Decolonisation of narratives in British Museum: with an Ethnographic Lens

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Why museums decolonisation a pressing issue

Museums as sites of colonial memory
• Many collection acquired through colonialism.
• Recollections of empire are constructed, communicated and contested.
• Imperialism is also a discursive field of knowledge.
• False neutrality – truth of one perspective

National identity forming
• BAME groups representation in museum settings, profoundly impacting individuals’ experiences and forming their identities.
• Sharing idea for build sense of national identity, belongingness, and social cohesion.
• Citizen educational sites – identity forming

Museums as sites of intervention for reparative future
• Comprehensive display of global cultural and historical information
• More accessible form of revisionist history
Decolonisation challenges in museums

Narratives reproduction and transmission
- Private space: knowledge reproduction by professionals
- Public space: ordinary visitors as passive message receivers
- Singular knowledge transmission – limited interaction and debate

Essentialist style narratives
- Focus on aesthetics and physical part of collection
- Focused audiences: local visitors

Who is responsible for museum decolonisation?
- Professionals? – creating new decolonial knowledge and deliver to public?
- Visitors? – how to turn passive learner to active decolonizer?
Visitors’ decolonial awareness and immanent critique

• Inspired by key concepts from the discomfort and critical pedagogy: no educational spaces can be considered safe, as power and privilege always pervade them (Zembylas, 2015).

• Discomfort pedagogy: it situates white discomfort within the wider decolonisations project of dismantling white colonial structures and practices (Zembylas, 2018).

• Critical pedagogy: recognise power relations and how they operate in our everyday life through dialogue (Freire, 2018).

• Immanent critique: a dialectical practice that emphasis the preservation of critical thinking and the identification of contradiction by situating ourselves in social and power relationships (cited in Dhillon, 2022).

• Ethnographic conversation: Thinking decolonialism as an ‘experience-near’ event; thinking visitors as active subjects in the museum; Museum as a safe space to express; situated in power relationships to think about the power of narratives with visitors’ immediate feelings.
Ethnographic conversation: 
Hear public’s voices

Finding 1: Visitors’ imminent critique of colonialism and power in the museum often happened by comparing their museum visiting experience and their previous learning experience, which closely relates with their racial and ethnic identities.

• “Our cultural story is not only three sentence about the viking sword, it is matter to me”. (Origin English visitor)
• “I feel disappointed to see China artefacts here, the only connection between us is we are all from the same place, nothing else”. (Chinese visitor)
Ethnographic conversation: Hear public’s voices

Finding 2: The dominant educational approach involved singular knowledge transmission with limited interaction, consequently creating a passive message receiver for visitors.

• “I feel passive in the museum, there is no chance to debate”.
• “I know these sculptures means the god of death in Asian culture, it’s not a good thing to keep their picture in the phone, but there is no words about this, wish the selfies guys luck”.
Ethnographic conversation: 
Hear public’s voices

Finding 3: People’s attitudes towards decolonialism could potentially create an emerging identity category with political tendencies against placing cultures, races and epistemologies in hierarchical ranks or producing a dominant culture.

• “I have to say I am a bit too open-minded to talk about [decolonisation], it is about politics, we are losing power and influences”. (A French visitor)

• “As long as you’re celebrating old figures such as Napoleon in France, it’s not possible”. 
Research limitation and future studies

• For ordinary visitors, the term of ‘decolonisation’ need to be further explained and decoded, and associate with their life experience.

• The conversation which serving as an immediate and direct intervention to reveal visitors’ decolonial insight, but not proved those ideas works in their everyday material actions.

• Further studies to explore how to involve public’s decolonial power in decolonising museums could be valuable.
Q & A