

The museum comes home

I attract objects. Even as I prepared to write these words, I was offered some more, objects with a rich story and a loving, lovingly polished, history, but ultimately with no home to go to after this generation passes. I really can't help. I do not work in museums, and I have never worked in museums. I am a university historian working on modern China, but from the start of my career I would talk with the people who were the subjects of my work in their own homes, and every time I walked into a new house, the grand and the not at all grand, I realized I was walking into a hidden micro-museum of the British colonial experience. As I talked with this man, he reached to a shelf to pull out a photograph album to illustrate a point; as I talked to that man I was mesmerized by the carpet, bought in China seventy years earlier; when I chatted to this woman, we were surrounded by the furniture of a past life in that country; in this house were posters, armbands, and revolutionary dolls. Whenever I left, I looked right and left at the neighbours, and wondered what might be housed there.

Out of those homes, over 15 years, I fashioned a museum, borrowing those albums from that bookshelf, digitizing them and placing them online, open access internationally, some 22,000 images shared by these families, a third of what we had copied, barely scratching the surface of what might be out there. Some of what we copied has since, I'm sure, gone to landfill; some, I know, has gone to auction; some now sits in my university's storage. Some has been restored to a physical life, but in new guise, in books, in films, on gallery walls for the duration of an exhibition, or on permanent display. Out of Hastings, or Newbury, or Glasgow, or Bristol, images have made their way back to where they came from, to Changsha, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Chongqing. They have clearly been needed there, back home in China, where war and revolutions have destroyed so much, and where institutions zealously guard access to their holdings. Our museum has hundreds of thousands of rooms: it can be anywhere, and takes many forms.

I admit there has been violence, for we focused on photographs, wrenching them out of any wider context that survived – the furniture, the carpet, the trophies, and all the other stuff of lives lived by foreign nationals in Chinese cities a century ago. (It's trophies I have just been offered: we have already taken the photographs). Where we can, as I do not work in a museum, we have taken in documents, books, posters, and have tried to find homes for other objects. I don't know where that carpet went; the doll went to the British Museum; but a huge travelling trunk, destination 'Shanghai' on the shipping label, squats now immobile in my office. As China has in the last 20 years built an astonishing number of new museums, and refashioned old ones, I have hosted delegations who asked me to find them objects, but the audience and community I hope that we have served best seamlessly unites those old China hands in Hastings, and Newbury, and Glasgow, and Bristol, with those on screens or in museums and galleries in Changsha, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Chongqing.

I'm sorry about the trophies, but this at least we have been able to do.

Robert Bickers