

Miniatures of the nation: ethnic minority figurines, mannequins and dioramas in Chinese museums

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Abstract

This paper uses Chinese ethnic minority museums as case study to reflect on the significance of the use of figurines, mannequins and dioramas as modes of representation of individuals and collectivities in museums. By proposing the concept of miniature and exploring its diverse facets and conceptual implications in the context of specific examples of museum displays of Chinese ethnic minorities, the analysis reveals how specific museological practices and display supports – such as mannequins, dioramas, figurines and maps – enable the reduction and containment of cultural difference.

Through a critical engagement with China's nationalistic narratives on equal and harmonious inter-ethnic relations unfolded in museum displays by means of such representational devices, the analysis takes issue with museums' authority, notably with reference to their capacity to objectify identities, and to craft and disseminate oversimplified images of collectivities that are ultimately validated as 'real' in the context of State-vouched narratives.

Key words: miniature; ethnic minorities; museum; China; representation

The Provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan in South-Western China are among the areas most densely populated by ethnic minorities. In the Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities in Chengdu, the capital of the Sichuan Province in South-Western China, the visitor can see the fifty-six Chinese ethnic groups represented by small scale plastic figurines disposed side-by-side to form a materialised picture of the Chinese nation (figure 1). This depiction is consistent with China's self definition as a 'multinational state' composed of fifty-six officially recognised ethnic groups, including the Han Chinese, representing over 90% of the population (Wang 2004: 6) and fifty-five ethnic minorities.¹

The display technique adopted by the museum in Chengdu is not an isolated case, it can be found in a number of other Chinese museums exhibiting ethnic minorities' material culture. Based on observations in museums in Beijing, Shanghai, Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces of South-Western China, this paper reflects on the significance of this method of representation and proposes to focus on the concept of miniature (Levi-Strauss 1962; Stewart 1984) to investigate the agency of Chinese museums in shaping the image of ethnic minorities.

By exploring diverse facets of the concept of miniature and by discussing them in the context of specific examples of museum displays of ethnic minorities, the analysis aims to reveal how specific museological practices and display techniques – such as mannequins, dioramas, figurines and maps – enable the reduction and the containment of ethnic minorities' cultural difference. The discussion takes issue with museums' authority, notably with reference to their capacity to objectify identities, and to craft and disseminate oversimplified images of collectivities that are ultimately validated in the context of nationalistic narratives. In particular, the paper proposes to extend to Chinese museums Tony Bennett's (2006) theory of museums as sites for the development of 'civic seeing', whereby mannequins, figurines and miniatures in displays of Chinese ethnic minorities can be understood as devices aimed at imparting a 'civic lesson' (Bennett 2006) on the 'unity within diversity' of the Chinese nation. This analytical perspective



Figure 1: The miniaturized Chinese nation. Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities, Chengdu, Sichuan Province.

suggests that the development of a 'civic seeing' may be pursued not only through particular display arrangements, but also through specific museum objects and display techniques such as mannequins, miniatures, figurines, dioramas and small scale models.

The arguments put forward on the paper rely on direct observation of museum displays, discourse analysis of museum labels, texts and museum brochure, and interviews with curators and museum academics. Whilst a study of visitors' interpretations would be of sure interest – and indeed would provide an ideal complement to the analysis carried out in this paper – the methodological tools and analytical approach deployed in this research focus on the production rather than on the reception and interpretation of displays.

Miniatures in the Chinese cultural context

It seems important to preface the discussion of the use of miniatures in Chinese ethnic minority museums with some considerations about the culturally specific meanings and uses of this mode of representation in the Chinese context. This analysis is conducted from a Western standpoint, based on a Platonic notion of representation implying the distinction between medium and image, signifier and signified. Such an understanding cannot be unproblematically extended to the Chinese context, as the boundaries between the object represented and the medium of representation may be blurred, and at times irrelevant. In the context of pictorial representations of the dynastic period, for instance, the capacity of the painting to inspire and convey moral and aesthetic values was perceived as much more important than the accurate reproduction of the real – indeed the disregard of mimesis is considered one of the distinctive features of Chinese traditional painting (Clunas 1997b:10; Pohl 2009:89). However, this does not imply a lack of efficacy. Commenting on Chinese narrative illustration, the art historian Julia Murray (2007:4) points out that 'visual representations were thought to be capable of stirring the

viewer's response in the same way as the 'real thing' would, so pictures could serve as a means of influencing thoughts and actions' – one of the most telling illustrations of such intent being Chinese Socialist propaganda art (Evans & Donald 1999:30).

Whilst it seems important to bear in mind these culturally specific elements in discussing the use and possible impacts of miniatures and dioramas in museums, it might also be useful to recall the words of Mark Sandberg on this point. In his book on mannequins and museums, Sandberg writes '...it is striking to note how easily spectators today negotiate this complex game of oblique access to the living scene of a missing person. [...] Comingling with representational bodies presents no particular conceptual challenge to spectators accustomed by a wide range of late twentieth-century media experience to thinking of themselves as simultaneously inside and outside the world of representation, and of bodies on display as both convincingly present and conveniently absent. Our visual culture quite simply demands broad competency in effigies - not simply the mannequin kind but an entire range of recorded and digital bodies' (Sandberg 2002:3).

In the context of this paper, the term miniature is employed in the extended meaning elaborated by Levi-Strauss. For Levi-Strauss (1962: 23), miniatures are not so much defined by the reduced scale as by the loss of some of the features of the original: details, volume, smell, colour etc. Along these lines, museum mannequins, figurines, models, dioramas, maps and other reproductions can all be considered miniatures to the extent that, as we shall see, they have lost several of the dimensions of complexity of the originals – in this case, individuals and communities. However, it is also useful to consider the 'genealogy' of the concept of miniature, and its various declinations, in the specific context of China.

Miniatures occupy a significant place in the Chinese cultural system, and have been deployed in a range of diverse contexts, modalities and significations. One of the earliest uses of miniatures is as funerary paraphernalia. In Ancient China, royal tombs were meant to reproduce the features of the dwelling of the deceased person; all the details of interiors were reproduced either in life-size or, precisely, as miniatures (Clunas 1997a: 27). The art of creating reproductions to accompany the deceased in the nether world is supremely exemplified by the famous 'Terracotta Army' destined to protect the First Emperor of Qin (Qin shi huang di, 221-210BCE). Miniatures also feature prominently in Chinese figurative arts. Taoist adepts, for instance, are usually depicted accompanied by miniature items such as gourd and a sacred mountain. Maggie Keswick (2003: 48) explains that the reduced scale allowed the ascetic to focus on the magical properties of the object. Moreover, it was believed that the greater the gap between the real size and the miniature, the greater the magical potency of the object. Keswick concludes: 'representations of potent sites in miniature were thus not aesthetic in origin, but were pieces of practical magic' (ibid).

Miniatures reproducing natural features, such as miniature rock carvings also featured in literati paraphernalia, whom appreciated these objects for their aesthetic appeal. Miniatures of the natural world were particularly appreciated in Early Modern China. During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), miniature gardens became fashionable among scholars, wealthy government officers and aristocrats as an objects of aesthetic appreciation and as a social marker of status – the miniature garden signalling the refined aesthetic taste of its owner (see Clunas 1996: 91; Stein 1990). Examples of such gardens can still be admired today in the city of Suzhou.

One of the most accomplished miniaturized achievements is probably represented by the miniature curio cabinets. These are portable, compact storage facilities complete with small drawers, shelves and boxes to accommodate small objects. Miniature curio cabinets are thought to have originated during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD) as literati's travel kits, used to carry personal belongings such as combs, tea cups and incense. The value of these objects was linked to their reduced size, which required superior handicraft skills and techniques. Over time, from functional objects, curio boxes became precious objects and even presents offered to emperors and high imperial officers, as a source of enjoyment in its use and aesthetic delectation. Miniature curio boxes were still made in imperial workshops at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911AD).

China also developed an important tradition of reduced scale landscape architecture (Stanley 2002: 272), of which the Forbidden City may be taken as the most brilliant example.

The structure of the Imperial Palace has been designed to reproduce the structure of the city of Beijing in order to provide the emperor with a realistic representation of life in a Chinese city. According to Stanley (ibid), contemporary Chinese theme parks might have drawn from this tradition. Indeed, theme parks are one of the most recent interpretations of the concept of miniature. The theme park 'Splendid China', located in the city of Shenzhen, in the Southern Guangdong Province, is one of the most prominent tourist sites in China (Sofield et al. 1998: 366). Inaugurated in 1989, the complex includes around 100 miniature buildings and sites showcasing, as the name suggests, the most important scenic spots in China. The Great Wall, the Imperial Palace, the Three Gorges, are among the sites rebuilt in all detail on small scale, including a crowd of over 50000 miniature ceramic figurines (Sofield et al. 1998: 382). The reduced scale offers the visitors of 'Splendid China' (overwhelmingly Chinese) the unique opportunity to experience the best of Chinese national cultural and natural heritage in one day. If 'Splendid China' offers the best sites of China, 'Window of the World' offers the best sites of the rest of world. Opened in 1994 in the same city of Shenzhen, 'Window of the World' includes small scale reproductions of the Eiffel Tower, Egyptian Pyramids, Taj Mahal, Roman Colosseum and so on. In part, the popularity of Chinese theme parks is due to their focus on the theatricality and performative nature of the representations, whereby visitors can enter the three-dimensional space of the display and become part of it (Stanley 2002: 271). This aspect is seen as a continuation of the Chinese tradition of landscape gardening, most eminently expressed in the shan-shui hua (painting of mountains and water) painting style (ibid). This aspect appears to be shared by theme parks in Japan (Hendry 2000b: 209, 217) although the anthropologist Joy Hendry (2000b: 207) also notes that in Japan theme parks are more closely associated with museums and world fairs than with the Disneyland-inspired and highly commercialized leisure parks in the United States and the UK, which seem to have also inspired, to some degree, Chinese theme parks.

Chinese theme parks are examples of a global network of theme parks, of which the most famous in Asia is probably Taman Mini Indonesia Indah in Jakarta (Hendry 2000a, b). However, what probably distinguishes Chinese theme parks from other similar international ventures, is the emphasis on the representation of Chinese national culture. Chinese theme parks are mostly addressing Chinese visitors, to whom they offer a combination of leisure and education about the cultural, geographical, historical and ethnic features of the Chinese nation. Significantly, attention is being paid to edit out from representations any reference to external influences or cultural imports, such as MacDonald fast-foods or foreign handicrafts (Stanley 2002: 270). Miniatures and small-scale representations are here put at the service of the logic of tourism, cultural consumption and, overall, nationalism.

In a historical comparative perspective, the popularity and longevity of miniatures and reduced scale reproductions seems to have been greater in China than in Europe, where these became very popular only in the late 19th century. In that period, in Europe, miniatures were mostly used in museums for zoological, ethnographic and archaeological displays, as tools enabling a pristine display of natural and cultural human habitats (see Haraway 1984). At the turn of the century, mannequins and wax figures also became a familiar sight in various context of European urban life, including international exhibitions and museums (Sandberg 2002:5). Today, the use of miniatures, figurines and life size mannequins in museums has become relatively common, and is by no means unique to China. Shelly Errington (1998: 217) notes for instance how in Indonesia, Provincial museums usually include bride-and-groom dolls dressed in wedding clothes to represent the cultural diversity of the ethnic groups inhabiting the various Indonesian provinces. Similarly, John Chaimov (2001) discusses the use of Hummel porcelain figurines to represent Germany in museums and souvenir shops in the United States.

However globally widespread, the use of miniatures, mannequins and small scale reproductions to depict ethnic minority cultures especially invites reflection in the case of China, since here the narratives of equal and harmonious inter-ethnic relations unfolded in museum displays by means of such representational devices, sharply contrast with the reality of inter-ethnic frictions regularly reported in newspaper chronicles, such as the riots that broke out in the Summer 2009 in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region between the Uyghur ethnic minority and the Han Chinese majority.



Figure 2: Mannequins in the Yunnan Nationalities Museum, Kunming, Yunnan Province.

Mannequins as substitutes for the person

At the Yunnan Nationalities Museum, the wall glass cases in the gallery devoted to ethnic minorities' costumes contain identical mannequins offering an overview of the ethnic costumes of Yunnan ethnic groups (figure 2). One can find very similar displays at the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Yunnan, the Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities in Chengdu, the Sichuan University Museum, the Shanghai Museum, the Museum of the Central University of Nationalities and the Museum of the Institute of Clothing Technology in Beijing. In spite of the differences existing among these institutions², in all these museums, ethnic minorities are presented through an emphasis on ethnic minority costumes; artefacts other than costumes and textiles play a relatively marginal role.

The use of mannequins in such museum displays casts light not so much on the position of the subject represented (ethnic minorities) but rather on the position of the author of such representations (the museum and by extension, the Chinese State). In general terms, these renditions of the human body can be understood as museums' claims to the ability not only to reproduce variation and diversity in ethnic outfits' styles and materials, but also to reduce the complexity of ethnic minorities' physical, cultural and historical features. As Deborah Root (1996: 114) notes about the use of mannequins in museums, 'what is being displayed is the ability to construct the real'. Thus, the ability of the museum, through the acts of curators, to show the details of the elaborate embroideries and unique fabrics of ethnic minorities' costumes is instrumental to conveying the idea that museum displays are 'authentic' in that they closely reflect real-life conditions.

One might think that mannequins are such a common and familiar component of museum displays that they rarely are the object of attention. Indeed mannequins are not intended to be looked at, but to act as support for other items. Yet, if one reflects on the effects of mannequins in particular in the context of Chinese ethnic minority museums, one realizes that

this kind of representation is not without contradiction: whilst some of the objects on display – textiles, garments, body ornaments etc. – are forcefully presented as ‘authentic’, their material support – the plastic mannequin – denies any claim for authenticity. The mannequin, likewise the model, the miniature, the diorama, the map and other reproductions, does not make any attempt to be taken for ‘real’, its function being by definition auxiliary. The mannequin, with its standardized features and static body postures, resists variation, uniqueness and individuality, by imposing an element of artificiality and anonymity that disrupts the correspondence person-object: the mannequin depersonalizes the object in order to enable the generalization of the representation. When transposed in museum displays of Chinese ethnic minorities, such disruption entails that what is retained and communicated by mannequins is a superficial and reductive notion of cultural difference as limited to diverse dress codes, head-dresses and physical appearances. Conversely, that the mannequins are identical suggests that, beyond superficial difference of different body adornments, all ethnic groups are essentially similar in that they are all ‘Chinese’ – as is painstakingly reiterated in museum labels and panels, and through the visual juxtaposition of the mannequins. Tellingly, museum displays do not provide information on the social biography of the objects on display – who made them, when, how, who used them, how they entered the museum collections etc. – as this would anchor the object to real life situations and to specific individuals. On the contrary, it is the object’s capacity to become representative of a group that is being emphasised in museum displays. The mannequin is central in enabling such abstraction.

Miniatures as a metonymy of the ethnic group

The relationship between the scaled figurines and the ethnic groups they are made to represent can be said to be metonymic, insofar as in the museum setting, the figurines become substitutes for the ethnic group. The metonymic relation between the ethnic group and the figurine can be explained as a ‘strategy of ‘reduction’ used to bring some higher or more complex realms of being (down) to the terms of a lower or less complex realm of being’ (Burke 1969: 506). In the case of Chinese ethnic minorities, such strategy of reduction also translates the relative position of ethnic minorities within Chinese society, as the small scale of ethnic minority figurines can be seen as expressive of the subaltern status of Chinese ethnic minorities vis-a-vis the Han Chinese majority.³ One is here reminded of the (mostly appreciative) words of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962: 23) on the effects of scale reduction: ‘being smaller, the object as a whole seems less formidable. By being quantitatively diminished, it seems to us qualitatively simplified’.

The subordinate status of ethnic groups exudes from the use in museum panels (for instance at the Museum of the Central University of Nationalities) of such adjectives as ‘diligent’, ‘peace-loving’ and ‘colourful’ (the use of such terms has also been noted by Gladney 1994: 103). The condescending tone adopted towards ethnic minorities also appears in expressions such as ‘brave, intelligent and unsophisticated people [...] working together with diligence and intelligence’⁴ in the panels of the Yunnan Nationalities Museum. The text of the introductory panel to the Kadoorie Gallery of Chinese Minority and Nationalities Arts of the Shanghai Museum endorses more explicitly the discourses on unity and diversity of the Chinese nation:

our splendid and glorious Chinese civilization is the result of the assimilation of various nationalities that have lived in China. Due to varying social conditions and means of livelihood, the different nationalities in China have developed quite diverse cultures. The unique features of each culture are best expressed through their decorative arts. The numerous different artifacts, often magnificently coloured, exhibit diverse skills and reflect the flavour of each culture’s rich and varied lifestyle. The unusual and original arts and crafts of minority cultures have made great contribution to the culture and art of the Chinese nation.⁵

In tune with the Marxist-Leninist theory of evolution, the official rhetoric adopted in museum texts links cultural variation across ethnic groups to their different ‘stage of development’, of which material culture (and notably, decorative arts) is considered to be evidence. This approach becomes apparent in museum texts such as those at the Yunnan Nationalities Museum, in Kunming, reading ‘since 1949, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China all the

nationalities of Yunnan province have turned to be masters of their own destiny and stepped into Socialism together'.⁶ Consistently with such perspective, the institutional mission of museums displaying ethnic minorities is to celebrate the harmonious relations among groups, which 'come together for cultural exchange [in a] microcosm of the greater family of diverse peoples that make up China' (Li and Luo 2004: 40).

The use of miniature figurines to represent ethnic groups also enables their construction as a-historical entities. The propensity of miniatures to deny time has been defined by Susan Stewart (1984: 48) in terms of temporal closure, whereby 'the miniature offers a world clearly limited in space but frozen and thereby both particularized and generalized in time'. This prerogative of miniatures serves well the Chinese State narratives emphasising ethnic minorities' alleged lack of historicity (that is, the disregard of the history of ethnic minorities pre-dating the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, see Varutti 2010b) and 'backwardness' (Varutti 2008: 39-40).

Yet the miniature is not deprived of agency, in Alfred Gell's terms (1998). As Levi-Strauss (1966: 24) aptly notes '[miniatures] are not just projections or passive homologues of the object: they constitute a real experiment with it'. If one considers for instance the figurines in the installation at the Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities in Chengdu (figure 1), one might argue that the figurines' agency operates at least at two levels. Firstly, through their static body postures and facial expressions, the figurines are made to convey a specific body-type and attitude – in short, they materialize an idealized image of the ethnic group. Secondly, their reduced scale hinders the possibility of an equal relation between the viewer and the exhibit. This is further reinforced by the spatial position of the miniatures in relation to the viewer: in the case of displays at the Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities for instance, the viewer, empowered by a panoptical gaze, looks down at the miniatures to visually encompass them from a position of comfort and control. If, as mentioned above, the mannequin is meant to contribute to the homogeneity through anonymity of the ethnic group, the miniature figurine contributes to instantiate its subaltern social and cultural status.

This is however not to imply that the use of small scale figurines in museum displays expresses hostility towards the ethnic groups represented. Quite the contrary. Also because of the figurines' dimensions and features, the viewer is invited to approach them as fragile, valuable, pretty things. In her discussion on miniatures, Susan Stewart (1984: 111) introduces a useful distinction between the 'dwarf' and the 'midget' to describe the more or less benevolent gaze that is purported on the small scale object. Following on Stewart, the miniatures of ethnic minorities that one can see in Chinese museums tend to present human figures as 'midget' rather than as 'dwarf', that is as positive, charming entities, non-threatening yet not entirely familiar. To this effect, it is perhaps not surprising that in most instances mannequins and miniatures impersonate female members of ethnic minorities. For example, at the Yunnan Nationalities Museum a miniature reconstruction shows three breast-bare female figurines washing their hair in a forest environment – they represent members of the Dai ethnic minority. Intriguingly, the scene is illustrated by the caption 'a miniature of topographical conditions of Yunnan Province', whilst no reference is made to the fact that the women are breast-bare (figure 3). The gender construction of Chinese ethnic minorities as female, with the corresponding connotations of objectification and eroticization of the ethnic group depicted as naïve, instinctual, easily accessible, 'close to nature', as opposed to the rational, urban, 'civilized' and modern Han male, has been extensively documented in the framework of several representation practices (Gladney 1994; Schein 2000). This approach is reflected in the museums discussed, where exhibits are often complemented by photos of smiling, young ethnic minority women (Varutti 2008).

Albeit ethnic minority figurines usually depict adults rather than children, it could be argued that the miniaturized figurines ease the infantilization of ethnic groups, thus producing a form of 'infantile citizenship' that, as Chaimov (2001: 62) has noted for German citizens during Nazism, particularly suits dictatorial and authoritarian regimes. The figurines of ethnic minorities in Chinese museums might be compared to toys: likewise a toy, the ethnic minority figurine invites emplotment, it stimulates the creation of personal and collective narratives. Here the figurine acts as a 'physical embodiment of the fiction: it is a device for fantasy, a point of

beginning for narrative' (Stewart 1984: 56). The miniature-toy thus allows for the play of an infinite variety of narratives to be unfolded in the safe realm of imagination.



Figure 3: Miniature representing women from the Dai ethnic minority. Yunnan Nationalities Museum, Kunming, Yunnan Province.

The parallel with a toy also brings into play another element: nostalgia (for a discussion of nostalgia as a tool to foster cultural consumption in China, see Anagnost 1997). Nostalgic feelings might play a role in the popularity of miniatures within and outside Chinese museums. The standardization and commodification of cultural goods and practices brought about by the turn to market economy and the socio-political change since the early 1990s have thoroughly altered the lifestyle of Chinese families in only one generation. The idealized image of 'exotic' communities living in a distant, undefined place and time, 'peacefully' and 'in harmony with nature' resonates the nostalgic desire for an ideal world 'unspoiled' and 'uncorrupted' by modernization (in this sense also Wang 2001:81). Such nostalgic feelings are nevertheless not exempt from commercial exploitation. Museum souvenir shops, ethnic minorities parks (such as the Ethnic Minorities Park in Beijing) and ethnic villages (such as the ethnic minorities village at the outskirts of Kunming, Yunnan Province) are filled with ethnic minority costumes and paraphernalia available for sale. Also, the widespread practice (at these sites) of having one's photo taken in ethnic garments, is quite telling of the degree to which ethnic identity can be appropriated and, literally, worn and divested. 'Being ethnic' is here a game, it's a safe estrangement, a close encounter with the Other within the non-threatening realm of the *mise en scene*.

Dioramas and the power of contextualization

Due to their realist effect, the detailed reproductions of real-life scenes and *tableaux vivants* designated by the term dioramas, were particularly popular in the museums of the Maoist era (1949-1976) when museum displays were informed by the principles of historical materialism

and by the imperative to provide historical and scientific evidence in support of Marxist-Leninist theories of socio-economic development. In spite of the concerns about the use of this medium expressed in critical museology scholarship⁷, dioramas remain a museological tool largely used in museum displays – notably, they feature prominently in museum displays of Chinese ethnic minorities. At the Tea Museum in Hangzhou (on the eastern coast, not far from Shanghai) for instance, the interior of a Tibetan house has been re-created to provide contextualization for the practice of tea making among members of this ethnic minority. This enables the visitor, if not to physically walk into the house and occupy the seats as an imaginary host (because of restricted access), at least to inspect and visually appropriate a Tibetan private space. Similarly, at the Museum of the Yunnan Ethnic Minorities University in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, characteristic ethnic dwellings have been reconstructed for visitors' appraisal. At the Nationalities Museum, also in Kunming, curators have reconstructed the sacred spaces of ethnic minorities, for instance, the visitor is presented with a Bai ethnic group's ritual altar, complete with wooden and rock sculptures of Deities and embroidered banners set against the backdrop of a painted panel reproducing a view of the snow capped mountains and the three pagodas of Dali, the main centre of the Bai ethnic area. Dioramas are also used at the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Yunnan in Kunming, to illustrate life in an ethnic village. In a gallery of the Yunnan Nationalities Museum currently being refurbished, the visitor could previously see a life-size bronze sculpture representing soldiers of the Red Army being greeted by female members of ethnic minorities – a propaganda image illustrating the Socialist discourse on the contribution of ethnic minorities to the Revolutionary cause. Albeit the accuracy and fidelity of the depicted scene might be questioned, the hyper-realism of the three-dimensional sculpture confers to the scene the value of an historical document.

The peculiarity and potency of dioramas as tools for representation reside in part in their suitability to be apprehended not only visually but also through feelings of proprioception, that is through the perception of one's body's relative position and movements in space. Through such perceptions, the diorama enables the viewer to position him or herself vis-a-vis the object. A relation – of solidarity, authority, distance or opposition – is thus established not only between the viewer and the exhibit, but also by implication, between the viewer and the ethnic groups represented.

By aiming to represent a real-life community within the walls of a museum, dioramas produce a spatial, temporal and cultural displacement. In so doing, they act as powerful evocative tools able to bridge the gap between reality and the abstract narrative of the museum exhibition. In this sense, the diorama is a good illustration of the miniature in Levi-Strauss' terms (1966:22), given its capacity to conjure both a real-life subject matter and the image of an idealized, magical world. So for instance, at the Tea Museum in Hangzhou, the visitor is able to enter a Tibetan dwelling, or experience the depth of a tropical forest in the air-conditioned comfort of the exhibition room. Because the diorama is ultimately a fiction, its efficacy in providing object contextualization can only be achieved on the basis of a tacit understanding between museum curators and visitors on the fictional character of the scene represented. This tacit understanding also entails a degree of trust and of suspension of disbelief on the part of the viewer. As mentioned, this might be in part the result of a Chinese culturally specific understanding of representation, whereby the distinction between the object represented and the medium of representation becomes blurred. But, much more importantly to this analysis, this suspension of disbelief also entails the recognition of museums' legitimacy and authority in authoring such representations. By re-creating real-life communities in the space of the exhibition room, dioramas assert museums' capacity to manufacture images and validate narratives. But they do so, once again (as for the miniature and the mannequin) within the borders of a safe zone, as the object of observation – ethnic minorities in this case – is confined to the passive, speechless and motionless position of the inanimate world.

Visualizing the Chinese nation

Having briefly considered some of the conceptual implications of the use of mannequins, miniatures and dioramas in displays of ethnic minorities in Chinese museums, it seems opportune to ponder the effects of their juxtaposition in museum displays.

Displays at the Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, include a large wall map of China with ethnic minority figurines fixed upon it. The use of the map attains in this case two complementary objectives. Firstly, the positioning of ethnic minority figurines on the map contributes to fix their identities by anchoring the group to the territory. This method of representation reinforces the stereotype of ethnic groups as discrete communities that can be unproblematically linked to specific geographic areas. Indeed, China's efforts at defining ethnic groups and clearly mapping them over the territory have been the guiding lines of Chinese official rhetoric on ethnic minorities since well before the 1953 ethnic minorities census⁸, and the subsequent institution of autonomous regions, prefectures and counties in areas densely populated by ethnic groups (cf. Duara 2002; Harrell 1995). Secondly, on a broader level, the map enables the panoptic visualization of the ethnic dimension of the Chinese nation – in accordance with Shelly Errington's (1998: 196) argument that 'maps emblemize and naturalize the boundaries of the nation-state'. This point also chimes with Ann Anagnost's (1997:162) comment on miniature landscapes to the effect that 'they speak the totality of the nation in time and space'. In particular, maps also bear the advantage of representing and including contested areas of China, such as Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, whilst visualizing the extent of Han presence over the Chinese territory.

Similarly, displays at the Museum of the Central University of Nationalities in Beijing present an overview of the fifty-five Chinese ethnic minorities through an array of life-size plastic mannequins showing the ethnic costumes of each group. Ethnic costumes are presented in museums as the most distinctive feature of ethnic groups. Tellingly, the catalogue of the Museum of the Beijing Institute of Clothing Technology defines ethnic costumes as 'China's national treasures', maintaining that 'customs and conventions, art traditions, religious beliefs, ways of lives and the alike are all represented to some extent by the costumes and accoutrements of various minorities. [...] China's ethnic costumes are more than just a material system of culture. They have a spiritual resonance' (Beijing Institute of Clothing Technology n.d.: 'prologue'). The juxtaposition of mannequins in the galleries of the Museum of the Central University of Nationalities emphasises the cumulative and classificatory dimensions of the display. Consistently, the Museum panels inform the visitor that the Chinese nation is composed of fifty-six nationalities, of which twenty-two ethnic groups constitute the Northern nationalities, and thirty-four the Southern. Not only does this concern with classification express a need for the ordering and hierarchization of ethnic groups (cf. Blum 2001; Gladney 1994), but also and once again, it aims to create homogeneity (Mullaney 2010). By reducing ethnic communities to the common minimum term of a costume worn by a mannequin, this display makes ethnic groups quantifiable and allows for such statements as '[the Chinese visitor can] touch history, understand the present situation, appreciate the charm and glamour of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation, [...] and strengthen our national solidarity'⁹. Even more direct and visually powerful, is the display of the Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities in Chengdu mentioned in the opening of the paper (figure 1). This features fifty-six small-size figurines positioned side by side in three rows against the background of the Chinese national emblem. This layout bears a considerable visualizing potency: the whole Chinese nation is here encompassed in a single gaze. Quite exceptionally, the Han Chinese are also represented – yet in contrast to the others, the Han figurine is male, and is wearing blue work overalls instead of an ethnic costume. This layout aims to display China's ethnic groups as a collectivity, a single constituency unified by its inscription into the overarching framework of the Chinese nation. The agency of the miniature is here fully deployed: the small scale reproduction enables the viewer to apprehend the whole nation in one single visual frame, in a powerful illustration of Levi-Strauss' argument (1966:23-24) that 'in the case of miniatures, in contrast to what happens when we try to understand an object or living creature of real dimensions, knowledge of the whole precedes knowledge of the parts'.

Interestingly, with the exception of the miniature figurines at the Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities, collective displays of ethnic groups do not include the Han majority. The absence of Han majority contributes to the construction of Han's modernity – Han Chinese do not feature in ethnic displays since Han do not wear costumes, they do not practice 'superstitious' rites nor peculiar marriage practices. The absence of the Han majority

is thus meaningful in a Derridean sense (Derrida 1982): Han's non-representation reinforces their distance and difference from ethnic groups, thus ultimately contributing to the institutionalization of ethnic minorities alterity.

Susan Stewart (1984: 132) has argued that through the miniaturized world of the freak show, 'we derive an image of the normal; to know an age's typical freaks is, in fact, to know its points of standardization'. Paraphrasing Stewart, one could argue that by looking at displays of ethnic minorities, one derives an image not only of the ethnic Other and of its alterity, but also of the extent of its conformity to an idea of 'Chineseness' embodied by the Han majority. This is particularly significant given the fact that most visitors of museums displaying ethnic minorities are Han Chinese (for instance, the Nationalities Museum and the Nationalities Village in Kunming are one of the main destinations for Han Chinese tourists, and large tour buses can be seen unloading every day hundreds of tourists in these spots). The apprehension of the diversity of the Other is instrumental to the definition of the viewer's own stance; in short, the Other acts as a point of reference for the apprehension of self. So for instance, displays of ethnic minorities' 'exotic' lifestyles may reassure the viewer of his or her own cultural, moral, technological superiority, and 'modernity'. Dru Gladney, discussing ethnic relations in China, aptly notes

the objectified portrayal of minorities as exoticized, and even eroticized, is essential to the construction of the Han Chinese majority, the very formulation of the Chinese 'nation' itself [...] the representation of the Han as 'normal' and 'un-exotic' is critical for understanding the construction of present-day Chinese identity (1994:98).

As a result, the representation of ethnic minorities' exoticism in museum displays is essentially constitutive of Han majority's (see also Jonsson 2000; Fiskesjö 2006).

'Civic seeing' in Chinese ethnic minority museums

The scholar Tony Bennett has noted that historically,

the functioning of museums as civic institutions has operated through specific regimes of vision which, informing both the manner in which things are arranged to be seen and the broader visual environment conditioning practices of looking, give rise to particular forms of 'civic seeing' in which the civic lessons embodied in those arrangements are to be seen, understood, and performed by the museum's visitors' (2006:121).

Tony Bennett's assertion mostly rests on the analysis of museums and displays in Europe and the United States over the nineteenth and twentieth century. His predicate, however, can plausibly be extended to the case of China: museum displays showing all fifty-six officially recognised ethnic groups can be understood as a specific device within a regime of vision aimed at instilling the 'civic lesson', and constitutional principle, of the 'unity within diversity' of the Chinese nation. In this regard, ethnic minority figurines can be paralleled to one of the tools through which the Chinese state, through museum professionals, deploys its disciplinary strategies.

In his analysis, Bennett notes that the model of the nineteenth century evolutionary museum distinguished itself from the Enlightenment museum for the unprecedented relevance attributed to the ideas of progress and evolution of the species. The evolutionary museum was mainly concerned with presenting to viewers not the marvels of natural objects in themselves, but the relations among them in order to communicate the notions of progress and evolution. Bennett (2006: 128) notes that 'far from looking *into* things, the visitor's eye had to be directed to look *along* the relations between them'. Likewise, Chinese audiences are not invited to look *into* the figurines of ethnic minorities – in fact, museum displays make no claim as to their artistic, historical, cultural or scientific relevance – but they are being educated to look *along* the relations that bind them, that is their common Chinese identity. In addition, and most importantly, audiences are invited to imagine those relations as harmonious. The body postures, facial expressions and attitudes of the figurines in the Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities in Chengdu (figure 1) are revealing: they are mostly dancing and express happiness, but crucially they are not facing each other, there is no interaction among

them, they are all facing the viewer. Their aligned, frontal position not only reveals the staged, theatrical nature of the scene – a characteristic feature of miniature representations (Stewart 1984: 54) – but also brings to the fore the agency of museum curators who arranged the figurines, and beyond that, the agency of the Chinese government whose nationalist principles inspired the installation.

Yet for such agency to be efficacious, maps, miniatures and mannequins representing ethnic minorities need to be exposed to public view. As in Bennett's (2006) civic seeing, and in contrast to Renaissance cabinets of curiosities whereby the aristocrats could comfortably admire the exotic Other in the privacy of their dwelling (Abt 2006), here it is the public view – the shared, collective experience of observing the exhibit – that makes the display consequential.

Whilst there are sound arguments for (Chinese) museums as sites for the organization and control of audiences' view in ways reminiscent of Foucault's panopticon (cf. Bennett 1995), the extension of this argument to Chinese museums displaying ethnic minorities calls for some specifications. Miniatures in ethnic minority museums – be they mannequins, models, dioramas or maps – act upon viewers in ways that transcend the mere regulation of sight: they not only organize vision, but also, as mentioned, establish specific relationships between the viewer and the object on display, and transversally, *among* the objects on display (i.e. ethnic minority groups). Ultimately, paraphrasing Strathern (1993), what is miniaturized in the figurines is not only the features of ethnic groups, but also the set of social relations in which these are embedded, that is inter-ethnic and minority-majority relationships.

Concluding remarks

The representation of cultural pluralism and the processes of identity making in museums have rightly received much attention in museum-studies, culture studies and anthropology (e.g. Karp et al. 1991 and 2007; Kaplan 1996; and Jones 2005). Identity entails alterity and this paper has explored how the miniature is deployed in Chinese museums to embody a contrast between the multitudes of the ethnic nationalities and the implied observer, the Han majority. Miniatures create a collectivity – all minorities are the same in their difference to the majority – and as such minorities are figuratively diminished. As a museological device characterizing the representation of ethnic minorities in Chinese museums, the miniature enables the depiction of ethnic minorities in a domesticated fashion and facilitates the obviation of undesirable dimensions: markers of cultural difference (such as specific idioms, systems of beliefs, marital, funerary or other ritual practices) as well as unequal and conflictual inter-ethnic relations.

The analysis of museum displays of ethnic minorities in Chinese museums shows that miniatures are deployed in an effort to anchor identities to ideal-types, to regulate social and inter-cultural relations and to promote understandings of the Chinese nation as 'united and diverse'. In this sense, miniatures, mannequins and figurines in Chinese museums can be understood as tools for the dissemination of 'civic lessons' (Bennett 2006). At the same time, the figurines are also revelatory of what is given to be seen and what is concealed by the display. The museum visitor is given to see ethnic groups in terms of harmonious relations, docile character, laboriousness, dancing and musical skills, and folklore traditions. Conversely, what is concealed from view are the effects of modernization, hybridization and change, as well as inter-ethnic conflictual and hierarchical relations. As a result, the ethnic minority is on display yet absent, visually available yet physically inaccessible. As a replacement for the 'real' ethnic minority, the miniature is ultimately the index of its absence. As Susan Stewart (1984: 134) puts it for miniatures more generally, 'the possession of the metonymic object is a kind of dispossession in that the presence of the object all the more radically speaks to its status as a mere substitution and to its subsequent distance from the self'. The miniature acts here, according to Stewart, as a form of magic and 'like other forms of magic, it guarantees the presence of an absent other through either contagion or representation' (1984:126).

The miniature, like the mannequin, the figurine, the diorama contribute to illustrate the national narratives of unity, harmony and progress in the context of the museum display. Whilst the discussion is open on whether the object on display is 'authentic', its effects are real. Yet, there is more to museum miniatures than propaganda tools. Part of the reason why miniatures cannot be merely propaganda is that the miniatures deployed in museum displays of Chinese

ethnic minorities are not merely vehicles for state narratives of the nation. By virtue of their materiality, they are also agents in producing meanings, relations, emotions, and world views far more complex and nuanced than monolithic master narratives.

In their insightful book, *Fieldwork Connections* (Bamo et al. 2007), the authors discuss a set of difficult nodes in the processes of collecting and displaying ethnic minorities' artefacts of the Nuosu ethnic group from Sichuan Province. Difficulties emerge for instance about how to set parameters for hand-work, materials, design etc. that make an object 'hand-made', 'traditional', 'authentic', or 'representative'; how to set the right acquisition price for objects that most often either don't have a market (because they are heirloom possessions) or circulate in a market of collectors with highly inflated prices; how to appropriately present ethnic minority artefacts to non-Chinese audiences in ways that make ethnic cultures intelligible, yet retaining their cultural complexity. These issues reveal the contested, negotiated character of ethnic identities and cultural representation in China (see Harrell 2001), as well as the multiplicity of perspectives, approaches, concerns, assumptions and sensitivities that shape museum representations, and which are generally concealed in the context of public museum displays in China.

This paper shows that museum displays are valuable sites to reflect upon the implications of the use of miniatures as tools for cultural representation. Understood as the expression of the unfulfilled desire of turning human beings into manipulable, docile objects, the miniature becomes the materialization of the gap between ideology and reality. Specifically, the widespread use of miniatures in Chinese museum displays of ethnic minorities reveals the tension between the idealised unity of the Chinese nation and the reality of a complex, multi-layered, fluid and culturally hybrid citizenry. In this perspective, the miniature is an index of the incompleteness of the Chinese political body, and of the idealized objectives of Chinese cultural and nationalistic policies.

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Notes

- ¹ The Chinese expression used to designate ethnic groups is *shaoshu minzu*, which literally means 'minority nationality' or 'national minority'. The term *shao* is a diminutive, it may refer to a small number and/or small size. *Minzu* also appears in the official denomination of China, *duominzu guojia*, that is a 'unified, multinational state'. The term is laden with political significance. As the China scholar Frank Dikotter (1996: 593) notes, 'the conflation of "race," descent and nation has been expressed throughout the twentieth century by the term *minzu*, signifying both a descent group and a cultural community'.
- ² These museums vary in status, availability of funds, audiences, and visibility, among the rest. For instance, displays at the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Yunnan have been largely funded by the Ford Foundation, whilst the others museums mentioned are public. The Museum of the South-Western University of Ethnic Minorities in Chengdu is only open to researchers and by appointment, whereas the Shanghai Museum draws thousands of visitors daily.
- ³ For a broader discussion of the political significance of museum representations of ethnic minorities in China see Varutti 2008 and 2010a.
- ⁴ Yunnan Nationalities Museum, text in English and Chinese.
- ⁵ Shanghai Museum, text in English and Chinese.
- ⁶ Yunnan Nationalities Museum, text in English and Chinese.
- ⁷ See Haraway (1984) for one of the most authoritative analysis of the implications of the uses of dioramas in natural history museums.

- ⁸ See Mullaney (2010) for a history of China's ethnic classification project.
- ⁹ Museum of the Central University of Nationalities, Beijing. 'Preface' panel; text in Chinese and English.

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