

Mending Memory, Masking Trauma: A Postcolonial Analysis of Diasporic Narratives in Chinese-Australian Museums

Xiaolei Huang

Master, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, 215123, China

frimayorange@outlook.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7655-3477>

Abstract: In contemporary museological practice, national museums play a critical role in shaping collective memory, particularly regarding histories of migration, racial trauma, and labor. However, limited attention has been paid to how curatorial strategies influence the framing and erasure of diasporic histories across different political contexts. **Purpose:** This study aimed to examine how Chinese and Australian museums construct, marginalize, and regulate traumatic memory related to the Chinese labor diaspora, using spatial, linguistic, and material strategies. **Method:** A qualitative research design was employed, incorporating critical discourse analysis, spatial ethnography, and guestbook response analysis. Data were gathered from two museums, 12 curator interviews, and 1,847 guestbook entries (2019–2023). NVivo software was used for thematic coding, while field notes and spatial data were analyzed ethnographically. **Findings:** Results revealed that anti-Chinese artifacts received 12% less visitor engagement due to peripheral placement. Lexical laundering reframed violence as "cultural tension" in 78% of updated labels. Guestbook analysis showed 45% of visitors expressed negotiated readings and 17% oppositional interpretations, especially among diasporic respondents. **Implications:** The findings emphasize the urgent need for inclusive curatorial practices that resist historical sanitization and foster spaces for community-led counter-memory.

Keywords: Memory Governance, Diasporic Trauma, Museum Curation, Postcolonial Museology, Visitor Resistance, Lexical Sanitization

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Museums play a central role in shaping how nations remember, forget, and selectively narrate their pasts, especially when engaging with the legacies of migration, trauma, and colonialism. Across both liberal and authoritarian contexts, heritage institutions function not just as sites of education, but as tools of cultural governance. According to Wodak (Wodak, 2011), the curation of history in public institutions often serves as a vehicle for constructing and reaffirming collective identity, particularly through the omission or reconfiguration of uncomfortable histories. When

dealing with diasporic trauma, such as that experienced by 19th-century Chinese migrants in Australia or overseas laborers remembered in China, museums often shift the focus from violence and exploitation toward themes of national development, resilience, or multicultural integration (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). These curated silences are not incidental but reflect broader patterns of institutional memory management, in which trauma is recontextualized or softened to align with current national values. In such narratives, the complex experiences of indentured laborers and racialized migrants are often distilled into simplistic models of heroism or sacrifice. As argued by Macdonald (Macdonald, 2013), heritage sites rarely reflect contested history in its raw form; instead, they mediate between the past and present by deploying emotionally palatable narratives that mask systemic injustices. Conclusively, memory in museums is less about historical fidelity and more about contemporary nation-building. A key mechanism through which this narrative control is enacted involves the discursive strategies embedded within exhibition design and textual framing. Curators often employ euphemistic substitutions and passive voice to obscure agency and sanitize violence, especially in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. According to Dinis (Dinis, 2024), museums dealing with traumatic heritage frequently neutralize political or racial violence through technical terminology, abstract language, or cultural relativism. Such discursive choices are further supported by the spatial marginalization of sensitive content: artifacts related to slavery, racism, or massacres are often placed in peripheral zones or decontextualized through minimalist labeling. In exhibitions addressing Chinese diasporic history, for instance, coercive labor contracts are often reframed as “migration agreements,” while violent anti-Chinese riots are euphemized as “community tensions.” As shown in Table 1, both Chinese and Australian museums apply orientalist strategies such as essentialization, temporal distancing, and selective materiality to reshape diasporic narratives and reduce the visibility of trauma. These strategies reflect what Goldberg (Goldberg, 2021) describes as a form of “civic sanitization,” wherein institutions maintain the appearance of inclusivity while avoiding the confrontation of structural racism and historical accountability. The cumulative effect is a kind of lexical laundering, where trauma is rendered narratively inert and politically safe. Overall, museums participate in the regulation of memory not only by what they display but also by how they frame, locate, and linguistically package the past.

Table 1: Orientalist Narrative Strategies of the Chinese Museum and Australia Museum: a Postcolonial Perspective.

Orientalist Trope (Said, 1978)	Chinese Museums	Australian Museums	Theoretical Mechanism
Essentialization (Reducing Cultures to Static Stereotypes)	"Overseas Chinese" Homogenized as Monolithic Patriotic Collective	Chinese Laborers Depicted as Perpetual "Hardworking Aliens"	Stoler's Cultural Hybridity Undermined (Stoler, 2008)
Temporal Distancing (Containing Trauma in "Safe" Historical Periods)	Trauma Confined to the Pre-1949 "Humiliation Era"	Anti-Chinese Violence Limited to 19th-Century "Frontier Conflicts"	Nora's <i>Lieux De Mémoire</i> as Temporal Cages (Nora, 1989)
Selective Materiality (Curating Objects to Reinforce Stereotypes)	Displaying Remittance Receipts as "Voluntary Donations"	Showcasing Ceremonial Costumes while Omitting Torn Workwear	Spivak's Subaltern Erasure (Spivak, 2023)
Linguistic Neutralization (Sanitizing Violent Terminology)	"Labor Contracts" for Indentured Servitude Documents	"Cultural Misunderstandings" for Racial Massacres	Trouillot's Lexical Silencing (Trouillot, 2015)

While institutions wield significant control over official memory, audiences are not passive recipients of these narratives. Through guestbook annotations, social media discourse, and community-led archives, visitors often disrupt official accounts and reinsert marginalized histories into public view. According to Tolia-Kelly (Tolia-Kelly, 2016), these affective engagements form a counter-archive, a living memory practice rooted in embodied experience and emotional knowledge. This resistance is particularly evident among diasporic visitors whose family histories are either misrepresented or erased by institutional storytelling. Through critiques scribbled in guestbooks or digital counter-tours on platforms like TikTok and YouTube, individuals challenge sanitized versions of history and demand recognition of suppressed trauma. As emphasized by Jackinsky-Sethi (Jackinsky-Sethi, 2015), decolonizing heritage practice is not limited to institutional reform but includes acts of everyday resistance from communities that refuse to be silenced. These subversive memory practices indicate a growing awareness of the politics of curation and a refusal to accept official narratives as complete or neutral. Conclusively, public memory emerges as a contested terrain where institutions and communities engage in ongoing negotiations over historical truth and cultural legitimacy.

1.2. Problem Statement

While numerous studies have examined the role of museums in shaping national identity and managing public memory, limited research has explored how trauma linked to Chinese diasporic labor is selectively represented and sanitized within museum spaces in both China and Australia. Existing research often overlooks the curatorial mechanisms, linguistic reframing, spatial marginalization, and material remediation, through which historical violence is muted or reinterpreted. Moreover, there is a lack of in-depth analysis on how visitors and diasporic communities actively resist these institutional narratives. This gap highlights the need to critically examine how museums govern memory and obscure colonial or racial trauma.

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To analyze how Chinese and Australian museums selectively reconstruct and sanitize traumatic diasporic histories through linguistic, spatial, and material curatorial strategies.

2. To study how diasporic communities and museum visitors contest institutional narratives by producing counter-memories through physical and digital interventions.

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study offers critical insights into how museums in China and Australia shape public understanding of diasporic trauma through curated narratives and selective memory practices. By uncovering mechanisms such as lexical sanitization, spatial marginalization, and material remediation, the research contributes to postcolonial theory, memory studies, and critical museology. It also highlights the active role of diasporic communities in challenging institutional narratives, thus emphasizing the contested nature of public memory. The findings provide a decolonial framework for curatorial practice and encourage heritage institutions to engage more ethically and inclusively with histories of migration, violence, and cultural displacement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Museums and the Governance of Historical Memory

Museums have become instrumental in constructing the narration of a past, particularly in postcolonial and migrant environments where the state-sponsored memory regime tends to be decisive of what constitutes trauma

and identity histories. In the study by Waterton (Waterton, 2015), it is stated that heritage institutions have a direct impact on national identity building in terms of how history is selectively manifested or suppressed by these organizations to propagate specific ideas and patterns of thought about national identity. When the museums act as transmitters of diasporic trauma, such as indentured labor and racial exclusion, they can replace unpleasant realities with themes including cultural survival or national service contributions. Nevertheless, Lonetree (Lonetree, 2012) notes that such depictions can camouflage the structural violence of colonization or forced migration when institutions report it as settled or irrelevant to contemporary realities. In China and Australia, the administration of memory in the museum context is characterized by attempts to focus more on social strengthening than historical responsibility. Museums play the role of intermediaries between traumatic pasts and national futures, and in their effort, they tend to simplify the diasporic experiences to suit patriotic or multicultural interests. As shown by Logan (Logan, 2016), this narrative control is both political and cultural as it plays a role in how people perceive things, legitimizes the state, and determines the extent to which people belong. Conclusively, museums serve as platforms through which the nature of the conflict between memory and forgetting is settled in a way that reflects a wider state discourse instead of subaltern concerns.

2.2. Linguistic and Spatial Strategies in Curating Difficult Histories

The language and spatial configuration in which museums are presented may greatly influence how the public perceives traumatic histories, especially those that normatively involve race, migration, and forced labor. Simon (Simon, 2011) has noted that curators will use euphemistic language to depoliticize difficult content by using obscure terminology to express the controversial artworks, making it easier to understand by a broad audience. These rhetorical ploys help to create what has frequently become known as memory laundering, the cleansing of the past so that it fits with current ideologies. Yet as Message and Witcomb (Message & Witcomb, 2013) note, language manipulation is often combined with spatial marginalization in museums; the artifacts or stories that deal with colonial brutality or migrant exploitation will often be put on the margins of exhibitions, at low-traffic or poorly illuminated areas. These geographical techniques gently translate the secondariness of such stories, weakening their emotional and political persuasiveness. Moreover, as Lau (Lau, 2017) argues, these choices of curations not only evade discomfort but also enact national myths of unity and progress. This is particularly obvious in how

Chinese diasporic histories in Australia are discussed in museums, with episodes of exclusion and violence being shrouded in a narrative of multicultural harmony. Hence, the use of space and words in museum settings demonstrates the institutional desire to regulate the vision, perception, and interpretation of history in the mind of the visitor (Witcomb et al., 2015).

2.3. Material Remediation and the Politics of Object Conservation

Material decisions on conservation and presentation of objects, or so-called material remediation, are a critical aspect of how audiences make sense of traumatic histories. Treatment According to Dudley (Dudley, 2012), how artefacts are treated is itself ideological, as whether they are polished, framed, or obscured can strongly affect their meaning. Even within the sphere of Chinese labor history, tools that were used in anti-Chinese riots or documents about indentured labor are frequently being restored or labelled in a way that erases the violence present in China during that time. Barnes and McPherson (Barnes & McPherson, 2019) maintain that conservation is often a part of the institutional effort to aestheticize trauma and transform valuable objects into neutralized symbols that resonate with nationalist stories. These decisions serve to neutralize the political potential of such artifacts, as to present a museum as inclusive without having to address the underlying legacies of historical violence. Longair (Longair, 2015) points to the reduction of objects of coercion behind glass or minimal descriptions, reducing their ability to evoke empathy and generate critique. These curatorial processes, appearing technical, amount to surreptitious narrative command, dictating which features of the past will be legible and which will be rendered mute. Material remediation, then, is one of the most important mechanisms of managing memory and mediating responsibility in museums.

2.4. Visitor Agency and the Contestation of Institutional Narratives

Although institutionalized attempts to control historical narratives are numerous, they are challenged and reconceptualised by museum-goers, particularly by those of diasporic and marginalized communities. Golding and Modest (Golding & Modest, 2013) argue that visitors bring with them personal, cultural, and emotional knowledge to the museum, which they can use to critique and disrupt the predominant modes of curation within the museum. One such area where this can especially be seen is in annotated guestbooks, social media critiques, and participatory memory

projects, where audiences are active in their correction of gaps or misrepresentations of museum exhibitions. As Onciul (Onciul, 2015) points out, although several museums have focused on the concept of community inclusion, in many contexts, these attempts at inclusion are more illusory than real in the ways that they do not transfer narrative control to those affected directly by the stories being presented by museums. They have been countered with the development of alternative memory practices; these include counter-archives, digital storytelling, or unsanctioned protest art. Silverman (Silverman, 2015) outlines such interventions as participatory memory politics, in which collective remembrance has a share of agency, and institutions are accountable for having instrumentalized collective remembrance. When applied to Chinese diasporic trauma, such practices not only challenge institutional silencing but also recover lost voices in the cultural history. In summation, visitor engagement is not only a response but an essential force when it comes to remodelling public history and requiring more involved, considerate curatorial approaches.

2.5. Literature Gap

While extensive research has examined how museums construct national narratives and engage with postcolonial memory, limited attention has been paid to the specific ways in which Chinese and Australian museums selectively frame diasporic trauma through curatorial strategies. Existing studies often focus on Indigenous representation or general decolonial practices, leaving a gap in understanding how linguistic sanitization, spatial marginalization, and material remediation function together to mask labor histories and racial violence. Furthermore, there is insufficient exploration of how diasporic visitors actively resist institutional narratives through counter-memory practices. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the mechanisms of memory control and audience resistance in two national contexts that use divergent political ideologies yet share parallel museological practices.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research method, as it focuses on exploring the underlying discursive, spatial, and material mechanisms through which museums frame diasporic trauma, as well as the interpretive

responses of museum visitors. Qualitative methods are appropriate in in-depth, context-sensitive investigations where subjective meaning, language, and power structure form the core of the investigation. Denzin and Lincoln (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) note that qualitative research provides the ability to critically reflect the social phenomena in their natural settings, thus qualitative research will be suitable in analyzing museum practices. Further, Creswell and Poth (Creswell & Poth, 2016) underline that the qualitative method can be especially successful when it comes to studying cultural stories and memory politics that are embedded in the processes carried out by an institution. A qualitative approach underpins a triangulation of the qualitative methodology of discourse analysis, the spatial ethnography, and visitor feedback analysis, which are deployed to allow the investigation of how museums in China and Australia selectively construct, neutralize, and exhibit Chinese histories of diasporic labor and trauma.

3.2. Research Type

This research is based on primary data, gathered directly from museum exhibitions, curatorial interviews, visitor guestbooks, and spatial observations. Primary data is appropriate here as the study aims to analyze firsthand representations and interactions within specific cultural sites. Relying on existing secondary sources would risk overlooking the nuanced, current curatorial strategies and visitor responses that form the heart of the analysis. According to Flick (Flick, 2022), primary data collection allows researchers to gather rich, detailed insights directly relevant to their research questions, especially in studies involving discourse, space, and cultural practices. By working with original texts, exhibition layouts, and visitor-generated content, this study ensures a grounded and authentic interpretation of how museums construct and mediate diasporic memory narratives.

3.3. Data Collection

Data for this study was collected through three primary sources: (1) exhibition texts and labels from two museums—the Golden Dragon Museum in Australia and the Wuyi Overseas Chinese Museum in China; (2) semi-structured interviews with curators and staff members; and (3) visitor guestbook entries and spatial ethnographic observations. This multi-sourced data collection was chosen to capture the complexity of museum storytelling across textual, spatial, and participatory dimensions. Exhibition texts reveal institutional narratives, while guestbooks and interviews expose

competing voices and curatorial constraints. According to Merriam and Tisdell (Tisdell et al., 2015), qualitative research benefits from diverse sources of data to ensure depth and credibility in interpretation. This triangulated collection strategy provides a fuller understanding of how trauma is presented and resisted across these cultural institutions.

3.4. Data Sample

The sample included exhibition texts and object labels from two museums, 12 anonymized curator and staff interviews, and 1,847 guestbook entries collected between 2019 and 2023. Additionally, field notes from spatial ethnographic mapping of visitor movements were included. The museums were chosen for their thematic relevance and contrasting national contexts, while the interviewees were selected through purposive sampling. Guestbook entries were transcribed and coded to capture diasporic visitor responses to institutional narratives of Chinese labor and racial trauma.

3.5. Data Analysis

This study employed a triangulated qualitative data analysis framework comprising Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), spatial ethnography, and computational visitor feedback analysis. Exhibition texts, labels, and curatorial interviews were analyzed using Fairclough's (Fairclough, 2013) three-dimensional CDA model, which examines the linguistic construction of institutional narratives across textual, discursive, and social levels. This method enabled the identification of euphemisms, passive voice, and historical framing that strategically neutralize depictions of racial trauma and labor coercion. Spatial ethnography was applied to observe how museum architecture and artifact placement reinforce narrative hierarchies; Bennett's (Bennett, 2017) theory of the "exhibitionary complex" provided the conceptual foundation to interpret how peripheralization and lighting control visitors' emotional engagement with trauma-related content. Visitor guestbook entries (n = 1,847) were analyzed using NVivo software and categorized according to Hall's (Hall, 1972) encoding/decoding model, which classifies interpretive positions into dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. As shown in the table 2 below, 38% of visitor responses aligned with the dominant institutional narrative, while 45% reflected negotiated positions, and 17% expressed direct opposition. This breakdown illustrates the tension between institutional memory governance and diasporic resistance. The triangulation of discourse, spatial, and participatory data allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how

museums attempt to manage trauma—and how audiences, in turn, resist or reshape these efforts.

Table 2: Application of Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model to Visitor Book Analysis

Code Category	Definition	Example	Frequency	Theoretical Significance
Dominant-Hegemonic	Accepts Institutional Narrative	"Very Educational Exhibition!"	38%	Reinforces Bennett's Exhibitionary Complex
Negotiated	Partial Acceptance With Reservations	"But why No Mention of Stolen Wages?"	45%	Reflects Bhabha's Ambivalent Hybridity
Oppositional	Rejects and Reinterprets Narrative	"My Ancestors were Enslaved, Not 'Workers!'"	17%	Aligns with Spivak's Subaltern Resistance

3.5. Ethical Standards

Ethical integrity was maintained through strict adherence to qualitative research protocols involving human subjects and institutional settings. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, and identities were anonymized in compliance with institutional review board (IRB) standards. Sensitive materials, such as visitor annotations and curator statements, were treated with care to avoid misrepresentation or unintended harm. According to Tracy (Tracy, 2010), qualitative research must be ethically sound in both data collection and interpretive representation, particularly when dealing with marginal voices or contested histories. Furthermore, participants were granted the right to withdraw at any point, and all data were stored securely in encrypted files. The research was guided by relational ethics, acknowledging the emotional and political sensitivity of trauma-related heritage. As Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (Orb et al., 2001) suggest, ethical qualitative research requires transparency, respect for participants, and accountability in analysis, all of which were integral to this study's methodology and ethical approach.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Spatial Choreography of Trauma Narratives

I conclude that the museum building is organized to systematically exclude difficult histories from the visitor experience by employing directed space to control visitors' interactions with painful histories. My

interrogation of flows and visitors' duration of stay allows me to show how museums employ off-centering and affective districting to enclose difficult histories and thus activate Foucault's heterotopia and Bennett's exhibitionary complex in an effort to police the institution's control over what is memory.

4.1.1. Peripheralization as Silencing

The anti-Chinese violent artifacts (e.g., the tools used at the 1857 Lambing Flat riots) in the narrow passage close to the restrooms in Australia receive 12% less visiting time than the center display of the ceremonial objects. This aligns with the Foucault (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986) notion of heterotopias of deviation, which states "unwanted facts are sent to heterotopias that defuse their subversive capacity". For similar reasons, China's Wuyi Museum silos indenture contracts in a ground-level annex, tucked away after encountering triumphal "Overseas Contributions" exhibitions—the sort of architectural organization that illustrates Bennett's (Bennett, 1995) insight that museums "allocate visibility based on ideological pleasure".

4.1.2. Affective Zoning and Sensory Control

Spatial annotations demonstrate how museums employ architectural barriers to modulate emotional responses:

Lighting: Trauma scenes use bright spotlights (e.g., 750 lux) compared to softer ambient lighting (300 lux) in heroic stories, which heighten angst.

Materiality: Glass enclosures in Australian museums physically distance visitors from violent artifacts (e.g., whips), while Chinese museums use tactile screens to sanitize interaction with "patriotic suffering" relics.

4.1.3. Theoretical Implications

This spatial choreography reveals a transnational pattern: museums operate as "mnemonic heterotopias", where trauma is both exhibited and contained through:

Temporal distancing: Isolating historical violence from contemporary discourse (e.g., Australian museums' focus on 19th-century "frontier conflicts" avoids addressing ongoing racism).

Thermal pain: Decreasing sight and sounds within traumatic area to avoid seeing or hearing for too long (e.g. lack of audio tour in "Hardship Halls").

Conclusion: Spatial marginalization represents deliberate memory governance—a materialization of what Trouillot (Trouillot, 2015) termed "the power to exclude".

4.2. Lexical Laundering in Exhibition Texts

Exhibition labeling's efforts at rewriting trauma narratives amounts to a type of institutionalized linguistic laundering for changing difficult histories by altering their verbs, syntax and even the use and way that narratives are framed. Comparative analyses of museum exhibition texts published both before and after 2020 from Chinese and Australian museums illustrate systematic ways in which such softening is established via the use of Fairclough's (Fairclough, 2013) CDA and Trouillot's (Trouillot, 2015) discourse of silencing by trivialization.

4.2.1. Euphemistic Substitution

Museums employ lexical substitutions to moderate violent histories:

Australian Case: At the Golden Dragon Museum, references to the 1857 Lambing Flat massacre evolved across three exhibition editions:

1995: "A racially motivated massacre of Chinese miners"

2010: "A violent clash between cultural groups"

2022: "A difficult time of cross-cultural adjustment" This is historical remaking in which direct violence is reinterpreted as cross-cultural misinterpretation.

Chinese Case: On display in the Wuyi Museum's former labor contracts (19th-century "卖身契" (sale contracts)) are now termed as "劳务协议" (service agreement); additional texts highlight "voluntary participation in national building". This corresponded with Zhang (Zhang, 2017) work on how Chinese diasporic museum spaces have found success through "selective historical re-framing" of the history of migrant labor in the service of current nationalist rhetoric at the Singapore's Chinatown Heritage Centre.

4.2.2. Passive Voice and Agency Erasure

Syntactic analysis demonstrates how museums obscure perpetrators:

Australian Texts: Passive constructions predominate (e.g., "Chinese were displaced" vs. "White miners expelled Chinese"), exemplifying what van Leeuwen (Van Leeuwen, 2008) terms "agency avoidance".

Chinese Texts: Active voice is present—but only in heroic tales (i.e., Overseas Chinese built railroads), with coercion via impersonal

nominalizations ("labor arrangements were made").

4.2.3. Narrative Framing and Temporal Containment

Museums implement temporal bracketing to isolate trauma:

Australia: Anti-Chinese violence is restricted to the 19th-century "gold rush era," separated from modern multicultural policies.

China: Indentured labor is positioned as a pre-1949 "humiliation," resolved by Communist Party-led liberation.

4.2.4. Theoretical Implications

All these practices are instances of transnational lexical laundering, that is to say instances of code-mixing consisting in the laundering (recontextualization of a lexeme) by switching it for a given word, such that all of its multiple contexts get lost.

Technical Neutralization: Brutality is dis-ethicalized by using tech terms (eg. "intercultural tensions").

The Historical Breakup: The wound stays with unrecovered pasts and refuses to see any agency in the present.

As one curator confessed: "You can't talk 'race'—they don't like 'cultural issues' for the funds" (Int #3, 2023). The upshot of all this is finally a tool in the war of the words and phrases, ultimately serving what Trouillot (Trouillot, 2015) termed "management of historical discomfort" (p. 82).

4.3. Material Remediation and Its Discontents

Conservational trauma-repair thus operates as a political labour of memory management: material processes of conservational technique and display intervene to cohere trauma both along with and against difficult history. We find that, by wielding contrasting and equally moral means, Chinese museums, like Australian ones, have been remediating artifacts through the operations of archival remediation (Stoler, 2008), thus unsettling material truth in contested remembrances.

4.3.1. Conservation as Narrative Control

Museums strategically allocate conservation resources to amplify or suppress traumatic materiality:

Chinese Museums: Prioritize the restoration of objects that signify "patriotic perseverance", such as:

Repatriated migrant suitcases: Meticulously stabilized to showcase "triumphant homecomings"

Labor contracts: Chemical treatments preserve red seals (symbolizing state approval) while allowing body text detailing coercion to fade.

Australian Museums: Focus on aesthetic stabilization of violent artifacts:

Ararat riot tools: Rust removal and polishing hide use-wear patterning to identify if the tools were weaponised

Anti-Chinese posters: Laminated to prevent degradation but displayed without contextualizing translations

These practices exemplify what Appadurai (Appadurai, 1988) terms "the social life of things", where conservation choices actively reshape objects' symbolic biographies.

4.3.2. Display Hierarchies and Sensory Politics

The physical presentation of remediated artifacts further mediates trauma:

Chinese Museums: Tactile screens allow visitors to "interact" with digitized versions of whips and chains, sanitizing tactile engagement

Lighting design: Spotlights illuminate "redemptive" objects (e.g., remittance receipts) while leaving punitive tools in shadow

Australian Museums: Glass vitrines: Physically distance viewers from violent artifacts (avg. 1.2 m barrier width vs. 0.5 m for celebratory objects)

Label analysis: minimalism: 78% for trauma-related artifacts describe the artifact by 50 words or less versus descriptions containing more than 150 words for exhibiting "multicultural harmony" related artifacts.

4.3.3. Visitor Encounters and Counter-Readings

Despite institutional oversight, audiences demonstrate alternative material interpretations:

62% of diasporic visitors interviewed demonstrated ability to identify "erased" trauma indicators (e.g., chemically faded contract clauses)

Guestbook annotations demonstrate alternative interpretations, including the reframing of polished tools as "evidence of whitewashing" (Guestbook #112, 2023)

4.3.4. Theoretical Implications

A paradox of this act of preservation—the conservation becomes silencing—undermines conventional notions of the authority of archive: .

Selective Decay: Non-intervention is a voluntary decision to curate (i.e., let coercive tools decay).

Haptic Censorship: Touchscreen interfaces facilitate engagement while limiting direct material examination (cf. Dudley, (Wingfield & Dudley,

2010))

In other words, as one conservator put it, “We...don’t ‘de-struct’ anything; we just let a few of our stories remain...unreadable” (Interview #7, 2023). This material dialectic between legibility and unreadability is Trouillot’s (Trouillot, 2015) “archival silences” in action.

4.4. Visitor Resistance: From Guestbooks to Digital Spaces

Audiences, noted here as museum guests, serve as an active and rather than a docile body in negotiations, subversions, and emancipation of institutional versions of traumatic pasts and future through physical and digital interventional means. In what follows, we consider how diasporic audiences and public audiences tacticality manifest across public (guest) books and social media platforms against the “mended memory” propositions put forth earlier.

4.4.1. Guestbooks as Counter-Archives

Here we study three main modes of resistance, as derived from an analysis of 1,847 entries written by hand (2019–2023) in the Golden Dragon Museum (Australia) and Wuyi Qiaoxiang Museum (China).

Corrective Annotations: Visitors regularly supplement exhibition labels, such as inserting “forced” before “labor migration” in descriptions of 19th-century Chinese workers (Guestbook #89, 2022) .

Generational Testimony: Descendants of migrants incorporate family narratives omitted by museums (e.g., “My grandmother was sold, not ‘contracted’” - Guestbook #203, 2021) .

Visual Subversion: Sketches of violent events (e.g., Lambing Flat riots) appear alongside official celebratory imagery .

Indeed, they share characteristics with Hall’s (Hall, 1972) concept of oppositional decoding: audiences refuse institutional encodings of histories imposed on them by hegemonic agents 2 . Especially since 72% of oppositional entries were from diasporic visitors (see also Zhang (Zhang, 2017) who finds museums to serve marginalized groups as “sites of memory correction”).

4.4.2. Digital Dissent and Hashtag Activism

Beyond physical guestbooks, social media platforms facilitate expanded resistance:

#MuseumSilence Campaign: On Chinese platforms like Weibo, users contrast censored museum content with archival evidence (e.g., posting 1920s anti-coolie posters beside sanitized exhibits) .

Diaspora Creators' TikTok Counter-Tours: Diaspora creators (many who are young) create “uncensored walkthroughs” of missing artifacts (e.g., “Here’s where they don’t show the whips” - @HistoryReclaimed, 2023).

Crowdsourced Archives: Projects like Gold Mountain Stories aggregate migrant testimonies excluded from museums, establishing alternative digital repositories .

This technological revolt represents, according to Briceño-Florez and Eccles (Briceno-Florez & Eccles, 2022), a form of “mnemonic guerrilla warfare”—the use of technology as a political strategy to undermine institutional suppression of traumatic memory .

4.4.3. Institutional Co-Optation and Its Limits

Museums increasingly seek to incorporate resistance into sanctioned frameworks:

"Participatory" Tokenism: The Wuyi Museum's 2022 "Your Story Matters" initiative solicited visitor contributions—but selected only those aligning with patriotic narratives .

Algorithms: Australian museum social media team uses sentiment-filtering algorithms to sink offending comments (Interview #12, 2023).

However as another visitor notes: “You can’t put our rage behind glass too” (Guestbook #511, 2023). These contradictions reveal the uneven power of dissent—visitors may interfere with the museum’s narrative, but the museum remains in command of the preservation and amplification of material things.

4.5. The Transnational Memory-Laundering Nexus

This comparison suggests an international convergence as to how Chinese and Australian museums use similar tactics to cleanse the diasporic wound, despite their differing ideological positions. “Memory-laundering overlap” produces itself with these three means.

4.5.1. Temporal Containment

In both countries, violence is narrowed to an isolated period of history—the historical focus on 19th century “frontier wars” in Australia and the tendency to describe indentured labour as pre-1949 “national shame” in China as a process that is discrete and absent the attribution of responsibility in the present. Subrahmanyam’s (1997) idea of “linked histories”, whereby nations focus selectively upon the temporal hiatuses to

justify present stories, fits with this.

4.5.2. Lexical Neutralization

Grammars of erasure As well as systematically replying violent narratives with positive frames, institutional texts are known to frame some crimes with a less violent lexicon or euphemisms. 30 For instance, according to Australian museums, those massacres were called "intercultural tensions", while Chinese museums state that forced working contracts were not slavery, but "service agreement". Such strategies are explained as "grammars of erasure" by Trouillot (Trouillot, 2015).

4.5.3. Material Complicity

Conservation priorities in both nations favor artifacts that support nationalist narratives—Australia's polished mining tools and China's preserved remittance receipts illustrate Stoler's (Stoler, 2008) critique of "archival remediation as ideological salvage".

4.5.4. Theoretical Implications

This connection problematizes the East-West dualism of memory researches showing how apparently antagonist regimes engage in "mnemonic globalization"-a process by which museums worldwide work according to similar routines to deal with difficult heritage. Even decolonizing initiatives are not exempt from this procedure when trauma is being marketed for tourists, as in the case of Ghana's Year of Return project.

5. DISCUSSION

In both democratic and authoritarian contexts, museums have become central to the management of national narratives, especially those involving difficult or traumatic histories. This research has investigated the curation of memory of Chinese diasporic labour at Chinese and Australian museums, showing trends of spatial othering, linguistic cleansing, and material selectivity. These are in line with the assertions of Logan and Reeves (Logan & Reeves, 2011) that museums are frequently classrooms of authorized heritage discourse where state-blessed narratives take precedence over controversial or painful ones. Equally, the study conducted by Waterton and Dittmer (Waterton & Dittmer, 2014) demonstrates how heritage spaces practice the use of space and symbol to

enforce ideological dominance over national memory. In the present day, trauma-related artifacts were placed in marginal areas and were emotionally desensitized by lighting, material barriers, and the absence of narrative, confirming how memory is spatially choreographed by institutions to produce a discomfort level as low as possible and minimize critique (Waterton & Smith, 2010). The study also found patterns of euphemistic substitution and use of the passive voice in the exhibition texts, with a systematic burying of agency and reframing of the violence in relation to race. This resonates with the facts presented by Ashworth and Hartmann (Ashworth & Graham, 2012), who assert that heritage institutions are rapidly getting involved in the processes of deliberate disinheritance in which inconvenient histories are either removed or recontextualized to conform to multicultural harmony ideals. Similarly, Kidd (Kidd, 2014) discovered that passive voice construction usually contributed to erasing perpetrators and the voice of victims in curatorial texts, which is also confirmed in this research in cases like the term service agreement instead of slavery or a cultural misunderstanding instead of racial aggression. These strategies of lexical laundering facilitate what Leavy (Leavy, 2020) suggests should be viewed as the production of narrative coherence, an enactment whereby post-traumatic events can find a narrative slot within the broader discourse of redemption or patriotism. The use of these methods was revealed to be used in both Chinese and Australian museums, in that they shared a curatorial grammar of silencing that refuses to subscribe to the politics of its land of origin. Most importantly, the results indicate how viewers, especially with diasporic backgrounds, challenge institutional discourse by commenting on guestbooks, digital counter-archives, and social media inventions. These acts of civil defiance represent the increased prominence of participatory memory work within heritage studies. Similar to research by Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson (Lehrer et al., 2011), the current study shows that museums are no longer the ultimate judges of the past and are being challenged by audiences that claim their own version of history. The oppositional readings identified in the guest books and the online space echo the recommendation by Drozdowski D. et al. (Drozdowski et al., 2016) of affective counter-narratives that undermine official discourses on the past. In addition, the study by Longair (Longair, 2015) contends that digital media creates new spaces where marginalized communities can challenge the silences produced by museums, which in this case can be validated by the existence of hashtag activism and crowdsourced counter-tours. The practices represent what Simon (Simon, 2011) calls a type of difficult engagement by which visitors not only

consume heritage but also challenge it, dispute it, and appropriate it. In sum, the research demonstrates that there has always been a conflict between institutional control and community voices in the creation of the narratives of diasporic trauma, and that the way memory culture must transform in the future has to consider these competing and diverse forms of remembrance.

6. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to critically explore how Chinese and Australian museums collect, interpret, and reframe the traumatic histories of the Chinese labor diaspora. The study utilized a qualitative research approach encompassing critical discourse analysis, spatial ethnography, and visitor responses interpretation to understand how the process of spatial marginalization, lexical laundering, and mending of the historic material was used by the institutions to rewrite the difficult historical accounts. The results demonstrated a consistent pattern of trauma minimization: artifacts of racial violence or indentured labor were either metaphorically relegated to the perimeter of exhibition spaces or reframed using euphemistic or passive terminology, or physically altered through selective conservation. These curatorial strategies serve a specific role of what Trouillot refers to as memory management that was geared toward creating emotionally desirable and politically harmless pasts. Remarkably, the potentially antagonistic liberal-democratic and authoritarian national contexts reflected equal erasure and containment strategies, pointing to a transnational homogenization of memory governance through museologies. In addition to institutional practices, the study has also highlighted the proactive agency of the audiences, especially those who are dissidents of the diasporic types, in resisting, challenging, and rewriting official histories. Guestbook annotations, digital counter-tours, and activating hashtags were essential experiments that the museums presented to create a clear picture. These results allow us to move beyond the instance of institutional authority as a single point of attention and to provide insight into the memory as a dynamic and controversial landscape, which depends on curatorial discourse and audience activity. This challenge of the analytical frames of postcolonial studies (e.g., Spivak (Spivak, 2023), Bhabha, and Hall (Hall, 2019)) and memory theory (e.g., Nora (Nora, 1989), Stoler (Stoler, 2008), and Trouillot (Trouillot, 2015)) helps to broaden the general discussions about trauma, identity, and power in

heritage institutions. In sum, the paper provides evidence of the necessity that museums to address instead of repress hard histories. A more socially conscious and diverse curation would not only respect historical accuracy but would also give museums a chance to become places of communication, justice, and group reconciliation. This research sets the foundation for a potential future work on decolonial museology and affective resistances, and changing the nature of public memory in transnational settings

6.1. Study Limitations

This study employed a qualitative approach, including critical discourse analysis and spatial ethnography, which provided depth but limited generalizability. The findings are context-specific, focusing only on two museum sites in China and Australia. Additionally, the use of visitor guestbooks and interviews may not capture the full diversity of audience responses. Language translations and institutional access constraints may have also influenced interpretive accuracy. These limitations suggest caution in applying the conclusions beyond similarly structured heritage institutions.

6.2. Future Directions

Future research should expand to include comparative analysis across a broader range of national and community museums in diverse geopolitical contexts. Quantitative methods or mixed-methods approaches could help validate and extend the current findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies on how museum narratives shift over time in response to political change, public pressure, or digital activism would be valuable. Exploring the role of underrepresented groups, including Indigenous and youth voices, could further enrich understanding of counter-memory practices within institutional settings.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1988). *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ashworth, G. J., & Graham, B. (2012). Heritage and the reconceptualization of the postwar European city.
- Barnes, S., & McPherson, G. (2019). Reframing trauma: Conservation, curation and the aesthetics of difficult heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25(6), 569–584.
- Bennett, T. (1995). *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*.
- Bennett, T. (2017). *Museums, power, knowledge: Selected essays*. Routledge.

- Briceno-Florez, E., & Eccles, K. (2022). Museums as Platforms of Resistance: The Use of Technology in Conflict Memory, Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding. *Museum International*, 74(3-4), 82-93.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. sage.
- Dinis, F. (2024). Exploring Intermediate Modes of Memory Representation and Resignification. In *Performativity and the Representation of Memory: Resignification, Appropriation, and Embodiment* (pp. 290-310). IGI Global.
- Drozdowski, D., De Nardi, S., & Waterton, E. (2016). *Memory, place and identity: Commemoration and remembrance of war and conflict*. Routledge.
- Dudley, S. H. (2012). *Museum objects*. Routledge Abingdon.
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge.
- Flick, U. (2022). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. SAGE.
- Foucault, M., & Miskowiec, J. (1986). Of other spaces. *diacritics*, 16(1), 22-27.
- Goldberg, D. T. (2021). *Dread: Facing futureless futures*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Golding, V., & Modest, W. (2013). *Museums and communities: Curators, collections and collaboration*. A&C Black.
- Hall, S. (1972). 1980. Encoding/decoding. *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (ed.) Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 79, 128-138.
- Hall, S. (2019). Encoding—Decoding (1980). In *Crime and media* (pp. 44-55). Routledge.
- Jackinsky-Sethi, N. (2015). Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums by Amy Lonetree. *The American Indian Quarterly*, 39(2), 236-238.
- Kidd, J. (2014). *Museums in the New Mediascape: Transmedia, Participation, Ethics*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Lau, S. K. (2017). Silencing history: The politics of exclusion in multicultural museums. *Museum International*, 69(3-4), 54-63.
- Leavy, P. (2020). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. Guilford publications.
- Lehrer, E., Milton, C. E., & Patterson, M. E. (2011). *Curating difficult knowledge*. Springer.
- Logan, W. S. (2016). Cultural diversity, heritage and human rights. In *The Routledge Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (pp. 439-454). Routledge.
- Logan, W. S., & Reeves, K. (2011). *Places of pain and shame*. Routledge.
- Lonetree, A. (2012). *Decolonizing museums: Representing Native America in national and tribal museums*. Univ of North Carolina Press.
- Longair, S. (2015). Cultures of curating: the limits of authority. In (Vol. 8, pp. 1-7): Taylor & Francis.
- Macdonald, S. (2013). *Memorylands: Heritage and identity in Europe today*. Routledge.
- Message, K., & Witcomb, A. (2013). Museum theory: An expanded field. *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, xxxv-lxiii.
- Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *representations*, 7-24.
- Onciul, B. (2015). *Museums, heritage and Indigenous voice: Decolonizing engagement*. Routledge.
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in qualitative research. *Journal of nursing scholarship*, 33(1), 93-96.

- Silverman, H. (2015). Heritage and authenticity. In *The Palgrave handbook of contemporary heritage research* (pp. 69-88). Springer.
- Simon, R. I. (2011). A shock to thought: Curatorial judgment and the public exhibition of 'difficult knowledge'. *Memory Studies*, 4(4), 432-449.
- Spivak, G. C. (2023). Can the subaltern speak? In *Imperialism* (pp. 171-219). Routledge.
- Stoler, A. L. (2008). *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Princeton University Press.
- Tisdell, E. J., Merriam, S. B., & Stuckey-Peyrot, H. L. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Tolia-Kelly, D. P. (2016). Feeling and being at the (postcolonial) museum: Presencing the affective politics of 'race' and culture. *Sociology*, 50(5), 896-912.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851.
- Trouillot, M.-R. (2015). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Beacon press.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford university press.
- Waterton, E. (2015). Heritage and community engagement. In *The ethics of cultural heritage* (pp. 53-67). Springer.
- Waterton, E., & Dittmer, J. (2014). The museum as assemblage: Bringing forth affect at the Australian War Memorial. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 29(2), 122-139.
- Waterton, E., & Smith, L. (2010). The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 16(1-2), 4-15.
- Wingfield, C., & Dudley, S. H. (2010). Museum materialities: Objects, engagements, interpretations.
- Witcomb, A., Message, K., & Witcomb, A. (2015). *Toward a pedagogy of feeling*. Wiley Oxford.
- Wodak, R. (2011). *The Discourse of Politics in Action: Politics as Usual*.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2015). *Methods of critical discourse studies*. sage.
- Zhang, S. (2017). Shaping National Identity in Local Museums: A Case Study of the Chinese Original Museum in Chinatown, Singapore. *Museology Quarterly*, 31(4), 67-87.