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Museographic narrating of dissonant heritage in Tianjin's former international concessions

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Abstract

Concessions—defined as the urban elements built by Western powers while ‘occupying’ various parts of the Chinese territory—have recently been granted heritage status by the Chinese national and local authorities. However, in many respects, they are ‘dissonant’ heritage sites since they are the result of the several-decade-long ‘colonial’ presence in Tianjin of nine foreign powers. The aim of this study is to understand how former international concessions are featured in museums and interpretation centres in present-day Tianjin. Using an approach that draws on dissonant heritage; literature on postcolonial museums, nostalgia and forgetting mechanisms; and the relationship between museographic narratives and patriotism, this article analyses a corpus of eight museums located in three former international concessions (Marshal Zhang’s Mansion, the Former Residence of Ma Zhanshan, the Museum of Modern History of Tianjin, the Five Avenues History Museum, the Museum of the Department Store Quan Ye Chang, Zhang House, the Astor Hotel Museum, the Tianjin Planning Exhibition Hall and the Tianjin Museum). The analysis is based on a common observation grid and semidirect interviews conducted with museum staff. The article captures and examines the main narratives from three perspectives: 1) revisiting the concession period as evidence of the beginning of modernity in China, which was a time in which celebrity life stories and the emergence of modern urban elements were praised; 2) considering the concessions as a dreamlike past of ‘others’ and ‘elsewheres’ belonging to a ‘foreign land’ and a context far removed from contemporary life in China, which favours the thematisation and leisure of Western architecture; and 3) selecting and targeting narratives focused on the heroes of the Republic of China (1912–1949) and the People’s Republic of China. This paper highlights and further develops how former Western concessions are imbued with a sense of both nostalgia and patriotism and sets out to gain a deeper understanding of the tension between these two attitudes.

Keywords Dissonant heritage, Colonial past, Museums, Tianjin, China

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1 Introduction

Although relatively unknown in the West, Tianjin is a major city in northern China. It is located on the Bohai Gulf coast and is the gateway to the capital Beijing, which is only 120 km away. In 1858, unequal treaties were signed in Tianjin, which forced the Chinese Empire to open its ports to foreign trade (Bickers and Jackson 2016) and led to the creation of Tianjin concessions along the Hai River during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Western and Japanese powers. Goodman (2000) described concessions as ‘semicolonialism’ (Goodman 2000), and Osterhammel (1986) defined ‘semicolonial’ conditions as a situation in which ‘a metropolitan country exerts power and influence within an asymmetrical relationship, but does not assume outright domination and formal sovereignty over the peripheral country’ (Osterhammel 1986, 308). Neglected and partly destroyed after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), these former concessions have seen a recent surge of interest with the opening up of the country and the government’s adaptation to the capitalist economy. The period during which Tianjin’s former concessions were built could be experienced as a difficult memory and give rise to a divergent dominant discourse on national heritage ideologies. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, especially since the 2010s, the city has experienced a general boom in terms of museums and interpretation centres, specifically in relation to the history of former foreign concessions. Museums that deal with the colonial past are not new. Such museums adopt different attitudes, ranging from reinterpretation of trauma to oblivion to nostalgia for the ‘romantic’ past of other individuals and other places. However, it is still unclear why there are a myriad of such museums in Tianjin; this raises questions about how the dissonant past has materialised through the heritage of the concessions and how it is being narrated and history is being reappropriated. As Wei and Fang (2022) underlined in the case of colonial heritage in Kulangsu (China), visitors are interested in these former colonial sites and do not necessarily have preexisting negative impressions or discourses. Moreover, they actually expect authorities to present comprehensive and neutral information about these sites to reflect upon and develop their own conceptions of colonial heritage. Taking this perspective into account, the present paper examines the different narratives and scenographies (and the actors who manage them) located in Tianjin and how they deal with the difficult past of foreign domination.

Through a dissonant heritage perspective (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), the current paper critically engages with the narratives and scenographies of these museums. Dissonance is conceptualised around the difficult historical dimension that is reflected in such buildings’

materiality and architecture and in the planning of Western concessions that reproduced urban models of the dominant concessionary countries. Examining this institutionalised heritage implies a critical examination of the authorised discourse (Smith 2006) and the individuals whose political power is represented (Long 2011). These material elements and their intangible dimensions are the foundations for museum exhibits. How can the popularity of these museums be explained, and how can they differ from one another? We contend that although the postcolonial perspectives presented in these museums follow a politically authorised discourse, they also offer different historical interpretations to fit within the general realm of capitalism and, more specifically, the tourism and leisure industries.

We set out to delineate the ecologies of these museums by first assessing their geographies in the former concessions and their main themes. We then look at how these sites are being managed and what products can be found near to the exhibit. We finally move to the exhibition itself and analyse the narration and the exhibition design, identifying three main ideal concession typologies: 1) triggers of modernity, 2) nostalgic ‘elsewheres’, and 3) traumatic pasts used as vectors for propaganda for the People’s Republic of China. These three narratives intertwine in different former concessions museums; most museums use one type of interpretation, while in some museums, there is a combination of all three, thus making this seemingly inherent conflicting cultural interpretive strategy all the more interesting to observe.

The paper is structured as follows: After the museum narratives and scenographies in the larger debate on postcolonial heritage and dissonant heritage are contextualised, we provide a comprehensive presentation of the museums in Tianjin and address the former concessions. We then turn to the selected museums that are representative of our three ideal–typical cases before moving on to the discussion and the conclusion.

2 Literature review

2.1 Former colonial sites, dissonance and interpretation

There is a contrast between the international concessions located in China and the ‘traditional’ colonies of the 19th and 20th centuries because China retained its formal political independence during economic, military or political domination by imperialist power(s) (Gotte-land 2015; Gravari-Barbas et al. 2023). Concessions, or areas under foreign administration, were granted during the latter period of the Qing dynasty as a result of the series of ‘unequal treaties’ that began with the British and the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. Each new treaty exerted pressure on Imperial China to open more ports for trade and either lease out or cede more territory as

part of the concession. By drawing distinctions between the 'indigenous city' and foreign concessions, the foreign powers created divisions, the traces of which are still visible today, both in physical places and in people's minds (Henriot 2003). For almost every concession, the site's existing spatial organisation was erased and redesigned (Zhang 2012). Furthermore, as is the case for Tianjin, many remarkable buildings were constructed by the Chinese; however, those overseen by foreign powers used features from their national architectural heritage (for example, the Italian Renaissance style) to symbolically represent the power and the 'civilising' authority of the Western metropolises concerned (Coslett 2019). These foreign architectural elements in Chinese territory assumed significant meaning beyond their function, as they were objects of representation of colonial Western states (Gravari-Barbas et al. 2023), embedding and maintaining the national myths of imperial nation-states. As mentioned in the introduction, colonies were traditionally governed and occupied by foreign powers, whereas with China, the context and situation were different and complex; the foreign presence was effective only in the concessions, while China retained political power and sovereignty over the rest of its territory (Gallagher and Robinson 1953). For example, in the Tianjin concessions, the foreign population was extremely limited, and the majority of the residents were Chinese. Importantly, this period was marked by chaos, thereby creating a situation that caused Tianjin's concessions to be relative oases of peace and places of refuge for Chinese officials and aristocrats (Fei 1991). We thus follow the ideas of domination and distinction being embedded in the notion of colonial or semicolonial ruling.

The narration and interpretation of former colonial sites, more specifically dedicated museums or interpretation centres, is not a neutral action because it means addressing domination and ideology dimensions and symbols. Indeed, these built elements can be associated with a 'dissonant heritage' (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) because, despite their history, they have been preserved, restored, protected and reappropriated over the past decades. Such elements can also be associated with the notion of 'difficult heritage', as coined by MacDonald (2015, 7), which is defined as heritage that has the potential to disrupt positive self-identity. In the case of Tianjin, however, the dissonance of this heritage has been neutralised through commodification, commercialisation and touristification (Gravari et al., 2023); thus, narrating the history of these elements implies the reappropriation and reinterpretation of this same history and its conveyed ideology. In this context, we follow the lines of Van Dijk (2006, 116) by defining ideology as a belief system that is socially shared by the members of

a group of social actors in relation to other groups; this device is all the more prevalent in times of transition. For example, as Dragičević Šešić and Rogać Mijatović underlined in their analysis of postsocialist heritage in the Balkan region (2014, 10) '(...) inventing new traditions and interpretations of the past is a part of the general process of political, economic and cultural transition (...). This is especially the case for nations that have experienced domination and want to move away from events that are narrated by former colonial powers. Svensson, for example, explained how public initiatives in India have tried to memorialise the establishment of India and Pakistan as postcolonial states that practice violent partitioning rather than as a successful act of independence from British imperialism (Svensson 2021). Some criticism has questioned whether such initiatives are successful; nevertheless, Svensson showed that difficult and dissonant heritage holds transformative potential (Svensson 2021).

2.2 Museums and postcolonial history

Museums are 'complex, multilayered and multifunctional sites that maintain vast networks of significance across history, place and politics, mobility, identity and economics' (Message 2006, 198). According to Lord and Blankenberg (2015), in addition to museums becoming cultural landmarks, through their engagement with civil society, museums become anchor institutions and place-making sites, thereby generating social capital and accelerating cultural change. As presented by Nakano in the case of East Asian World War II heritage, the interpretation, memories, and messages conveyed through the objects all engage the discourse producers in discursive processes and practices that have the potential to reshape social relations and policy directions (2018, 50). In some cases, a museum's 'colonial capital' may even assist the nations' diplomatic agendas (Grincheva 2020, 114; Hoogwaerts 2016), as through their artefacts, these institutions have the power to construct a 'truth' using evidence from the past (Nakano 2018). Such places have become instruments of soft power, as highlighted by Wang (2008a, b, 794), who indicated that since 1991, the Chinese government has gone to unparalleled lengths to construct memory sites and use them for ideological re-education. Museums that serve as institutions are thus highly political, as they mediate between objects and visitors.

With the reform and opening-up period resulting in relaxed control over culture and an orientation towards the cultural market, museums have become associated with tourism and the cultural industry in a bid to contribute to economic development and social advancement. While museums are often used as flagships for urban regeneration projects (Hamnet and Shoal 2003; Leng and Chen 2021), this process is less common for

museums located on the former concession sites in Tianjin, as they seem to accompany and support redevelopment rather than generate it for projects in these areas. It is therefore important to conduct a critical investigation into these displayed objects, narratives or representations to gain an understanding of how museums support the rehabilitation of these former concessions, the role they play, and the history that is being conveyed. As Dijk (2006, 124) explained, the relationship between ideologies and discourse is complex because discourse may depend on ideologically biased contexts, on the ideological way participants interpret events as subjective mental models, or more directly on general group beliefs. Ideologies are acquired, expressed, enacted and reproduced by discourse through different discursive structures, devices and strategies. For example, using the case of Shanghai, Leng and Chen (2021, 265) showed how the revival of 'red culture' in museums and tourism has been mobilised and closely associated with the city's local redevelopment schemes. In his detailed critical account of the mobilisation of history as a political educational and ideological tool in the post-1949 era and the reform and opening-up era, Wang asserted that the CCP Central Committee and State Council launched the 'Red Tourism' programme to encourage people to visit former revolutionary bases and landmarks as a means of enhancing their patriotic education. Also in the case of China, Denton (2005, 568) identified two different waves of museum settings with specific narratives: those serving governmental objectives by harmonising museum narratives to current official agendas, and those legitimising the CCP leadership in a growing economy galvanised by the opening-up of the market and in the wake of globalisation. While Wang went on to say that there has been a replacement of the term 'education' with 'tourism' (2008, 797), we see that this distinction is not that evident, as many related heritage sites are labelled as both 'Red tourism attraction' and as 'Patriotic Education Demonstration Base'.

Certain scholars, such as Wei and Feng, contend that looking at colonial artefacts through a postcolonial lens means that 'colonial heritage is associated with a colonial history that is usually deemed to be negative, traumatic, and humiliating for nations that were colonised' (2022, 2). Other researchers have shown that this process can also negatively impact the local community's identity (Liu and Chen 2018). Still others (Kaur 2017) argue that although the sharing of individual 'success stories' and the construction of consensual collective memories critically engage with history, they may also overshadow trauma and suffering. This is the example given by Harrison (2013, 244) in his account of the state-run National Museum of Kenya (NMK), which underwent major refurbishment in 2005 with the creation of

a 'history gallery' to produce an 'inclusive' (his) story of Kenya. With social and political struggles overlooked and a focus on noncontroversial subjects, it was said that the NMK had 'failed to address issues of immediate relevance to the citizenry', including the colonial experience and struggle for independence (Harrison 2013, 245). This 'overshadowing' of history can also occur when a 'nostalgic' perspective is adopted. As Walder (2009, 939) noted, 'Nostalgia clearly involves pain as well as pleasure, and taps into a reservoir of feelings that vary according to context'. Boym distinguished two basic kinds of nostalgia, namely, restorative and reflective (Walder 2009, 939), and stated that nostalgia is qualified and distanced by an awareness that the past cannot be restored but that it is approachable through 'stories and secrets' (Walder 2009, 940). Thus, it becomes part of a healing process. In this context, nostalgia is a useful feeling that can be activated to reconcile contrasting or ambivalent positions on the same recorded event. Therefore, colonial history can be associated with both painful and positive elements. In this regard, Wang clearly shows how the '100 years of humiliation' (Adcock Kaufman, 2010)—an expression used in China to describe the period of intervention and subjugation by Western powers and Japan of the Qing dynasty and Republic of China from 1839 to the 1940s—has been mobilised and is not specific to any one period. Cohen (Wang 2008, 789) went as far back as the late Qing dynasty (1911–1912), linking it to the construction of national identity and citizenship in the Republic of China. Two narratives were generated, namely, domestic corruption and incompetence in the country's governance, indicating that the two regimes were the reasons behind the failure to thwart invasions, and the use of this history as an important educational tool with which to emphasise the importance of the CCP's role in taking the country down the 'right path' (Wang 2008, 789).

These accounts draw attention not only to the issue of which voices are being heard but also to how they are being rationalised and presented as 'dissonant heritage'. Recording and managing this type of heritage involves an integrated approach and is thus complicated and challenging not only for historians and heritage managers but also for us all (Murray 1994).

2.3 'Dissonant heritage' and the commodification of history

Dragičević Šešić and Rogač Mijatović (2014) noted that in the relationships between globalisation forces and practices of local cultures, there is an interplay and intermingling present in which memory, culture and society are being renegotiated in their interactions. For 'unwelcome pasts' and heritage in tense contexts, the possibilities of recreation are opened up by the reconstruction of

tourism narratives. In the interpretation and management of this dissonant heritage, tourism involves memory conflicts, guiding viewers' understanding of heritage history through narratives (Naef and Ploner 2016). Tourists are no longer mere passive observers but can also take a proactive position; the use of 'exotic' elements as marketing objects for commercial activities allows tourists to participate in the 'dissonant' heritage narrative, helping them to form their own interpretation (Banaszkiewicz 2016). The complex interactions among tour operators, guides, tourists and other tourism actors reinterpret discordant memories and tend to 'banalise' complex heritage discourses into more acceptable narratives, even in the context of the 'Hollywoodisation' of history (Causevic and Lynch 2011).

For former colonial destinations, as Cheer and Reeves (2015) suggested, the redevelopment and revival of exclusive 'comfort zones' for the 'colonial class' and the consumption of colonial nostalgia through tourism can exacerbate social and political sensitivities. This scenario, however, may be more complex for former concessions, as it was not only foreigners who lived in the concessions but also the Chinese upper class, i.e., educators, artists, politicians and intellectual figures, who constituted the main demographic of the left-wing revolutionary activities of that era. Against the backdrop of unbalanced power relations, the concessions created a social space where different cultures met, clashed and struggled, and they provided the hidden spaces needed by left-wing revolutionaries in China at the time, making these sites a special part of China's 'red memory' (Wang and Shen, 2023). For example, the site of the First National Congress of the Communist Party of China is located in the former French concession in Shanghai. The 'hybrid' heritage (Gravari-Barbas et al. 2021) of former concessions not only designs a 'cultural contact zone' (Pratt 2012) but also implies a mix of the heritage of the occupied past and nationalist sentiments.

The context of patriotism provides further legitimacy for the former concession tourism, especially when the history of invasion associated with the former concession is viewed as contributing to and galvanising the revolution (Wang 2008). It has particularly benefited from the popularity of red tourism, which is defined as a means of promoting the commemoration of the events of the communist revolution, monuments, former homes with historical and patriotic personalities, and other attractions to strengthen patriotic national identity and promote the development of the local economy (Tang et al. 2021). Becoming a red tourist attraction, often through museums, not only serves ideological legitimacy, in line with mainstream discourse (Vickers 2007), but also generates a vibrant 'red' economy through the commodification of

space to attract investment and consumption (Lin 2015). As Denton stated, commercialism in museum practice and exhibitions may work towards undermining more conventional narratives of modern Chinese history. However, this commercialism also bears the imprints of an ideology that is often consistent with the market reforms and economic policies favoured by Party leadership (2005, 570). There is a mixed narrative present in museums; famous people's former homes in concessions, in particular, are identified as the perfect places to build red museums, and the glamorous lives of upper-class people, including the intersection of Chinese and Western civilisations, provide a nostalgic reminder of concession eras. This may lead one to think that the tourism market prefers the latter narrative, as it hampers the red narrative. However, in our investigation of the former Tianjin concessions, we were surprised to find that through exploiting the imagery of upper-class life in the former concessions, the core narrative of the concessions remains grounded in the red story, thus serving the dual purpose of responding to an authorised historical discourse and attracting tourists. It is a two-pronged strategy that enables operators to obtain permission from the institutions concerned and generate income and to carry out practices that are encouraged by authorities and thus attract further younger generations to identify with patriotic historical narratives in modern Chinese history.

3 Methodology

Many museums have sprung up in Tianjin's international concessions since the beginning of the 21st century (Fig. 1). The creation of these museums, which in general are very uneven in terms of collections and museographic projects, has coincided with public authority recognition of the former concessions' heritage and its enhancement and protection under the categories of 'Memorial Buildings of Revolution' and 'Modern Relics and Representative Buildings' (Gravari-Barbas et al. 2023). The term 'museum' is not the most appropriate word for some of these spaces, which can also be linked to interpretation areas.

The research method used herein is based on the analysis of a selected number of museums related to international concessions (Table 1). Registered museums may be related to concessions in general, sometimes through a specific theme (as in the case of the Tianjin Museum of Modern History, which focuses on famous international personalities in Tianjin as part of the city's modern history), or more often to a more specific concession (as in the case of the Five Avenues Museum in Tianjin, which is dedicated to the history of the British concession). They can also be more specific museums that are dedicated to important places located within the concessions and stay

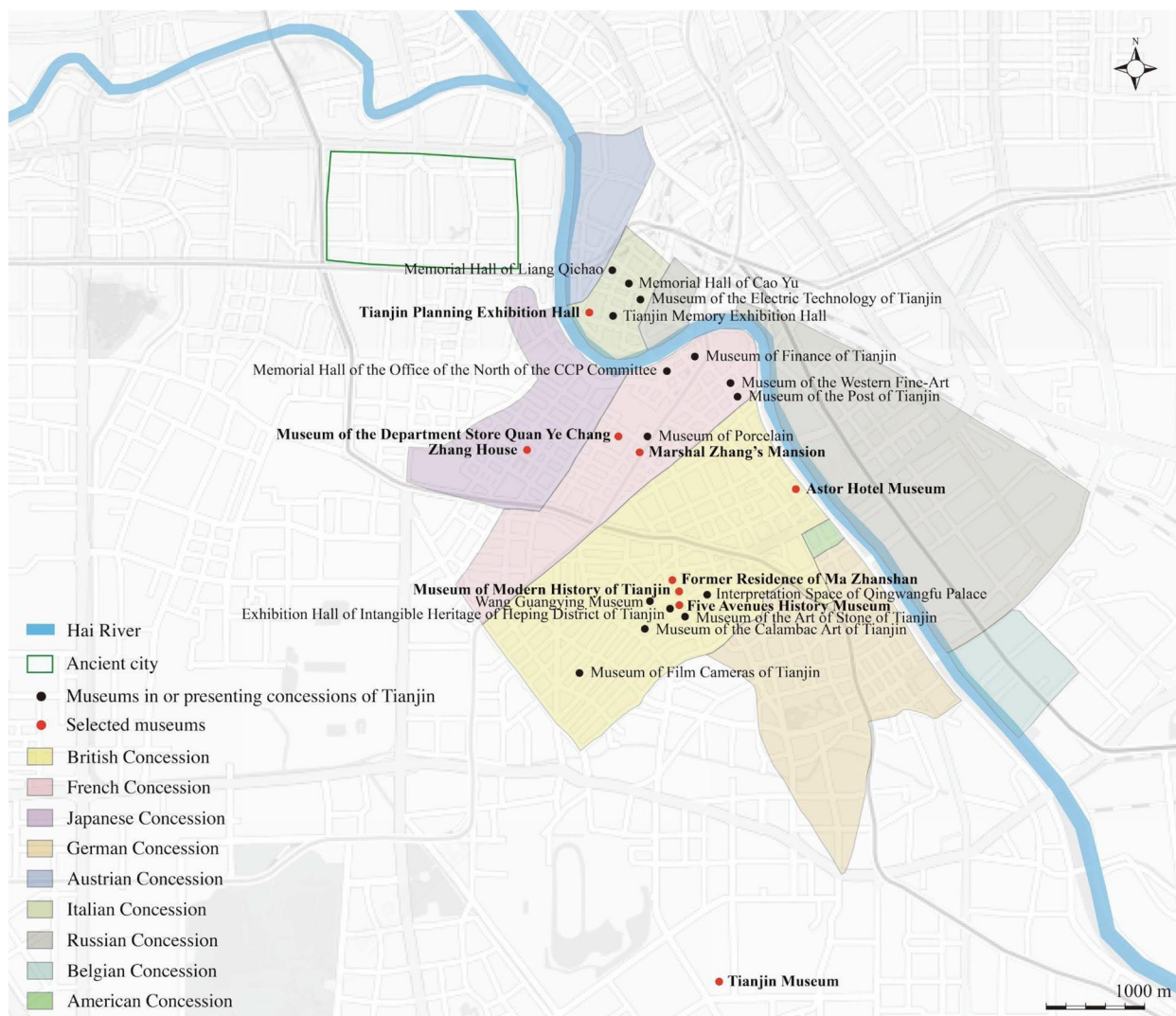


Fig. 1 Museums located in or that present the former concessions of Tianjin (Source: Yue Lu)

consistent with the history of the concessions as a whole (as is the case for the museum located in the Astor Hotel, which is also located in the British concession). They can also be museums dedicated to a famous person who previously lived there. Tianjin’s concessionary history, which is a determinant for the city, is also presented in city museums located outside the concessions, with the most important museum being the Tianjin Museum at Tianjin’s Cultural Center, which was founded in 2012.

We selected nine (9) of these museums that represent different types of concession or concession-related museums and located them on a map (Fig. 1). They were all created between 2002 and 2021.

3.1 Onsite observation

Each museum was observed according to the following protocol: 1) a visit to the museum, and when available, participation in a guided tour or an immersive visit; 2) photographic coverage of the exhibits; 3) recording of the texts of the tables in Chinese and English; 4) note-taking or recording the visits given by the guide; and 5) note-taking of the activities proposed as part of the guided or immersive visits.

All the data were subjected to lexical analysis to identify how the concessions and their artefacts were presented. In particular, we sought to capture the narrative in which the concessions were presented by asking the following: did the museum emphasise that these sites were the fruit of China’s past resistance or the relics of the ‘one hundred years of humiliation?’ If so, how did the museum

Table 1 Characteristics of the selected museums

Date of opening (and closing)	Name	Management (Public/private)	Surface (m ²)	Type of visit (free/guided/immersive)	Short description of the museum
2002	Museum of Modern History of Tianjin	Private	700	Free visit (currently closed to the public)	This museum carries out the collection, research and presentation of modern history materials and cultural relics of Tianjin and China
2009	Tianjin Planning Exhibition Hall	Public	15,000	Free and Guided visit	Presentation of urban master plans, special plans, urban designs and detailed plans of various key projects in Tianjin
2009	Five Avenues History Museum	Private	2,000	Free visit and Guided visit	Comprehensive presentation of the history and culture of the Wudadao area, including the interior of famous houses, the exterior of famous streets, the lives of famous people, and the anecdotes of famous families
2010	Astor Hotel Museum	Public	700	Free visit	Presentation of the history of the Astor Hotel, the first hotel in the British concession, which was founded in 1863
2012	Marshal Zhang's Mansion	Private	approximately 1,400	Free visit of the mansion; immersive visit of the thematic area	The museum is dedicated to Zhang Xueliang, vice-commander in general of land, navy and air force of Nanjing Government, born in Haicheng in 1930. He launched the Xian event in 1936. The museum is composed of Zhang's villa and a reproduction of a series of Tianjin spaces from the 1920s-1930s. The former residence of Fan Zhuzhai is located next to the mansion used as the setting for an immersive activity
2015	Former Residence of Ma Zhanshan	Public		Free visit	Focuses on the life of Ma Zhanshan and commemorates his anti-Japanese actions and spirit
2012	Tianjin Museum	Public	64,003	Free visit	The collection is a combination of Chinese artworks of past dynasties, modern historical documents and local historical materials, showing the history and status of Tianjin
2018	Zhang House	Public	2,375	Guided immersive visit	'Red Seals' witnessed the overthrow of the imperial system and the creation of the republic, the Japanese invasion of China and the fight of the people against the invasion, as well as the liberation of Tianjin and the changes in China's modern history
2021	Museum of the Department Store Quan Ye Chang	Private		Free visit	The history of Quan Ye Chang, as well as a hundred years of Tianjin commercial development

Table 2 Interviews

Museum/Organisation	Function	Place	Duration (minutes)	Date
Astor Hotel Museum	Director	Astor Hotel Museum	60	2019
Five Avenues History Museum	Director	Five Avenues History Museum	75	2023
Marshal Zhang's Mansion	Planner for Marshal Zhang's museum program and the immersive theatre program	Zhang House	32	2023
Association Memory of Tianjin	Members	Bureau of Association Memory of Tianjin	140	2018, 2023
Tianjin Digital Art Museum	Staff	Tianjin Digital Art Museum	30	2024

deal with this painful past within the framework of the national expression of contemporary China? How was the history of the former concessions mobilised to reconstruct the city's identity for Tianjin's future development?

3.2 Interviews

The interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2023 (Table 2). As soliciting interviews with public authorities is complicated, as it implies official requests sent through an intermediary, questions sent in advance, and no deviation from the selected questions, we mainly tried to secure interviews with private museum managers for the in-depth analysis of four museums. The interviews were conducted onsite in Chinese and translated into English.

4 Tianjin's museums in the former concessions

The sample of the analysed museums is large and diverse, offering a wide spectrum of situations in terms of operations (public or private), size (important museums having a more general scope, such as the Tianjin Museum or microlocal museums dedicated to one site, such as the Astor Hotel Museum), or date (20 years separate the oldest museum from the newest).

4.1 Museum operations

Some museums are entirely public-authority run. For example, the operating entity of the Tianjin Municipal Planning Exhibition Hall is the Tianjin Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau. Others are operated by state-owned companies, such as Tianjin Jingyuan, which is operated by the Tianjin Historical Architecture Restoration and Development Company (THARD), i.e., the largest state-owned company to restore heritage architecture in Tianjin, and Qingwangfu, which is in turn managed by the Tianjin Wudadao Asset Management Company Limited, which is itself a branch of THARD. There are also museums run by other state-owned companies, such as the Astor Museum, which is run by the Tianjin Astor Hotel company, along with the Astor Hotel, and the Zhang House, which is operated by the Tianjin Performance Company.

Some museum venues, such as the Wudadao Historical Museum, are provided by the public sector and operated by private managers. There are also venues that are rented and operated by private companies, such as Marshal Zhang's Mansion and Fan Zhuzai's Former Residence (including the immersive games area), which are run by the Chuyuntian Cultural Performing Arts Company. For these museums, the private sector is responsible for exhibition content, venue operation, and revenue through leasing contracts for historical areas, whereas the public authorities oversee the renovation. For example, the manager of Marshal Zhang's Mansion said that they organise a guided tour programme for different former concession areas (interview with the manager of Marshal Zhang's Mansion in 2023). Others use immersive performances such as the Qingwangfu Palace, Zhang House, and Mianli Café to engage with visitors.

4.2 Innovations in operation

Through the use of innovative tourism concepts, museums have shifted their focus to attracting more visitors. Such strategies, including virtual/augmented reality experiences, immersive theatre/games/guided tours, and the recreation of scenes in new curatorial ways, are becoming key tools for museums to convey historical information in different ways. These new technologies have become popular, as seen by the Astor Museum, the 'See Tianjin for 100 years in China' exhibition at the Tianjin Museum or the light show at the former residence of Liang Qichao (Ice-Drinking Room) in the former Italian concession, which was inspired by Liang Qichao's famous poem, 'The Sayings of Young China', that intended to motivate young Chinese people to contribute to the country.

Museums, such as the Urban Planning Exhibition Hall, also organise activities, city walks and educational programs to introduce children to Tianjin's history and reach more people. Museums also try to generate income by tapping into new trends in leisure tourism. Some venues, such as Jingyuan and Marshal Zhang's Mansion, offer exclusive expensive dining experiences set in special architectural and historical environments. For example,

Qingwangfu Palace Museum, the former private residence of the fourth Prince Qing in the Qing dynasty, has diversified its services; the space within the protection area now features a restaurant, a café offering coffee beans from around the world, and a craft beer shop that is popular with young people in the evenings. The former interpretation centre that presented the place's history was closed down and replaced with a traditional cheongsam dress hire shop that offers people the opportunity to take pictures with the museum as the backdrop. The palace's garden can also be booked (at elevated prices) for special events. While these business activities attract more visitors, few visit the museum itself.

4.3 Different narratives of the same story? Narrating the international concessions in the museum

The following table (Table 3) presents the description and narrative found at the entrance of the museums and introduces the concessions.

The observation and analysis of the presentation and setting of the nine selected museums reveal contrasting positions. Three main approaches can be defined:

- 1) A positive approach to concessions considers them singular urban and architectural elements that have produced a unique heritage in Tianjin. Concessions are conceived as the product of hybridisation between Tianjin's inhabitants and elites and Westerners (architects, politicians, and intellectuals). The former concessions are regarded, interpreted and celebrated as testimonies of China's international opening up and relations with the world (Wei and Feng 2022) and entry into modernity. Indeed, several innovations have arrived in China through open ports. As previously mentioned, urban settings and architecture are crucial products and tools that delineate the modern colonial system (Coslett 2019) and the city's social division. The development of concessions also brought the achievements of the Western Industrial Revolution, i.e., railways, telegraphs, telephones, postal services, mining, modern education and justice. In the 1930s, Tianjin had therefore become the perfect flagship for the opening up of Northern China and a modern multifunctional city (financial, commercial, cultural, residential and entertainment) (Wang 2009). Tianjin's concessions became a showcase of modernity, where international modernist architects worked, which in turn connected Tianjin's concessions to the most advanced trends in urban planning, architecture, and design (Gravari-Barbas et al. 2023). The Tianjin Museum of Modern History and the Astor Hotel Museum fall under this category.
- 2) The revisiting of the concessionary period as a past consisting of 'others' (Lowenthal 1985) considers it to be something that happened in another context in which the details of history are distant, blurred, reorganised and romanticised and turned into a kind of imaginative narrative. The past is an argument for the thematisation of Western architecture for leisure. International modern architecture, the frivolity of the 1920–1930 period, modern and technological progress, Western music, dance, and, more generally, lifestyles are presented as fascinating memories and seen through a nostalgia lens. Marshal Zhang's mansion, particularly the immersive section, falls under this category.
- 3) The former concessions are regarded as painful moments in China's history, which provides an opportunity to learn from this difficult past. The museum narratives developed herein show how the People's Republic of China was also built on the basis of and in response to these traumas and humiliations. Some museums have been transformed into platforms for ideological education that disseminate postconcessional history—from the establishment of the Communist Party of China in 1921 to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Zhang House falls under this category.

Below, we present several museums that are representative of the three narratives.

- 1) The positive history of concessions as catalysts of modernity

Tianjin Museum of Modern History and the role played by illustrious Western personalities

The Tianjin Museum of Modern History is the work of Hang Ying, a famous writer and journalist in China; it was created to counter the trend of buildings in former concessions being replaced by skyscrapers. The museum was founded in 2002 by the Association for the Historical and Cultural Promotion of Tianjin. In 2015, it was reorganised and opened to the public. The museum's collections consist of books, photos, old documents and other artefacts. The exhibition space shows the famous people who lived in Tianjin, the representation of Tianjin in Western paintings, the '1900 Incident' that occurred during the Boxer War and the takeover of the city by Western powers.

The museum bears witness to the city's turbulent history, to the violence it suffered, and to the ability of its built heritage to synthesise the relationships between China and the West: '*As the gateway to the country's capital, Tianjin was a microcosm of the vicissitudes of China's modern history. [...] Synthesising the essence of Western*

Table 3 Presentation of Tianjin's former concessions in the selected museums

Museum	Presentation of the former concessions in the museum
Museum of Modern History of Tianjin	<p><i>Through many historical photographs and ancient objects collected from all over the world, the museum exhibits the history of the nine former concessions in Tianjin and the lifestyle of the expatriates in the late Qing dynasty and the Republic of China. It focuses on the research and display of historical materials in 'See Modern China in Tianjin', aims to publicise the international image of Tianjin as a 'Modern Historical and Cultural City', and seeks to integrate and develop what remains of the 'International Architecture Exposition' and its humanistic historical materials into tourism resources</i></p> <p><i>The exhibition rooms include the following: See Modern China in Tianjin – 100 Chinese First Achievements; The History of Several National Armies in Tianjin; The Wudadao Historic Architecture District; The Historical and Cultural Heritage of the United States of America in Tianjin; The Historical and Cultural Heritage of Germany in Tianjin; The Austrian Architect Geyling and the Western Buildings in Tianjin; The French Scientist Paul Émile Licent and the Musée Hoangho Paiho; and People of Japanese Heritage Born in Tianjin. One of the featured exhibits is handmade artwork from foreign buildings in Tianjin that uses old Western stained glass methods</i></p>
Tianjin Planning Exhibition Hall	<p><i>Tianjin, a nationally famous historical and cultural city, is known as the 'World Architecture Exposition' for its rich and diverse culture and cityscape combining Chinese and Western elements. Fourteen historical and cultural blocks including Wudadao have been protected and renovated. Tianjin has established 6 nighttime cultural areas, which include Italian-Style Street, Jinwan Plaza, and Wudadao, to enhance its carrying capacity</i></p> <p><i>The core brand of cultural tourism, namely, 'See Modern China in Tianjin', which was formed by 12 cultural tourism thematic sites such as Austrian- and Italian-style towns, shows tourists Taijin's position in the modern history of China and explores the historical lineage of Tianjin. The development and utilisation of historical architectural groups represented by the Wudadao not only further enhances the brand effect of 'See Modern China in Tianjin' but also serves as a unique neighbourhood for tourists to take in the exotic architectural culture and experience the exotic atmosphere</i></p>
Five Avenues History Museum	<p><i>The Wudadao area was part of the British concession in Tianjin, also known as the Off-Wall Extension. The history of this area can be traced back to 1900 when the British concession, through the Genzi National Rebellion, submitted a request for the third time to the Qing government to expand the concession to include this marshland in the scope of the British concession</i></p> <p><i>This area was originally planned to be a modern urban garden-style residential area in the early 20th century. The houses are known for their various architectural styles and have been called the 'Universal Architecture Exposition' because each house has a unique design that creates diversity. Wudadao is located in the former British concession; even though the architectural style is mainly Western, 95% of the people who live here are Chinese</i></p>
Astor Hotel Museum	<p><i>The land area of the British concession was expanded twice and eventually covered an area of 6,018 mu, making it the largest of the foreign concessions. Of this area, Detring owned 5,698 mu. The development included the construction of fine examples of British classical-style architecture, including the Astor Hotel</i></p> <p><i>The original concessions of Tianjin have had a direct influence on the development of modern Tianjin society. Reconstruction of the hotel became a major milestone in the architectural history of Tianjin, and as previously stated, it was the most impressive building in Tianjin up until the early 20th century. The hotel architecture was taken as an example to follow by many companies, banks, businesspeople and comrades with interests in Tianjin. Buildings constructed during this period reflected Western, and combinations of Western and Chinese styles; this gave Tianjin a world-renowned reputation for collective architectural styles and significantly contributed to influencing the global architectural fashion of the period</i></p>
Marshal Zhang's Mansion	<p><i>There were concessions from nine countries in Tianjin, including Britain, France, Germany and Japan, which made it the city with the most concessions in China. As a result, Tianjin's landscape was transformed with the diversity of architectural styles. Military and political leaders from all over the world also gathered in Tianjin. Young Marshal Zhang Xueliang served as a deputy commander-in-chief of the army, navy and air force of the National Revolutionary Army. Military and political officials from various countries were royally received in a special room, namely, the Western-style reception hall, by General Zhang</i></p>
Former Residence of Ma Zhanshan	<p><i>Concession part: 'In 1860, Tianjin was forced to open up as a treaty port, and Britain was the first country to claim its concession. In 1903, Britain expanded its concession southwards and the large area south of the Qiangzi river was defined as part of it. The Five Avenues area, which is now surrounded by the Chengdu, Nanjing, Machang and Xikang Roads, was inside the extension, and there were 23 roads and streets that crossed it. Since the end of the Qing dynasty, the area has attracted many patriotic generals, high-ranking officers in the military and politics, former Qing dynasty officials, Chinese and foreign entrepreneurs, and other celebrities'</i></p> <p><i>Ma Zhanshan part of the museum: Ma Zhanshan was a gallant national hero whom Chairman Mao called 'an unyielding soldier who fought against the Japanese army to the last moment (...) he fired the first shot against the Japanese army at the start of the anti-Japanese war'. The whole room is dedicated to this person. Pictures, interviews and comic strip-like designs narrate the heroic achievements of Ma Zhanshan against the Japanese</i></p>

Table 3 (continued)

Museum	Presentation of the former concessions in the museum
Tianjin Museum	<p>After the opening of the port of Tianjin, Britain, the United States and France took the lead in establishing a concession in Tianjin and were followed by Germany, Japan, Russia, Italy, Belgium and Austria-Hungary. By 1902, a total of nine countries had formed a concession. The area was equivalent to about eight times the size of the city of Tianjin at that time</p> <p>Under the shield of unequal treaties, Western powers stationed troops, set up administrative offices and police forces, bought and sold land, and levied taxes in the city, thus making these concessions 'countries within a country' where the imperialists interfered in the internal affairs of China and plundered the country's treasures</p>
Zhang House	<p>There are no direct descriptions of the concessions</p> <p>Reformulate: Through the story of Zhang House, the exhibition highlights the 'red memories' that have spanned the century. Located at 59 Anshan Road, Heping District, Zhang House is now a key national cultural heritage, a national AAA-level tourist site, one of the first revolutionary cultural relics of Tianjin, and a base for patriotic education in Tianjin. See 'A Hundred Years of China in Tianjin' and 'A Hundred Years of Tianjin in Zhang House.' From a private residence to a place where revolutionary pioneer Dr Sun Yat-sen and the last emperor Puyi stayed, to the residence of the Commander of the Japanese Garrison in China, to the office of the CPC Tianjin Municipal Committee, Zhang House has been the site of many important events affecting China's modern history, which is uncommon among the 'small foreign buildings' in Tianjin. Zhang House has become a must-see for understanding Taijin's history and culture</p>
Museum of the Department Store Quan Ye Chang	<p>There are no direct descriptions of the concessions</p> <p>Tianjin Quan Ye Chang is located in the centre of Tianjin, at the intersection of Heping Road and Binjiang Road, and is an eclectic European-style building. It was built in 1928 by buyers Gao Xingqiao and Qing Prince Zai Zhen and designed by French engineers Mullerwith. It has a reinforced concrete frame structure, a total of seven floors and a building area of 16,500 m². The building was expanded with a total floor area of 54,000 m². Quan Ye Chang is the birthplace of Tianjin's high-class commercial complex, which has historically played an important role in supporting Tianjin's commercial prosperity and public consumption. With its favourable geographical location, a wide variety of high-quality commodities, and considerate and meticulous commercial services, it has become a leading commercial centre in Tianjin and is famous both in China and abroad</p>

and Eastern cultures, Tianjin had become the embodiment of multiculturalism. [...] Today, with the growth of China, the historical cross-cultural phenomenon of Tianjin provides a valuable historical basis and emotional connection for building new East–West relations'.

The section on the '1900 Incident' situates Tianjin as the scene of a world war. The city, which 'defended itself against the entire Western powers, was honoured despite its defeat. 'Tianjin, the only city occupied by nine countries', was 'the centre of international attention and conflict and East–West cultural mixing'. Then, Tianjin 'turned from being a military acropolis to trade...and developed into an international, multifaceted, and open city'. The museum explains that the Boxer War was 'doomed to failure' because, in 'resisting the Western invasion, (the Boxers) refused to learn advanced knowledge from the West [...]'. The narrative of the Museum of Modern History thus emphasises 'Tianjin's pioneering role during China's modern development'.

The Astor Museum and the positive history of concessions

The Astor Museum was created in the hotel basement and is the only hotel museum in China. The tour comprises eight thematic units: Mud House, Founders, Flowing Time, Secrets, Changes, Celebrities, Inheritance, and Historical Memory. The collection is composed of 3,000

pieces, mostly of which come from the first half of the 20th century, i.e., furniture, earthenware, and everyday objects, which are displayed throughout 700 m².

It dates from 1980–1989, when the former manager of the Astor Hotel, who was interested in its history, created the first historical database by using his personal collection. At the same time, the former mayor decided to open a museum both as a place to visit and a tourist landmark in Tianjin. In 1990, the Astor Hotel History and Culture Bureau was established and invited experts to research the hotel's genealogy. A working group composed of tourism office executives and hotel employees worked to create the museum. Ninety-five per cent of the collection consists of the objects found throughout the hotel and the former manager's collection. When the hotel celebrated its 130th anniversary in 1993, experts who stated that it 'contains a history and historical depth' (interview with the hotel director, 2018) proposed holding an exhibition for the collection, which contributed to the creation of the museum (Fig. 2). The museum manager believes that, as part of the hotel's latest renovation in 2008–2010, which was done in the Victorian style, the museum is testimony to the concessions' value and positive attitude towards their history. To understand the history of Tianjin's concessions, he suggested starting with the history of the Astor Hotel: 'It is a gateway to



Fig. 2 Astor Hotel Museum Source: Maria Gravari-Barbas in 2023 (left), Yue Lu in 2023 (right)



Fig. 3 The immersive environment created by Marshal Zhang's Mansion. The shops, 'inspired' by those found in Tianjin in the 1920s-1930s, serve as a background for the tours whose activities involved solving city crimes (Source: Maria Gravari-Barbas in 2023)

understanding the modern history of Tianjin' by 'showing history without judgements' (Interview with the manager of Astor Hotel Museum in 2023).

2) The former concessions as a nostalgic 'elsewhere'

Marshal Zhang's Mansion uses Tianjin's past as material with which to play. The city's past offers a nostalgic substrate on which a heritage immersive experience has been freely built. Concessions are presented as exotic environments in both time and space that can be accessed only through 'immersive' mediation (Figs. 3 and 4). The politically charged element, linked to Western

semi-domination, is thus neutralised by gamification and is a means of reappropriating the past.

3) The concessions: a traumatic past creating the foundations for the emergence and construction of modern China

Zhang House, which opened in 2018, is associated with red museums. The immersive, guided tour is an ode to the People's Republic of China. In the main hall, a representative of the Red Army greets visitors in front of an enormous red panel, which presents episodes from the war; then, in front of everybody, a banner is unfurled from the balcony in a grand gesture. The banner reads as



Fig. 4 A visitor photographed in the ‘study room’ of Marshal Zhang’s Mansion wearing Western-style clothing (Source: Chensi Shen in 2023)

follows: ‘On 28 June 1919, the Chinese delegates refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles. It was the first time that China had directly opposed the Great Powers. We refuse to sign!’ Visitors are invited to say ‘No’ and proclaim slogans.

The tour continues with a guide who is dressed as a spy. The content is propagandist, and the tour ends with a red wedding; i.e., two visitors are ‘married’ in front of a portrait of Mao. They take an oath on the Red Book in a room displaying the most essential items for newlyweds, such as a sewing machine, a bicycle, and a television set (Fig. 5).

5 Discussion

Despite their differences, the museums analysed herein also share some common features.

5.1 The ‘entertainment turn’

The concept of entertainment can be found in some museums where the historical component (i.e., the famous people who lived there) is a pretext for developing a tourism project. This is the case for Marshal Zhang’s Mansion, as it seems that Marshal Zhang never actually lived in the villa that currently bears his name. The main Marshal Zhang museum is located in Shenyang, the capital of China’s Liaoning Province. Zhang’s biography presented at the entrance of Marshal Zhang’s Mansion in Tianjin does not even mention that he lived in Tianjin. The Memory of Tianjin Association says that although Zhang’s family owned this house, there is no evidence that he lived there; the link to Marshal Zhang was created by a grandnephew’s childhood memory of Zhang Xueliang having lived there and appears to have been created as a pretext for developing a nostalgic narrative on the

basis of a famous personality and life in the concessions. This account of history, historical facts and characteristics of the scenography align with the economic motivation of the museum and the commodification of history and culture.

5.2 A ‘red turn’

The dominant political narrative, however, remains the core of most museums. Sometimes the themes are obvious, such as the ‘Stronger Youth, Stronger China’ theme chosen for the Liang Qichao Museum or the ‘Red Immersion Guided Tour’ offered at Zhang House. The red theme is sometimes woven into the lexicon of museums; for example, at the Museum of the Five Avenues, the guide presents the fireplace by discussing how this concept was introduced to China as a Western way of life and how it served as a hiding place for people in the perilous moments of the revolution. The immersive experience provided next to Marshal Zhang’s Mansion gives visitors the feeling of travelling back in time to the concessions, and the main storyline focuses on resistance against Japanese aggression.

In some museums, the three narratives may be juxtaposed. In the Tianjin Museum, which is seen as the most comprehensive exhibition in the modern history of Tianjin, the traumatic period of the concessions is mentioned first, followed by the modernisation this period brought about in various areas such as education, industry and healthcare, and finally, the image of daily life in Tianjin, which is depicted as a cosmopolitan city.

5.3 The economic-touristic turn

While each museum’s analysis is primarily concerned with one of the three themes presented above, they do not exist independently of each other, as they are interdependent and together form the main narrative of the concessions. The apparent contradiction between the three types of narratives is driven by the ultimate objective of attracting visitors and tourists. In Zhang’s Mansion, for example, the game, while testimony to colonial and retro nostalgia, also focuses on how to join the resistance narrative and therefore the red tourism narrative. This hybridisation of narratives ensures the museum’s political legitimacy and guarantees its economic success through tourism.

For private museums, presenting the history of the former concession and of historical personalities is not only a cultural strategy but also an operational one. Some historically important buildings, such as the former French Council, have been used by the private museum operator ‘Tianjin Digital Art Museums’ to display digital versions of Van Gogh’s paintings. On the one hand, cultural



Fig. 5 The immersive experience of Zhang's House (Source: Maria Gravari-Barbas in 2023)

subsidies from public authorities allow museums to negotiate rent reductions, with red history museums being particularly welcomed. On the other hand, the living history of the former concessions with the imagery of modernity and Western lifestyles are used as a backdrop to advertise their associated products and brands, which in turn creates a business model that generates profits from the museum's ancillary merchandise. This model is particularly prominent in the former residence of Ma Zhanshan, which has a café, a bar and a souvenir shop that have been created around a small museum.

At Marshal Zhang's Mansion, this business model has been expanded to include an entire street (Fig. 6). This has led to a variety of nostalgic merchandise, which is needed to maintain the museum's romantic life imagery. With, inter alia, clothing, food, and photography shops on offer, the life in the former concessions is being Disneylandified.

'In the former concession buildings... the historical atmosphere makes our shops, such as the perfume shop, have a better turnover rate. Customers who want to come to the museum to learn about culture have a higher level of spending and education. We are also considering a partnership with a wine merchant' (Interview with staff from the Tianjin Digital Art Museums located in the former French Council building, 2024).

Nostalgia is a highly relevant business strategy when the objective is to attract tourists and consumers. *'There has been too much historical storytelling about the*



Fig. 6 The commercial street around Marshal Zhang's Mansion (Source: Chensi Shen in 2024)

concessions... the Tianjin Museum's exhibition is particularly exhaustive and cannot be topped. Visitors won't want to see the same content over and over again' (Interview with staff from the Tianjin Digital Art Museums located in the former French Council building, 2024). The success of the novel, cinematography, music and theatre museum strategy has attracted many museums and encouraged them to join the collaboration led by the curators of Marshal Zhang's Mansion, which is the Northern Performing Arts Group, thus bringing about a new model of interaction between museums. Even at the

Tianjin Museum, there is a session that recreates scenes from concession life to provide a time-travel-like experience. Such content is amplified by the attention given to the social media economy in particular and has become popular in former concession tourism.

6 Conclusion

Tourism is one of the sectors most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2023, China reopened its doors to international tourism. The lowest growth target in recent decades of approximately 5% shows that the country is facing economic difficulties and urgently needs to boost its development engine.

However, the closure during the pandemic has had a significant effect on cultural sites and museums in particular. Tianjin has been marked by a 'local turn,' with museums adapting their narrative, history, and visit approaches to either local populations or the national Chinese population. Museums that had English-language interpretation facilities have either limited them or removed them entirely (e.g., the Five Avenues History Museum).

This 'local turn' has been accompanied by a commercial and entertainment dimension. Private museum operators clearly have a focus on entrepreneurship. At the historical level, they actively search for information, find exhibits and tell stories according to their own understanding of history. At the commercial level, they are constantly seeking to adapt to the market in an attempt to attract more consumers and visitors. Although this is regarded as an 'inauthentic' attitude, it reflects the great demand for interpretations of concession history, especially when only the complete history museum is not located within the concessions. In general, the target audience for these museums, whose international visitor rate is almost zero, is one of the main factors that explains their storytelling and how the information is conveyed and transmitted.

What do these different museums, which are almost exclusively aimed at a Chinese audience, tell us about the history of the concessions? The concessions narrative is kaleidoscopic and is composed of hybrid spaces that exist between China and the West. Whether the concessions are viewed as representing trauma, the beginning of modernisation, or a good romantic life, there seems to be a great diversity of historical interpretations of the built environments. There is also a certain consistency beneath the surface of diversity, namely, that Tianjin should receive more contemporary attention because of the special site it has passed through its specific history.

Chinese visitors' immense fascination with the former concession areas, the remarkable development of tourism over the last two decades, and the recognition and protection of the concessions' heritage value by the local and national authorities have all led to an extraordinary increase of museums in the former concession areas. However, the former concessions still lack an institution that carries out museum tasks, as defined by ICOM (2022).¹ Although the presented history can be described as hybrid, museums in Tianjin 'have not gone postmodern,' as phrased by Denton (2005, 569), in the sense that they still do not deal with multiple (or conflicting) perspectives on the interpretation and representations of the former concessions period.

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Authors' contributions

Maria Gravari-Barbas conducted fieldwork, analyzed the concession narratives of the museums and was a major contributor in writing the manuscript. Sandra Guinand contributed to the literature review, the writing of the manuscript and the editing. Yue Lu conducted fieldwork, analyzed the museums' presentation and has contributed to the writing of the manuscript. Chensi Shen conducted fieldwork, analyzed the museums' operation and has contributed to the writing of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Permission to conduct the interviews for the purposes of this research was obtained from all respondents, who were fully informed about the purposes of this research and how their responses would be used and stored. All interviewees have been anonymised.

Consent for publication

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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¹ <https://icom.museum/fr/news/licom-approuve-une-nouvelle-definition-de-musee/>

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