

The Debate Regarding the Swedish Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities: Politics, Postmodernism and the Purpose of a Museum

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Abstract. In September 2016, the journalist Ola Wong wrote an op-ed in the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, “The Government Is Turning the Museums into Propaganda Centers.” Wong claimed to have seen the change at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, arguing that it had shifted from intellectual position to “sensitiveness to shallow opinions in the media and politics.” The text started the debate that would continue for several years. The purpose of the article is to deconstruct the debate regarding the Swedish museums over the last eight years, paying a special attention to the debate between Wong and various representatives from Swedish museums. The analysis focuses on claims regarding the purpose of a museum made in the debate, using previous theoretical discussions on the topic. The study showed that the participants in the discussion were unable to agree on the nature of issue. This reminds of what Frida Beckman and Nora Hämäläinen call *kultursidesmissförstånd*, or a “feuilletonistic misunderstanding,” where the participants never agree on common ground, misinterpret and misunderstand each other. Moreover, they disagree on situation in question and hold incompatible views.

Keywords: museum, East Asia, postmodernism, cultural debate.

Diskusija apie Švedijos Tolimųjų Rytų meno muziejų: politika, postmodernizmas ir muziejaus paskirtis

Santrauka. 2016 m. rugsėjį laikraštyje *Svenska Dagbladet* paskelbtame autoriniame vedamajame „Vyriausybė verčia muziejus propagandos centrais“ žurnalistas Ola Wongas teigė pastebėjės pokyčių Stokholmo Tolimųjų Rytų meno muziejuje. Jis tvirtino, kad muziejus pakeitė intelektualią poziciją į „jautrumą paviršutiniškai nuomonei žiniasklaidoje ir politikoje“. Vedamasis ižiebė keletą metų trukusią diskusiją. Šio straipsnio tikslas – dekonstruoti pastarųjų aštuonerių metų diskusiją apie Švedijos muziejus, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant diskusijai tarp Wongo ir Švedijos muziejų atstovų. Straipsnio autorius analizuoją diskusijoje išsakytas nuomones apie muziejaus paskirtį, remdamasis ankstesniais teoriniais svarstytiams šia tema. Tyrimas parodė, kad diskusijos dalyviai nesugebėjo susitarti dėl problemos pobūdžio. Tai labai panašu į tai, ką Frida Beckman ir Nora Hämäläinen vadina *kultursidesmissförstånd* terminu. Diskusijos dalyviai nesutaria dėl bendros pozicijos, jie klaudingai interpretuoja mintis ir nesupranta vieni kitų, viso to pasekmę – pozicijos dėl dabartinės situacijos nesuderinamumas.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: muziejus, Rytų Azija, postmodernizmas, kultūrinė diskusija.

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Introduction

In September 2016, the journalist Ola Wong wrote an op-ed in the daily *Svenska Dagbladet* “The Government Is Turning the Museums into Propaganda Centers.” In it, Wong debated the change that he claimed to have noticed taking place at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, arguing that it had shifted from intellectual position to “sensitiveness to shallow opinions in media and politics.”¹ The text started the debate that would continue for several years. The article aims to dissect the controversy surrounding the Swedish museums during the past eight years, concentrating on Wong’s debate with various Swedish museum representatives. Utilizing earlier theoretical discussions about the purpose of a museum, the article concentrates on statements made in the argument regarding the issue.

Museum as such is a very old phenomenon. There is evidence that collections bearing similarity to museum collections were already kept in ancient Egypt. The purpose of such collections seems to have been to demonstrate the power and importance of the ruler. As a concept, museum dates back to the Hellenic period.² The private museum, related to one’s will to demonstrate power, originated during the Renaissance, when the museum was described as a “room of learning.”³ It is possible to specify a shift in the role of a museum moving forward. The private museum, which could be described as a collection of curiosities, gave way to a new type of a museum—a vehicle for educating the public and a form of “rational recreation.”⁴ The artifacts moved from private ownership to the space where the public could see them.⁵ For example, the British Museum opened to the public in 1759 and the Louvre in 1793. A visit to the museum had shifted from being a privilege to having the right to attend it.⁶

The shift from private to public created the need for a discussion regarding the purpose of a museum. Education of the public, mentioned earlier, is one of the three purposes of a museum. Nation-building, i.e., to present the official view of one’s nation’s history, is another aspect that has been part of the discussion about the purpose of a museum.⁷ A resource for researchers is yet another purpose attributed to the museum.⁸ These purposes do not necessarily overlap. Education can work together with nation-building, but only if when situated in certain time and space they agree on presentations and descriptions. Similarly, with the museum as a resource for researchers. It could work with both education and nation-building, but only to some degree. The purpose of a museum as a resource for research mostly concentrates on collections, whereas the purposes of education and nation-building lean more toward the presentation of the material. The possibility to do comparative research requires large collections.⁹ Bearing in mind these three potential purposes of a museum, the possibility of a conflict regarding the use of economic resources arises: to focus on presenting certain material or on creating a large collection with potential for research.

¹ Wong, O. Regeringen förvandlar museer till propagandacentraler. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 8 September 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.svd.se/a/zXmjq/regeringen-forvandlar-museer-till-propagandacentraler> [accessed 02/03/2025].

² See Maroević, I. *Introduction to Museology: The European Approach* / Ed. G. Edson. Munich: Verlag Dr. Christian Müller-Straten, 1998, p. 26.

³ See *ibidem*, p. 44.

⁴ See Bennet, T. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 19. Retrieved from <https://freight.cargo.site/m/L2012294489115848705274294807587/The-Birth-of-the-Museum-History-Theory-Politics-To-ny-Bennett-Z-Library.pdf> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁵ See Saumarez, S. Ch. Museums, Artifacts, and Meanings. In: *The New Museology* / Ed. P. Vergo. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 6. Retrieved from https://synth06iii.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/vergo-peter_new-museology.pdf [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁶ Cf. Maroević, I. *Introduction to Museology*, p. 46; Zabalueva, O. “Not All Museums”: *Memory, Politics, and Museum Activism on the Move*. Linköping: Linköping University, 2023, p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.3384/9789180752947>.

⁷ See Prösler, M. Museum and Globalization. In: *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World* / Eds. Sh. MacDonald, G. Fyle. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 24.

⁸ See Lund, J. *Museet vid Korsvägen*. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 2016, p. IX. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/41819> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁹ Cf. *ibidem*.

There is also the possibility of a conflict between education and nation-building. No nation-state has been built on homogeneous population. There will always be more stories to be told. Eventually, the same will happen in an educational setting. The historical orientation of most museums could work as a catalyst in the case of such potential conflicts. As David Horne notes in his book *The Great Museum: The Re-Presentation of History*, in the museum, we are watching “previous declarations of reality” and “discarded dreamlands.”¹⁰ Many voices might want to be heard through the material collected in a museum. To some extent, every exhibition will be only one version of a period or event presented; moreover, it will be observed from a time distance.

Preservation and communication are the two key general concepts in museology.¹¹ Preservation is the act of collecting and keeping objects in a museum setting. Communication is the act of presenting these objects to the public. The result of preservation is a collection that can be presented through a framework.¹² It is within this framework that the act of communication is put in practice.¹³ The result of all these acts is a narrative machinery—a message presented by an organization to the public, using the objects that have been collected and preserved.¹⁴ Such a framework could be constructed in many different ways, depending on narrative the museum wants to promote. It is relevant to note that the narrative promoted by the museum in many ways can be seen as authoritative.¹⁵ In the book *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects*, the authors argue that material things do not exist independently from a narrative, a spoken or written text; and, at the same time, they cannot be reduced to a narrative.¹⁶

During their modern history, museums have always been a subject to the demands to reform, such as adequately represent history and the cultures included in collections and exhibitions.¹⁷ The latest reforms have focused on the inclusion of groups that have not been represented before.¹⁸ This corresponds well to the critique of (non-existent) homogeneous population of a nation-state mentioned earlier, and can be seen as the latest development in both museum theory and museum practice. Museums, libraries and archives are often grouped as concepts—as three similar human phenomena. Although, there are some differences. An opinion exists, especially regarding art museums, that what ends up in a museum is dead and that it is not a living art.¹⁹ This conception can be compared to the archive, in which the documents, from a researcher’s perspective, start their life only upon entering the archive. At least as a subject for research. The library does not suffer from the same type of conflict between the new and the old.

Museology, a theoretical approach to museums, has also changed in a similar way. A major shift in museology had occurred during the last decades of the twentieth century, when the older museology with a focus on practical methods of keeping and presenting a collection began to give way to more modern museology with a focus on the purpose of a museum.²⁰ One way of explaining this shift is through the concepts of iconodule and iconoclastic museology. Iconodule museology is museology that

¹⁰ Horne, D. *The Great Museum: The Re-Presentation of History*. London: Pluto Press, 1984, p. 1.

¹¹ See Maroević, I. *Introduction to Museology*, p. 11.

¹² Cf. Bergqvist, A. Framing Effects in Museum Narratives: Objectivity in Interpretation Revisited. In: *Philosophy and the Museums: Essays on the Philosophy of Museums* / Eds. V. S. Harrison, A. Bergqvist, G. Kemp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 295, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246116000187>.

¹³ Cf. Bennet, T. *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 125.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 178.

¹⁵ See Bergqvist, A. *Framing Effects in Museum Narratives*, p. 301.

¹⁶ See more, Ulrich, T. L.; Gaskell, I.; Schechner, S. J.; Carter, S. A. *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹⁷ See Bennet, T. *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 90.

¹⁸ See Zabalueva, O. “*Not All Museums*,” p. 1.

¹⁹ See for instance, Crimp, D. On the Museum’s Ruins. In: *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* / Ed. H. Foster. New York: The New Press, 2002, p. 49. Retrieved from https://monoskop.org/images/0/07/Foster_Hal_ed_The_Anti-Aesthetic_Essays_on_Postmodern_Culture.pdf [accessed 02/03/2025].

²⁰ See more, Vergo, P. Introduction. In: *The New Museology* / Ed. P. Vergo. London: Reaktion Books, 1989, p. 3.

does not analyze and criticize the museum as such, whereas iconoclastic museology is opened to criticism of a museum as a phenomenon.²¹

I begin the first section with the description of hermeneutical method, which I use in my investigation and analysis, followed by a brief background of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities and the debate regarding its organization and function. The debate is then analyzed and the key concepts of the debate are presented, leading to the finalization of both the article and investigation.

1. The Method of Investigation

In the analysis of the debate, I employ the hermeneutic method, divided in two steps. First, I investigate the material with the purpose of creating different categories, which I call the “themes”. This is also one of the article’s descriptive aspects. The method used is not based on research questions but rather on research propositions, the first proposition (RP1) being to describe the debate in a thematic fashion. By doing this, I clarify what the debate was actually focused on. The next step is to analyze and describe the narrative behind those themes, which is connected to my second research proposition (RP2): to analyze and describe the narratives that the debate was based on. Narratives, the ideas and stories behind a certain political stance are important in the era of postmodernity that we inhabit. These narratives are often in conflict with one another.²² It is these conflicts that I am attempting to reveal. In the article, I use a simplified version of narrative analysis. In order to relate the analysis to narratology, I focus on what is usually described as *fabula*, the manipulation of the story, and the tendencies in the texts.²³

In the article, hermeneutics is understood as an approach of the material (the textual matter) with a preconceived notion, based on research questions and theoretical method. I also share some aspects of my prior knowledge.²⁴ The writer is always trapped in his / her *Horizontverschmelzung*, a fusion of horizons, culture, language, prejudices, and so on, which affect both reading and the account of what is being read. The primary method that I employ to make the horizon evident is the intertextual discussion and expositions that can reveal at least some portions of this horizon.

The empirical material investigated consists mainly of the newspaper articles published from 2016 and onwards. To find the articles, a number of keywords were extracted from the articles found on the internet at the beginning of the research process. The keywords, such as “Östasiatiska museet,” “museum collection,” “colonial gaze,” “postcolonialism,” etc., were used to identify the articles related to the debate in the Swedish Royal Library’s newspaper database. The Royal Library’s database is based on scanned newspapers, and all references are made to original newspapers, which makes it easier to find the articles in comparison to changeable links to the digital material.

2. The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities: The Root of the Problem

The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities was founded in 1959–1963 with the purpose of hosting collections gathered during the archaeological expeditions to China, as well as art and porcelain collections from Asia in general that were donated by the collectors and other individuals.²⁵ Since the beginning, it has been located at Skeppsholmen in central Stockholm. The museum covers Asian culture and not just

²¹ Cf. Lund, J. *Museet vid Korsvägen*, p. 49.

²² Cf. Malpas, S. Introduction. In: *Postmodern Debate* / Ed. S. Malpas. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, p. 4.

²³ Cf. Bal, M. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, p. 9.

²⁴ Cf. Gothóni, R. *Words Matter: Hermeneutics in the Study of Religion*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2011, p. 22; Gadamer, H.-G. *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer Philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1965, p. 415.

²⁵ See more, *Östasiatiska museet: bildkatalog: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities: Album* / Ed. B. Gyllenswärd. Stockholm: Östasiatiska museet, 1963, p. 3–15.

Asian history, which makes its scope extremely extensive.²⁶ Such scope offers the possibility to present exhibitions on a wide variety of subjects: Chinese porcelain, archaeological material, contemporary South Korean music and Japanese manga, to name only a few. The museum also has the largest and oldest library of Asian literature in the Nordic countries.²⁷ At the start, though, museum's collection consisted of archaeological artifacts from China, gathered during the Swedish expeditions to the area, and a fair amount of Japanese porcelain from various private collectors.

The Sinologist Perry Johansson has written the history of Swedish Sinology, in part including the history of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities. According to Johansson, during the procuring of the original archaeological collections, there was a tendency to accept the Chinese often quite nationalistic ideas regarding the artifacts' provenance, etc. without a critical look. This was due to the dependence on the Chinese state regarding translations, permits and other necessities for the expeditions. There was also a clear predatory trait in collecting of the Chinese antiquities among the Swedish expedition participants to China during the early twentieth century.²⁸ However, this was very common to the expeditions from other countries, such as those of Paul Pelliot (France) and Aurel Stein (UK) during the same period.²⁹

As a precursor to the debate initiated by Wong in 2016, the professor in literature Lars Lönnroth wrote an article “Museet—malpåse och cirkusarena” (“The Museum—A Mothball and A Circus Ring”) in 2003. The conflict that Lönnroth wrote about was a conflict between the museums as the “keepers of cultural goods” and the museums as “a scene for different sorts of events and experiences.”³⁰ The article describes the debate on Swedish museums in general. The section of the article, dedicated to the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, carries the headline “The Misery at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities.”³¹ According to Lönnroth, the process of moving from the position where “the museum is a keeper of cultural goods” to position where it is “a scene for different sorts of events and experiences” has gone far at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities. He claims that it is due to a change of view at the Department of Culture, and to a new director with his merits in anthropology, rather than Sinology or East Asian studies.³² The article ignited a short debate in the magazine *Svensk Tidskrift*, involving Lönnroth³³ and the present director of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Magnus Fiskesjö.³⁴

Lönnroth is not the only one to have noticed the shift in Swedish museum policies. According to the researcher Johan Lund, who wrote his dissertation on the development of museum practice in Sweden during the 1990s, there was a shift in Swedish museum practice at the end of the twentieth century. An ideological move from an authoritarian view of science toward a more modest view as fallible had taken place.³⁵ Another change that happened during the 1990s was a change regarding museum policy.

²⁶ See Birde, M. *Manga: från Hokusai till Dragon Ball*. Stockholm: Östasiatiska Museet, 2004, p. 5.

²⁷ See more, Kinas bokhistoria: [China's Book History]. Östasiatiska museet, 2007. Retrieved from <https://www.ostasiatiskamuseet.se/utstallningar/kinas-bokhistoria/> [accessed 02/03/2025].

²⁸ See Johansson, P. *Sinofilerna: Kinakunskapslande och politik från Sven Hedin till Jan Myrdal*. Stockholm: Carlssons Bokförlag, 2008, p. 83. See also, Johansson, P. Johan “Kina-Gunnar” Andersson och de östasiatiska samlingarnas ursprung. *Häften för kritiska studier*, 2003, Vol. 36, No. 2, p. 3; Johansson, P. Orvar Karlbeck på skattjakt: Historien bakom Östasiatiska museets svenska kinasamlingar. *Nordisk Museologi*, 2005, No. 2, p. 28, <https://doi.org/10.5617/nm.3313>.

²⁹ Cf. Hägerdal, H. *Väst om öst: Kinaforskning och kinasyn under 1800- och 1900-talen*. Lund: Lund University Press, 1996, p. 81.

³⁰ Lönnroth, L. Museet—malpåse och cirkusarena. *Svensk Tidskrift*, 2003, No. 3–4, p. 6. Retrieved from <https://www.svensktidskrift.se/arkiv100/2003/45%20Lars%20L%C3%B6nnroth%3B%20Museet%20-%20malp%C3%A5se%20och%20circusarena.pdf> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ Lönnroth, L. Svar till Ann Follin. *Svensk Tidskrift*, 2003, No 5, p. 7. Retrieved from <https://www.svensktidskrift.se/arkiv100/2003/65%20Magnus%20Fiskesj%C3%A5%20Ytigheter%20om%20C3%96stasiatiska%20Museet.pdf> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³⁴ Fiskesjö, M. Ytigheter om Östasiatiska museet. *Svensk Tidskrift*, 2003, No 5, p. 5–6. Retrieved from <https://www.svensktidskrift.se/arkiv100/2003/65%20Magnus%20Fiskesj%C3%A5%20Ytigheter%20om%20C3%96stasiatiska%20Museet.pdf> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³⁵ Lund, J. *Museet vid Korsvägen*, p. XV.

The “Kulturproposition 1996/97:3,” the government bill concerning the changes in cultural policy, covered a few policies regarding the purpose and organization of the Swedish museums. One idea was to create a *Världsmuseum*, a museum of world culture, in Gothenburg. The plan involved moving a couple of museums from Stockholm to Gothenburg, and the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities was one of the museums that the government planned to move.³⁶ The plan had failed, but some remnants of changing the geographical location of museums resurfaced in the debate between Wong and the Swedish museum representatives.

Wong is a Swedish journalist of Chinese descent, who has been writing in the Swedish press about China for a long time, mostly in dominant Swedish newspapers, such as *Svenska Dagbladet*.³⁷ His texts have also appeared in a number of books,³⁸ which focus on life in China and China’s foreign policy.

3. The Investigation and Analysis of the Debate

3.1. Discussion Themes

I have identified a few themes that the debaters returned regularly in their discussions. I chose the themes as an organizing principle of my investigation and analysis, arguing that the alternative—the chronological follow-up of the debate—would be too space consuming. The “collection vs presentation” theme covered the conflict between collection and presentation of a collection over the resources and focus. The theme of “organization” concerned the organization of a museum in general, and the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in particular. “Iconodul vs Iconoclast” was about the museum as a phenomena, raising the question if it should be criticized or maybe even abandoned as a concept. The theme of “postmodernism” covered arguments regarding the museum’s change of focus and its relation to the general change in society, usually described as postmodernity (if the changes are due to changes in society) or “postmodern ideology,” if the changes are due to ideological stance (connected to the politicians in power). Finally, the theme of “soft power” linked the debate to foreign policy toward East Asian countries, in this particular case, mostly to China.

3.2. The Beginning of the Debate: Wong vs The East Asian Museum

The first article by Wong regarding “the problems at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities” was published as an op-ed / short essay in *Svenska Dagbladet* on 9 September 2016.³⁹ The headline of the article was “The Government Is Turning the Museums into Propaganda Centers.” Wong began his op-ed with a mention of the G20-meeting in Hangzhou that started during the same week as his piece came out. Wong claimed that the meeting was a step for China toward taking a leading role in world politics, and the worst time ever to liquidate the Swedish infrastructure of knowledge regarding China. The focus of the op-ed then shifted to the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, which is famous worldwide for its collection and library. According to the journalist, now the politicians want to change that and promote exhibitions on tolerance, migration, integration, democracy and human creativity instead. He linked this change to the establishment of the Museum of World Culture. Wong argued that the change was

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 114. See also, *Statens offentliga utredningar (SOU):1997:95. Forum för världskultur: en rapport om ett rikare kulturliv: betänkande av Utredningen om inrättandet av ett världskulturmuseum i Stockholm*. Stockholm: Fritzes, 1997.

³⁷ See for instance, Wong, O. Debatt: Världskulturmuseerna måste prioritera sina samlingar. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 3 April 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.svd.se/a/1a29M/debatt-varldskulturmuseerna-maste-prioritera-sina-samlingar> [accessed 02/03/2025]; Wong, O. Vem är det egentligen som har kolonial blick? *Svenska Dagbladet*, 7 October 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.svd.se/a/8KEJw/vem-ar-det-som-har-kolonial-blick-egentligen> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³⁸ See Wong, O. *När tusen eldar slickar himlen: Kinas väg mot framtiden*. Stockholm: Ordfront Förlag, 2007; Wong, O. *Pekingsyndromet: Kina, makten, pengarna*. Stockholm: Ordfront Förlag, 2014.

³⁹ Wong, O. *Regeringen förvandlar museer till propagandacentraler*.

also a shift away from knowledge toward something else—less advanced, populistic and propagandist. Although the goal of such changes was to promote anti-racism, according to the author of the op-ed, they had not been efficient. As a second-generation immigrant, he claimed that those goals could not be fulfilled by simply shifting one's focus from the promotion of knowledge to a discourse of tolerance.

In his critique, Wong highlights two aspects. First, the change of focus from knowledge to tolerance, which is not one of the most explicit goals of the museum. Wong sees it as a consequence: in the picture painted in black and white, the focus on tolerance automatically will cancel the focus on knowledge. The second aspect concerns economy. The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities suffered severe budget cuts and started to downsize its staff. There were even discussions to move the museum from the expensive central part of Stockholm.

Wong ends his op-ed with two arguments. His first argument is that the Swedish way of political governing of the museums is problematic. He uses the examples of the museums such as Metropolitan in New York and the British Museum, which have board members with specific competence in the areas distinct to the museums. According to Wong, it is not the case in Sweden. His other argument concerns the commemoration of the founders of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities and the collectors who donated to the museum's collections. Wong says that the Swedes should be proud of these collections as part of their cultural heritage. The disposal of them (a solution proposed by the museum board) is, according to Wong, an attack on the Swedish cultural heritage.

3.3. Collection vs Presentation

The creation of collection's polarity on the one hand and its presentation on the other hand, was present in the above mentioned article by Lönnroth, which, I claimed, was a precursor to the debate of 2016.

The topic is also present in the first op-ed by Wong, in which the exhibitions (presenting a theme of tolerance) are weighed against the preservation of the collection. Wong's claim that the collections were in danger was challenged by Ann Follin, the director of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, in an article published in *Svenska Dagbladet* on 3 April 2017. The article "Ola Wong Does Not Know How a Museum Works" claims that there is no animosity between preserving collection and "finding new and interesting ways of making exhibitions."⁴⁰ In the article "The Museums Need to Prioritize Their Collections," published on the same page as the piece by Follin, Wong argues that if the museum debates which parts of its collection it could dispose of or sell, and if it is being done because of economic reasons, it is clear that the new focus on presentation is too expensive.⁴¹

In an article "Should We Melt, Sell, or Save Our Cultural Heritage?" published in *Svenska Dagbladet* on 26 September 2017, Wong continues with his argument about the disposal of museum collections. In order to present a wider picture, he interviews archaeologists on what happens to collections when the museum no longer has the funds to keep them. The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities is also mentioned, although rather briefly, in the article. Wong links the issue to a trend among the Swedish museums, when the collections are seen partly as a burden because of the cost of keeping them.⁴²

In contemporary museology, the possibility of creating a divide between an object (part of a collection) and a presentation (the story surrounding an object) is questioned.⁴³ The debate of 2016 did not take into account the diverse histories that an object can tell. At least from Wong's perspective, the issue had not been part of the discussion.

⁴⁰ Follin, A. Debatt: "Ola Wong brister i kunskap om hur museer arbetar". *Svenska Dagbladet*, 3 April 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.svd.se/a/noz75/debatt-ola-wong-brister-i-kunskap-om-hur-museer-arbetar> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁴¹ Wong, O. Debatt: *Världskulturmuseerna måste prioritera sina samlingar*.

⁴² Wong, O. Ska vi smälta, sälja eller spara kulturarvet? *Svenska Dagbladet*, 26 September 2017, p. 18.

⁴³ Cf. Ulrich, T. L.; Gaskell, I.; Schechner, S. J.; Carter, S. A. *Tangible Things*, p. 4.

The conflicting narratives of the debate concerned the status of collections. Are they in danger of being disposed of, or are they safe in the hands of the museum? Do the museum staff have the competence to decide what should be kept and what should be disposed of? The participants of the debate did not agree on the status of the collections.

3.4. Organization

The debate about the reorganization of Swedish museums, creating a larger organization consisting of more than one institution, started earlier than the debate initiated by Wong. The topic was present already in the article of 2003 by Lönnroth.⁴⁴ In *Svenska Dagbladet* article “Who Does Actually Have a Colonial Gaze?” of 7 October 2016, Wong focused on what he claimed the main reason of reorganization of the museums, i.e., saving money. According to him, the motivation to reorganize was based on false idea, because the creation of larger units does not automatically lower the cost. In most cases, claimed Wong, referring to Lars Nittve, Swedish former director of the Tate Gallery, the creation of larger administrative units creates rising costs.⁴⁵ I was unable to find direct answers from the museum to Wong’s claim regarding the economic value of reorganizations; however, I found a couple of general references about the issue. In the article “Ola Wong Does Not Know How a Museum Works,” Follin wrote that they are trying “to reach new audiences during a period of economic restraint.”⁴⁶ In the later article, she also claimed that no staff member had been fired during the time she was the director.⁴⁷ When Wong recalled the debate a couple of years later, he noted that the reorganization, i.e., the merge with other museums, created a great risk for the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities to lose its identity.⁴⁸

The claim that the museum was under the economic restraints was shared by other participants of the debate; even though, they did not agree on how to solve the problem. Follin claimed that they needed to seek a new audience, whereas Wong claimed that this search might had made the museum to lose its previous audience—the public with an interest in knowledge. He made this claim after reading the proposals of a new exhibition that was supposed to be oriented toward audience that included “12 year-old children with dyslexia.”⁴⁹

Here, the problem was not really a difference in narrative, but rather a difference in belief what is efficient. The debaters agreed that the budget was a restraint put on the museum and that something needed to be done. A difference of opinion was about the direction of action. To focus on the collection and traditional audience, or seek a new one? Wong claimed to have proof that the focus on “traditional” audience drawn by a “traditional” exhibition was a more efficient way to boost the number of visitors. In his first article “The Government Is Turning the Museums into Propaganda Centers,”⁵⁰ he stated that the most well attended exhibition was the very traditional exhibition of Chinese Terracotta Army presented in 2010.

3.5. Iconodul vs Iconoclast

The polarity, only this time between an iconodul view (not questioning the museum as a phenomenon) and an iconoclast view (questioning the museum as a phenomenon), was also present in the debate

⁴⁴ Lönnroth, L. *Museet—malpåse och cirkusarena*.

⁴⁵ Wong, O. *Vem är det egentligen som har kolonial blick?*

⁴⁶ Follin, A. *Debatt: “Ola Wong brister i kunskap om hur museer arbetar.”*

⁴⁷ Follin, A. “Ingen har avskedats från Världskulturmuseerna.” *Svenska Dagbladet*, 11 July 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.svd.se/a/zL1p55/ingen-har-sparkats-men-de-har-akt-ner-i-hierarkin> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁴⁸ Wong, O. *Dags att släppa världskulturstenen?* *Kvartal*, 4 September 2021. Retrieved from <https://kvartal.se/olawong/artiklar/fortfarande-en-dalig-ide-att-sla-samman-museer/cG9zdDo2MDAy> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁴⁹ Wong, O. *Svar till Ann Follin.* *Svenska Dagbladet*, 12 July 2018, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Wong, O. *Regeringen förvandlar museer till propagandacentraler.*

under consideration. However, it was rather one-sided, and mostly coming from Wong. I will return to this aspect later, when discussing the theme of postmodernism. Wong often uses museums that have been criticized for their at least previous iconodul stance, such as the British Museum or the founders of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, as positive examples.⁵¹ Another example is his claim regarding more “traditional” exhibitions, such as the Chinese Terracotta Army, and the retaining of the previous audience. The representatives of the museum did not provide answers to these claims. Their arguments did not follow the pattern of iconodul vs iconoclast. If they hold an ideological stance, in most cases, it was suggested by the opponents of the debate. As for the narrative, there is an iconodul background to Wong’s claims regarding the economic efficiency of a “traditional museum.” The museum delivered its answer—its contra-narrative, though, mostly in economic terms.

3.6. Postmodernism

Sweden, like many other countries, has had a fierce and less balanced debate about postmodernity and postmodern ideology during the last decade. The literature professor Frida Beckman in her book on the reception of postmodernism in Sweden, writes that postmodernism in the media has been blamed for essentially everything—from bad food to the decline in the number of people that go skiing.⁵² Beckman borrows a very interesting term from the Finnish philosopher Nora Hämäläinen, *kultursidesmissförstånd*, or a feuilletonistic misunderstanding—a misunderstanding typical to debates that occur in the cultural section of a newspaper. There is a tendency in current cultural debates to misunderstand the opponent, willingly or because of one’s narrow self-centered view.⁵³ Such misunderstanding could be observed in the debate about the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, when the opponent did not answer the questions or got carried away discussing the opponent’s arguments. Speaking of museums, some scholars refer to a new type of a museum, “a postmodern museum,” the one that uses a form of presentation, which is more open-ended and challenges the visitor to participate.⁵⁴

In the article “Should We Melt, Sell, or Save Our Cultural Heritage?”⁵⁵ Wong claimed that hiring directors without extensive knowledge in the collections, but with a deep critical view on museums as institutions (an iconoclast stance), puts collections in danger. Wong also wrote that many people have built their museum careers on such criticism. No answers came from the museum regarding these claims. It seems that “postmodernism” is a label that one generally does not put on oneself, instead it is done by others. Anna Dahlberg, a political editor at the newspaper *Expressen*, when discussing the changes in museum’s direction and describing postmodern ideology, employed the term “identity politics.”⁵⁶

The debate about the museums and postmodern ideology found its way to the Swedish parliament. The Member of Parliament, Birgitta Ohlsson (Liberals), asked the minister of culture, Alice Bah Kuhnke (Green Party), about the “intellectual trends” that affect Swedish museums. Ohlsson noted that “objective knowledge” is more important than ever in the time of “postmodernism and disinformation.” The example she used was the World Heritage Museum, the organization that the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities became part of.⁵⁷ Bah-Kuhnke answered that the museums were not being politicized, and that she welcomed the debate on the topic in the media. In her reply, she did not mention the word

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Beckman, F. *Postmodernismen*. Stockholm: Fri Tanke, 2023, p. 9.

⁵³ See *ibidem*, p. 22.

⁵⁴ See e.g. Reeve, J. Islam: Islamic Art, the Islamic World—and Museums. In: *The Contemporary Museum: Shaping Museum for the Global Now* / Ed. S. Knell. London: Routledge, 2018, p. 62.

⁵⁵ Wong, O. *Ska vi smälta, sälja eller spara kulturarvet?*

⁵⁶ See more, Dahlberg, A. Rädda museerna från normpolisen. *Expressen*, 2 October 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.expressen.se/ledare/anna-dahlberg/radda-museerna-fran-normpoliserna/> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁵⁷ Ohlsson, B. *Skriftlig fråga 2016/17:64*. Sveriges riksdag / Swedish Parliament. Retrieved from https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fraga/politiseringen-av-ostasiatiska-museet_h41164/ [accessed 21/01/2026]

“postmodernism” even once, and explained that the process that has been taking place in the museums was non-political but bearing a democratic vision.⁵⁸

After Wong left *Svenska Dagbladet* and moved on to become a cultural editor of the magazine *Kvartal*, his critique of postmodern ideology had intensified. One of the arguments he used was that the museums have been infiltrated by the “postmodernists.” The museums are one of the few institutions where a person with a background in the humanities could gain stable employment.⁵⁹ Another argument he used was that critical postmodern museology has been implemented as a tool of political control in the Swedish museums.⁶⁰ Wong made these claims in the articles written five years later, in 2021.

The debate continued, with the organization “Sveriges Museum” (“Museums of Sweden”) publishing the answer, written by its director Niklas Cserhalmi. He claimed that what Wong identified as “postmodern ideology” was actually a democratic stance, which the museums were bound to follow by law.⁶¹ His answer “Wong Is Wrong about the Museums” echoed the title of the article written by Follin in 2016, “Ola Wong Does Not Know How a Museum Works.”

In the debate about postmodernism, no one called themselves postmodern. The statement that somebody is “postmodern” or a proprietor of “postmodern ideology” always came from the opponent; in this case, from the debaters who were not the representatives of the museum, such as Wong and Ohlsson. In relation to postmodernism, it made the narrative one-sided. It became a label put on someone else, with whom you do not share the same values.

3.7. Soft Power

Soft power is a concept used by the political theorist Joseph S. Nye to describe a nation’s ability to “attract and persuade” its surroundings. Hard power, on the contrary, is the ability to coerce by force.⁶² Looking at the debate under consideration from the perspective of soft power, it is interesting to observe the portrayal of Asian nations as powerful. The foreign powers (China in general) were mostly discussed by Wong. Already in the first article of 2016, he mentioned China as a rising economic power, motivating a serious interest in China from Swedish institutions because of its economic rise.⁶³

The news about the changes at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities reached China and was published in the Shanghai-based newspaper *Pengpai* first as a news article “The Swedish Museum of East Asia May Be Closed. Another Victim of Multiculturalism?”⁶⁴, and later as a descriptive text by the Swedish Sinologist and Swedish Academy member, Göran Malmqvist.⁶⁵ It is hard to draw any conclusions from these texts, and to say how they affected the public in China; nevertheless, it is evident that the Chinese linked the changes in Sweden to “multiculturalism,” the term often used in connection with postmodernism and identity politics.

⁵⁸ See more, Bah-Kuhnke, A. *Svar på fråga 2016/17:64 av Birgitta Ohlsson (L) Politiseringen av Östasiatiska museet, Etnografiska museet, Medelhavsmuseet och Världskulturmuseet*. Sveriges riksdag / Swedish Parliament. Retrieved from https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svar-pa-skriftlig-fraga/politiseringen-av-ostasiatiska-museet_h41264/ [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁵⁹ See more, Wong, O. *Har humanismen blivit den nye vite mannen?* *Kvartal*, 30 September 2021. Retrieved from <https://kvartal.se/olawong/artiklar/har-humanismen-blivit-den-nya-vita-mannen/cG9zdDo2MDY4> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁶⁰ See more, Wong, O. *Är talet om modiga museer en hundvissla?* *Kvartal*, 12 September 2021. Retrieved from <https://kvartal.se/olawong/artiklar/ar-talet-om-modiga-museer-en-hundvissla/cG9zdDo2MDMw> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁶¹ See more, Cserhalmi, N. *Museidebatten: Wong har fel om museerna*. *Sveriges Museer*, 30 September 2021. Retrieved from <https://sverigesmuseer.se/nyheter/sveriges-museers-ordforande-i-replik-wong-har-fel-om-museerna/> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁶² See more, Nye, J. S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004. For more on soft and hard power, see also Babones, S. *American Tianxia: Chinese Money, American Power and the End of History*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t88xx8>.

⁶³ Wong, O. *Regeringen förvandlar museer till propagandacentraler*.

⁶⁴ Luo Xi, Sh. J. *The Swedish Museum of East Asia May Be Closed. Another Victim of Multiculturalism?* *Pengpai*, 9 October 2016. Retrieved from http://culture.ifeng.com/a/20161009/50073489_0.shtml [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁶⁵ Malmqvist, G. *Göran Malmqvist Tells the Story of The Swedish Museum of East Asia*. *Pengpai*, 9 October 2016. Retrieved from http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1540176 [accessed 02/03/2025].

Concluding Remarks: The Contemporary Discourse and the Strive to Fit in and Be Relevant

In his book *Introduction to Museology: The European Approach*, museologist Ivo Maroević argues that theoretical museology should always “widen horizons and break through the framework and limits of ancient prejudices,”⁶⁶ although he does not specify how this widening of horizons actually should look like. The world is complicated. It is not just ruled by ideology, there are such things as keeping to one’s budget, and there are also goals, set by politicians, which the organization must reach.

The analysis showed that there were different opinions regarding the purpose of a museum and different narratives about what had been happening to the museums in Sweden during the time of the debate. One of the most prevalent narratives was the narrative about the collection being in conflict with a new way of presenting it to the public. The debaters did not agree whether this conflict has been real. According to those critical of the governing of the museum (Wong et al), the conflict exists, and the collections are not cared for due to a change in how the governing of the museum is performed. The other side (the representatives of the museum and the ruling politicians) claimed that they are going to take care of the collections in a proper way, while changing the approach of how to exhibit them. Disposing of some parts of the collection can be a part of such proper care.

The situation was similar when it came to the discussion regarding museum’s organization. The debaters had different claims regarding what is a proper way of organizing a museum, in a smaller or larger organizational unit, and did not agree on which of those strategies are the most suitable. Their narrative was not compatible and their views of what has been happening to the organization varied. One argument, used at least two times in the debate was that the other side (Wong et al) “does not know how a museum works.” This must be considered a rather bad argument in the debate as it leaves an explanation of “how a museum actually works” unanswered.

The critique of the museum as a phenomenon, or the iconodule vs iconoclast debate was present in some sense. There was an accusation of the museum representatives of being too critical against how the museum has been governed and museums in general. This is rather close to the discussion about postmodernism and postmodern ideology. None of the debaters claimed to support this stance—it was more of an accusation coming from the other side. This is a very interesting situation: no one claimed to be a postmodernist or an iconoclast—they were accused of being the supporters of these stances by other participants of the debate.

Concerning ideology, a discourse of not accepting the promotion of ideology in relation to museum practice dominated.⁶⁷ However, it falls flat against the argument that the promotion of ideology is oriented toward such ideological concepts as human rights and democracy. It should also be clear that the promotion of ideology is not accepted when it comes in conflict with the truth. It would be impossible to exhibit anything under other circumstances. It is also important to note that the discussion regarding postmodernism and museums is not unique to Sweden.⁶⁸

Are the changes in museum practice necessary from an economical or mere ideological point of view? We cannot really tell by just looking at the debate. There might be the reason why this debate lasted for such a long time too. The impossibility for the debaters to meet some kind of consensus regarding the nature of the problem might be one of the reasons. The situation is similar to what Beckman and Hämäläinen calls *kultursidesmissförstånd*, which I have translated as a “feuilletonistic misunderstanding.”

⁶⁶ Maroević, I. *Introduction to Museology*, p. 18.

⁶⁷ See Harrison, V. S.; Bergquist, A.; Kemp, G. Introduction. In: *Philosophy and the Museums: Essays on the Philosophy of Museums* / Eds. V. S. Harrison, A. Bergqvist, G. Kemp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246116000047>. See also, ICOM Code of Ethics for Museum. *International Council of Museums (ICOM)*, 2017, p. 29. Retrieved from <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁶⁸ This is a global trend. See more, Macdonald, S. Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction. In: *A Companion to Museum Studies* / Ed. S. Macdonald. Oxford Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 4, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996836.ch1>.

The debaters never met each other on common ground; they misinterpreted and misunderstood each other. They did not agree on the lay of the land, keeping their incommensurable positions.

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