

# The Making of an Inclusive Museum: The Example of ‘General Branch Museum System’ of Datong Museum, China

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A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. In order to effectively integrate public cultural resources, many museums at home and abroad have begun to explore general branch museum system. This mode develops rapidly in China and forms many models. However, the general branch museum system of each museum has its own characteristics. Based on this, this paper mainly introduced the example of “general branch museum system” of Datong Museum, China. For the time being, Datong Museum is implementing “general branch museum system”. Datong Museum is located in Shanxi Province, China. It is a comprehensive museum and now it is a national first-level museum. There are more than 170,000 cultural relics in Datong Museum. Besides the general one, the other nine branches have opened to the public. It is different from the National Museum Wales, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Cathedral Museum Complex in Toscana District. Led by theme of integration of the main, not only each of the nine branch museums bears its own specific theme and distinct characteristics, but they also link and complement each other. In future, we will further explore the exhibitions of other thematic displays to tell the complete history of Datong, and supplement the untold historical stories, as well as boost recognition of cultural identity and cultural confidence of the public.

*Keywords:* Datong Museum, general branch museum system, development

## Introduction

In Prague, on August 24, 2022, the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM has approved the proposal for the new museum definition. Following the adoption, the new ICOM museum definition is: “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing”. Traditional museum management model has been unable to meet the development needs of modern museums. Many museums are exploring a new development model called the general branch museum system. Datong Museum is implementing the “general branch museum system”. Besides the main one, the other nine branches have opened to the public, including Liang Sicheng Memorial Hall; Pingcheng Memorial Hall; Mingtang Site Museum; Kuixing Culture Museum; Northern Dynasties Art Museum; Liao, Jin and Yuan Dynasties Ethnic Integration Museum; Datong Revolutionary Memorial Hall; Ancient Bronze Art Museum; Weibei Calligrapher

Zhang Aitang's House and Memorial Hall. We would like to supplement the "untold" historical stories and present the most complete 2300-year history of Datong.

### **Datong Museum**

Datong Museum is located in Pingcheng District, Datong City, Shanxi Province, China. It was founded in 1959. In 2009, it planned to build a new one, and opened to the public in 2015. Datong Museum has more than 170,000 collections now, which is a national first-level museum. The architectural appearance is drawn from the phoenix, dragon wall, volcano and other elements and symbols of Datong skillfully. It has a floor area of 32,800 square meters and a display area of 9,000 square meters.

Reviewing the history of Datong, it is actually a grand epic of ethnic integration. The basic exhibition is chronologically divided into four chapters with more than 4,000 pieces of cultural relics. The relics of the Northern Wei, Liao and Jin Dynasties are highlighted by artistic exhibition.

### **"General Branch Museum System" of Datong Museum**

#### **Overview**

The general branch system is the organization mode and operation mechanism of public library in Europe, America and other countries, and then it was applied to the field of museum. The general branch museum system plays an important role in museum management. This system mainly adopts unified management and funding mode to ensure that the subordination of financial and human resources does not change; the museum in the core position is the general museum, and the other museums in the subordinate position are the branch museums. Since 2011, Datong Museum has fully activated the cultural relics resources in its collection and gradually formed a "1+9" management mode of "general branch museum system". The funds, staff and management of the general and branch museums implement integration operation strategy.

#### **Original Intention**

The original intention is to add the "untold" historical story to show the most complete 2300-year history of Datong. The history of Datong presented in the general museum of Datong Museum has been relatively complete, and the basic exhibition is chronologically divided into four chapters: Kingdom Dai: Ups and Downs; Pingcheng Capital in the Northern Wei Dynasty; Western Capital of Liao & Jin; Datong: Town of Strategic Importance during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Besides, Datong Museum is on two special exhibitions containing "Dinosaurs in Datong" and "Buddhist and Taoist Statues". But more than 170,000 collections with rich categories and obvious regional characteristics are still sleeping in the warehouse. Our idea is very simple. We want to present the real historical background of Datong to the audience. At least let everyone know what glory we have created on the land where we live and what our ancestors have left for us in this historical process. In other words, let more people find a sense of cultural identity and cultural confidence here! Curator Wang Limin has been pondering how to tell the complete history of Datong and how to supplement this unfinished historical story.

#### **Characteristics and Classifications**

There are two characteristics of the "general branch museum system" of Datong Museum. (1) "Three unchanged principles": adhere to the administrative subordination relationship, adhere to the staffing relationship, adhere to the funding channel way unchanged. (2) Led by theme of integration of the general, not

only each of the nine branch museums bears its specific theme and distinct characteristics, but they also link and complement each other.

The museum classifications are history and culture, revolutionary commemoration, archaeological sites, art, etc. These branch museums have supplemented and improved the display and interpretation of Datong's history and culture.

### **Comparison**

In recent years, an important trend in the development of international museums is to explore general branch museum system. The construction of the general branch museum has played a positive role in the scientific development, rational layout and improvement of national quality. The system is not without precedent. For example, there is a museum cluster in Nanjing. However, for Datong Museum, its business characteristics and work are different from those of domestic and foreign museums. For example, the mode of operation of some “main and branch museums” outside the province is mostly to provide resources and technical support to branch museums by the main museum, but the essence is to complement and share the resources of several small and medium-sized museums. Compared to the establishment of different museums in the same city by Cosmos, the original intention and concept are not the same.

In addition, foreign models of “main and branch museums”, such as the National Museums of Wales in the United Kingdom—the direct management model of the main and branch museums under the Council; the Smithsonian Institution Museum System in the United States—the “government-run” model; and the Tuscan Museums in Italy—the government-led win-win partnership model, basically see the main museum as a “manager”. It is either under the direct management of the Council, or the “government-run” model, or the government-led win-win cooperation model, which is more about the inclusion of private museums and grassroots museums, thus forming a “harmonious family”.

### **The Curator System Under “General Branch Museum System”**

The establishment of the general branch museum system cannot be separated from the implementation of the curator system. The curator system has been actively implemented. Our original exhibitions include such as “Course of Integration—Exhibition on Migration and Development of Tuoba Xianbei in the Northern Wei Dynasty”, “Bright Bronze Wares—Special Exhibition of Bronze Wares Excavated in Liyu, Hunyuan and Referred in The Book of Songs”, “Red Memory—Cultural Relics Exhibition of Datong Modern Revolutionary History”, “Traces of the Western Capital—Exhibition on Cultural Relics of the Liao, Jin and Yuan Dynasties in Datong”, “Copper Shining Datong—Display of Ancient Copper Manufacturing Art”, “Traces of Datong”, “Encounter—A Special Creative Show”. “Traces of the Western Capital” exhibition has been exhibited in 28 museums in 13 provinces. After its domestic tour, “Course of Integration” was also held in South Korea. We are expanding the international influence of Chinese culture. The excellent exhibitions launched by Datong Museum have won the recommended project award of “promoting Chinese excellent traditional culture and cultivating socialist core values” in 2019, 2020 and 2021 by the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

### **Comprehensive Development Under “General Branch Museum System”**

The implementation of the general branch museum system is also inseparable from comprehensive development. Collections are the foundation of the museum's existence and development. We have been constantly improving the collection management institution, and carrying out the label management on relics

based on Intelligent Warehouse Management System. Datong Museum has completed the 3D data information collection to improve the digital level of collections. As the combination of modern technology and traditional skills, “relic hospital” improved the level of conservation and restoration.

We use various media for extensive publicity, publishing books. We rely on the collections to upgrade the cultural and creative products with characteristic theme. We improve the external image of Datong Museum and promote the prosperity of cultural and creative business in the museum.

At the same time, we hold a variety of academic conferences, seminars and educational activities, and launch a variety of museum columns. Datong Museum joined the ICOM in 2019 and has continuously strengthened exchanges with international museums. About 1.37 million people visited Datong Museum in 2021. On July 22, 2022, the exemplary groups and individuals awards conference of national cultural relics system was held in Beijing. Datong Museum was awarded the honorary title of “the exemplary group of national cultural relics system”, which is the highest honor of the national cultural relics system.

Datong Museum won widespread praise from the audience at home and abroad.

### **Representative Cultural Relics Reflecting Ethnic Integration Under “General Branch System”**

Northern Wei was the dynasty founded by Tuoba Xianbei. The capital was settled in Pingcheng in 97 AD (today’s Datong). The most brilliant chapter in the history of Datong then started.

Pingcheng was the political and cultural center of North China and an international metropolis. The quintessence of the history and culture of Pingcheng of the Northern Wei Dynasty is still preserved today. Pingcheng Mingtang Site and Fangshan Yonggu Mausoleum record the feudal footprints of Xianbei people; the great “Yungang Grottoes” mark the beginning of the localization of Buddhism from the West; cultural relics from Song Shaozu’s tomb and Sima Jinlong’s tomb witness the cultural exchange and integration of the south and north. The classical mural paintings, powerful terra-cotta warriors, exotic gold, silver and glass wares, etc. bring us back to Pingcheng 1,600 years ago.

#### **Sima Jinlong’s ‘Corps’**

The glazed pottery figurine assemblage in Sima Jinlong’s tomb can be termed a large, formidable ‘corps’, which records a glorious Pingcheng Period in the history of the Northern Wei Dynasty and has witnessed the integration of agrarian civilization with nomadic civilization. After careful repairs, the Datong Museum has selected 238 figures that are in relatively good shape to represent the original formation of this army, which may be termed “a miniature version of the Terracotta Army”. These glazed pottery figurines do not just reflect their owner Sima Jinlong’s distinguished status, but also give a true portrayal of the military life of the time, demonstrating the military strength of the Northern Wei.

#### **Tomb of Sima Jinlong (Northern Wei Dynasty)**

Sima Jinlong, son of Sima Chuzhi—a former Eastern Jin aristocrat who, persecuted by the Liu Song regime in South China, defected to the Northern Wei and was created Prince of Langya in recognition of his meritorious military service. Sima Jinlong’s tomb was discovered in the early winter of 1965 to the north of the Shijiazhai Village, Nanjiao District, Datong City, Shanxi Province. This large, south-facing multi-chamber brick tomb consists of a front chamber, a rear chamber, and a wing chamber, with a total length of 45.6 meters from south to north. The three chambers, inter-connected by passage ways, are all square-shaped, with their

walls slightly curving outwards and their upper sections inclining inwards towards the center to form a pyramidal roof. Though the tomb had been robbed before, over 450 precious burial objects were unearthed. Among these are rare finds such as the woodblock lacquer paintings, the stone carved column pedestal, and the stone carved coffin bed. The large assemblage of warrior figurines, cavalrymen figurines, and guards of honour figurines, exceeding 360 items in total, are extremely rare among the burial objects found from the tombs of the same period, being the largest figurine assemblage ever unearthed from a Northern Wei tomb.

### **The Glazed Pottery Figurine Assemblage in Sima Jinlong's Tomb**

At the forefront of the array are a few vanguard cavalrymen, followed by a large number of guards of honour, warriors, and attendants. Armoured cavalrymen bring up the rear.

Figurines of vanguard cavalrymen. The figurines wear drooping hats whose top slumps backwards and whose ear flaps droop to the shoulder. Their ears wear round-shaped embellishments. Their faces are whitewashed, with red facial contours, eye sockets and lips, and black eyebrows, eyeballs and handlebar moustaches. The figurines are clad in cross-collared long uniforms, trousers and riding boots.

Figurines of guards of honour. These figurines, in dome-shaped hats, are deployed on both sides of the formation as armed guards of honour to guide and protect the owner's chariot. Most of these figurines wear cloaks bearing striped patterns like that on tiger fur.

Warrior figurines. The warrior figurines have colored faces, and wear conical helmets, long uniforms and trousers, clad in suits of armour bearing vertical white stripes. Aside from the guard pieces protecting the shoulders and arms, the armour's body section is made by sewing together a number of rectangular plates with rounded corners, and its bottom is trimmed with a wide red stripe. The figurine's left arm either hangs down empty-handed or holds a certain object while stretching forward; and the right hand, also empty, is raised to the shoulder, the object it holds being missing.

Figurines of armoured cavalrymen. These are heavy cavalry, the warrior and the horse both being clad in heavy armour. The warriors, weapons in hand, wear conical helmets, round-neck and slim-sleeved uniforms, and are clad in short armour bearing white stripes. The horse armour bears striped or scale-like embellishments. The figurines of armoured cavalrymen were arranged to flank the tomb owner's chariot on both sides to give strong protection.

As the dominant force in the Northern Wei army, cavalry won numerous battles. The empire's military strength was directly demonstrated by the superior armament. Armaments like armour and harness used by the Northern Wei military were more advanced than those of the Southern Dynasties. Besides the soldiers and generals, the war horses began to wear heavy armour, too. These heavy-armoured cavalry became the main force of the army. Furthermore, the invention and application of stirrups greatly improved the cavalry's combat effectiveness.

## **Conclusions**

The city itself is a museum without walls. The construction of "city of museums" can better play the role of museums and meet the spiritual and cultural needs of citizens and tourists. In the future, we will continue to promote the general branch museum system. We will further explore to curate other thematic exhibitions to tell the complete history of Datong, and supplement the untold historical stories, as well as boost recognition of cultural identity and cultural confidence of the public.

In order to create more exhibitions, it is necessary to continuously explore the regional cultural characteristics of “ethnic integration” and promote the innovation of the museum development system. We must build an excellent team that understands cultural relics, is good at writing and can curate exhibitions. Firstly, we must revitalize cultural relics. Now there are more than 170,000 cultural relics in Datong Museum. Among them, there are nearly 3,000 (sets) precious cultural relics. The collection is well-known for featuring the culture of the northern ethnic minorities, the strategic border area and religious culture. Particularly, the treasures in the Northern Wei, Liao and Jin Dynasties enjoy a high reputation. However, only about 5,000 cultural relics are on display, and many precious relics have not been released. The connotation of many cultural relics that can reflect the history of the city has not yet been interpreted. Secondly, we need to scientifically arrange general museum and branch museums. There are also many porcelain, ancient coins and historical documents in the warehouse. These are the themes and directions for us to establish branch museums in the future. Thirdly, we should actively support the development of private museums and give full play to the participation of social forces in the construction and operation of museums.

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