

The Development of Cultural Diplomacy in Toronto

through the lens of the ROM's "The Chinese Exhibition," 1974

By: Megan Sue-Chue-Lam

Supervisor: Prof. Jeffrey Brison

Queen's University Undergraduate Summer Research Fellowship

Blockbuster Exhibitions & Cultural Diplomacy

- Bring a populist approach to often elitist institutions
- Present exhibits as a "can't miss" experience – limited availability results in more motivated audience
- Big corporate sponsorship
- Avoids explicit politics in effort to emphasize a common and unifying human experience, but are inherently political
- Often uncritical of popular perceptions of a culture due to corporate involvement and desire for mass appeal
- Promote tourism, business, and political connections by reinforcing positive stereotypes and historical narratives
- Essentialize cultures by selecting key symbols and visual representations at the expense of a broader and more diverse set of representations, while suppressing others

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Jeffrey Brison for his guidance and background on this topic. I also extend my thanks to Philip Cheong of the City of Toronto and the Library and Archive staff of the ROM for providing me with primary resources.

Selected Bibliography

Barker, Emma. "Exhibiting the canon: the blockbuster show." In *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, edited by Emma Barker, 127–146. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Berryman, Jim. "Art and national interest: the diplomatic origins of the 'blockbuster exhibition' in Australia." *Journal of Australian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2013): 159–73.

DuVernet, Sylvia. *Canada-China Cultural Exchanges*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989.

The Exhibition of the Archeological Finds of the People's Republic of China: Official and Authentic Introduction and Catalogue. Edited by the Organization Committee of the Exhibition of the Archeological Finds of the People's Republic of China. Toronto: The Chinese Exhibition Council of the Royal Ontario Museum, 1974.

Hague, Mary Jo Michelle. "Cultural Diplomacy, Canada-China a Case Study: The Exhibition of Archeological Finds of the People's Republic of China Held at the Royal Ontario Museum from 8 August–November 16, 1974." Master's thesis. Order No. ML37702, University of Alberta, 1987.

Lin, Nancy. "5,000 Years of Korean Art: Exhibitions abroad as cultural diplomacy." *Journal of the History of Collections* 28, no. 3 (2016): 383–400.

Wallis, Brian. "Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Diplomacy." In *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, edited by Itit Rogoff and Daniel J. Sherman, 265–281. London: Routledge, 1994.

Watson, William. *The Chinese Exhibition*. London: Times Newspapers Ltd, 1974.

Thesis

"Blockbuster exhibits" are a significant locus for cultural exchange between the exhibiting institution and the culture that is being showcased. The purpose of "The Chinese Exhibition" was to simultaneously legitimize the ROM as a player on the global stage, as well as to further the cultural legitimacy of the People's Republic of China in the Western World via international diplomacy.



"Flying Horse of Gansu," Eastern Han dynasty, 25 – 220 AD: a centerpiece of The Chinese Exhibition. Photograph by Michael Gunther, 2007. www.art-and-archaeology.com

Conclusion

"The Chinese Exhibition" effectively glossed over ongoing cultural disputes in order to present an uncomplicated narrative timeline of the PRC for the nation's political gain. In return, the ROM gained international repute while strengthening Canada's complex political relationship with China. Ultimately, the prioritization of Toronto by China as an exhibitor exemplifies the city's diplomatic power.

"The Chinese Exhibition"

- 1973: Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau recommends that Canada exhibit archeological finds of China
- Exhibited August 8–November 16, 1974 at the ROM
- Total visitors to the exhibit: 435,000
- Cost of the exhibit: \$1.1 million
- Profits: \$1.7 million

Negotiations

- Toronto is promised to be first stop in North America
- Toronto exhibition negotiated partly due to the ROM's extensive East Asian collections
- Canada also lends landscape exhibition to gain leverage
- Intended to improve perceptions of PRC's attitudes towards the preservation of culture post-Cultural Revolution
- China displays apparent unwillingness to provide firm commitments to the contents of the exhibition and catalogue, reserves right to veto all components

Catalogue

- Framed by quotation by Chairman Mao: "Let the past serve the present."
- Reflects Marxist interpretation of Chinese history
- Emphasizes the skill and artistry of the working class
- Exemplifies the social progression of dynasties towards a more "modern" Communist future
 - Example: peasant uprisings in feudal age posited as foundation for socialism
- Canada uses a revised version of the British catalogue, notably changing the name of the exhibit from "The Genius of China" to "The Chinese Exhibition" in order to comply with PRC interpretations
- Two catalogues: one adapted from the British catalogue, and a supplementary one made entirely of official text from the Chinese government