

# Materializing the past

## Mannequins, history and memory in museums. Insights from the Northern European and East-Asian contexts

MARZIA VARUTTI

**Abstract:** *What are the rationale, significance and implications of the use of reproductions of the human body in contemporary historical museums? This article probes this question through a critical analysis of diverse uses of body simulacra – specifically mannequins and life-size figures – in historical museums in Taiwan and China. The discussion of the East-Asian case study is set against examples from historical representations of the body in Northern Europe as a way to offer a comparative perspective that casts light on the uniqueness and similarities among these geo-cultural areas. This material enables me to reflect on the changing and diverse roles of mannequins in historical displays – in Western (North European) and non-Western contexts – ranging from materializations of the national past, its heroes and martyrs, aiming to canonize History as distant and authoritative, to display devices that strive to generate personal understandings of the past through memories and emotions.*

**Keywords:** Past, memory, mannequins, museums, Taiwan.

The National Museum of Taiwan History opened in late 2011 in a magnificent, futuristic building in the city of Tainan, Southern Taiwan. The Museum is ground-breaking in many respects. It is the first and only devoted to the history of Taiwan and its people; it required twelve years of preparation and intense consultations with hundreds of experts (including historians, anthropologists and archaeologists) as well as community members. The latest technologies were deployed to enhance visitors' experience. The most striking and visually impressive feature is the large number of life-size figures: over 200 hyper-

real reproductions of historical and fictional personalities are to be found in the galleries.

Why has a twenty-first century, state-of-the-art national museum of history chosen to resort to mannequins and life-size figures as one of its main exhibition tools? More broadly, what are the rationale, significance and implications of such reproductions of the human body in contemporary historical museums?

This article endeavours to probe these questions through a critical analysis of diverse strategies of display and contextualization of body simulacra – specifically mannequins and life-size figures – in historical museums

6 in Taiwan and, in a comparative perspective, in nineteenth century Northern Europe. This analysis suggests the sustained significance – across time and different geo-cultural contexts – of human figures as display techniques, notably in historical representations.

The study draws on case studies of historical exhibitions in Taiwan (including at the Shihshanhang Archaeological Museum and the National Museum of Taiwan History), in China<sup>1</sup> (at the Site of the First Congress of the Communist Party of China), as well as in the Northern European context, in order to offer a contrasting comparative perspective.

The article opens with some preliminary theoretical considerations on the issues surrounding the public display of human bodies and body reproductions. I will then move on to consider the potentials and limits of mannequins and realistic wax figures as display techniques. These general considerations will be contextualized with reference to historical exhibitions (using examples from the Northern European context) and further grounded in concrete examples of displays through the case studies of museums in Taiwan and China. The article aims to show how – across different historical, cultural and museological contexts – human figures and reproductions have been a particularly efficient and consequential display technique, able to fascinate viewers across time and space, and uniquely apt to materialize national pasts and canonize History, but also able to engender more personal understandings of the past through individual and collective memories and emotions.

**DISPLAYING THE BODY AND ITS  
SUBSTITUTES: SOME THEORETICAL  
PERSPECTIVES**

The human body is an object of knowledge as

much as it is an instrument of knowledge, a tool through which knowledge about oneself and the world can be gained. One of the main interests of the human body for the social sciences resides in its intrinsic character of interface between the personal – the body as carrier of individual subjectivity – and the social – the body as a signifier of one's place in society, the core of the bundle of social relations in which one lives. In other words, the human body can be understood both as “what circumscribes the social person, the very site of the self” (Breton 2006:14, my translation) and as a catalyst for social relationships, whose nature is dependent on cultural and historical factors. Thanks to these prerogatives, the human body is evocative, symbolic and metaphoric; it can stand for other concepts, such as humanity, race or gender. As a result the body is a prime site of construction, contestation and negotiation of individual and collective identities.

These considerations apply not only to the human body as such, but also to its representations and simulacra – all the more if displayed in public venues such as museums. Museum depictions of bodies are constitutive and revelatory of specific view points and ways of envisioning the human body; American performance studies scholar Petra Kuppers (2004:125) aptly reminds us that “envisioning” entails “translation, interpretation, intervention”. Thus museum representations of the body are worthy of attention because they express a specific imaginary about those bodies' identities. I am particularly concerned here with the potential of body representations in museums to convey cultural and racial difference. Museums are particularly meaningful sites in this respect since “if we are to understand how ethnicities and cultures are racialized we have to consider

the ways in which they become visualized, not only as bodies but also within broader social contexts of cultural expression” (Ali 2008:83).

The ties between museums and bodies are long-standing and multifaceted. Science museums, ethnographic, art and antiquities museums have historically provided the main contexts for the display of the human body and its representations. Most museum visitors are accustomed to the sight of Egyptian mummified bodies in antiquities museums, and of body specimen in science museums. British visual and cultural studies scholars Mara Gladstone and Janet Catherine Berlo (2011:355) note that “[d]isplaying the bodies of cultural others for the entertainment and edification of European and American audiences long predates the institution of the modern museum, going back to sixteenth-century displays of Aztec and Brazilian Indians in Europe”. Moreover, since at least the eighteenth century, wax anatomical models have been used and displayed in anatomy and medical museums (Pirson 2009).

In context of nineteenth century human evolutionary theories, and in parallel with the development of biological anthropology, body features became prominent criteria for the study of ethnic groups. This provided legitimation for the display of human beings and human remains as curiosities and as “scientific” specimen of human “races” (Lynch & Alberti 2010:18). Eager to distance themselves from such past colonial practices, Western museums are increasingly reluctant to display and store human remains – a position that is matched by increasing requests of repatriation of these from source communities worldwide.

In natural history and ethnographic museums, the depiction of the anatomical and cultural differences among ethnic groups was eased by the use of life-size figures and

mannequins as replacement for real human beings. The display of anatomical parts and realistic wax models in mainstream museums started to decline in the twentieth century as a result of changed sensitivities and approaches to the body, and the development of a collective understanding that such displays may be disrespectful for those displayed and for viewers. Significantly, in the United States museum mannequins are often featureless since a mannequin with features would be perceived as having racist connotations (Sabloff 2002:94).

Mannequins have however far from disappeared from ethnographic displays. The persistent use of mannequins in contemporary ethnographic exhibitions may in part be ascribed to the prominent role that they played in the past as a display technique. Commenting on a collaborative project of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) with source communities, Canada-based communication studies scholar Miranda Brady (2009:145) notes that

if consultants to the NMAI were concerned with the implications of dioramas and life-size, lifeless-looking mannequins, why does the museum continue to include them? One explanation for the persistence of the dioramas in the NMAI and other residual practices is that while community curators were given the opportunity to self-present, their understanding of such self-presentation comes from the traditional museum form with which they are accustomed.

This tendency may in some instances even denote a self-orientalizing approach, whereby the display curated (or informed) by source communities ends up by reinforcing the very stereotypes that post-colonial and new museological approaches attempt to displace.

Further evidence that the use of mannequins as a display technique is not necessarily perceived as problematic by source communities is provided by Canadian anthropologist Julia Harrison's (2005:34) account of Blackfoot elders' involvement in the making of the exhibition *Nitsitapiisinni. Our Way of Life*, held at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 2001. Blackfoot elders expressively requested mannequins to be a central element of the display. In the context of the exhibition-making, Blackfoot elders approached with "hilarity" the experience of posing as models for plaster casts, and seeing themselves reproduced as wax figures in the gallery's diorama was "an experience of pride and honor" (Harrison 2005:34). Indeed – in stark contrast with the politically correct featureless mannequins in the United States (see Sabloff above) – the very fact that the mannequins were identifiable with living persons in the local Blackfoot community was key in framing the dioramas as "positive" display devices. In this respect, Canadian curator Alexandra Palmer (1988:9) notes that

the use of made-up faces, wigs and complete accessories leads one to explore social history, manners and custom. Abstract faces and minimal detailing tend to represent the costume as art object, the mannequin providing the frame. Realistic faces draw our attention as we tend to 'read' them before focusing on other details.

Bodies and body reproductions have also long been the subject of artistic production. For instance, during European Renaissance, wax effigies were considered high expressions of artistry, whilst in later periods they would be associated with lower forms of sculptural expression. Interestingly, the likeliness to life of wax sculptures (and the connected ability

to deceive the viewer) were the main reasons for their low artistic recognition. As Italian art historian Roberta Panzanelli (2008:5) notes, "the very indexicality and mimetic powers of wax made its status in the canonical aesthetics of art even more uncertain". Incidentally, it seems ironic that a few centuries later, that very likeliness to the real body would decree the international success of exhibitions such as Gunther von Hagen's *Body Worlds*, where the notion of likeliness is indeed transcended by the use of real dead bodies treated through plastination.

Among museum professionals and academics, the use of wax figures, mannequins and dioramas in the context of exhibitions tends to be associated with outdated, problematic approaches to display that disregard the critique of museums' *modus operandi* brought about by the post-colonial and new museology literature (Harrison 2005:35). Yet, the permanence of wax models and mannequins in museums bears witness to a lingering fascination for the body on display. Part of the reason for this might lie in the idea of immortality that the wax models suggest. Some scholars (Feigenbaum 2008:vi) draw emphasis on the paradoxical capacity of wax sculpture to be both fragile in its materiality and (semi-)permanent in its representation of the human body. Panzanelli (2008:2) also reminds us that the extreme realism of some wax models "transports the representation of life into the 'realm of the immortal dead'". The wax mannequin, paradoxically, may become an emblem of death (see Kendrick 1998).

In the same vein, it has been noted that mannequins representing human beings defy the aim of dioramas to recreate a real-life situation, since the presence of mannequins is a forceful and inevitable reminder of the diorama's artificiality. As American natural sciences scholar Karen Wonders (1993:17)

puts it, “attempts to create the human form fail to arouse the *trompe l’oeil* effect that is the aim of the habitat diorama. No matter how realistic a human model may be, there is always an intuitive sense of its falseness [...]”. American visual culture scholar Mark Sandberg (2002:1–2) corroborates this point by noticing that the presence of a mannequin requires viewers to negotiate its uncanny resemblance to a real person; conversely, the very absence of a body on display enables viewers’ imaginary engagement with it.

However, as Jane Insley (2008) points out, it is important to distinguish between habitat dioramas (which aim to reproduce a natural environment and to create an illusion of reality) and dioramas including life-size reproductions of human beings. The purpose of the latter “is not to deceive but to convince” (Insley 2008:27). In other words, human life figures in dioramas are believed to make an argument more persuasive, to make a point.

Regardless of curatorial intentions, the likeliness of human-like models blurs the boundaries between the “real” and the “fake”, creating a loss of certainty that may produce quite diverse responses in viewers. Some viewers may wish to move away from the uncomfortable zone of not knowing whether an object is animate or inanimate (what Sigmund Freud has labelled “the uncanny”). Conversely, other viewers may approach the model as a springboard for imaginative plots and may enjoy dwelling in what German curator Uta Kornmeier (2008:67) has labelled “the waxwork moment” that is “the time it takes the spectator to decide that a convincing human shape is, in fact, an artifact and not the ‘real thing’”.

In searching for explanations for the persistent fascination that human reproductions exert, one might also take into account the

sheer spell they cast on viewers; the care and attention to the detail that has been put in the making of the wax figures is a central factor in their efficacy as tools of display. This might be explained through British anthropologist Alfred Gell’s (1994:45) concept of “the enchantment of technology”, referring to “the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form”. This enchantment acts through the impressive verisimilitude of wax figures to real human bodies, together with the often considerable historical research that is put in the details of garments, accessories, and hairstyles of each single figure. The enchantment of mannequins’ technology can then account for yet another facet of their spell on audiences.

But do these considerations extend equally to any kind of display? What happens when the mannequin becomes a witness of the past, or when the reproduction of a body is framed as historical “evidence”? In what follows, I turn to examine the role of bodies – notably life-size figures and mannequins – in the context of historical exhibitions. I first consider the pioneering work of Artur Hazelius in nineteenth century Europe, and then set the Taiwanese and Chinese case studies against this background.

#### **HUMAN FIGURES IN NINETEENTH CENTURY NORTHERN EUROPEAN DISPLAYS**

Reproductions of the body (or of body parts) can be frequently found in antiquities, medicine, or ethnographic museums; they are now relatively little used in the context of historical displays, at least in Western Europe. Mostly, life-size figures and mannequins are not perceived as historical artefacts; at best,

they are “interpretations” of historical figures, or material supports for historical items such as textile garments and body adornments. Thus widespread use of mannequins in contemporary historical displays may be perceived as an index of poor historical collections and research. Tellingly, over the twentieth century most mainstream Western European historical museums have gradually phased out mannequins and realistic figures, which were replaced by video and photographic documentation providing contextualization for the objects on display.

Yet it is worth pondering the specific context of Northern Europe as life-size figures, mannequins and body reproductions played a very special role in the development of historical displays and museum categories (specifically folk museums and open air museums) in nineteenth century Sweden, Norway and Denmark (see Sandberg 2002; DeGroff 2012). Consideration of the use of human figures in the nineteenth century Northern European historical displays offers an intriguing term of reference for the subsequent analysis of human figures in East-Asian museums.

In Europe, the use of wax dummies to display folk costumes dates back to the first world exhibitions; however, it was in the Paris World Exhibition, in 1867, that this display technique came to prominence. The Paris World Exhibition committee requested that all the participants send wax dummies with folk costumes to the planned exhibition. In this context, folk costumes were supposed to symbolize national cultural diversity. The Swedish and Norwegian costumes were the most popular among visitors, both for the realistic style of the figures and for the narrative arrangement that enabled visitors to grasp complete scenes of rural and peasant life. Allegedly, two visitors at the Paris Universal

Exposition in 1867 commented on the human figures on display in this way: “To say of which substance these Danish, Swedish and Norwegian figures were made, that would be impossible: it is not wax, not plaster, not stone; it is a composition unknown to us, one which lends itself wonderfully to the representation of the human body” (Ducuing quoted in DeGroff 2012:232). It seems then plausible to think that even in this early date, the Nordic countries had already started to develop unique and innovative techniques for the reproduction of body features in forms of display.

But it would be with Artur Hazelius that the reproductions of human figures in displays would be elevated to a technical and artistic feat. Hazelius (1833–1901) is considered a pioneer figure in the realm of wax figures and *tableaux vivants*. The founder of the Nordic Museum, in the 1870s Hazelius exhibited in Stockholm his collection of Swedish peasant traditional costumes from the Dalecarlia region. Instead of wax mannequins, Hazelius and his collaborators experimented with plaster figures, paying unprecedented attention to the reproduction of human-like features. He would eventually go on to establish Skansen, the first open air museum in 1891. Skansen displayed “living scenes” including life-size costumed figures that were especially powerful in creating a very realistic setting, making this museum extremely popular to this date (see Berg 1980).

Human figures were a key feature in the *tableaux vivants* – realistic group life scenes – which in turn epitomize the Northern European folk museum and open air museum exhibitionary models, and set the Northern context apart in the European and international context. The development of such display techniques in late nineteenth century Northern Europe is better understood

in the light of the political and ideological contexts of the time – a time when concepts of national identity, “Scandinavian” identity, as well as “modernity” were gradually coagulating (see Stoklund 1994, 1999; Sandberg 2002; Bäckström 2011; DeGroff 2012). Cultural displays, and their human figures, were part and parcel of these processes. Interestingly, in spite of contemporary associations of folk museums with rural, peasant, “traditional” lifestyles and cultures (and the nostalgic feelings that underscore these representations), in the second half of the nineteenth century Northern Europe, the depictions of folk life in folk museums actually operated as indexes of “visual modernity” (Sandberg 2002). Such representations were also directly linked to the coeval processes of nation-building in the Nordic countries. As Mattias Bäckström has argued, these representations can also be interpreted as vehicles of national ideologies and expression of patriotism (Bäckström 2011; cf. Stoklund 1994, 1999). At the same time Magdalena Hillström cautions against a reductionist interpretation of folk and open air museums in the nineteenth century as merely showcases for the nation. Rather, she argues, that pan-Nordic ideas of “Scandinavianism”, understood as referring to “a cultural community transcending politically defined territories” played a role in the development of Nordic museums at the time, and were specifically influential for pioneer figures such as Hazelius (Hillström 2010:604).

But what about the use of mannequins in historical exhibitions today – in Northern Europe and the Western world in general? Whilst until a few decades ago an historical costume might have been presented on a mannequin with realistic features, in a contemporary exhibition that same costume is more likely to be presented through display

techniques that erase any reference to the human body, such as invisible suspending threads, or hidden hangers. These display techniques ease the transition of the costume from the status of personal belonging to that of a symbol, that is, an object that is made to stand for something else – an historical period, a trend in fashion, a social class (see also Varutti 2011). At the same time, the editing out of the human body draws attention on the costume’s materiality (the fabric, the patterns, the colours, the tailoring etc.) which may be one of the goals of the display.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Western and Northern Europe today, in Taiwan and China mannequins and life-size figures are extensively deployed in historical exhibitions. These brief notes on the unique and visionary deployment of human figures and reproductions in displays pioneered by Hazelius act as a foil, an historical and ideological Northern European background which can be fruitfully contrasted with the East-Asian (Taiwanese and Chinese) case studies discussed below.

In what follows, I will draw on examples of historical exhibitions in Taiwan to suggest that the use of body reproductions is not perceived as problematic in that context, rather it has become a museological asset.

### **HUMAN FIGURES IN HISTORICAL EXHIBITIONS IN TAIWAN**

In Taiwan both museums and their audiences appear to be relatively comfortable with the presence of human remains and reproductions of the human body in historical exhibitions; not only are they non-problematic, but indeed they are instrumental in conveying a sense of historical depth.<sup>3</sup>

Below I consider examples of bodies on display: the first concerns a display of human

remains at the National Taiwan Museum. The second pertains to a display of a hyper-realistic human mannequin at the Shihshang Museum of Archaeology in Bali, near Taipei, and the last ponders exhibitions in the National Museum of Taiwan History (NMTH) in Tainan.

*Death is Just Another Beginning. Legend of the Taiwanese mummy: Ko Hsiang* was a major exhibition held in Spring 2013 at the National Taiwan Museum in Taipei. In the exhibition, a mummified body becomes the catalyst for a range of historical, cultural and scientific narratives.

The exhibition tells the story of Ko Hsiang, a man living in Dapi village, in Southern Taiwan, in the second half of the nineteenth century, believed to have been a living Buddha. At his death, the body was allegedly found in a mummified state and became the object of veneration in a local temple. In 1912, the body was seized by Japanese police in occasion of an anti-Japanese movement that had developed among followers of the Ko Hsiang cult in Yunlin. The body was subsequently kept in Japanese police headquarters as “criminal evidence”. With the end of the Japanese colonial rule in 1945 and the subsequent establishment of the Chinese Kuomintang government in Taiwan, the Police offices in which the body of Ko Hsiang was kept were re-organized into the Taiwan Police Academy, and Ko Hsiang’s mummified body was used as specimen in criminal anatomy classes. In 1993 the body was accessed in the collections of the National Taiwan Museum, and in 2011 for the first time since 1912, it was displayed for six months in a temple in the village of Dapi, in Yunlin, where it re-ignited ancient legends and veneration practices.<sup>4</sup>

The reconstruction of the biography of the body of Ko Hsiang opens up a plurality of narrative lines in the exhibition, as the body

transited across different realms of signification and was endowed with different status as a living person, an object of religious veneration, an item of scientific research and education, and a cultural and historical specimen in a museum. In particular, Ko Hsiang’s physical remains – defined in the exhibition as “material evidence of history” – provide the springboard for an exploration of the multiple historical accounts and interpretations of this character emerging from newspapers and interviews throughout the twentieth century and up to today. These historical documents offer unique insights on the layers of history unfolding in Taiwan, from the Qing Dynasty period (during which Ko Hsiang lived) to the Japanese colonisation (from 1895 to 1950, to which Ko Hsiang was allegedly opposed), the subsequent reinstatement of the Chinese rule (in 1949) and up to contemporary religious practices.

Furthermore, the body of Ko Hsiang enables the museum to engage with a range of anthropological and museological questions. These included the religious practices developed in different cultures and in different times around human bodies resisting decay; the scientific, cultural, historical and religious significance of a mummified body in a museum; as well as the techniques of textile conservation applied to Ko Hsiang’s original clothing items. At the same time, the agency of Ko Hsiang was powerfully actualized by the museum, as the exhibition contributed to engender cultural and religious activities in the local community in Ko Hsiang’s original village, thus reviving not only the ancient beliefs and religious practices fuelled by the human remains, but also the overall cultural identity of the village.

I now turn to my second example. The Shihshang Museum of Archaeology in Bali, near Taipei – a national level museum





*Fig. 1. Stages in the making of the head reproduction. Shihsanhang Museum of Archaeology, Bali. Photo by the author.*

inaugurated in 2003 displaying prehistoric finds of human settlements dating back to around 1 800 years ago – makes large use of mannequins and figurines in its exhibitions. The mannequins are meant to depict the ancient inhabitants of the Bali region, and to complement the display of the archaeological finds relating to the Shihsanhang prehistoric culture (mostly pottery items and iron tools and fragments, as well as human remains). The museum’s permanent exhibition describes in great detail the making of the wax head of an hyper-realistic mannequin; attention is drawn on the use of the latest technologies and on the scientific foundations of the reproduction, based on the study of skulls

found in the archaeological excavations. The resulting head reproduction blends scientific research – archaeological study of cranial structures and facial features – and speculation (about the clothing items, hairstyle and body adornments). Nevertheless, the museum panels conclude: “The final work is a wax reproduction of the head of a resident of Shihsanhang”.<sup>5</sup> In this instance, it is not so much the historical and scientific accuracy of the mannequin that primes, as its ability to convey the image of an ancient inhabitant of the site. It is also interesting to note how the process of creation of a mannequin, usually confined to museum storages and laboratories, finds its way in the exhibition room and becomes part of the

14 display. It could be said that this is a meta-display, that is, a display of the making of a technology of display. In the Shihsanhang exhibition, the mannequin head is no longer a sign – it does not reproduce something existing somewhere else – rather, it gains value in its own right, it becomes itself a specimen, an object worthy of attention, almost elevated to the status of historical artefact. The display of the making of the wax head also reveals a curatorial assumption about the visitors' interest in such topic – suggesting that Alfred Gell's "enchantment of technology" might be at play here.

Other displays at the Shihsanhang Museum use small size figurines in dioramas depicting the ancient indigenous inhabitants of the site; the figurines portray individuals intent in the extraction and melting of iron, and the making and firing of pottery items. Although they do not qualify as historical items *per se*, these small figurines fulfil the important function of evoking Shihsanhang's ancient world and its inhabitants. The museum's website corroborates this point:

On display are the results of archaeological research combined with reasoned hypotheses, which were used to recreate images of how the people of Shihsanhang probably lived [...] The aim is to make the distant lives of these people seem as realistic as possible. [...] As a result, this presentation of aboriginal life is particularly vivid making it all the easier to imagine oneself watching the past in motion.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of dioramas at the Shihsanhang Archaeological Museum seems to comply with German museologist and historian Klaus Schreiner's (1997:106) note that "dioramas as a specific medium of presentation are – by definition – not designed to analyze, to

explain, or to classify historical evidence in a painstaking way. Curators and artists conceive and curate them to tell a story, impress the senses and to persuade the mind." Through the mannequin wax head and the small size figurines in dioramas, the visitors of the Shihsanhang Archaeological Museum are able to visualize and literally give a face to the ancient inhabitants of the area.

As mentioned, in nineteenth century ethnographic museums mannequins were usually reserved to the representation of the "Others"; this was not the case, however, in Northern European folk and open air museums, where life-size figures with detailed folk costumes were displayed in recreated settings. In this instance, the human figures were instead meant to display the cultural richness of the nation to its own citizens, as part and parcel of a process of nation-envisioning and nation-building.

In a similar way, the examples discussed above suggest that in contemporary Taiwanese museums mannequins are used in representations of Taiwanese themselves. This is all the more evident at the National Museum of Taiwan History (NMTHT) in Tainan. Here dioramas, mannequins and wax figures are the centre-piece of the permanent display *Our Land, Our People. The Story of Taiwan*. Over two hundred life-size wax figures feature in dioramas depicting everyday life scenes, as they might have happened in the past – such as the boat journey to Taiwan of migrants from mainland China, the trade between Han settlers and indigenous peoples in Taiwan, the sowing of the rice, as well as annual rituals and celebrations. The mannequins in the museum gallery are not sealed in glass cases; their accessibility is further enhanced by their positioning (on the same level as the visitor), facial expressions (hieratic smiles) and body



*Fig. 2. Mannequins staging a ritual procession. National Museum of Taiwan History, Tainan. Photo by the author.*

postures (often slightly opening their arms). Moreover, the wax figures are often positioned in ways that allow – and indeed invite – photo opportunities, whereby the visitor can take a photo next to the mannequin. Such physical proximity becomes the gateway to a kind of historical proximity.

This use of space – and the construction of vistas and points of view in and on the display – is reminiscent of Tony Bennett's (1995) analysis of the exhibitionary complex and its role (through the politics of vision and visibility) in conveying a sense of belonging and citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Yet in Taiwanese museums, those same goals of nation-building seem to be mediated by other aspects: a sense of light-heartedness and camaraderie in sharing a playful experience that has some binding force. Indeed, dioramas not only produce a

lively depiction of the past through detailed reconstructions of real-life situations, but also provide a springboard for employment, discussions and personal recollections. For instance, at the inauguration of the NMTH, in October 2011, I could notice visitors closely inspecting the dioramas and lively discussing the scenes represented.

At the NMTH, the permanent exhibition on the history of Taiwan is structured in layers of information, whereby each layer is constituted of a different media: dioramas occupy the centre of the exhibition space, museum panels and objects are located along its edges, and historical photos, documents, maps and paintings provide backgrounds on the walls. This layout is meant to offer visitors different points of entry into the display and different degrees of depth and detail of historical



*Fig. 3. Mannequins and visitors mix in the exhibition space. National Museum of Taiwan History, Tainan. Photo by the author.*

information.<sup>8</sup> In this layout, dioramas and wax figures do not detract from the capacity of the exhibition to convey detailed information, nor from the ability of visitors to closely observe “real” historical artefacts. Rather, dioramas, objects, texts and images complement each other providing a visually powerful representation of what the people of the past might have looked like, of what their lives might have been. The mannequin acts here as a link between the Taiwanese of today and those of the past; tellingly, the display is not so much about “History” as about “stories”, it aims to recall and trigger individual and collective memories, and to make them relevant to

contemporary definitions of Taiwanese identity. The end result is an historical exhibition that succeeds in maintaining a sharp focus on the centrality of human beings in the historical narrative. Viewed from the museum’s top floor, the permanent gallery offers a unique scene whereby visitors mingle with wax figures creating an intriguing landscape of animate and inanimate bodies – the ultimate conflation of Taiwan’s past and present.

In a broader East-Asian perspective, it is interesting to consider how the significance and use of mannequins and wax figures in Taiwanese historical exhibitions contrasts with the use made of these same display

tools in Chinese museums. Mannequins and reproductions of historical figures are widely used in China.<sup>9</sup> In particular, wax figures depicting key national political figures are prominently displayed in national museums such as the Military Museum and the National Museum of China in Beijing, as well as the Site of the First Congress of the Communist Party of China, in Shanghai. In these highly politicized contexts, the wax reproductions of major historical figures contribute to create an aura of charisma, instantiating and perpetuating a cult of personality that is central to Communist political ideology (see Wagner 1992; Watson 1995; Varutti 2014).

For instance, at the Site of the First Congress of the Communist Party of China, in Shanghai, visitors are presented with a diorama showing thirteen life-size wax reproductions of the founding members of the Communist Party – including Mao Zhe-Dong – discussing around a table. The scene is supposed to be observed at a distance; visitors cannot move close to the wax figures, which are positioned on a raised platform and protected by a glass barrier. The scene is self-contained, the wax figures do not address the viewer, who is merely a spectator. In this case, adding a fourteenth empty chair to the table for visitors to sit and take photos – as it might be done in the spirit of museums in Taiwan – might be perceived not only as historically inaccurate, but also as inappropriate. The wax figures play here the ever important role of creating the impression that the depicted persons and/or events are frozen in a permanent present. These display techniques, and by extension these national sites, enable generations of Chinese visitors to get themselves acquainted with, and pay homage to, the father-figures of the nation, and thus to implicitly subscribe to national narratives of heroism and sacrifice. These wax figures

operate as metonyms for the national past: they represent key personalities in the official national narrative of China, their function is both didactic and charismatic. Little or no space is left to personal recollections or discussion: Chinese past has to be apprehended, more than shared.

Conversely, it is intriguing to notice that at the National Museum of Taiwan History, the wax figures are seldom reproductions of known personalities. Most often they represent anonymous individuals to which visitors can relate on an equal level. The wax figures are here pointers towards personal stories, they offer a bottom-up perspective on the national past, not seen through the official historical narrative, but emerging from the juxtaposition of personal and collective memories.

#### **CONCLUSIONS: BODIES IN MUSEUMS ACROSS TIME AND SPACE**

Human bodies and their substitutes (such as wax figures and mannequins) have long been objects of public display, in nineteenth century Northern Europe as in contemporary Taiwanese museums. As such, they have also long spurred contrasting feelings, ranging from fascination to concern, from discomfort to pride. Whilst since the eighteenth century, mannequins, wax figures and dioramas have been widely deployed in the context of medical and ethnographic exhibitions, they have been less prominent in historical exhibitions.

In this paper, I have used examples from historical exhibitions in Taiwan, Northern Europe, and to a lesser extent, China, to cast light on the different roles and impacts of human remains and reproductions of the human body in the form of wax figures and mannequins. I have shown how such remains and reproductions can uphold quite diverse

18 narratives of the past, ranging from narratives that focus on national heroes and martyrs and aim to canonize an authoritative and official historical account (as in the case of the Site of the First Congress of the Communist Party of China), to more open narrative lines that aim to convey and generate individual memories and emotions in visitors (as in the Taiwanese museums discussed, and to large extent, in nineteenth century Northern European folk and open air museums).

In the mentioned exhibition *Body Worlds*, human beings are reduced to bodies, they are made anonymous. Humanity, personality and subjectivity are erased in order to enable the viewers' detached gaze (see also Linke 2005:18). I argue that what remains is the sheer materiality of the body, turned into an object of display – a “scientific” specimen and a “work of art”. In short, bodies are de-humanized and objectified.

A reverse process appears to be in place in historical exhibitions in the museums of Taiwan. Here human remains are being again endowed with an identity and agency (as in the case of Ko Hsiang's mummy) and mannequins and wax figures are being humanized in ways that are intriguingly reminiscent of Artur Hazelius' approach to human figures in nineteenth century Northern European folk and open air museums. In this sense, the role of mannequins and similar human figures in the Taiwanese historical displays can be seen as not too distant from Hazelius' *tableaux vivants*, which would become one of the defining features of Northern European museological approaches. In contemporary Taiwanese historical museums, as in Scandinavian nineteenth century folk museums, the “humanization” of body reproductions presents a physical, aesthetic facet – the figures are worked in extreme detail to resemble a real human being – as

well as an emotional and social dimension, as visitors are enabled and invited to relate to displays through the memories and personal recollections evoked by the reconstruction of historical scenes in dioramas, and the experience of being “in the picture”, of being part of the display, also literally through photo opportunities with mannequins. In this sense, mannequins and similar figures can be said to operate as effective materializations of the past. And this seems to be the case irrespective of the two temporal and cultural contexts in which we place ourselves: In both their historical, Scandinavian rendition, and their contemporary Taiwanese interpretation, body reproductions such as mannequins continue to facilitate the connection between the present and the past by endowing the past with physical features and by enabling the establishment of new, personal, and emotional relationships with a past no longer distant and authoritative, but approachable. In Hazelius' work, as in the contemporary Taiwanese museums discussed in this paper, the use of mannequins and reproductions of the human body are not perceived as problematic, nor reductive nor deceptive, but rather as tools easing the imagination of a shared past and of more cohesive national and local identities.

## NOTES

1. Research in China was conducted between 2003 and 2008 (with a return visit in 2012), and in Taiwan since 2010, as part of doctoral and post-doctoral studies.
2. An exception is the exhibition *The Power of Fashion*, opened at the Nordic Museum, Stockholm, in 2010 (<https://www.nordiskamuseet.se/en/utstallningar/power-fashion>) and displaying Swedish clothing items from the 1780s to the 1960s. In this instance, the exhibition

curators decided to use specially commissioned mannequins as support for the clothes. I am grateful to Eva Silvéen for this information.

3. I am not implying however that human remains in displays, nor museum audiences in Taiwan are dealt with nonchalance. For instance, in the exhibition of Ko Hsiang's human remains at the National Taiwan Museum, at the exhibition entrance a panel cautioned: "Warning: The content of this exhibition involves display of corpse and the issue of death. Children under the age of 10 require adult escorts. Adult audience please consider before entering to visit (*sic*)."

National Taiwan Museum, Taipei. Last visited 5 March 2013.
  4. This information was presented in the exhibition at the National Taiwan Museum.
  5. Photo caption, Shihshanhang Museum of Archaeology permanent exhibition. Last visited 20 April 2010.
  6. Shihshanhang Museum of Archaeology, <http://en.sshm.tpc.gov.tw/html/ensshm/shcomment.jsp?cparentid=226> (accessed 8 March 2012).
  7. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this link with Bennett's theory.
  8. Interview with the NMTH director, Professor Lu Li-Cheng, 28 June 2010.
  9. See Varutti 2011 and 2014 for discussions of the role of mannequins in museum exhibitions devoted to ethnic minorities in China.
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Marzia Varutti, Ph.D., Associate Professor in  
Museumology and Cultural Heritage  
marzia.varutti@ikos.uio.no

University of Oslo  
IKOS – Department of Culture Studies and  
Oriental Languages  
Postboks 1010 Blindern  
NO-0315 Oslo, Norway  
<http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/people/aca/marziav/>