and depends on their personal background and experiences. This is why museums commonly use a number of tools to guide visitors and promote specific readings of the exhibited objects. One of these tools is the verbal explanation. Museums speak for the objects through different types of texts (e.g. labels and audio guides), particularly in historical and ethnographic museums where objects are often used to signify something beyond themselves in a ‘synecdochic’ reading mode (Bal 1996; Neather 2008). In other words, and
regardless of its aesthetic qualities, the added value of an object is ‘to offer us information on the society in which it has been created’ (Bal 1996: 206). For example, a Chinese landscape scroll painting hung in a western museum can be charged with cultural meaning as a window to understanding how Chinese people perceive nature and land.

Bal discusses the role of museum displays as ‘a sign system working in the realm between the visual and the verbal, and between information and persuasion, as it produces the viewer’s knowledge’ (1992: 561). This is echoed in the work of Blunden (2016: 171) who explores whether and how labels help visitors look at objects more closely, and who suggests that it is in the back-and-forth viewing of objects and labels that ‘the texts add “something more” to the looking.’ She considers the interaction in this intellectual space between the visitor, object and label as ‘the critical moment in the museum experience’ (ibid.). Apart from this verbal-visual interaction, Neather (2008) also identifies a complex meaning-making relationship between written texts in different modes, such as wall panels, object labels and distributed leaflets. Based on these views, it may be suggested that through this critical moment is integral to how museum visitors receive and respond to the preferred institutional narrative, and how (or indeed if) visitors subsequently perpetuate the collective memory contained in that narrative.

The production of verbal interpretations for museum exhibitions is subject to a range of constraining factors, including ‘the wishes and ambitions, the intellectual or political or social or educational aspirations and preconceptions of the museum director, the curator, the scholar, the designer, the sponsor’ as well as the entire social and educational system in which such stakeholders are nurtured (Vergo 1989: 3). To use Sturge’s terms (2007), this mode of speaking for objects can be seen as the process of translating the source text (the previous life of an object) into the target text (its museumized life). The physical limitation on space (e.g. for object labels) and on time (e.g. for audio guides) means that museums inevitably need to decide on what to say and what not to say about the objects.

Within museum studies, discussions on museum labels have so far been concerned with monolingual museum exhibitions. In a multilingual museum where the verbal interpretations are translated into other languages – a common approach now used by museums to attract international tourists or to ensure language equality in a multilingual community – another layer of mediation is added to this process of actualizing the past experiences. The following discussion moves to the territory of translation of memory, or what Deane-Cox (2014: 273) describes as ‘an intercultural carrier of memory.’

When translation practices are considered, the most relevant questions for museum exhibitions are probably whether translations are needed and, if so, in which language(s). Liao (2018) has pointed out that the ‘exhibitive’ function of museum translation, that is, the mere presence of translated texts in museums is already a meaningful indicator of the stance and position of the museums: a museum’s decision to include texts in a particular language suggests its intention to communicate with those language users. On the specific issue of the memory of a museum, this means that such users are recognized as memory stakeholders or are invited to adopt the memory and identity narrated by museums. The ways in which the languages are ordered and displayed in written text panels can also actively contribute to the construction of collective memory. Deganutti, Parish and Rowley (2018) found that in the French World War One museum, the Historial de la Grande Guerre, the three languages used in the written labels are placed in French alphabetical order: Allemagne (Germany), France (France) and Royaume-Uni (United Kingdom). The fact that German is placed above French surprised many visitors, but this approach to the presentation of translation reinforces the museum’s emphasis on the common sufferings during the war.

Conversely, the choice not to include translations is often also a motivated decision. For example, Valdeón (2015) examined colonial museums in the US and found that translations are rare. The English texts in these museums cast other ethnic groups or nationalities, such as
the French, Indigenous Americans and Africans, in secondary roles or portray them as agents of violence. Through the strategy of non-translation, these colonial museums exclude users of other language heritages from participating in the process of constructing a broader, more inclusive collective memory.

This chapter is interested in investigating whether and how memory in museums is ‘reframed’ in the process of translation through an exploration of translation shifts. Framing can be understood in a passive sense ‘as “understandings” that emerge out of the interaction,’ or in an active sense as ‘deliberate, discursive moves designed to anticipate and guide others’ interpretation of and attitudes towards a set of events’ (Baker 2007: 156; original emphasis).

In this global world, narratives in a wide range of genres are offered in different language versions, while some genres, such as news and stories, are retold almost every minute. Baker argues that translation is one of the most effective or commonly used tools for reframing such narratives, and therefore plays a central role in shaping people’s understanding of events around the world, both in the present and the past. From this perspective, a translation-mediated museum exhibition is not only constrained by the factors pointed out by Vergo (1989) as discussed above, but should ideally consider the needs and ambitions of the translation commissioners, translators and target readers, alongside the social and cultural backgrounds that shape the target text producers and receivers. This framing process will be illustrated below in a case study on a touring photographic exhibition about nineteenth-century China.

**Framing memory in a photographic exhibition**

The analysis below on the construction of collective memory is based on a touring photographic exhibition, *China: Through the Lens of John Thomson 1868-1872*. The touring exhibition displays photos of nineteenth-century China taken by a Scottish photographer, John Thomson, showcasing Thomson’s original glass plate narratives collected by the Wellcome Library. The accompanying blurb on the Wellcome Library website (now expired) described Thomson as a pioneer photojournalist who introduced the people and culture of the Far East to the Victorian audience, explaining that Henry Wellcome himself was an enthusiastic photographer and that was why Thomson decided to entrust his collection to the Wellcome Library.

The exhibition was organized by Betty Yao, the managing director of Credential International Arts Management based in London, and started touring in 2009 in countries including China, Ireland, Thailand, the UK and the USA. The company’s website (Credential International Arts Management) explains that it offers international touring exhibition packages to museums and galleries, including 108 photographs, English and Chinese captions, introduction panels and promotional leaflet text and design. The following discussion is based on my observation at three sites: Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool (2010), the Burrell Collection in Glasgow (2011) and Chester Beatty Library in Dublin (2012).²

The most important vehicles of memory in this exhibition are John Thomson’s photos, which are contextualized by English and Chinese catalogues and by exhibition labels. The latter draw on Thomson’s album *Illustrations of China and its People* (1900) in which excerpts from the photographer’s personal diary were included as interpretative keys to his photographic work. The English exhibition texts can thus be understood as intralingual translations of Thomson’s experiences, before interlingual translation into Chinese takes place. In turn, the positioning of these photographic and textual memories in the public sphere (e.g. via exhibitions and publications) facilitates the construction of collective memory by inviting other people to form a connection with this specific period in China.

However, to return to Dudai’s (2002) terminology, there is a clear institutional attempt to mediate the *process* whereby that collective memory is constructed and transmitted given the
controversial nature of Thompson’s project. While few contemporary British museum visitors, as a broad group, will have pre-existing knowledge about the exhibition’s subject matter, i.e. nineteenth-century China, a more specific group of historical scholars have been critical of Thompson, seeing the photographs as images of imperialism and underpinned by colonial practices. Maxwell, for example, has commented that European photographers, including John Thomson, who travelled to the Near and Far East in the nineteenth century ‘set out to cater to the public hunger for information on exotic people’s appearances and living habits’ (1999: 38). The images recorded in these photos are deemed to consolidate the then-prevailing discourses of Europeans’ physical, intellectual and moral superiority, thereby perpetuating blatantly racist ideologies that non-European ‘others’ are more backward and primitive. Indeed, a discourse of race superiority is evident in Thomson’s aforementioned album (1900), in which the Chinese people are presented according to anthropological classifications of race, gender and class. Thomson’s Victorian gaze is explicit throughout his accompanying text of the photos. In a picture titled ‘Male Heads, Chinese and Mongolian,’ in which six heads of young and old Chinese men are juxtaposed, Thomson made a note on the working-class man, labelling him ‘a fine specimen of the lower orders of China’ (1900: plate IX, 24). Other photos depict social practices such as foot-binding women or opium smokers, which reinforce the common perception at that time of China as a backward society.

Contemporary scholarship frames Thomson’s photos as products of the Victorian era, a context that led Thomson to act ‘as an imperial agent, with the camera as his tool of visual acculturation and the travel book as his medium for expressing this gaze [of imperial expansion]’ (Belknap 2014: 75; see also Maxwell 1999 and Prasch 2007). And when Thomson’s photographs were presented to and consumed by a Victorian audience in the nineteenth century, those exhibitions may be understood as one cog in a distribution system used to strengthen the beliefs and value held by the society at that time, that is, to reinforce colonialism and imperialism. However, in today’s post-colonial society, the exhibition organizers and museum curators explicitly distance themselves from this difficult past and attempt to reframe the work’s value by emphasizing Thomson’s photographic techniques and presenting these photos as valuable historical documents. In an introductory article included in the exhibition catalogue, Pearce makes a statement which can be read as a disclaimer for the exhibitor:

Although from one perspective these ‘photographs’ of the natives may make us feel uncomfortable, Thomson’s artistic ability with the camera has produced some images which are striking and iconic, in the sense that they are hugely memorable. (Pearce 2002: 8; my italicized emphasis)

It is interesting to see the use of the first-person plural pronoun us in this quote, which seems to suggest that the author has identified with a contemporary social group that may share this view, the us referring to a general audience today who is looking back, from a great distance, at the them of the past. At the same time, however, this disclaimer perhaps unwittingly sets up an us/them dialectic that rehearses problematic colonial attitudes, as reflected further in the use of the word ‘natives’. More reframing endeavours come to light in an article for the exhibition catalogue by the Wellcome Library where Thomson is to praised as a cultural ambassador and the library expresses its delight in seeing this touring exhibition ‘bring Thomson’s most humane and evocative photographs to new audiences’ (Schupbach 2010: 5). Here, an emphasis on benevolence and aesthetics holds the more troubling aspects at bay.

Another example of framing can be found in the preface by the Chinese collector and scholar of photography, Bingxue Tong. The preface (Tong 2010: 10-14) is presented as a parallel text, with both English and Chinese appearing side by side. From the catalogue it is not clear whether the English text is the original and the Chinese is the translation, or vice versa, but a comparison
nevertheless reveals differences in how the past is framed. The article is segmented into four subheadings, and in each of them, the Chinese text is not only longer but also more positive than the English text:

1. Thomson’s work and legacy/ 第一个最广泛拍摄和传播中国的西方摄影家 [The first Western photographer who recorded and promoted China in a most extensive scale];
2. History of photography in nineteenth-century China/ 第一个对中国早期摄影术进行珍贵记录的摄影家 [The first photographer who made a valuable recording of early photography technology in China];
3. Thomson – the artist and the man/ 第一个在拍摄中国人时孜孜追求摄影审美的艺术家和沟通大师 [The first artist and master of communication who relentlessly pursued aesthetics in photographic images of Chinese people];
4. Thomson and China/ 第一个对中国人民广泛友好的同情的西方摄影家 [The first Western photographer who demonstrated extensive friendliness and empathy with the Chinese public].

All the additions in the more elaborated Chinese subheadings demonstrate the exhibitor’s clear intention to invite Chinese visitors to make a connection with the photographer and, in turn, with his photos.

When it comes to Chinese exhibition visitors, the history of nineteenth-century China will be more familiar to them through their school education, literature, films, or other types of media exposure, allowing them to share a more coherent set of historical narratives, beliefs and attitudes around the historical period recorded in Thomson’s photos, and around Thomson as a British man who went to China at that time. Nineteenth-century China – more commonly known as the late Qing dynasty to Chinese people – is a period often remembered by the Chinese as the darkest era in their modern history. Chinese historians refer to this period as the ‘one hundred years of national humiliation,’ starting from the outbreak of the Opium War in 1839 and ending just before the establishment of People’s Republic of China in 1949 (Wang 2012: 71). This ‘one hundred years of national humiliation’ falls into Dudai’s concept of an attribute in collective memory, which functions to symbolize and reinforce the shared body of knowledge held by the Chinese people. This period is associated with negative images of the westerners who invaded China or exploited Chinese people with profits from the illegal Opium trade, as such beliefs and attitudes are engraved in governmental narratives and history education in Chinese schools. A statement made by the organizer Yao suggests another attempt to reframe collective memory, in this instance as held by Chinese visitors: ‘We sometimes feel that foreigners look at the Chinese in a negative manner, but [John Thomson] was very different – all his photos showed positive images’ (Yu 2010; my translation and emphasis). Here, the use of the first-person plural pronoun, we, indicates that the curator is addressing visitors in an inclusive manner, inviting a shared perspective that opens on to a restorative image of the photographer. Again, distance is placed between Thomson and colonialism in this particular translation of his actions. In short, it seems that the exhibition paratexts have anticipated the beliefs and attitudes associated with the exhibition theme, as held by the British and Chinese social groups or sub-groups – the British memory of the Victorian colonialism and the Chinese memory of the humiliating century.

Turning to the photographs themselves, they can be understood as key vehicles in the exhibitions’ construction and transmission of collective memory. Photographs are effective
carriers of memory because they are often regarded as tangible proof of the past documented ‘by freezing its representation at a powerful moment’ (Zelizer 2004: 158). Therefore, photographs are often used in exhibitions of traumatic pasts, for example, when concrete objects from the original sites have been mostly destroyed. However, Hall (1991:19) points out that ‘visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs; they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted.’ Just like any other vehicle of memory, photos only provide selective glimpses of the past. Every photo is a result of a process of decisions, which may include choosing the topic, the context, the precise moment, along with other techniques such as angle, focus, framing and contrast (Roberts 2011: 10-11). When looking at a photo with human subjects, viewers do not know what happened before or after the frozen moment caught in that photo and have no access to relevant information – who the people in the photos are, what their relationships are. Therefore, in a photographic exhibition, interpretations may be developed in many directions; the accompanying textual materials are particularly instrumental in the process of framing and reframing and can be used to guide visitors towards the preferred reading of the organizers, as illustrated below.

When they enter the museum, visitors are made aware of the theme, purpose and relevance of the exhibition by introductory text panels. Figure 1 shows an exhibition panel in the Burrell Collection in 2011.

<Figure 12.1 around here>

Figure 12.1 Introductory panel in the exhibition at the Burrell Collection, 2011. Photo taken by the author.

The English and the Chinese texts differ in that the Chinese text is designed to elicit an emotional response from the reader, particularly through its more positive evaluation of Thomson. For example, the third paragraph in the English text is no more than a description of what Thomson did at that time: ‘He was eager to promote public knowledge about China. He lectured, wrote books and became known as “China Thomson”.’ While the words ‘eager to promote’ and ‘China Thomson’ may be regarded as a positive evaluation of Thomson, other interpretations may also be possible for readers. If we regard the exhibition texts as an intralingual translation from Thomson’s photos and writings, the undertone of the English texts here might demonstrate what Hermans (2014) refers to as ‘ironic translation’, in which the translator as an agent of reorientation is ‘relocating [the pre-existing discourse], and redirecting it to suit a new environment and a new audience’ (Ibid: 293). The translation is ironic because the audience simultaneously receives two utterances, one being an objective report of the source material (i.e. Thomson’s own record of the past) by the translator, the other being the translator’s attitude and stance that can be read between the lines of that report. Hermans argues that it is up to the readers to interpret the translator’s attitude; in fact, for the translator’s attitude to be perceived, the readers need to be aware of the pre-existing utterances. In this panel, the distancing tone of the English exhibition texts is only to be perceived by those visitors who are aware of the pre-existing utterances of European imperialism associated with Thomson’s photos in the Victorian era, and who thus share the uncomfortable feeling that may be triggered by these photographic memories.

By contrast, the corresponding paragraph is much more elaborate in Chinese:

After returning to his country, Thomson started to actively promote and introduce China to the general public. Besides organizing exhibitions, he published many photography collections and books about China. With no doubt, his photos led to a significant change in the nineteenth-century Europeans’ understanding of China, filling in gaps of
understanding between the East and the West through visuals. He won the reputation as ‘an expert on China.’ (My translation and emphasis)

Through positive, non-ironic evaluators such as ‘an expert on China’ and the intensifier ‘with no doubt,’ the Chinese text overtly presents Thomson in a positive light. As discussed earlier, because of Chinese society’s collective memory of the late Qing Dynasty and of many westerners travelling to China as invaders and exploiters during that period, the past is translated through a series of deliberate discursive moves that are designed to inform and shape the visitors’ attitudes towards this set of events. In this instance, Chinese visitors are primed to expect a Scottish photographer who was very different from other foreigners, one who portrayed positive images of China. These framing strategies can be seen throughout the Chinese translation in this exhibition, in both the addition of positive evaluations of Thomson and in the omission of negative evaluations to present Thomson as a positive and kind Scot, who is different from the other discriminatory British. This positive presentation of Thomson in the textual panels is thus in line with the aforementioned restorative framing evidenced in the exhibition catalogue of this exhibition.

In the example below, we will examine both intralingual translation (from the excerpts of Thomson’s diary in the album to the English exhibition texts) and interlingual translation (from English to Chinese) to gain more insight into how collective memory has been selected and reshaped.

<Figure 12.2 around here>
Figure 12.2 ‘A Dealer of Curiosities.’ Photo reproduced with the permission of the Wellcome Library.

The photograph, ‘A Dealer of Curiosities,’ shows four people, including one person holding a vase, two people standing around him, and one standing inside the house behind them. All of them are looking at the vase. From the title of the photo, the viewers may guess that the seated person is the dealer of curiosities, but just by looking at the photo, the viewers cannot surmise any more information than that. The object labels further guide their understanding of this photo:

A dealer of curiosities
Even in the second half of the nineteenth century, foreign visitors were a regular target for antique dealers, who tended to charge very high prices. One evening, Thomson found himself waited on by a dozen such dealers, who sought to sell him old porcelain bowls, dishes and various other items at exorbitant prices. The dealers were introduced to him by a servant he had previously employed. It was a common practice for household servants to introduce dealers to foreigners, for the servants received half of the profits.

街边古董摊
就像很多来到北京的外国人一样，汤姆逊有一天在大街上被六七个古董商围住，通过他在天津雇佣的仆人向他推销古董。汤姆逊也确实购买了一些。更重要的是，购买完后，他拍摄了这幅图画，为我们保留下了珍贵的资料。

[Dealers of curiosities in the streets
Just like many foreigners who came to Beijing, Thomson was one day surrounded by six or seven dealers on the street, who sought to sell him antiques through the servant
he hired in Tianjin. Thomson did buy some. More importantly, after the purchase, he shot this photo, and preserved the valuable data for us.]

The English label describes a typical experience for foreign tourists in Beijing in Thomson’s time (and probably still true now), where people interested in buying curiosities were being charged a higher price. The descriptions of foreign visitors as ‘regular targets’ who were charged ‘very high prices’ and ‘at exorbitant prices,’ and the observation that servants who introduced Thomson to the dealers ‘received half of the price,’ are not explicitly negative evaluations of Chinese society and culture per se; however, these can perhaps be implicitly regarded as a commentary on the business practices in China at the time. Thomson’s writing provides more information about this personal memory of this scene (Thomson 1900, Plate XI, 28), where he talks about the interesting shops that he saw in Beijing and how he could not resist the temptation of buying curiosities. He also describes the bargaining processes, including how he was aware that he was being charged higher prices because the deal went through his servant. There, in contrast to the labels, a more critical, imperialist stance on Chinese business practices emerges: although he believes that ‘the shop-keepers in Chinese cities are not inferior to those of Europe,’ he ‘cannot say that they are as honest and truthful, on principle, as the traders in Christian lands’ (Thomson 1900, Plate XI, 28). It is thus evident that, when the English labels were developed on the basis of Thomson’s personal memories, selections were made and discursive moves were taken to leave out his ‘Victorian gaze’ from the commentary. This echoes what we observed to be the framing strategy in the English introductory panels and articles, namely a distancing from Victorian colonial ideology. distance itself from the ideological view held in the nineteenth century.

When the English labels were transposed into Chinese, further selections and omissions were made, but most notably, there is evidence of additions that have no precedent in either Thomsons’ writings or in the English labels. The commentary on high prices and the servant’s involvement in the deal was left out, while a positive evaluation on Thomson’s contribution and some local colour in the form of the reference to the city Tianjin was added. Visitors are invited to connect with John Thomson who preserved the valuable data for us.

Both the English and Chinese labels used different framing strategies in their respective translations; the former providing an intralingual translation of Thomson’s diary, and the latter providing a subsequent interlingual translation of the English text. And both select and filter their source material to guide the visitors to read photos in the institutions’ preferred way; ultimately, these processes will have an impact on the construction as well as the perpetuation of collective memory mediated through the same collection of photos.

Visitor experience

While these framing strategies allow the curators to guide visitors to a preferred reading of the photos, ultimately how the visitors interact with the exhibition and construct their own understanding is a dynamic process that depends on a range of factors, including their personal experiences and their perceptions of the exhibition theme. Although it is impossible to establish this exhibition’s impact on an individual’s cognitive ability to recall or relate to the past, the visitor book can give us some indication as to how visitors have engaged with the past and potentially incorporated it into their own collective memory. The following analysis is based on 128 comments left in the visitor books collected by the Merseyside Maritime Museum and the Chester Beatty Library, including 115 comments written in English and the rest in Chinese. It seems that the Chinese comments were made only by Chinese visitors (as indicated by the city they come from, or their names in Chinese characters), but the English comments come from British visitors and visitors from other countries, including Chinese visitors.
The comments in English are, in general, shorter and consist of only a few words. Very few comment on the figure of John Thomson himself, limiting themselves to praising the general exhibition, or their fascination with China: ‘Loved the Thomson exhibition,’ ‘Interesting Chinese exhibition,’ ‘Loved the Chinese photographs,’ ‘Chinese exhibition is excellent,’ ‘Chinese exhibition makes me want to visit China,’ ‘A breath-taking exhibition!’, ‘Enjoyable exhibition, wonderful images, very interesting.’ The few English comments that make a distinction between past and present China are from Chinese visitors: ‘Happy to see old China in Ireland,’ ‘Great China Qing dynasty pics,’ ‘Fascinating China show. Remarkable nineteenth century’ (my emphasis).

The comments written in Chinese are longer; all of them make it clear that the exhibition is about Chinese history and not about contemporary China. For example:

我想说的是，他真的是个传奇人物！记录写实有真，我们伟大的中国历史就这样在他的摄像机里真实地记录下来。真棒！
[What I want to say is that he was really a legend! His photos were faithful and real. Our great Chinese history was recorded by his camera faithfully. How great!]

This example seems to signal that the visitor has ‘absorbed’ the positive messages of the textual material, that is, this is less about the history itself and more about the role of the photographer in preserving that history.

However, most of the Chinese comments do indeed differentiate between the old China (with its humiliating past) and the much more developed modern China. The example below wishes Thomson could see a better Beijing now. Perhaps anticipating other visitors’ misconceptions that China has stood still and these traces of the past can still be found – as some English comments seem to indicate: ‘Chinese exhibition makes me want to visit China’ – this comment even constructs a dialogue with other visitors by using English words at the end to directly address English-speaking visitors:

感谢汤姆逊记录了一个真实的北京、以前的北京，很感动。真希望汤姆逊能看见今天的北京，变化变化中的中国北京。北京欢迎你们。Welcome to Beijing. Welcome to China.
[Thanks to Thomson for recording a real Beijing, Beijing in the past. Very touched. I wish Thomson could see Beijing today. China’s Beijing is undergoing transformation. Beijing welcomes you. Welcome to Beijing. Welcome to China.]

Another similar comment implicitly signals a move away from the past and towards a peaceful future:

中国的历史渐远，多民族和睦相处。
[The history of China is belonging more and more to a distant past. All ethnic groups live in harmony.]

These two comments are interesting examples of how collective memory of the past can influence behaviour in the present. Other comments, however, suggest that despite the organizer’s intention of presenting Thomson as different from the discriminatory British, and despite the framing strategies in the labels to guide the visitor away from remembering a more traumatic past, the interpretative material has not had the intended effect on this particular visitor. In turn, the comment below reflects what the exhibition organizers had anticipated: the photos would trigger the collective memory of ‘one hundred years of national humiliation’
shared by the Chinese people, that is, how they had suffered and struggled in the war-torn Qing China:

看了摄影展，心痛晚清的中国人生活那么艰苦，如果中国当时强大就好，希望祖国以后更加有所发展。

[After visiting this photographic exhibition, I feel so pained to see how hard life was for the Chinese in the late Qing period. If only China had been more powerful then. I hope the motherland will be more developed in the future.]

An analysis of the 128 comments suggests the English-speaking visitors and the Chinese visitors have engaged differently with the exhibitions. For the Chinese visitors, the collective memory triggered by Thomson’s photos and framed by the Chinese interpretive texts interacts with their individual memories of their home country. This results in complex feelings of comparing past and present China as well as a desire to let other people know that China is much better now, a desire which may indicate that they feel Thomson’s representation of their country is not as good a reflection of current China as they would like foreigners to see. On the other hand, for many English-speaking visitors, this exhibition may not appear to them as an enactment of the past, but more like an exhibition of others. Their comments are restricted to ‘China’ but do not display consciousness of a temporal dimension, as shown in Chinese comments (e.g. from the past to the present). Also, while the English texts have used framing strategies of distancing or ironic translation, this attempt to challenge or to reshape the imperial colonialism associated with Thomson and other photographers at the time is not reflected in the English comments either. It may be because, as we argued earlier, the British visitors as a broad social group are not characterized by a shared belief or attitudes towards the people and the historical period in these photos. Nor do they express feeling uncomfortable with the Victorian gaze, as Pearce supposes they might do in the exhibition catalogue. The absence of any commentary on Thomson as a colonial figure may indicate a lack of engagement with the catalogue in particular, or a lack of interest in the topic more generally on the part of the visitor, or even an ineffectual treatment of the issue on the part of the organizers. In other words, this exhibition perhaps contributes to their understanding of the exhibition theme (e.g. amazing China), but from the comments, we do not see any evidence to suggest that the British visitors’ personal perceptions have been challenged.

Concluding remarks

In this case study, we see that Thomson’s photos have been framed and reframed when they enter exhibitions catering for different audiences, in the past and now, at home and abroad. This touring exhibition illustrates how collective memory is being operationalized in various contexts, through a chain of intralingual and interlingual translations. First, Thomson’s individual memory forms part of the basis of this exhibition that remembers China in the space of the museums located across Britain and Ireland. The journey starts from his personal experiences in China which then enter the public realm when they are encoded and transformed into exhibitions and books for his contemporary audience, and later on to the audience after his time. Each transformation adds another layer of re-narration and re-interpretation. Second, the intralingual translation into English exhibition texts show how collective memory is reframed in the sense of correcting, or even avoiding previous colonial ways of seeing and remembering through photography and its interpretation. Finally, the interlingual translation into Chinese exhibition texts attempts to challenge and re-shape the collective memory of contemporary Chinese visitors and guide them to a preferred reading of a humane photographer who empathizes with the Qing Chinese people. It is through these
different layers of operationalization that the museum has transformed the living memory of John Thomson into institutionally constructed commemorative practices which then enact and give substance to collective memories held by different memory communities.

**Further readings**

This article discusses prosthetic memory in a dialogue between memory and translation studies, based on a case study of a memorial museum.

This article discusses how conflicting views of the First World War are represented in European museums and explores whether multilingual representation contributes to promoting peace, or further divides different language communities and perpetuates animosity.

This article focuses on how time and space are manipulated in museum translation and how the two dimensions give significance to the narrative of mass trauma.

This article discusses how different semiotics in museum exhibitions interact with each other and co-construct the meaning of a bilingual exhibition.

This article examines how translations indicate the power negations of different communities in national museums in the US. The analysis focuses on the question of whether to translate and argues that non-translation has been used as a strategy to construct American history.

**Related topics:** photographic memory; collective memory; difficult pasts; museum interpretation; visitor experience

**Reference list**


1 The term ‘object’ has different meanings in museum studies (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 104), depending on the responsibilities of the person using the term, for example, curators or programme educators. This paper uses the term in the way it may be understood by curators, that is, ‘objects’ refers to collections or parts of the collections that have been assembled for some purpose. The collections may include three-dimensional material objects, or other media such as photos and videos.

2 The exhibitions in the Merseyside Maritime Museum and the Burrell Collection included both Chinese and English labels, whereas the exhibition in the Chester Beatty Library had only English labels.