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Intercultural Dialogues in Third Spaces: A Study of Learning Experiences of Museum Visitors

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Abstract: Bodo (2012) called for the need of museum exhibitions to create “third spaces” where individuals can cross the boundaries of belonging (both physical and psychological) to engage in intercultural dialogues. The imaginary cultural space of museum has propelled us into a realization that we are in an era where interculturality, transculturalism, and the eventual prospect of identifying a cosmopolitan citizenship can become a reality. Predicated on a five-month ethnography work at a provincial museum in British Columbia, Canada, this research explores the following questions: how have cultural and historical museum exhibitions put us in contact with the *other* and foster an understanding of the *other*? And how has transculturalism led to the establishment of a cosmopolitan citizenship? This study lends support to the potentiality of a cultural and historical museum transforming into “third spaces” where visitors may actively engage in exploration of complex multitudes of cultural identities and cosmopolitan citizenship. The findings of this study contribute to the literature on “third spaces” and transculturalism by providing an empirical study of learning experiences of visitors in museums. It reaffirms the notion of transculturalism by proposing a new humanism in recognition of the *other*, and in expressing oneself in a conscious subjective manner with cultural empathy. From a practical perspective, it suggests that in order to encourage international visitors to cross the cultural and psychological boundaries and engage in dialogues, the museum professionals may design interactive programs in a creative manner. It also suggests that museum administrators improve their services to more diverse groups of visitors to enhance inclusiveness.

Keywords: intercultural dialogues, third space, learning, museum

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1 Introduction

“One of the journeys we make in a museum is from material culture to non-material culture and a deeper understanding of ourselves, others and the world in which we live.” (Talboys, 2011, p. 101). In recent decades, an increasing number of museum practitioners started to realize the indispensable role that museums play in encouraging intercultural dialogues and enhancing social inclusiveness. Bodo (2012) called for the need of museum educators to create “third spaces” where individuals can cross the boundaries of belonging (both physical and psychological) to engage in intercultural dialogues. This call also resonates with recent discussions on a paradigm shift at the 25th International Council of Museums (ICOM) Triennial Conference in 2019. ICOM has started to reevaluate the new definition of museum, i.e., “zones of contact” between cultures (Clifford, 1997) and important pedagogical sites for framing and reframing relationship between culture, race, and identity (Crowley & Matthews, 2006).

Researchers examined museum-based pedagogy of transculturalism (Lewison Flint, & Sluys, 2002), and regarded museum as third spaces when different cultures collide and interact with each other. Thus, an in-between culture—“a partial culture that is ‘both alike and different from its parent culture’” (Eliot, 1948, pp. 63–64)—is gradually created. This imaginary cultural space is ideal for dialogues “where individuals and distinct cultural identities can act and interact, transform and be transformed” (Canclini, 2006, p. 166). Along this line of scholarly work, the third spaces of museum has propelled us into a realization that we are in an era where transculturalism and the eventual prospect of identifying a cosmopolitan citizenship can become a reality.

There is a call for researchers to examine how cultural and historical museums could be transformed into third spaces where, on the one hand, the international visitors could cross boundaries through museum learning activities that allow them to develop intercultural awareness by seeing themselves in the other (Cuccioletta, 2016); on the other hand, the museum professionals are able to reach out to a more culturally diverse audience group by being open to the richness of diversity (Bodo, 2009). In order to provide insights into those inquires, this research has examined visitors’ experiences in a provincial cultural and historical museum in British Columbia, Canada. Drawn upon five months of ethnography work which involves designing an interactive learning program for mandarin speaking visitors, this research proves the potentiality of museums to transform into third spaces where visitors may actively engage in exploration of a complex multitudes of identities and a cosmopolitan citizenship.

The findings from this study have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically speaking, it contributes to the literature on third spaces and transculturalism by providing an empirical study of international visitors' experiences in the museum setting. It reaffirms the notion of transculturalism by proposing a new humanism in recognition of the other, and expressing oneself in a conscious subjective manner in the public space. It also highlights the role of cultural empathy in the dynamic process of intercultural encounters in third spaces. From a practical perspective, it suggests that in order to encourage international visitors to cross the cultural and psychological boundaries and engage in transcultural dialogues, the museum professionals should inspire the visitors to contextualize themselves within the historical and cultural stories through active participation. In addition, it recommends cultural and historical museum administrators and staffs to further understand the unique ways of learning and knowing of international visitors, so that museum educators may creatively design exhibitions to engage a more diverse group of audiences, and truly achieve transcultural communication.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Transculturalism and Third Spaces

The term “third spaces” was commonly used to describe the hybridity of cultures in the age of globalization and post-colonialism (Bhabha, 1996). In a world where different cultures coexist and thrive, the differentiations among cultures are not always that clear-cut. As suggested by Eliot (1948), when different cultures collide and interact with each other, an in-between culture—“a partial culture that is ‘both alike and different from its parent culture’” (Eliot, 1948, pp. 63–64)—is gradually created. The culture in-between could thus be perceived as a space that blurs cultural boundaries and challenges our perception of culture as “homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originally past, kept alive in the national tradition of the people.” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 54).

The concept of third spaces stresses the interconnections among cultures, as it creates a habit of dialogue, debate, and mutual understanding, and is characterized simultaneously by a high level of complexity and tension. Because of this nature, it is highly dynamic and always in the making (Maviglia, 2015). This idea provides a tool to conduct cultural analysis that goes beyond the traditional polarities, such as between center and periphery, between visitor and host, or between the self and other. It brings an invaluable perspective of cultural criticism by revealing the complex balance and interchanges between parties. It highlights

the fluid nature of cultural identity—an identity that is no longer fixed or homogenized but instead has its flexibility to be reinterpreted in new ways. In this way, transcultural understanding goes beyond there cognition of cultural differences by taking a transcultural approach based on the merging and converging of cultures (Ortiz, 1995, p. 97). Through reflexive identity practice, cultural differences are regarded as an opportunity for dialogue and connection rather than separation, and one's own sociocultural values and selfidentity have been decentered in favor of universal human commonality (Kelly, 2018).

2.2 Museum as a Space for Transcultural Communication

Museums were found to play an important role in promoting mutual understanding between different cultural groups. For instance, Bodo (2009, 2012) compared two main interpretive paradigms “essentialist paradigm” and “dialogical paradigm” in conceiving heritage, and reviewed a growing body of research around good practice in intercultural dialogue in museums across Europe and beyond. Comparing with the essentialist paradigm which sees heritage as the “neutral” remains of the past: static, consolidated, “global value”, the “dialogical paradigm” views heritage as a set of cultural objects – both material and immaterial – that could be renegotiated, reconstructed in their meanings and to be shared for social interaction. Bodo (2012) argued that although the essentialist paradigm has dominated most institutional policies and practices, a dialogical paradigm is important for museums to encourage interaction between different cultural groups and to encourage greater recognition and appreciation of *other* cultures.

Following a dialogical paradigm, researchers suggest the potentiality for museum exhibitions to be an ideal space for transcultural communication, for its collections not only expose the museum professionals and the public to various cultures, but also challenge the visitors' (existing) perceptions toward other cultures.

For instance, Delgado (2009) believes that with its diverse body of historical objects as its collection obtained from different cultures, the museum exhibitions could trigger visitors' deeper thinking and reflections on the cultural identities of themselves and others while being immersed in a third space constituted by the richness of cultural diversity. In this third space, museum staffs and other stakeholders who are part of the co-creation process of the objects' interpretations are encouraged to embrace cultural literacies—the basic knowledge about a particular culture and the capability to respect and empathize with people from other cultural backgrounds (Anderson, 2004). As the narrator tells the stories of the museum

collections to the public, museum professionals need to forge collaborative partnerships with different source communities of the objects; this allows them to cross the boundaries between cultures and enrich their knowledge about their collections. In this way, museums are more able to unfold the cultural meanings and stories around the objects and share them with the general public.

The studies mentioned above indicate museum exhibitions' potentials in facilitating cross-cultural understandings; however, the capability of museum exhibitions in fostering transcultural dialogues with the general public could only be activated when a museum exhibition becomes an important pedagogical site for reconciling tensions between cultures in history that have important implications in managing intercultural relationships in contemporary society. This didactic function of museums can be brought into play when the museum is adopting narrations or visiting experience designs in a way that engage topical social issues. For instance, the museum practices in recent decades have challenged the long-held sense of superiority and hierarchy in maintaining social class boundaries and nationalism (Windle, 2013). These practices prove that the museum can change the ways to tell stories of its collections "by asking awkward questions, suggesting connections and throwing the spotlight onto omissions and their significance" (Macdonald & Fyfe, 1996, p. 2), and has the potentiality to be transformed into a space where mutual understanding can be achieved between diverse socio-cultural groups. To understand the complexity of communication between individuals and groups in a museum learning experience, it is suggested that museum practitioners need to consider visitors' social experience, prior knowledge, and biographical/historical position (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

2.3 Cultural Empathy in the Museum Setting

From the communication perspective, cultural empathy has been examined as a key factor in successful intercultural dialogues (Barnlund & Nomura, 1985; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Herz, 2015). To better understand the nature of cultural empathy (i.e., try to define if empathy is a trait, a learned skill, or a contextually emergent relational state), scholars conceptualize empathy from multiple perspectives. For instance, the definition of empathy has been posited specifically as intercultural communication skills. Researchers identify empathy as one of the key behavioral elements for a successful and effective intercultural communication process and as the prerequisites for one's achieving intercultural competences (Chen, 1992; Ruben, 1976). Klopff and Park (1984) describe that to practice empathy is to try to see things from the other person's frame of reference,

which corresponds with Bennett's (1979) description of empathy as a more other-focused human emotion. He proposes that we set the "golden rule" in favor of what he calls "the platinum rule: Do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them" (Bennett's, 1979, p. 422), thus he defines empathy as the "the imaginative, intellectual and emotional participation in another person's experience" (Bennett's, 1979, p. 418). Broome (1991) extends this discussion and adds that "the development of shared meanings must move the focus beyond both self and other to the interaction between communicators" (Broome, 1991, p. 247). In this sense, meaning has been regarded as co-constructed in social interaction (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990), rather than a phenomenon that exists prior to communication. This discussion emphasizes that interaction is at the heart of the relational approach to empathy. As Broome (1991) describes, "empathy is a series of successive approximations to the others' point of view during social interaction" (Broome, 1991, p. 1241). Meanings are products of this interaction, from which emerges a third culture. Broome (1991) adds that empathy is a behavior which requires not only certain skills, but also particular situational conditions. These situational factors include the verbal manner in which individuals express their feelings and "the nature of the empathies' feeling-state, including certain appraisals about the context" (Broome, 1991, p. 244).

There has been a growing concern over the need of empathy in intercultural understanding in the context of museum exhibitions. On the one hand, scholars regard empathy as an emotional tool that museums could use as part of the exhibition experience design (Silvers, 2013). On the other hand, it is argued that museum exhibition designers also have their roles to play in provoking their audiences' empathetic emotions. For instance, Herz (2015) believes that empathy has particular relevance to museum exhibitions, because the process of visiting an exhibition could bring visitors closer to a historical figure or context which is quite different from the present. Höge (2003) also argues that the displayed objects that surround visitors within the museum environment could trigger their imaginations, which creates possibilities for forming empathetic emotions. Witcomb (2013) argues that emotional responses of visitors are activated by creating a 'simulation of dialogue' between viewers and objects in museum exhibitions. By bringing their past and their partial knowledge to the present upon entering the exhibition, and specifically into the museum space, viewers could extend that partial knowledge at both cognitive and affective levels through interacting with the other person's displayed stories (Witcomb, 2013, p. 267).

Along this line of discussions, Silverman (2009) describes visitors' museum experience as an "interaction with museum resources and with each other" that helps visitors to "create, exchange and share information and meaning in real or

virtual time and space.” (Silverman, 2009, p. 15). This suggests that museum can be a space where people’s prior knowledge, attitudes, and values are challenged. Dodd, Sandell, and Scott (2014) suggest that the capacity of visitors to reflect on the self and on the other is activated in the context that visitors experience the museum. The new meaning that visitors can gain from the museum experience that allows them to feel the cultures that are different from their own and “discover new perspectives on the world” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 48) extends their empathy capacities as important learning outcomes.

Drawing on the literatures that focus on studying people’s empathetic emotion, consensus has been achieved that it is vital to build an immersive museum environment with proper navigations for different groups of visitors, so that they may be persuaded to rebuild the image of the past and step into the shoes of people who had been part of the history yet had remained unfamiliar to these visitors. Museum exhibition experience should be shifted from pedagogic to performative form of museum displays (Cameron, 2006; Chakrapathy, 2002; Gregory & Witcomb, 2007; Schorch, 2009). It is important to understand how museum audiences learn and know in the museum setting, so as to forge the connections between visitors and museum displays, thus creating more possibilities for visitors to empathize with local history and people who are different from their own cultural contexts.

2.4 Summary and Research Questions

This literature review provides insights into the understanding of transculturalism and third space in the context of cultural and historical museum. It stresses the important role of cultural empathy in intercultural experiences of museum visitors. However, there are few studies that examine how a third space is created and intertwined with intercultural practices in museum exhibitions. It is worthwhile to study the role of cultural empathy in the dynamic experiences of museum visitors from a transcultural communication perspective. Therefore, this essay takes these thoughts further by answering the following questions:

- A. How have cultural and historical museum exhibitions put visitors in contact with the other and foster an understanding of the other?
- B. What role does cultural empathy play in visitor’s experiences in a museum setting?
- C. How has transculturalism led to the establishment of a cosmopolitan citizenship?

3 Methods

3.1 Background of the Museum and its Bilingual Tour Program

International visitors' cultural experiences may take place at the provincial museum of British Columbia, a province which is regarded as the Canadian gateway to Asia-Pacific. The special location of the province and its diversity well demonstrate that the landscape has a history of being culturally diverse and could be seen as the window that allows visitors from Asia to better understand the Canadian history and how that could be related to themselves. In this study, we examine the experiences of groups of Mandarin students from different regions of Chinese mainland who visited the museum as part of a university summer cultural program. Responding to the learning needs of these visitors who are mainly undergraduate students from Chinese universities, the museum tour has been tailored as a bilingual (English/Chinese) program with due assessment.

There are several curatorial features of exhibition design in this studied museum. First of all, the curatorial style in the museum provides visitors with a vivid physical context where they can immerse themselves in a historical environment. As a major part of the museum setting, many life-sized replicas are placed in the human history gallery, in a way that they show vividly the province's historical past. Instead of merely displaying the exhibits in glass cases, the exhibitions are so curated that they seem to form a narrative that tells the stories of local history in a chronological and thematic order. Together with comprehensive light and sound effects, the museum presents a lively atmosphere for visitors to learn the history through their sense and sensibility.

Considering the communicative challenges (including possible language difficulties) that student's encounter in the museum, an interactive activity was designed as the navigation approach to lead the students to discover the stories behind the exhibits in a more meaningful manner. According to Bedford (2014), the narration of a story consists of the story itself and how the story is told. A scavenger hunt activity was integrated as the story telling method for the bilingual tour program to motivate the students to enrich their learning experience in the museum environment.

The scavenger hunt activity was designed in a way that combined the historical stories with the theme of the galleries and exhibits. By making the activity real-experience and interactive, students were given opportunities to explore the deeper meanings of the exhibits and find out the connections among different cultural groups and historical topics. In particular, the activity requires these students to find three pieces of laminated information sheets that were dispersed

in the galleries, so that they can form the whole stories of five historical figures in the province. These five historical figures were carefully selected from different cultural groups (i.e., England, China, and the First Nations). The stories contained important events that illustrate the figures' leadership styles, communicative strategies, and how they form their relationships with other cultural groups. Each of information sheets was placed in thematically specific galleries which matched the content of the information sheets. After finding the first piece of information, the students needed to read it through and fully understand it as well as the introductory panels in the galleries, in order to find important clues for the next piece of information. After all the information sheets were collected and all the stories were learned, the students were asked to answer some written questions which encourage their deeper thinking on local history, ethnicity, and intercultural relationships.

3.2 Data Collection

In order to understand the Chinese students' experiences in the museum, we used qualitative methods to collect data so that we can "make sense of the context and build larger knowledge claims about the culture" (Tracy, 2013, p. 3). As it was suggested by Hein (2002) that the study of visitors should involve both the observation methods and the language-based methods, we adopted a multi-method approach consisting of participatory observations and in-depth interviews, which allows us to gather students' experiences from multiple perspectives.

The researchers used the participated observation method and engaged in multiple informal conversations with the students, teachers, and staff from the museum, to generate an overall picture of the museum activities. To collect valid data through observations, we paid special attention to the students' behaviors, eye contacts, and even the conversations they had with each other during the activities. We took detailed field notes while observing. While shadowing the tour, we kept a distance from the students who were being observed in order to minimize our interference in the students' museum learning process.

To reach a deeper understanding of the visitors' behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews. In total, 27 university students from the visiting groups were interviewed. Participants were invited on a voluntary basis and all signed their names to agree to participate in this research project. The interviewees were originally from 13 provinces and municipalities and autonomous regions including Beijing and Tianjin. All of the students were between 20 and 23 years old studying at a university in China, with 14 male students

and 13 female students. None of them had previous experiences of visiting a Canadian museum. The researchers asked students questions according to the interview protocol and whenever possible encouraged students to expand and explore their responses through further questioning. The interviews last around 40–90 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded (with consent by the interviewees) and later transcribed.

First, students were asked to talk about their museum experiences and cultural impressions on this museum visit. They were also asked to reflect on different museum visiting experiences. Students were then asked their particular experiences, feelings and things that they learned from this bilingual museum program. They were asked to tell stories they had discussed with their peers and conversations they had had during the visit. They were also invited to comment on the design of the museum tour and provided suggestions. Finally, the students were asked about the intercultural learning experiences, and how this tour would impact their cultural assumption, emotions, awareness and identities, etc.

3.3 Data Analysis

We performed data analysis in both inductive and abductive steps (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Combining inductive and abductive approaches has been referred to as ‘systematic combining’ (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). According to Dubois and Gadde (2002): “In studies relying on abduction, the original framework is successively modified, partly as a result of unanticipated empirical findings, but also of theoretical insights gained during the process.” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 559). While the inductive approach helps researchers to infer a reasonable conclusion given premises which “bear a favorable evidential relation to the conclusion” (Swinburne, 1974, p. 3), abduction leads researchers to refer an appropriate premise such that the conclusion is a valid consequence of the given premise. In other words, abduction is characterized as inference to the best explanation (Harman, 1965).

We coded data and identified the first order themes, and then generated the second order themes by combining/reducing theme categories. We next followed Ketokivi and Mantere (2010) and Suddaby (2006), and iteratively matched all the identified themes against our theoretical base through a process of abduction. In this step, empirical data and theoretical framework evolve simultaneously (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Comparison between the emerging themes from the data and theoretical constructs allowed us to introduce additional third order themes.

For instance, we identified “boundaries”, “on-site engagement”, “intercultural dialogues”, “cultural empathy”, “cosmopolitan” and “reflective thinking” by

contrasting and analyzing themes associated with students' experiences in the museum. We also conducted an additional robustness check to discern among themes of "physical boundaries", "cultural boundaries", "cognitive encounter", "emotional encounter", "cultural empathy", "intercultural awareness", "cosmopolitan" and "reflexive thinking" in situations where second order themes appeared to overlap. Here we used contextual information to get further explanations and clarifications, as interviewees in our sample came from a high-context culture (Hall, 1976). In a few cases where we lacked enough information to code properly, the category remained ambiguous and we dropped those data from the analysis.

4 Findings

Based on the data gathered from our fieldwork, we found that the interactive learning activity worked as an effective tool to help the students cross the cultural barriers that got in the way of understanding local cultural diversity and historical issues—the different curatorial styles, educational styles, and language barriers. This research lends support to the notion that the museum can be an ideal cultural learning space where students raise their cultural awareness, develop their cultural empathy, and form a cosmopolitan citizenship through reflexive and critical thinking.

4.1 Crossing Language and Cultural Boundaries in Museums

Although the museum's curatorial and educational styles are useful in displaying local cultural diversities to its audience, this information is hard to be decoded for those foreign visitors who come from an entirely different cultural background. For the mandarin-speaking students from China, the different museum environments, the different educational backgrounds, and the language barrier created communicative obstacles to process information and develop intercultural understanding. As one interviewee mentioned:

"(Before) I usually just walked around the exhibits, appreciated them from outside of the glass cases. Here with so many displaying techniques and replicas that create an immersive environment, although it was fascinating, I also lost focus in some ways and wasn't sure where to start my journey in the museum." (Student D, 2017, personal communication)

This comment reveals that the visitors who are more used to a traditional museum curatorial style felt overwhelmed in a different museum context that requires them to take initiative in exploring and learning.

What's more, the educational style in China is more teacher-driven and goal-oriented. Thus when these students were asked to explore the museum without a specific goal to achieve, most of them lost their motivations to fully experience the museum environment. This point has been well illustrated by two students during the interview who claimed that they felt that the museum was full of exotic exhibits from a different culture, but they were not directly relevant to their own culture. As a result, there is a lack of motivation to unravel the cultural stories behind the exhibits.

"Though it is a really nice museum to visit and it is a good chance to learn about local history, I'm not quite interested in the content of the museum displays, especially when these stories have nothing to do with my daily life." (Student B, 2017, personal communication)

Last but not least, the linguistic environment in the museum also creates difficulties for those visitors to understand the content of the exhibition. Although most of these students had started to learn English at an early age, it is still not easy for them to absorb information when they are exposed to a solely English-speaking environment. Even though the assistance of translation software/app can be helpful for them to understand some key words in the introductory panels, the difficulties still exist, making them feel reluctant to read all the English contents without an incentive. For example, several students had difficulties translating the content of the introductory panels by themselves:

"Yes we can translate some key words or unfamiliar vocabularies from English to Chinese, but the language barrier for us to understand the whole paragraph on the introductory panels still exist." (Student M, 2017, personal communication)

"The translation software is not a panacea. True, I can look up translations of vocabularies on the app, but the problem is there are too many vocabularies I found hard to understand, and it would be too time consuming if I really search them all." (Student R, 2017, personal communication)

Considering the students' experience of cultural fatigue (i.e., an unbearable feeling one gets when one thinks the cultural interactions seems to take more effort than one thinks it worth) in the museum environment, bilingual materials can help visitors to better understand the theme of the galleries and the contents of the exhibits. These bilingual materials can also make visiting students feel more empowered and confident to fully explore the museum space and develop their

potentials in understanding the historical and cultural stories that the exhibitions convey.

4.2 Evoke Intercultural Awareness through Dialogic Interactions

(i) Making sense of the galleries from a narrative perspective

Rather than visiting the exhibitions without a clear clue, most interviewees mentioned that participating in the tour program helped them to organize what they have experienced in the museum in a meaningful way. In that sense, the visitors started to play a role in co-creating the narratives together with the exhibition designers. Thus, one of the interviewees described her experiences:

“Of course, we have encountered lots of exhibits which were not related to the information we were trying to find for the scavenger hunt activity, but in order to make sure whether an exhibit is useful for us to locate the information in the first place, we have to utilize the information we had (the introductory panels and our mobile phone) to understand what each exhibit was about. For example, when I walked past the modern history gallery, I was attracted only by the appearance of a ship replica. So I walked closer and read the introductory panel, then came to know the historical backdrop of this ship. I can still remember having seen this ship because I spent time researching it in the museum which left a deep impression on me.” (Student D, 2017, personal communication)

As is seen from her experience, the narrative of the museum exhibits was understood and appreciated by the visitors as they were fully engaged in the program. In order to locate a particular piece of information to construct the stories presented in the scavenger hunt activity, the students participated and co-constructed the historical/cultural narratives of the museum exhibits. In this way, they were inspired and began to focus on exploring the connections between the galleries, thus creating an opportunity for them to understand how the two different cultural groups were interrelated. With the help of the supplementary materials of the tour activity, the exhibits were successfully transformed into the material culture that worked as a medium for the students to better understand the past, which made it possible for the museum to go beyond being a physical space, and reach a higher level of cultural space that encouraged visitors to enhance their intercultural understanding.

(ii) Dialogic interaction with museum display – position oneself in historical context and form an understanding of other

Several interviewees mentioned that with the facilitation of interactive learning activity, the museum serves as a physical space that allows them to position themselves in a particular cultural/historical space while standing in front of the historical/cultural artifacts. In this context, the artifacts work as the medium that connect physical and cultural space. Here are some conversations that happened between two visitors while they were visiting the gallery of the First Peoples' heritage:

"This piece of information says that the judge once held court about an American coal worker assaulting the First People, so it has something to do with the relationships between the white and the First Nations here." (Student B, 2017, personal communication)

"Then according to the storyline, the next piece of information might be in the First Peoples' gallery, but which part of the gallery do you think we should go?" (Student A, 2017, personal communication)

"It might be in the galleries on the lower floor, I think. I remember that the museum guide told us the lower gallery was about the past contact between the First Nations and the Europeans, isn't it? Anyway, let's try that part." (Student B, 2017, personal communication)

As learned from this conversation, motivated by the designed learning activity, the two visitors succeeded not only in finding the required information in the gallery, but also in positioning themselves in the particular historical context when detailed information around the intercultural interactions among different cultural groups was given to reveal issues about the indigenous culture. By engaging with the exhibits in the physical space, the participants brought their past knowledge and experiences to the present within the museum space, which contributed to gaining new cultural knowledge. This point is also highlighted in another interviewee's comments:

"While finding the stories of the local historical figure in the museum space, the exhibits as well as its history were more touchable in some sense. I felt that I saw not just the mere appearance of the artifacts, but the stories behind them." (Student H, 2017, personal communication)

As mentioned above, this museum learning program provided an opportunity for the students to explore the historical/cultural stories that were hidden behind the museum displays. As the connection between cultural artifacts and the historical events/stories gradually gets established in the mind of the visitors, an intercultural learning space is constructed when the visitors brought their interpretations to the museum context.

(iii) Raise intercultural awareness in the museum learning space

According to several interviewees, one of their museum learning outcomes is that their awareness of cultural differences and their cultural identity was raised. For instance, one interviewee said:

“From what I’ve learned in the museum, every culture should be respected in their own ways and people should have equal rights to practice their cultural activities.” (Student E, 2017, personal communication)

Similarly, another interviewee talked about their cultural identities and cultural adaptations while studying in Canada:

“Of course it is important for us to respect each other’s cultures, so that it would be easier for us to adapt to a new cultural environment. For example, as Mandarin students who just come to Canada, we need to try to use the Canadian way to communicate with local people in order to be accepted by the local culture.” (Student F, 2017, personal communication)

As is seen from their comments, the students in general got a chance to consciously develop their cultural awareness by actively positioning themselves in the local culture that the museum space had made possible. The competencies that the students had cultivated in understanding the necessity of respecting cultural diversity and making intercultural adaptation highlights the importance of empowering visitors to negotiate the cultural implications of the museum exhibitions through interactive activities that enhance visitors’ on-site learning experience.

4.3 From Learning Space to Third Space – Forming a Sense of Cultural Empathy and Cosmopolitan Citizenship

Based on the cultural awareness that the visitors have developed, a sense of cultural empathy and cosmopolitan citizenship is gradually formed. This sense of cultural empathy starts when the visitors reevaluate their previous intercultural encounters, and reflected on their capability of feeling for other cultures, and in the process trying to connect their cultural identities with those of others.

First, the findings indicate the visitors’ abilities in relating what they have learned from the museum to their previous experiences. It is suggested that by being emotionally engaged with the museum learning experience, the visitors were motivated to think deeply about current social issues by reexamining the intercultural encounters they have experienced. One student described his experience below:

“This museum learning experience actually reminded me of what I’ve seen while visiting the Parliament House with my classmates before. I remembered that there were lots of the First People lining up together singing their traditional songs and protesting something, but at that point I couldn’t really understand why they protest and what conflicts they had had in history. Relating this experience to what we had learned in the museum today, I can somehow see the stories behind the exhibits from my own standpoint.” (Student E, 2017, personal communication)

As the student explained, his museum visit helped him not only to relate his past experiences with the present one, but also to deepen his understanding of some current cultural issues that have historical origins. It shows that with proper navigational activities for visitors, the museum enshrining the historical stories could motivate visitors to rethink intercultural relationships in contemporary society. In this case, by stressing the cultural conflicts between the first people and the Europeans in history, this interactive museum learning experience inspired the visitors to make sense of the cultural issues that they didn’t understand in the past, and with proper guidance, to explore the traumatic historical stories embedded within the museum display that the First People have suffered. In this way, the museum is not merely a space where visitors could learn about history, but an ideal cultural space where they could shift from an outsiders’ perspective to a standpoint closer to the cultural group who had experienced the history of disempowerment, which is still alive in the local socio-cultural context at present.

Second, findings from this research also imply that once the history and there presentational meanings of the displayed objects are revived in a more socially engaging museum learning experience, visitors can draw connection between their experiences/cultural identities and other cultures that the objects represent. The visitors’ capability and tendency to feel for other cultures and reflect on the similarity and differences in their own culture not only indicate that a sense of cultural empathy is being developed, but also shows that the visitors gradually formed a cosmopolitan view of their identity in the contemporary society.

“When being guided by the program to the residential school part in the First People gallery, and when I saw a broken mask on display, I felt really sorrow for the First People on one hand, and my previous assumptions had been challenged on the other. As a Hui (one of the ethnic groups in China) myself, I felt that how First People were treated was quite different compared to the ethnic groups in China, as my cultural traditions are not that interfered or disrespected by the Han.” (Student M, 2017, personal communication)

As we can see, this visitor (she) was able to put herself in others’ shoes, which helped her to develop empathetic emotions while learning what had happened to other cultural and ethnic groups in the past. In this case, what she had learned from the exhibition challenged her previous assumption about ethnic diversity

within the nation from the standpoint of an ethnic group member herself. The emotional expressions from her comments proved that she is not only looking at the world from a different perspective, but also forming a strong emotional connection with other ethnic minority groups who had similar experiences during a specific historical era. It is also worth mentioning here that during the interviews, we had also noticed several interviewees using emotional words to describe their experiences (e.g., shocked, touching, surprised, joyful, enlightened, etc.), which implies that the empathetic emotions are not confined to the visitors who have ethnic identities of a minority, but can be applied to other visitors who took part in this museum learning experience.

This student's reflection also suggests that she is aware of the multilayered cultural identity she is having as an international visitor from one of the 56 ethnic groups in China and was able to make a comparison between her experience and that of the First People. By stating that she felt her cultural identity had been fully respected, she marked the different situations faced by the Hui in China and the First Nations in Canada as a recognition of historical cultural differences between the two countries. In addition, her reflections show a tendency in developing heterogeneous understandings of identity and the willingness in accepting plural definitions of identity, which are considered essential in forming a sense of cosmopolitan citizenship in museum (Lloyd, 2014; Mason, 2013). The advantage of forging a sense of cosmopolitan citizenship has also been highlighted by Penny (1999), who claimed that adopting cosmopolitan visions while fashioning local identities could offer critical insights into the historical and social issues displayed in the museum space.

Following the discussion of Hannerz (1990), cosmopolitanism is a model of meaning-making, an act which brings cosmopolitan into being through particular frames of action and interpretation. It is not something that emerges as a result of cultural training, but rather, it is a set of increasingly available cultural skills, attitudes and practices that individuals achieved and performed. By actively engaged in socially meaningful learning experience from their visit to the museum, the visitors' cosmopolitan citizenship has been activated. This point has been demonstrated in the following example that by taking a cosmopolitan view, visitors realize the importance of preserving language diversity as a crucial part of cultural heritage in contemporary society:

"This (bilingual tour) activity made me realize the importance of preserving languages as the legacies we inherited from our ancestors. However, I felt really pity when losing our cultural traditions to a large extent in China (nowadays)." (Student I, 2017, personal communication)

In this comment, the visitor showed that she started to project what she had learned from the exhibition in the First People gallery on the preservation strategy of cultural heritage in China. By drawing connection between the First People and cultural minority groups in China, the student started to perceive the preservation of language diversity and traditional culture not only as a significant issue for First Nations, but also as a pressing issue in China in the context of globalization and modernization. This intercultural reflection stimulated an intercultural dialogue within the context where past and present, Chinese culture and Canadian culture, are intertwined, illustrating the need and importance of introducing the concept of cosmopolitan citizenship in the museum space.

In sum, the interviews reveal that the visiting students feel a deep connection with the cultural group (e.g., the First Nations in this case) by emotionally imagining what it is like to be in their positions. In this sense, even if the visitors themselves are not part of those stories, they could still feel for others and get emotionally connected with the cultural others. This inter-subjective connection plays a vital role in fostering perspective-taking and empathetic emotion that bring visitors into a specific historical context so that they may imagine what it feels like to be “othered” within that context; it also helps to develop a sense of cosmopolitan citizenship through the interactive museum learning experiences.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

This research examined intercultural experiences of international visitors in a museum in British Columbia, Canada. It suggests the need for third space to be reconceptualized and reconfigured in museum settings through interactive learning program design, and it provides abundant empirical evidence to explain the dynamics of transforming museum learning space to third space. It reaffirms the notion of transculturalism that proposes a new humanism in recognition of the *other*, and expresses oneself in a conscious subjective manner in the public space. The research findings also contribute to the literature of cultural empathy and extend the discussions to the unique intercultural context of museum. It further explains the crucial role of cultural empathy that has been activated through intercultural dialogues in forging a sense of cosmopolitan.

Museums have long been regarded as important pedagogical sites to frame and reframe relationship between culture, race, and identity (Crowley & Matthews, 2006). It calls for more effort to better understand the dynamics of dialogues happening within museum settings from a transcultural communication perspective. Our findings shed light on the discussion of intercultural dialogues, which cannot be usefully conducted in isolation, but have to be observed in real-

life situations involving visitors on-site within museum settings (Tudor, 2003). The relationship between international visitors and museum exhibits is a dynamic one, which is often formed and adjusted as visitors interact within the museum space during their learning process. The design of interactive learning programs may effectively empower visitors to reconstruct the exhibition narratives together with others and engage in enlightening cultural dialogues. Through those kinds of interactions, visitors may cross cultural and psychological boundaries and develop fresh intercultural awareness by seeing themselves in the other (Cuccioletta, 2016). In this sense, visitors can feel connection not only to local and national others and territories but to the rest of the world.

The research findings also elaborate the role of cultural empathy in museum exhibitions that shapes and challenges visitors' attitudes towards other cultures. By emotionally responding to the museum displays with the help of the specially-designed museum learning materials, dialogues between the viewer and the displayed culture are generated, and the viewer's empathetic emotions toward other cultural groups are activated. The findings extend the discussion on "simulation of dialogue" (Witcomb, 2013), that through interacting with the other person's story "viewers could then extend that partial knowledge at both cognitive and affective levels" (Witcomb, 2013, p. 267). In this sense, cultural and historical museum exhibitions are transformed into third places where visitors can feel for others, and put themselves in the shoes of others who were contextualized in the history of a different culture (Ingold, 2011). Through reflexive thinking, an open and receptive attitude towards the geographically and culturally distant others grows. It leads to creating connection with people and things that are culturally different from oneself with cultural empathy. By conscious attempting to be receptive to the cultural outputs of others, cosmopolitanism is achieved by individuals that selectively and flexibly deploy cultural skills, attitudes, and practices to deal with new or emergent conditions, and become immersed within and engaged with them.

Aside from the theoretical probing, this research also has several practical implications for both museum staffs and intercultural educators. First, it suggests that museum educators design interactive exhibitions creatively to encourage transferring exhibitions into third place and to facilitate intercultural understanding and dialogues. Second, the findings of this research call on museum administrators and staffs' attention to improving their services to a more diverse group of audiences so as to enhance the inclusiveness of the museum exhibitions. Thus, museums may actively encourage visitors to critically reflect on their cultural identities in the global context, develop connections with people from different cultural groups, and truly achieve transcultural communication. Finally, this research sheds lights on reflecting how new teaching pedagogy and

diversifying teaching methods may be created for transcultural communication. We suggest that such cultural sites like museums and other cultural institutions/sites may find ways to transform themselves into an ideal space that provides a more favorable physical and cultural context for learning and transcultural communication.

6 Limitations and Future Research

While this study brings both theoretical and practical implications for the future work in the transcultural communication and museum realm, there are still several limitations in this current study. First, this research emphasizes an interactive bilingual (English and Mandarin) tour program, which invites mandarin students as study subjects, it would be constructive and culturally interesting to study participants from a variety of cultural backgrounds in future. Second, we allowed the participants to use their mother tongue to conduct interviews, which helps them to express their ideas more effectively due to their limited English proficiency. As all of the transcripts were translated into English, some changes in meaning may occur, even though such changes are so slight that they do not affect the genuineness of the interviews. Third, we mainly emphasized an interactive approach adopted in a specific museum exhibition in this research paper. Considering the advancement of smart technologies, e.g., virtual reality, augmented reality, etc., it is worthwhile to examine how the use of smart technology and other approaches could facilitate intercultural dialogues in museum settings.

For future studies, we may examine the idea of third spaces in different cultural and learning settings, to generate a deep understanding of the dynamics of intercultural dialogues. As this research may likely highlight the role of cultural empathy that facilitates understanding of the other through reflective thinking, we need to pay critical attention to a range of elements of culture both at the cognitive and emotional levels, which impact intercultural understanding and dialogues. We look forward to delving into these new investigations in the near future.

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