

Museographical discourse analysis of the Otani Collection exhibition at the National Museum of Korea (NMK) in Seoul

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The purpose of this case study is to assess how the NMK's museum discourse has been constructed and transformed by the insertion of dislocated Central Asian archeological objects within the collection of Korean national heritage.

The Otani collection is exhibited in a permanent exhibition gallery at the Seoul branch of the NMK. This collection, however, was formed and transferred to the museum in an imperialist context. Ōtani Kōzui (1876-1948) collected more than 5,000 objects in the course of three expeditions in Central Asia between 1902 and 1910. In 1914, due to the financial problems of his Buddhist temple in Kyoto, his collection was dispersed across Japan, Korea and China.

About 1,500 objects were taken to a Japanese businessman, who ceded them to the Japanese governor of Korea in 1916. Ever since, this collection has been on display at the NMK. Since 2007, there has been a demand to repatriate this collection to China. However, an ambiguity surrounds the issue of repatriation in terms of nation-state: not only did South Korea receive these items within the colonial context, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region, where the collection hails from, is experiencing tensions related to its independence with the Chinese government, making the process complicated.

As the objects and their permanent exhibition in the NMK are closely related to Korean national historiography as well as to the definition of *Korean-ness*, the heterogeneous character of the Otani collection has been problematic regarding the construction of nationalistic museographical discourse. This case study investigates the logic governing the identification and appropriation of this collection in a Korean museum exhibition. Relying on the semio-pragmatic model, the production of meaning, affect, relations and impact will be analyzed in terms of social and historical context.

This semiotic analysis of the intersecting colonial and nationalist discourses of museum exhibition surrounding the Otani collection in Seoul would contribute to enlarging the topographic and theoretical scope of the “translocations” project.