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國立臺灣博物館 2014 年特展中的 伊斯蘭再現¹

Representing Islam:

A Special Exhibition of the National Taiwan Museum, 2014

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Introduction

In recent decades, after critics started to analyze museum with Michel Foucault's theories, many like Hooper-Greenhill (1989) or Tony Bennett (1990) do not view museum as the way people in the 19th or early 20th century did: it is no longer an entirely positive Modernist institution that disseminates knowledge

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and improves civilization, but a centralizing power on behalf of bourgeoisie ideology that try to discipline the public and control people's behaviors.³ Similarly, following Edward Said's criticism, many theorists have explored the history of museum as an imperial institution that in fact has actively participated in colonial projects rather than just a plain "recorder" of history (Barringer & Flynn, 1998: 1–8). In brief, in current postmodernist or postcolonialist atmosphere, it seems that people are getting more suspicious on the true functions behind its ostensibly benign image. Besides theorists, museum workers also have been reflecting upon such issues, trying to face the challenge and to justify their work in such an era. Some may resort to a kind of nihilism that museum no longer needs to provide meanings, and visitors would generate their own ones. Yet if one still recognizes education as an important function of museum, apparently newer kinds of goal should be proposed to suit the needs in the 21st century.

National Taiwan Museum (NTM) is no exception in this case. Celebrating itself as "the starting point [literally 'the enlightening place'] of Modern(ist) knowledge in Taiwan" 臺灣現代知識的啓蒙地, the slogan is sometimes embarrassing since it straightforwardly points out the Museum's (previous) role as a Modernist institution and evokes the memory of its establishment as a Japanese colonial project in Taiwan.⁴ Reflecting upon the mentioned challenge, it is representative that in 2014 NTM set its mission at promoting both cultural diversity and biodiversity through exhibitions and educational activities

³ Hooper-Greenhill (1989) contends that public museum is embodied with three contradictory functions: the elite temple of arts, the instrument of democratic education, and the instrument of disciplining society. Likewise, Tony Bennett (1990) points out that the aims of museum (education) often mismatch its true function (reform of public manner).

⁴ See the banner on NTM website: <http://www.ntm.gov.tw/tw/index.aspx> (accessed 8 May 2016). In fact, NTM has faced this past honestly and deal with the complexity of modernism in its current celebration of 100th anniversary, see Kuo, 2015.

(Liu, 2015: 14). It is clear that the Museum still regards itself as a place of knowledge, yet not in a way of imbuing values from ruling élites but trying to accommodate different cultures and respective ideas. It served as a great example that in the same year NTM launched the special exhibition *Islamic Life and Culture* 伊斯蘭：文化與生活 (January 14–September 14),⁵ introducing the public to the religion and its relative cultures, which are often ill represented, misunderstood and even discriminated in Taiwan.

Although many Muslim international workers are prevalent in the society, they are often unnoticed—for instance, relative knowledge is absent in popular intellectual fields like bookstores. But once they are noticed, say, their congregation in religious festivals, often the public response with an unfriendly manner because of a lack of understanding (and thus sympathy) of both their culture(s) and their economic statues (Chang, 2014). In this background, the exhibition on Islam was an advance in multiculturalism integrating “the Other” into mainstream society thematically and constitutionally: Muslims were not only a focus of the exhibition but also as participants in the planning—since the exhibition was cooperated with Taiwan Association of Islamic Studies (TAIS)—and as visitors or even amateur docents (Wei, 2015). Generally, it opened positive communications from museal institution and planning to exhibition and public education. However, this exhibition is worth deeper exploration that only by knowing exactly what kind of communication was formed and what was the limit of such an exhibition can we seek not a superficial representation of multiculturalism but a critical, delicate understanding and possible improvements in the future.

⁵ Website see: http://www2.ntm.gov.tw/en/exhibition_2_11_0_110.htm (accessed 8 May 2016).

In fact, the theme itself is worth reflection. The encounter of museum with history or religion can be nothing aberrant, since they have been major themes of museal exhibitions for long. From traditional Renaissance paintings to African masks, history and religion are both regarded as crucial elements—established by the Louvre since the birth of modern museum (Duncan, 1995: 21–33)—in discriminating the Self and the Other. But when an exhibition is ambitiously titled “Islam,” often critics would automatically raise their eyebrows and question it on its reflections upon Orientalism, which, since criticized by Edward Said (1978), has been viewed as a “must-answer” aspect when it comes to the representation of Islam. In fact, some show that curators and institutions do start to consider Saidian criticism (Bryce & Carnegie, 2014). Still others maintain that the representation of Islam, e.g. in British Museum, may still be shaped by a biased ideology from its size, location, and title to installation, texts, and contexts (Ajani, 2011).⁶ Knowing these international examples, can “we”—we as an organizer of the exhibition, or as people in Taiwan—do better than British Museum, considering the short of almost any kind of resources in comparison? Or, could it be possible that we would do better since we do not have to carry burdens of imperialist past in such an issue?

This consideration was what kept perturbing me when I participated in this exhibition. Recruited by TAIS as an assistant to help NTM planning the exhibition, I served as an in-between: based on a settled framework, I summarized information from academic works into shorter texts and modified them according to other planners’ review to meet displaying needs. As an afterthought, it is clear that this position inevitably trapped me in a middle

⁶ British Museum has been planning on improving its display of Islamic World with touring exhibitions and a new gallery. See:
https://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2015/gallery_of_the_islamic_world.aspx (accessed 21 February 2016).

ground between two divisions proposed by E. Hooper-Greenhill (1991: 51): one is the outsider's view as a "consumer of cultural artifact" (when being trained as a cultural critic in the academy); the other is the insider's view as a "producer of such artifact" (when editing texts for the exhibition). Just as Hooper-Greenhill maintained, many academic analyses are admittedly valid, but they do not help much when it comes to actual practices. Furthermore, I also felt another kind of typical ambivalence long existing within academies: for instance, when professional historians often lament the debasing of history in popular culture, they actually played an important role in legitimizing history in public sphere as well (De Groot, 2009: 4–5, 15–16). Several academic professionals who have directly or indirectly taken part in this project happened to show the same contempt that they thought education through museum is "superficial" (obviously, comparing to "serious" higher education institutions); yet meanwhile many seemed to enjoy the process of managing such "superficial" affairs and try to lecture the public, which they held in contempt, with verbose messages in such an exhibition.

What I tried to illustrate in this article is these manifold in-betweens: between personal experience and academic criticism, history and museology, believers and non-believers, and finally presentation and representation. Concerning Hooper-Greenhill's criticism that many of the analysis come from outsiders rather than insiders, by the notion "representing" I tend to emphasize the vibrant interaction and communication among the presenter, the representation and the represented during the planning process. This article seeks to present a critical reflection on how Islam is being represented and raise some questions to be solved in order to benefit future exhibitions on related issues.

I. Overview of the planning team

The exhibition (Wei, 2014) was divided into three parts: “the Sacred Space” 神聖空間, “The History [lit. corridor of time and space]” 時空走廊, and “Life and Culture” 生活與文化. Visitors would first learn basic understanding of Islamic teachings and major religious practices in the first part. Second, a brief introduction to the historical development of Islamic civilization (major dynasties and cities). Finally, aspects on daily life and cultural activities including clothes, music, and tableware etc. This framework clearly reveals its aim to encompass almost every aspect related to Islam—interestingly, every but what concerns contemporary politics.

Held by NTM, this exhibition was entrusted to TAIS (an association comprising by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, specialists and enthusiasts in Islam and relative areas) with planning, organized by professor Nabil Chang-Kuan Lin 林長寬, the then chairman of TAIS and an associate professor of Department of Arabic Language and Culture, National Chengchi University (NCCU). The planning process was thus a three-way interaction: first, the museum part, with NTM curator Chen-Yu Wei 魏振瑜 in charge, monitored the planning, decided the actual installation, and modified the contents to suit museal needs. TAIS proposed the plan, wrote the texts and contacted object providers. Finally, mosques, foreign offices and some other Muslims provided the objects and occasionally served as the supervisor in mid-term inspections (Figure 1).

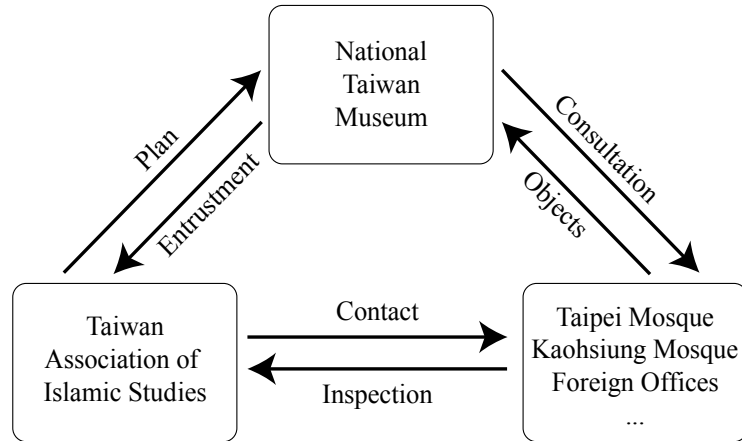


Fig. 1 The interaction between three parties of the planning team.

Although opened in 2014, the project actually started from May 2010, costing almost four years to prepare, two years longer than originally scheduled. Such a lengthy planning period was partly resulted from the fact that this project aimed at an overly ambitious target but with only limited resources. First, Islamic studies are rare in Taiwan due to a lack of specialized institution and geo-political reasons (Lin, 2014: 140–144; Liu, 2013). Besides, constituting only some 0.1–0.2% of population (approx. 50,000), Taiwanese Muslims are not only minority but shrinking (Su, 2002: 86–93).⁷ As a result, it is hard to find suitable writers, scholars and curators to serve as the intermediary who are capable to transform intricate academic jargons of Islamic knowledge into plain language. Instead, the project was coordinated by three different parties (NTM, TAIS and Muslim institutions) to compensate such a shortage.

⁷ “Taiwanese Muslims” here specifically refers to Muslims who own Taiwanese citizenship rather than all Muslims in Taiwan. The number of latter is mostly made up of international workers from Indonesia, who are 236,440 in November 2014 (Ministry of Labor, 2015: 202–203).

Yet the hydra-headed situation was hence less like a cooperation than a three-way non-interaction because of fundamental dissidence of interests (Figure 2). First, when TAIS sought to present a pedantic introduction of Islam, NTM also wanted the exhibition to be entertaining. For example, the first edition of the exhibition texts handed in by TAIS was regarded systematic yet dull. So at NTM's request, sections of "further readings" 延伸閱讀 including questions in response to common myths like "Does Islam encourage polygamy?" were added by TAIS (Wei, 2014: 109). Yet still finding TAIS members were reluctant (or unable) to take care of public's especially youngsters' needs (i.e. designing interactive games, finding interesting topics or writing the texts with lucid terms), NTM staffs turned toward areas they could decide independently: A children's picture book of Islamic fables was published accompanying the exhibition without the participation of TAIS (Wei, Su & Luo, 2014), four spin-off events were launched for especially elementary school students, and a trying-on area, where visitors can put on Arabic-Islamic clothes and take photos, was set in the exhibition room (Liu, 2015: 71–73).

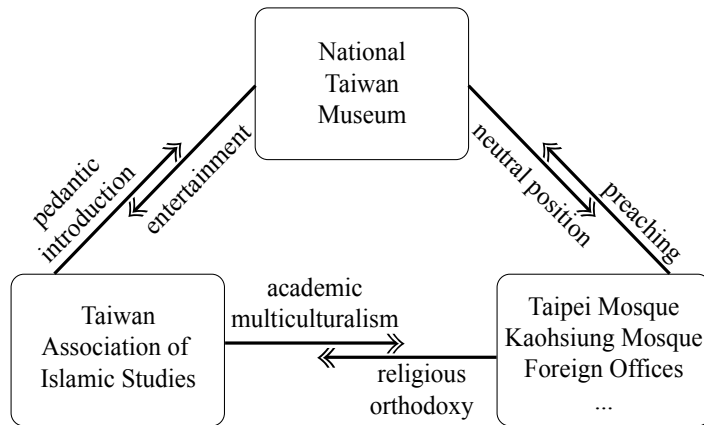


Fig. 2 Conflicting interests within the planning team.

Second, When NTM sought to present Islam in a neutral tone avoiding any possible dispute, many Muslims regarded the exhibition as a chance of preaching rather than only popularization of knowledge. This position trapped NTM in a dilemma when certain Muslim consultants viewed the part of religious teachings as “incomprehensive” or “unorthodox,” while NTM was aware of the fact that more religious descriptions means more possible objections by different Muslim scholars, and that if “orthodox” view on women’s clothing would arouse disgust or even enhance stereotypes among visitors. The solution was to expand the sections of further readings to incorporate these detailed religious teachings (for example, see Wei, 2014: 66, 72, 92). Moreover, these further readings were not shown on exhibition panels, but on A4 size plastic cards, which were not immediately noticeable (in fact, mostly neglected) because they were half covered since they were put in standing drawers. As for orthodoxy, NTM insisted on using the phrases “traditionalists recommend that ...,” implying that there were also “non-traditional” opinions (Wei, 2014: 204).

Finally, when many Muslim consultants stressed on religious orthodoxy (namely, a specific kind of Sunnism), what TAIS promoted was multiculturalism. The issue was even not “how to deal with Sufism and Shia Islam,” but “should the exhibition comprise non-Sunni aspects” (further discussions see “IV. Which Islam”).

Although the interest of the three parties are different, none of the three can hold the exhibition by its own efforts. TAIS needs NTM to validate its program and mosques to lend their collections, NTM needs TAIS and other Muslims to serve as authorities to legitimize its discourses, and finally other Muslims need the two institution to mobilize more resources to settle down the exhibition. Since no one party can fully decide the result independently but struggle against one another, as a consequence of such internal conflict mentioned above, the

planning was involved with compromises (where concession was achievable) and disagreement (where it was not). This is why messages delivered in this exhibition were often not in coordination. This dissonance was reflected upon almost all aspects of such an exhibition.

II. An anti-corporal soul

Susan M. Pearce (1993) describes collecting as the interaction of body and soul, through which one explore its relationship with the world and construct the world through objects. But what if the “soul” one wants to understand is anti-corporal? Religions alone has been hard to exhibit in museums since their main core is mostly about ideas (Liao, 2006). In Islam, it may be a more sensitive question. Indeed, as Finbarr Barry Flood suggests, Iconoclasm has been contested (rather than dominated) within Muslim societies, and actual practices of managing zoomorphic and anthromorphic figures have varied in time and space. In addition, even ostensible Islamic iconoclasm—for example, the completely destruction of Bamiyan Buddha statue by Taliban government of Afghanistan in 2002—could be rational usage of historical justifications under a contemporary logic in order to promote its political message rather than ignorantly following traditions. Based on criticizing global modernity, it was more a mockery of Western hypocrisy which weighs inanimate icons (namely arts in museums) more than living beings (Flood, 2002). This clarification concerning historical and territorial multiplicity, despite illuminating, does not solve the problem but raises only greater difficulty: Shouldn't an exhibition aiming at multiculturalism and communication show controversial icons, explain why they are contested, illustrate how varying managements were performed through respective time and space, and give the public a chance to know and think of different opinions?

Unfortunately, it seems unlikely to do so in a contemporary museum. In Britain, Blackburn Museum has recalled its brochures in 2001 because it contained offending message, viz. a calligraphy of religious text shaped in a zoomorphic gazelle, after the review from members of the Lancashire Council of Mosques. But when some Muslim visitors actually saw such a picture in that exhibition, some did worry about it, some regarded it as inoffensive, yet others thought it as open to personal decision. The same year another exhibition in Edinburgh also endured similar situation (Heath, 2004: 302–304). Is there an actual line between being considerate and (self-)censorship? Even if we temporarily agree that theoretically respecting all contemporary represented “Other” (no matter who they are and how it is possible) is the most important thing, is it always so in praxis? For example, when Chinese media accused works of Ai Weiwei 艾未未 for vilification of China and find them extremely offending, why most Western galleries did not revoke his pieces in response to those who were offended? Admittedly every case is unique and perhaps even incomparable with one another, but what I intend to show here is that “respecting those who are represented/offended” is plausible yet neither a self-evident truth, nor an actual universal rule in contemporary museology.

These questions should also be considered in a greater, long debated context: Who can claim to own some part of history, and on what point can one determinate it history or contemporary? In the fifth Industrial Exhibition held in Osaka (1903), World’s Natives Building was canceled because Chinese students in Japan strongly protested its allegedly vilification of China by its representation of feed-bounded women and opium smokers (discussions see Yang, 2010). If it is a nowadays case, would one mind an exhibition on Chinese culture introducing such traditions, if their obsolescence is clarified and historical context explained? In such a situation, is considering some Chinese feeling of offending reasonable? Likewise, when it comes to representation of Islam, why, do one regard it

reasonable to remove offensive figures rather than illustrating its historical context and explain how could it being regarded as offensive? As Heath (2004: 304) questioned, who can serve as the arbiter?

In the practice of NTM case, it is much more “simple”: Since mosques and other Muslims provide the major collections and serve as the inspector, it is impossible to challenge their ideology (at least not conspicuously), on one hand. And since Imams and Muslims from the mosques do not collect *haram* (forbidden) objects, what they provide would naturally obey their belief. The anti-corporal soul furthermore influenced both quality and quantity of their collections in a deeper sense: There is an obvious lack of great “masterpieces” (because a distaste of fetishism), although indeed most of them are fine artifacts.⁸ In consequence, while there were more than 200 items displayed in the scene, there is still a sense of scarcity, i.e. the items are too small—this is why originally the exhibition was planned to be in the main exhibition hall on the ground (first) floor, yet it ended up on the third floor. This also directly results in the uneven spread of the three parts in the exhibition room: “the Sacred Space” was set at the smaller side, “the History” owned literally just a wall (Figure 3), and the rest are all about “Life and Culture” (Figure 4).

⁸ On the mechanism of masterpiece, artifact, authenticity and artificial, see Clifford, 1994.



Fig. 3 The wall on the history of Islam. (Photo by Hisham Tsai)

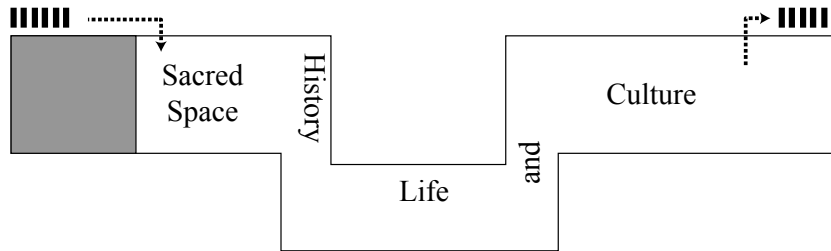


Fig. 4 Plan of the third floor and the exhibition.

For the Sacred Space, the only acceptable body are Quranic copies, images of Ka‘bah sanctuary and mosques, and some religious objects including rosaries and censers. Other items, if put in the Sacred Space, would arouse suspicion or objection for they are not “Islamic” in the sense of an anti-corporal soul (for instance, see the example of Turkish clothing in “III. Religion, history, anthropology, and Occidentalism”). As for the History part, an excuse was that it is hard for mosques in Taiwan to collect items of early Islamic dynasties in Middle Eastern countries far from the island. But if we think of the installation as a hole rather than just the items, the anti-corporal soul was influencing the

planning in a broader sense: the difference between texts and pictures. For instance, although the texts prepared by TAIS mentioned that Umayyad dynasty (661–750) recruited Byzantine craftsmen to create (even figural) mosaics (Wei, 2014: 239), there was no relative photo accompanied with the texts either in the book or in the exhibition scene. In fact, the wall of History was full of only texts and maps without any pictures as shown in Figure 3. It was not a coincidence, but an actual concern kept recurring during the planning process: how would some Muslim consultants react toward historical pictures (even genuine)? Would they regard some historical pictures offensive or anti-Islamic? International cases mentioned above (Ai Weiwei, example recorded by Heath, or early World Exhibitions) were not faraway things but what actually haunted members of TAIS and NTM during the planning. After weeks of arguments, the final results proofed that texts—unlike photos, which are not anti-corporal enough—passed through inspections more easily, and most of the attendees agreed that texts only would be a safer way.

However, if the anti-corporal soul was really a question, or if the resource was not capable for the museum to present a comprehensive introduction, then why “the Sacred Space” and “the History” are still settled as independent parts? Why not just omit them? Has this exhibition not named as *Islamic Life and Culture*?

III. Religion, history, anthropology, and Occidentalism

When reviewing Muslims’ feeling on Islam-related exhibitions in Britain, Heath concludes that many Muslims consider Islam as a thorough way of life unbreakable into this or that aspects, while it is intangible in museal displays and often unsatisfied (Heath, 2004: 322). This report accurately coincides to what Nabil Lin—the then director of TAIS—maintained: “Islam, contrary to what

common people think, is not ‘pure religious beliefs and rituals’, but a total ‘way of life’ [al-Din]” (Wei, 2014: 6). This is why this exhibition elevated or extracted the core beliefs, then narrated the development of Islamic Civilization, and finally showed how it is practiced in ordinary life.

As a religion or personal beliefs, such understanding is down to personal preferences. Yet as an exhibition, it nevertheless brought the point mentioned before: why, then, did the exhibition introduced religious, historical and social aspects but political (especially contemporary) one? Isn’t politics a part of such a way of life? To TAIS and NTM, the aim was to introduce the sides other than what is often covered in media (namely, politics, violence, terrorism etc.), as the director of NTM Chi-Ming Chen put it, “to bring out more accurate pictures of Islam to Taiwanese public” (Wei, 2014: 5). Deducible from the aim and the fact that contemporary politics were played down, the logic here was that if people know more about Islam other than what they had learnt from mass media, the former negative perceptions might change. But what this exhibition tried to avoid might just be one of the aspects that ordinary visitors in Taiwan most eagerly wanted to know. When I served as the docent in the exhibition, the most asked question was “why do Muslims support terrorism?” Likewise, a visitor, despite acknowledging that there were many items and descriptions, wrote in his blog article with a slightly unsatisfied tone that “naturally it’s all about positive narratives without any discussions on contemporary situations and challenges,” while he admitted that his previous understandings of Islam were mainly from newspapers and mass media.⁹ With hindsight, since museumgoers like such a blogger do know their limited sources of knowledge and are willing to learn new things, this exhibition could have at least told them that of course Islamic

⁹ See “Good3610,” <http://good3610.pixnet.net/blog/post/356195246-伊斯蘭生活與文化展> (accessed 07 May 2016).

teachings and most Muslims do not support terrorism (Esposito, 2002), on one hand, and the wrongly linkage between terrorism and all Muslims is a tool established to justify Islamophobia (Allen, 2004), on the other hand. It seems a great loss for the exhibition to face the issue frontally and grab the chance to clarify such a myth and actually change the visitors' possible stereotype. In this case, the visitors seem more willing to be challenged than the planning team to challenge public opinions.

Yet viewing Islam as a total way of life also poses another question in the sense of history. If some deeds can be determined “un-Islamic”, clearly either she/he did not practice Islam “correctly”, or it is not actually so “total” in practice. Scholars like Marshall Hodgson (1922–1968) generally oppose an overly inclusive view of Islam. He points out, for instance, that secular wine songs [prevalent in literature among medieval Muslims] were clearly “un-Islamic” but still related to Muslim societies. In other terms, although the line between secular and sacred is sometimes hard to separate, they are nevertheless two related but different sphere. To differentiate them, he coined the adjective “Islamicate”, contrary to “Islamic”, to denote what is related to Islam or Muslims but may or may not in accordance with Islamic doctrines (Hodgson, 1974). In this sense, there is Islamicate civilization rather than Islamic civilization, for civilization is the constant practice and renewal of its core rather than just the doctrines themselves. Some like Haneda even propose that scholars should bid their farewell to the notion “Islamic World History”, for it is less a historical reality than an abstract concept among Muslims and a notion manipulated in modern times by the academe (Haneda, 2012).



Fig. 5 Turkish style male clothing. Provided by Nabil Chang-Kuan Lin.
(Photo by Vincent Mu-Chien Chen)

Such an understanding not only concerns history but also contemporary Muslims. During a planning meeting, one Imam (i.e. one who leads prayers in mosque) pointed to a Turkish style male clothing and maintained that it is just an ethnic costume bearing nothing Islamic (Figure 5). Yet other members like Nabil Lin, who also revealed his position in the introductory article of the exhibition, replied that since Islam is about a total way of life, the clothes covers one's body as Islamic doctrines require, so it is suitable to present such a piece (Wei, 2014: 6). Trying to conciliate, another Muslim consultant reminded the Imam that since this exhibition is also about "life and culture", it can be placed in the cultural sections. The Muslim consultants' position is actually closer to Hodgson's view, i.e. a core (Islam) religion which is different from its relating culture rather than an integrated whole. Since then, the NTM members have stressed one the "cultural and living" side of this exhibition. Indeed, when TAIS and other Muslim consultants cared more about religiosity or history, NTM staff minded that how this exhibition can fit in the essence of NTM as a museum of natural history: the aspects of culture and life are lot more compatible than

religion (Su, Wei & Wu, 2014). This is why the practical installation and the title accented more on ordinary culture, while in the accompanying book, religion, history and cultural practices were in similar proportion. However, if this exhibition were really set upon the discipline of anthropology, the same problem still would have continued to exist: who can claim to own history? When anthropological studies and representation request high respects on represented others, do NTM really have to accept all instructions from mosques and consultants? Or should the exhibition focus specifically on local Muslims rather than religion and history? The situation would go into a loop of questions which have been raised in previous sections.

Finally, viewing Islam as “a total way of life” may itself be a problem concerning Orientalism no matter which discipline did the exhibition fall upon. As a paradox Robert J. C. Young points out, Western scholars either become an Orientalist if they engage in non-Western studies, or they turn into Euro-centrist if they choose not to take part in things other than Western affairs. (Spivak & Young, 1991: 226–227) A similar but reverse version is that non-Western scholars are either colonized, self-Orientalized, and Euro-centric if they accept such Western value and structure, or they are “Occidentalists” in opposition to Orientalists if they tried to establish themselves into counter-Western narratives.¹⁰ It does not literally mean that actual world falls into the dichotomy without any ambiguity or getaway. What I contend is that when one tries to resist Western views (unfortunately, often still in Western institutions) and propose another voice, such voice often also essentialize some of its presuppositions of the West (viz. Occidentalism), and thus there may be nothing different but only its position.

¹⁰ For example, see reflections of Stenberg, 2004: 103–104.

When binary in Orientalism is always different and unequal, in any case referring to a hierarchy of values (Sharp, 2009: 16–19), anti-Orientalism would be deconstructing the binary or proposing equal value among differences, rather than just reversing the hierarchy, which is in fact strengthening the binary. In other words, “defending Islam” itself sometimes not only is unable to defy Orientalism but actually falls prey to the binary proposed by Orientalists. Yet in the case of TAIS and NTM, when the opening article of the exhibition brochure lamented the “invasion of materialist Western Civilization into the Islamic World” (Wei, 2014: 29), it actually echoed a belief that Western civilization is materially superior and rational (secular, irreligious) while the “Islamic World” is religious and materially inferior (Esposito, 1999: 21), only that here the value is reverse (sober, religious Islam v.s. materialistic, empty modern West), as if the entire Islamic World in all space and time is not materialistic at all. While a great irony was that the exhibition (or perhaps museum *per se*) was itself materialistic, even in the “Sacred Space” the Quranic copies on display were stressed for their physical value, including high quality of workmanship, ancientness or pricey materials (gold, silver and shell sculpture) (Wei, 2014: 54–71).

A further manifesto of Occidentalism lay at the conclusion “Dialogue for Prosperity and Harmony.” The texts wrote that “fundamentally, religion can defend [the world] from the destructiveness of materialism and atheist science [...] Judaism, Christianity and Islam or even other religions have the same root, the goal of different believers is the same.” (Wei, 2014: 283).¹¹ Although acceptance, dialogue and interaction were emphasized in this section and made it ostensibly multicultural or politically correct, the quoted sentence nevertheless polarized the differences between religious and irreligious sphere. Even among religions, the author(s) assumed that all monotheist believers are the same (which

¹¹ Interestingly, these sentences were not translated into the accompanying English texts in the brochure.

are prone to peace) in contrast to atheists (which are causing destructions). And what about polytheists? Finally, if religion really is the cure, then what about religious wars and many contemporary political turbulences resulted from religious disputes?

Considering these points, the blogger mentioned in the second paragraph of this section is right: this exhibition was kind of biased. It was to a degree rooted on a ground of Occidentalism. To reflect upon such Occidentalism, it should be analyzed what this exhibition did essentialize: aside from “materialistic West” or “destructiveness of atheist science,” what kind of Islam did the exhibition actually represent?

IV. Which Islam

When considering if Islam is singular or multiple, Timothy Insoll maintains that Islam is one since Muslims are immediately identifiable, but within Islam there are diverse *ways of lives* (Insoll, 1999: 9–11). Base on similar assumption, Heath summarizes that most British museal representation of Islam neither contain detailed believers’ experience but superficial message, nor do they present the real diversity in the Islamic world (Heath, 2004: 319–321). In this sense, the NTM case seems to provide enough insider perspectives since the exhibition starts with the section “The Foundations of Islam” including four sub-sections: The Unity of Allah, the Quran, the Prophet, al-Hadith and al-Sharia, corresponding to beliefs, scripture, important figure and epistemology.¹² However, as for diversity, this exhibition revealed a shortage.

¹² Al-Hadith (Prophet Muhammad’s sayings and deed) served as a reference for Muslim behavior, and al-Sharia (Islamic laws) is developed upon al-Quran, al-Hadith and community traditions (Wei, 2014: 76).

Diversity in Islam, in the most superficial sense, should at least contain the differences between Shiite and Sunnite, the two major sects. The exhibition did cover this topic, yet it was written in “further readings” rather than the main texts. As mentioned, in the exhibition room, further readings are put in standing drawers. Many visitors barely noticed these cards, some wondered if it is available for taking up, some just gave up after seeing more pedantic words, only few visitors actually read them. The exhibition texts mentioned Shia Islam five times in total, three of them in such kind of further readings, only two of them in main texts. Furthermore, since the only two brief occasion in main texts were on the wall of History, which is a wall without any object, people can easily ignore it and pass the corridor (Figure 3). In other words, an average visitor to this exhibition would not notice that there are two major sects in Islam, let alone why and how they are different.

The management of further readings is resulted from two reasons. First, NTM does not want to bombard visitors with tirades, when TAIS, since most members are in academic institutions, insists to retain those words. Indeed, as Michael Baxandall (1991: 33) suggests, the visitors’ aim is to see visually interesting objects; otherwise they would go read a book. The anti-corporal soul, in this sense, may not be Islam but academic institutes (especially that of history and religion), which are used to texts while disdain pictures, in contrast to museums which are born to be visual bodies. The second reason is quite simple: both TAIS and NTM know that Shia Islam may not be favorable in eyes of Muslims in Taiwan (both local citizens and international workers, almost all are Sunni Muslims). Such consideration led to self-censorship determining some “sensitive issues” not to appear in main texts.



Fig. 6 The right side of a scene in “Life and Culture” part. (Photo by Hisham Tsai)

Why do the institutes functioning as disciplining the society become self-disciplined? A personal experience may serve as an example. When I gave an oral presentation to NTM and Muslim consultants on behalf of TAIS in a mid-term inspection, an Imam corrected my understanding of practices related to prayer beads (Subhah/Misbahah) and instructed me to right the mistakes. But then another meeting attendee refuted the Imam that in aspects of Sufism the original description was right.¹³ NTM curator clung not to go against the Imam, but other was resentful about such kind of Sunni orthodoxy pervasive among Taiwanese Muslims of which some often neglect or even hold a negative view on

¹³ Sufism is often mistaken as a sect, but in fact it is practiced by some Sunni, Shia or other sects of Muslims.

Sufism. At the end, both description of Sunni and Sufi practices of prayer beads were retained in the final texts (and yes, the texts became even lengthier a little bit). But ever since then, when it comes to every decision of writings, NTM members and I were keep asking if there is still any possible controversy. Instead of elaboration, often the decision is omitting. Indeed, as Lin's notion of "way of life", comparing to Insoll's one of "ways of life", the exhibition generally provided only a univocal narrative. Occasionally, some sections did try to give a more diverse picture straightforwardly. For instance, Szu-Wei Chen 陳峙維, the scholar in charge of the music section, points out that Muslims' attitude towards music is divergent, and both parties use verses from Quran to legitimize their claim, so actual practices is different and down to local traditions (Chen, 2014: 21). His position was revealed in the main texts and successfully passed through all censorships and inspections (Wei, 2014: 214).

In regards of installation, the problem of diversity became even worse. In a scene of "Life and Culture" part, visitors saw objects pile up at the two sides and the description texts in the middle. On the right side (Figure 6) were some contemporary paintings with Persian and North African styles (and their authenticity uncertain), while on the converse (Figure 7) were woolen tapestry from Tunisia, fragrant glasses from Egypt, women silver jewelry from Arabia, ornamental plates from Turkey, and hanging ornaments from Syria etc. Yet ridiculously, the explanation text in the middle is a passage about Halal food (permissible food according to Islam) without any connection to items displayed on both sides. Although there were labels telling the visitors the region of the items, no further explanation or introduction on differences between these regions and their sub-cultures. In such a situation, the rationality of display was more like a modernist one: They are juxtaposed together because of their seemingly similar shapes, styles and other aesthetic reasons, as if their respective contexts and features do not influence their seemingly harmony, despite the fact

that one with basic understanding of diverse arts in Islam can easily sense the differences. If a certain harmony was achieved in a degree, it was because most visitors in Taiwan also hold an Orientalist view on Islam and relative styles of arts (although, geographically most Muslims in the world are not in Orient but in the west and south of Taiwan), mystifying Islamic cultures as “an” unknown world and unable to tell their inner nuances. In other words, such harmony is based on visitors’ naivety. Another scene also revealed similar problem: Clothes and hats from Indonesia, Malaysia, Arabia etc. are all collocated together, with a black Turkish style tapestry hung in the back of them (Figure 8).



Fig. 7 The left side of a scene in “Life and Culture” part. (Photo by Li-Yuan Jhang)



Fig. 8 A scene of “Life and Culture”. (Photo by Li-Yuan Jhang)

In brief, the objects and the texts are telling their own stories with only bare connections. The reason was partly a consequence of the said hydra-headed planning. When TAIS tried to focus on the “total way” of Islam, it failed to reflect upon items, which since were from different foreign offices, naturally embedded with diversities. The only bit possibly related to these multi-cultural objects may lay within the history part. NTM, which actually execute the installation of items, also lacked of enough information to assemble them into a more reasonable way, and thus they managed the objects in a modernist method—according to their shapes, colors, materials rather than social or cultural contexts—which is what they were most familiar and professed.

Considering such defects, a disproportionate and thematically different yet structurally comparable example of famous case studies may be the *Africa95* project and its blockbuster exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent* at the British Museum in 1995. Supported by the Royal Academy and cooperating with more than 40 arts institutions in the UK, this exhibition was a bold survey introducing

visual culture of Africa from time to space as a whole (Court, 1999: 159–162). When reviewing its representation of Africa, Elsbeth Court concludes that critical objections came in three aspects: (1) It represented Africa as a totalized, unchanging single entity; (2) There was a question of “curating the other”, without enough Africans’ participation; and (3) It centered on objects ‘from’ Africa and failed to consider African diaspora, for example, African descendants in Britain (Court, 1999: 170–172).

Conferring to such criticism, some similar structural points are intriguing: (1) the NTM case also aimed at an overly ambitious area. While *Africa95* was at least limited in arts, the NTM case was set to incorporate religious, history, and daily lives. When the topic was too broad and resources of TAIS and NTM were so scarce completely incomparable to Royal Academy and British Museum, the defects shown in previous paragraphs are predictable and could have been thought of, had the planning team refer to such experiences. (2) Africa to the UK and Islam to Taiwan are both “the Other” to “the Mainstream/the Self” to a certain degree. In the UK, “Africa” is about its imperialist past and ethnical or racial inequality. In Taiwan, “Islam” is about minority (Chinese-speaking Muslims), international workers from Muslim countries, or at best an unfamiliar foreign culture(s). When *Africa95* tried to distinct itself from “the Other” which was being represented (for instance, there were extremely few Africans among the organizers, and contemporary African arts were excluded from the exhibition. See Court, 1999: 159–160), NTM actually did much better: many members of the planning team (TAIS or mosques) are Muslims. And finally (3) When *Africa95* failed to consider African diaspora, since the spread of Islam is itself a continuing diaspora of Muslims, the History part in the NTM case would justify this point a little bit. But what about Muslims in Taiwan, say, Muslim international workers, who are some four to five times as many as local Muslim citizens? How were they considered in this exhibition?

V. Ritualizing exhibition

Carol Duncan suggests that Art Museums are not so ostensibly secular but are like temples they emulate, introducing visitors a certain kind of ideology in their disguised rituals (Duncan, 1995: 1–9). Duncan’s understanding of Museums has aroused reflections among curators upon such an issue. But what if one’s solution is trying to make disguised rituals into candid expressions? From the very beginning, the entrance of the exhibition was decorated with a giant Arabic word “Allah” (Figure 9). Additionally, in the first part “the Sacred Space”, a niche toward Mecca was established in the room with a statue in the posture of Muslim prayer (Figure 10). To my surprise, Taipei mosque in this case did not raise any concern at the use of model. More than this straightforward manifesto of museum as a sacred space, NTM furthermore translated the scene into an actual prayer hall: In a visiting event, some Muslims are invited to actually perform prayers in the exhibition scene (Wei, 2015). Museum now is not just emulating temples but a certain kind of in-between: it itself became a place for dual believers (both believers of museum and of Islam) to perform its dual rituals (to perform civilization and prayers). The validity of this mechanism is based on the fact that congregated Muslim prayers do not necessarily have to be performed in mosques but any clean space. The rituals they performed—in its literally term—broke the religious-secular dichotomy prevalent since Enlightenment. When religious objects endure a process of de-sacredness and then museumification in an ordinary religious exhibition (Liao, 2006), this one de-museumfized and re-sanctified the exhibition field. I have to admit that it is extremely hard to tell whether this transformation is a return to the ancestry of museums, or a postmodernist mockery on pretentious, ostensibly secularized modern museums.



Fig. 9 The entrance. (Photo by Chia-Fu Liu)

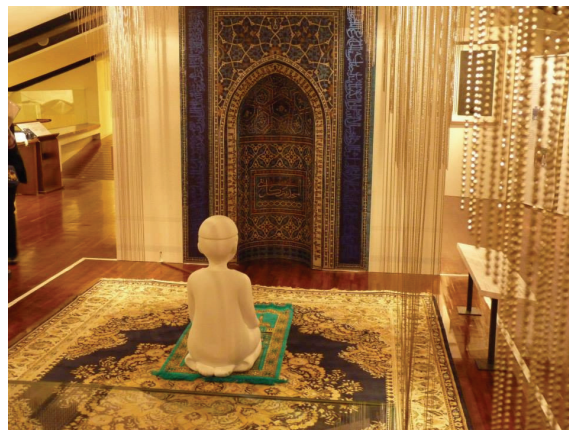


Fig. 10 A scene from the part “the Sacred Space”. (Photo by Farid Lai)

Muslims, especially those of new immigrants and international workers, performed another “ritual” in the exhibition encouraged by modern state rationality: to enhance cultural integration and diversity. The Ministry of Culture started to raise the awareness of museums on accommodating new immigrants since 2013, and the next year one special topic of *The Newsletter of the Chinese*

Association of Museums, R.O.C. 博物館簡訊 was also “museums and new immigrants” (Cheng, 2015: 104). Cheng summarized that there are diverse needs and aspects when it comes to such an issue: some maintain that the work of museums is to introduce Taiwanese culture to new immigrants and transform these non-visitors into museum goers; others contend that it is more important to introduce other cultures (in Taiwanese context, cultures of Southeast Asia) to Taiwanese, empower these new immigrants, and transform them into capable docents to be the intermediary (Cheng, 2015:107–112). When reflecting upon this issue, the NTM curator of this exhibition Chen-Yu Wei reports that with the policy of NTM, by cooperating with non-governmental organizations in planning the spinoff events, this exhibition has achieved some positive results. For example, some international workers were glad to have a chance introducing their religion and culture to their Taiwanese employers. A Muslim mother also revealed her joy to introduce her religion to her child(ren) and families (Wei, 2015). In other words, the Museum still serves as civilizing rituals disciplining its visitors with a high contemporary ideal, in which citizens, new immigrants and international workers alike should perform multiculturalism through understanding and participating cultures different from their own.

But if one again really scrutinizes how Islam was actually being represented, the inconsistency in this exhibition revealed its problem, which was actually resulted from a kind of ideology (i.e. knowledge used to justify unbalanced power or situation). When the narration is based on academic ideal (namely, an Arab-centered version) rather than actual practices in certain regions, most Muslims of new immigrants and international workers were from Indonesia. For instance, in the passage concerning daily usage of greetings (Wei, 2014: 163), only a list of everyday dialogue in Arabic was provided. Although Arabic language is indeed the formal language in many religious practices, and greetings like “As-salamu ‘alaykum” (may peace be upon you) is used almost universally

by all Muslims, still most non-Arabic Muslims greet and speak to one another more often in their mother tongue. This is a neglect of the fact that about 4/5 of Muslims are non-Arabic, and Indonesia alone counts some 13% of all Muslims.¹⁴ Likewise, the passage concerning funerary rites was based on a “standard” version maintaining that Muslims do not use gravestones and decorations in principle (Wei, 2014: 112–114), while they are in practice pretty common, and some of them are even delicate enough to serve as objects for artistic analysis (for example, see Frembgen, 1998). Such obvious difference between theory and practice was neglected, let alone “nuanced” variations like special funerary practices in Indonesia (Gaper, 2015). Indeed, there was a section concerning locality (Wei, 2014: 262–279), yet it was the section of “Islam in Taiwan,” which is based on Muslim Taiwanese citizens (viz. Chinese-speaking Muslims in Taiwan) with only few lines about international workers or new immigrants.

In addition, such imbalance had its material base. Since the major objects were provided by Taiwanese mosques and Anatolia Formosan Association, what visitors saw were Arabic, Turkic and Chinese Islam with extremely few Southeastern Asian origins. Even visitors might notice that this exhibition was abundant with Turkish artistic objects, including the recurring tulip design.¹⁵ In the passage of “Musical instruments in the Islamic world,” again it basically centered on Middle Eastern instruments and music (Wei, 2014: 217–229), but others like Gamelan music was not able to be included, despite its widely use in Islamic rituals in Java (Sumarsam, 1995). Even if we accept the excuse that any information of Gamelan ensemble was rare in Taiwan, other kinds of Indonesian Islamic performance are still available: for instance, a certain group of

¹⁴ Statistics from the survey of Pew Research Center in 2010, accessed 08 May 2016, <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/religions/muslims>.

¹⁵ See Jhang, L. Y., <http://liyuanfotography.pixnet.net/blog/post/367021643->【展覽分享】伊斯蘭文化與生活特展(accessed 7 May 2016).

Indonesian international workers in Taiwan had actually performed Islamic dancing and singing in several occasions (Chiou, 2014: 41–43). In other words, genuine public culture of Indonesian Muslims was not uncontactable when the exhibition was being planned, yet TAIS and NTM laid their emphasis or main goal in cooperating with Turkish and Arabic institutions to borrow delicate copperware, silverware, exquisite ceramics and “Oriental” instruments like Oud, Tablah or Qanun (ironically, “Middle East” or “the Orient” actually lies to the west of Taiwan) (for instance, see Wei, 2014: 198–199). The exquisite items did not in themselves constitute a problem; the problem is that almost none of the presented materials, including audios, videos, texts or items, were from or related to the public culture of international workers in Taiwan. Class acts as an important factor here: no matter how genuine, lively and geographically intimate these Indonesian international workers are, they are unable to compete non-daily, upper-class and purely artistic objects coming from faraway Turkey or Arabic countries. Although they are also Muslims, the only role assigned to them in this exhibition were to be the model visitors contemplating these “exotic” items which were represented as “their” culture.

In sum, when some Muslims of new immigrants and international workers were excited to see these objects concerning Islam, it was partly because what they saw was what produced and appreciated in a certain kind(s) of high culture, which was provided by middle- and upper-classes planning members from TAIS, NTM, foreign offices and mosques altogether, and which was probably different from these new immigrants and international workers in culture, or even in class. It is extremely suspicious that what kind of multiculturalism was being receipted in actuality. Was it because Islam is also from another high culture (in a mystified and an Orientalized mixture) so it deserves our respect, rather than a deeper understanding about some international workers’ own religion in their actual Indonesian context? Local Muslim visitors—citizens and international workers

alike—were also amazed by a seemingly authentic version of “their” culture, which was not actually the background of many. Due to the economic, political and cultural position of the planning team, the rationality pointed out by Carol Duncan was still valid in this exhibition. In brief, although in an ostensibly multicultural aim, the ideology of museum as a tool to discipline the public with middle-class ideal had never been challenged, at least not in this exhibition. In this sense, this project is also about “curating the other”, just like *Africa95*.

Conclusion

The exhibition *Islamic Life and Culture* was probably the first comprehensive introduction of Islam in Taiwan (Lin, 2014: 140). The cooperation of NTM, TAIS and other Muslim institutions led to many compromises and dissonances in the message presented and the kind of Islam represented. First is its conservatism in texts and tones avoiding any potential controversies. Second, the position of the exhibition was trapped or struggle between religiosity, historicity or ethnicity, while a certain kind of Occidentalism revealed in the texts prevent further dialogues and communications. In addition, when there was a lack of true cooperation between organizers and object collectors, Islam was being represented as an entity without enough descriptions on its diversity, while objects from a wide variety of cultures were gathered and piled up without seemingly discrepancy based on a mystifying (Orientalizing) vision. Indeed, the method of display blurred the distinction between modern idea of religious-secular separation. But meanwhile, the ideal of disciplining the public still prevailed in the exhibition, especially when it comes to the difference in class between planning team and new immigrants or international workers.

Despite museum has being criticized by Foucaultian theories, Lord (2006) points out that it still serves as an effective tool contributing to progress even in

Foucaultian terms for it provides a place for public contestation. Considering such a perspective, there is no doubt that the special exhibition on Islam is nevertheless praiseworthy for its uniqueness, ambition, bravery and even the questions it has generated. Indeed, the progress (if any) of a society is often between struggles and frustration. As a participant of such a project, perhaps I could have been satisfied by finishing my part and let go the exhibition. But just as museums bear both functions of entertainment and education, I feel it responsible to reflect upon my own experience critically, to contemplate the process I have been involved in, and morally responsible to respond to Saidian criticism (although possibly forever in vain). Hopefully this reflection between insider and outsider perspectives would give light to further studies and planning.

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