

The Exhibition of Contemporary History Collections and Visitors’ Interpretations (A Case of the Discovery Center of the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (MUCH))

Kook, Sung Ha (Curator, MUCH)

1. Introduction

Conveying historical facts through collections is instrumental, and interpreting them is constructive. Such interaction between curators and visitors form learning in the museums, and museum interpretation is the multi-layered process of museums issuing messages to the public (Alexander, 2008, 258). Curators want visitors’ interpretation to be same as theirs, but it is a difficult task.

The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History(MUCH) is challenged with the same issue of interpreting the exhibitions. For instance, the Discovery Center of the MUCH is a contemporary history exhibition for children and their parent. Children can find historical facts through collections and discover the meanings of them. Curator provides interpretations related to the collections in various ways, but visitors do not accept the interpretations in the same ways. Each visitor’s purpose, previous experiences, knowledge and companions determine the visitor’s interpretations of the collections.

In this paper, I will consider the relationship between curator and visitor interpretation over the historical exhibition. Since curators planned concept of the exhibition based on the knowledge of the collection in various ways, curators expect their interpretation to be conveyed and understood by the visitors. However, the visitors’ understandings are different. So I will review the exhibition concepts and various ways of the interpretation of the exhibition and collections. And also review how the visitor understand and interpret about them.

2. The exhibition concepts and various ways of interpretation

The Discovery Center has three sections - Long-cherished Hope from the Suffering (Section 1: 1920s - 1940s), Success from the Ruins (Section 2: 1950s - 1970s) and Global Korea (Section 3: 1980s - present). Children can learn Korean contemporary history using various historical collections throughout the center. Curator wanted to convey these concepts based on chronological division : In Section 1, Korea was colonized by the Japanese from 1910 to 1945. Despite trials and tribulations, people did not lose hope for independence and continued struggle for the freedom. In Section 2, The Korean War left people with indelible scars. In order to rebuild what was lost Koreans worked very hard. In Section 3, Korea achieved rapid growth. People have been trying to move on from dark moments of the past and longing for peace and happiness. (Section 3) Additionally there are small experiential areas such as history investigation and music box. The history investigation includes stamps and postcards, a stationary shop, toys of the past, Korean popular culture and a used book store. In the music box area visitor can touch guitars, record players, radios and etc.

As Edward Alexander wrote, good interpretation of exhibition contains five basic elements. (a) It seeks to teach certain truths, to reveal meanings and to impart understanding. (b) It is based on objects. (c) It is supported by sound scientific or historical research. (d) It makes use of sensory perception. (e) It is informal education without the trapping of the classroom (Alexander, 2008, 259). The curator of the Discovery Center established an exhibition plan for Discover Center utilizing various elements in order to induce good interpretations. The plan has been realized through history diaries, illustrations, collections, explanatory notes and tablet PCs.

We made 'a historical diary of 60 memorable days' from 1926 to 2012, and each diary includes specific historical facts on that day such as Emperor Sunjong's funeral in June 10th in 1926. The diary was designed to present historical facts as a form of a diary and it has been written by a historian in order to present an objective view. The diary of June 10th in 1926 is like this. : "Today was the funeral day of Emperor Sunjong. Mother told me we should attend the funeral because he was always concerned for Korean people and was the last Emperor of Korea. When the large bier was beginning to across the Kwansu bridge, we

heard the people's shout of "Dokripmanse" which means 'Hurray for Independence'. " We also made illustration of the diary and provided collections so the children could grasp the history easily. We took all these elements and made a story book including online book.

The size of the Discovery Center is 198 square meter, actually it is small for exhibition and experience. We have exhibited three related objects for each diary so there are about 180 collections for 60 days. Most of the collections are exhibited in the case that the shape of cubic bookshelf. We have placed item cards which include names of collections in front of the cases. Detailed explanations are provided through the tablet PC. It is an assisting tool to enhance understanding of the collections by providing extra information about the collections so that visitors can learn the historical facts and meaning of them. Each explanation of the collections consists of a description and ten related objects with historical facts.

Here is an example of Sohn Keechung. There is a diary on August 25th , 1936 about the story of a marathon runner who won the 1st prize in the Berlin Olympic during the Japanese colonial period. There are three collections in the show case, which are an ancient Greek Helmet(reproduced item), a medal and a book of Berlin Olympic. Three cards show the name of the collection and the explanations include in the tablet PC and can be also searched in the Discovery Center's website (<http://discovery.much.go.kr/>). Visitors can search for the dairy of the day, explanation of the collections, and several related pictures of Sohn Keechung and the Berlin Olympic Games.

3. Visitors' understanding and interpretation

Visitors can reserve the admission of the Discovery Center on the website and also find the 60 days of diary, exhibited items explanations and related pictures and stories. Usually, visitors come to the Discovery Center before the admitted time and read story books, and explore the museum for about an hour. Visitors could discover the historical meaning of the presented collections, yet their understanding could be different from what curators intended because visitors change the interpretations and construct their own values. Visitors' interpretations of the collections are found using various methods such as surveys and observations. It also could be found in the online website such as personal blogs.

First, the museum surveyed 84 children and 48 parents about the experience in the Discovery Center. The result of the children's survey showed the following: The 87% answered that the tablet PCs were useful for the understanding the exhibition but The 11% thought that docent's guide was not so much helpful. The 36% respondents were satisfied with the tablet PCs because of the explanation of the collections. The rest thought that QR Cords(36%), the animation in the tablet PCs(21%) and the diaries(6%) were somewhat helpful to understand the Discovery Center's collections. Generally, the understanding of the exhibition were not so high(48%) because children did not exactly comprehend the relationship of the diary, collections, and the finding the explanation of the collections. However, the 84% the children were satisfied with the experience in the Discovery Center. We also asked to draw a picture of the collections they remembered the most. The collections that they remembered were a bicycle of Um Bokdong(famous cyclist during the Japanese colonial period), a dial style telephone, the first Korean made airplane, the Greek Helmet of Sohn Keechung, a tram model, automobile in the 1960s etc.

Some of the results of the parents' survey on interpretation were a little bit different from their children. The tablet PCs were most useful in understanding the exhibition(51%). Though parents answered that the docent's guide was not so much useful(21%), yet they wanted interpretation programs(46%) were guided by docents. They did not want to discover facts and meanings of the history by tablet PCs but rather expected specialists to explain which opposed the answers of children. The understanding of the exhibition were not so high(52%), and overall the satisfaction of the experience in the Discovery Center was not so high(52%). We also got specific comments from parents such as. "It was an opportunity to recall the dismal past", "The animation LP remind me when I was young.", "When I saw the national flag of Korea which was used by the dependence Army, I could feel the determination of the Independence Army.", "I felt painful seeing the prisoner's name card of Yu Gwan-sun(a patriot during Japanese colonial days)."

Second, here are the observations we have made about the visitors. When children came to the Discovery Center they were waiting for the admission reading some historical books in front of it. Once they entered, staffs explained the exhibition and the usage of the tablet

PC about 10 minutes. Children went into the exhibition, passing through section 1 to 3 and experienced the collections and found the meanings of them by using the tablet PC. At first, they were very enthusiastic (about 10 minutes) about the collection, but soon they interested in the experiential items such as a tram, an automobile and an oiler. After that children played in the experiential areas such as a history investigation and a music box, and even some of them played online games using their tablet PC.

Most of the parents who came to the Discovery Center with their children wanted to take the roles of the 'facilitator' (Falk, 2010, 158), who help the children experience the exhibition. After parents went to the Discovery Center with their children, they encouraged children to see the collection and find the explanation in the tablet PC. As children lost their concentration on collections, parents showed their children the experiential items and areas. Parents prevented the children from playing online games with the tablet PC. Actually the tablet PC was not a interpretation tools rather a source of anxiety for the parents, because sometime they had to prevent their children from online games. Many times parents found some of interesting collections that recall their childhood memories. In this case the parents visited the Discovery Center as 'rechargers' (Falk, 2010, 158).

Thirdly, we could find the visitors' interpretations of the collections on the online websites, because they uploaded lots of stories about visiting the Discovery Center of MUCH. The interpretations were divided into two parts. One is the same interpretations that the curator offered, but the other consisted of visitor's own interpretations.

Curators wanted visitors to learn the historical facts and the meanings while experiencing the experience in the Discovery Center. On personal blogs, we were able to find many interpretations intended by the curators. For example, "The Greek Helmet of Sohn Keechung, the prisoner's name card of Yu Gwansun and the automobile in the 1960s encouraged to experience Korean history. The automobile was very impressive because it acknowledged the hardships after the Korean War." (<http://blog.naver.com/esper35>, searched June 30th 2013), "Mom, why we had to fight even though we are the same race?, At that time we had no power to control of our domestic affairs and the ideology made us hated each other." (<http://bluyuna.blog.me>, searched June 30th 2013)

Actually curators did not wanted the visitors experience feel nostalgia of the past but

many of the visitors interpreted the collections as the tools to evoke nostalgia. The interpretations were like these. "The Discovery Center was the place to feel the nostalgia for the parents and to experience the interesting stuffs." (<http://blog.naver.com/hks8934>, searched June 30th 2013), "The collections remind me of the past days. The tambourine, black and white television were in the house of my grand mother. " (<http://blog.naver.com/mudeni>, searched June 30th 2013), "The LP records, cartoon books, animations were sufficient for me to recall my school days." (<http://blog.naver.com/bearsjh>, , searched June 30th 2013).

4. Conclusion

On museum objects, Pearce(1999, 9) wrote, "The moon rock has been turned into material culture because, through its selection and display, it has become a part of the world of human values, a part which, evidently, every visitor wants to bring within his own personal value system." Visitors had their own value of the collection, even though the curator wanted to convey some of interpretations of the collection to the visitors, they did not (re)interpretate the same ways. That is why the interpretations are so difficult in the museum exhibition. Moreover, the collection (re)interpretations of curators and visitors are closely linked with the learning or the museum education. As curators intended the interpretation to be fully understood by visitors, they offered various tools and methods related to the exhibited collection. However, sometimes the interpretations of visitor's not that of the curator offered .

<Reference>

Edward P. Alexander, Mary Alexander (2008) *Museums in Motion*, Altamira.

John H. Falk (2010), *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (2010), Left Coast Press.

Susan M. Pearce, 'Museum objects', Susan M. Pearce edit. (1999), *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, Routledge.

<http://discovery.much.go.kr>

In Munich, the Bavarian State Painting Collections' museums are allowing one visitor per 20 square meters (215 square feet) of exhibition space. And, across China, visitors' QR codes are being scanned for details on their health and recent travel history. Below is a running list of some of the museums that have reopened -- or have announced they will soon. West Bund Museum, Shanghai, China. Architect David Chipperfield's glass-fronted West Bund Museum reopened to the public back in March. The exhibition "The Shape of Time," part of a long-term partnership with France&a