

Vast in scope and scale

Ancient treasures and modern ambitions collide in Beijing's new National Museum

By Dr Victor Rabinovitch, Fellow in Policy Studies at Queen's University;
President Emeritus of the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the War Museum



In the gallery of revolutionary Art

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the National Museum's dual mandate: it was formed a decade ago by merging the Museum of Chinese History, which presented ancient archaeology, with the Museum of the Revolution, which focused on recent political events. They occupied separate wings of the 1959 building, and were entirely independent entities with very different styles. To some degree, these differences are still evident in the new permanent exhibition galleries.

Visitors entering the new building are guided toward a central gallery filled with art about the Chinese Revolution, including iconic paintings of scenes normally seen in

The post-1949 sections focus entirely on achievements in economics, technology and modernisation. Altogether, this gallery is a showcase for today's China, expressing a sense of confidence.

Challenges in store

An impressive building is just the starting point in the search for museum greatness. As in any cultural undertaking, the challenge lies in the renewal and rotation of content, balancing excellence in knowledge and research as well as popularity.

The museum's most notable innovation may lie in its presentation of Chinese history

as a grand narrative.

This radically differs from what is usually seen in museums in other cities, where the focus is often on regional dynasties, or treasured artefacts

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grouped into material categories (bronzes, jades, etc.). Foreign visitors with dynastic names like Tang, Song and Ming ringing in their memories will likely find the ancient history gallery the most accessible.

The National Museum is also aiming to grow into a major international venue. Although there had been some previous exhibition exchanges, the new building has greatly improved installation conditions, raising the confidence of potential lenders. The museum will also attract countries seeking more visibility in Beijing; its international office has been expanded with the goal of developing such relationships.

A year after opening in its newest incarnation, the National Museum has attracted record-breaking crowds, and has solidified its importance in terms of Chinese archaeological and historical research. It is set to become a major player on the international exhibition circuit, as both borrower and lender. In short, the National Museum is poised for take-off. ■

China's massive National Museum is a significant new force on the global cultural stage. Following an eight-year redesign and rebuilding process, all aspects of the original museum, which opened its doors in 1959, have been radically overhauled. This is part of Beijing's growth as the capital of "rising China", with a boom in construction and infrastructure that has also entailed important projects in culture and heritage development.

With its central location on Tian'anmen Square, the new National Museum demonstrates how China shapes its modern identity with a mix of ancient history and modern politics. Its permanent exhibitions reflect this duality, combining archaeological treasures, important photographs, iconic paintings and political messages.

Size matters

The new building preserves the 1959 facade, unveiled in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Chinese Revolution. This is the world's largest single museum building: more than three times larger than its predecessor, wider than two football fields, with an atrium lobby six stories high. It symbolises China's pride in its expanding commercial, diplomatic and cultural links around the globe. Size also reflects

textbooks, films and posters. The formal exhibitions begin with an immense installation on Ancient China. Artefacts illustrate the evolution of human societies in

the region, beginning with objects from the Peking Man excavations. A long chronology of kingdoms, conquests and dynasties ends with the abdication of the last Emperor in 1912. This gallery's scope is unique, and its artefacts are breathtaking both in number and quality, contextualised by texts on social and economic life, technology and culture.

This gallery is a good example of museological interpretation using displays of material historical evidence, but does not explore more political topics such as the causes of dynastic decline. Its central theme is that China's growth reflects millennia of evolution, as well as continuity; while today's state breaks with previous imperial traditions, it is the inheritor of Chinese culture.

Contemporary history with an instructional tone is at the heart of the third part of the museum, entitled "The Road to Rejuvenation". It displays content drawn from the conflicts of the 19th and 20th centuries, notably foreign occupations and the civil war leading to the People's Republic.