

# Deepening the Supply Side Structural Reform of Museums in China

Nian Wang\*

Sichuan Museum, Chengdu 610000, Sichuan Province, China

\*Corresponding author: Nian Wang, 809647251@qq.com

**Copyright:** © 2022 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

**Abstract:** Deepening the supply side structural reform of museums in China refers to resolving the structural problems in the cultural supply of museums through reform, enhancing the adaptability of supply structure to demand, improving the cultural supply level and production efficiency, as well as balancing the relationship between supply and demand; it is the embodiment of China's economic "new normal" in the development of museums. This paper discusses the necessity of the supply side reform of museums in China, the existing structural problems, and the concept as well as main contents of effective supply.

**Keywords:** Museums; Supply side structural reform; Effective supply; Culture industry

**Online publication:** March 23, 2022

As China's economic development has entered a new normal, the main social contradiction has changed, and the cultural consumption level and demand of the people have improved. The issue of supply-side reform has gradually become an entity that Chinese museums must pay attention to in the practice of cultural production and supply. Deepening the supply side structural reform has increasingly become a practical way to promote the high-quality development of museums in the new era. On May 28, 2021, the 50th Biweekly Consultative Panel Meeting of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) pointed out that the people-centered principle should be adhered to and the deepening of the supply side structural reform should be assumed as the main line in striving to remove systematical and institutional obstacles as well as promoting the high-quality development of museums in the new era. After solving the question of "Is there or not?", it is now unavoidable to solve the question of "Is it good or not?"<sup>[1]</sup>. In terms of objective demand, the rapid development of China's economy and society has led to the iterative and rapid growth of people's cultural consumption demand, resulting in the need for museums to resolve structural contradictions and increase effective supply through supply side reform, so as to maintain the relationship between supply and demand. From the perspective of self-development, Chinese museums also need to re-identify their basic positioning after national modernization has entered a new era by deepening the supply side structural reform. This paper intends to discuss the necessity, structural contradictions, and effectiveness of deepening the supply side structural reform of museums in China.

The purported supply side reform of Chinese museums simply means that museums, as the suppliers of cultural consumption in modern society, meet the spiritual needs and cultural consumption requirements of the broad masses by improving the supply quality and level of cultural products based on "museum objects," so as to maintain the relationship between supply and demand. Among them, deepening the supply side structural reform is a practical way, which refers to resolving the structural problems in the cultural

supply of museums through reform, enhancing the adaptability of supply structure to demand, expanding effective, medium-, and high-end supply, reducing ineffective and low-end supply, as well as improving the level of cultural supply and the production efficiency, so as to balance the relationship between supply and demand. As cultural consumption and supply behavior are based on the level of economic and social development as well as the degree of national modernization, the practice of deepening the supply side structural reform in liberating and developing the cultural productivity of Chinese museums still fundamentally belongs to a part of China's economic structural reform, which can also be said to be the performance of the "new normal" of China's economy in the development of museums.

At present, the necessity of deepening the supply side structural reform of museums in China is mainly based on three basic judgments. First of all, the "profound changes unseen in a century" requires museums to play an important role in the development of national cultural soft power. Since the global financial crisis in 2008, there have been overall setbacks in the process of human modernization led by western countries, such as Europe and the United States, which are mainly reflected in the slowing down of the process of economic globalization, represented by the global allocation of financial capital and the prominent trend of anti-globalization, the rise of national protection and populism, the intensification of competition and game among big countries, the increasingly prominent concerns for human survival, such as environmental and climate problems, as well as the serious impact on human society spawned by the sudden global crisis of COVID-19. In this context, the confrontation of different ideologies, the game of international cultural influence, and the competition of cultural industry and market together constitute the increasingly fierce confrontation of cultural soft power of various countries around the world, which involves not only the scrutiny of the road to modernization, but also the interpretation of the form of civilization. Museums were born in the process of human modernization. With the genesis of globalization, industrialization, modern sovereign state, and international system spreading to the world, they have become an important part of the cultural soft power of industrial modernization countries. For example, the United States had 35,000 museums in 2014 <sup>[2]</sup>, ranking first in the world. In the current changing situation, facing the competition of cultural soft power, China has put forward higher requirements for ensuring national cultural security and developing cultural productivity. As important cultural institutions in national modernization, Chinese museums must meet this requirement through reform.

Secondly, China's entry into the new era requires museums to transform from "incremental" development to improving quality and efficiency. Over the past 40 years of reform and opening-up, the number of museums in China have increased rapidly to more than 5,000, solving the issue of insufficient museums and public cultural service supply. However, as China's economic development enters the new normal, on the premise of increasing external unstable factors, downward pressure on the economy, and stable growth through structural adjustment, the state is bound to co-ordinate its resource investment in both, soft and hard power, which focus on economy, science and technology, national defense, environment, and people's livelihood. With the previous "input stock" of museums, it is impossible to maintain the high-speed growth centered on infrastructure over a long period of time. At the same time, the process of national modernization also puts forward higher requirements for the cultural supply level of museums. For instance, museums are required to actively participate in the cultural-tourism industry integration and improve the utilization rate of cultural and museum resources; strengthen patriotic education to provide strong support for cultivating a "Chinese nation" community and strengthening cultural confidence; tell Chinese stories well to the world and expand the influence of the Chinese culture. All these require Chinese museums to further change their positioning and role in the modernization of national development and governance system through reform as well as transform "quantity" into "efficiency"; that is, improving both quality and efficiency. Finally, the iterative development of cultural consumption requires museums to continuously improve their cultural supply capacity and level. Since the development of New China, it can be said that

it has experienced three rounds of technological and productivity progress in mechanization, electrification, and informatization, which is equivalent to completing the development process of the west that took more than 200 years in 70 years. Especially with the continuous improvement of urbanization, China has formed the largest middle class in human history, and its willingness and ability of cultural consumption have rapidly improved. For Chinese museums, this means that they can only take a third of the time in the west to adapt to the iterative development of social and cultural consumer needs as countries modernize rapidly, so as to obtain public recognition and needs. At present, the social attention of museums in China is increasing, but the cultural supply is still dominated by public cultural services and has not fully entered the mainstream consumer market. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, domestic trips in China were about 6 billion in 2019<sup>[3]</sup>. In the same year, about 1.12 billion<sup>[4]</sup> people visited museums nationwide, reflecting only one-sixth of the total number of tourists, less than once per person a year. This objectively requires museums to improve their supply level of cultural products through reform, so as to meet the growing social and cultural consumption demand as well as set foot in the mainstream consumption circle.

The focus of deepening the practice of supply side structural reform is structural contradictions and problems. After more than 100 years of development, Chinese museums have made historic achievements, but there are still some structural contradictions, mainly involving seven aspects. First, the structural problem of collection. In addition to industrial science museums, most of China's history, culture, art, and natural history museums collect the cultural and natural heritage of the country, the nation, and the region, which is of great significance in the development of multiple civilizations, exchanges, and mutual learning, but the overall number of collections are still relatively insufficient, facing a barricade in reaching the world scale. This is also a common problem for museums in non-western countries. Second, the structural problem of type. The main reason is that the number of comprehensive and historical traditional museums are too many, and the development of various special museums with distinctive characteristics is insufficient. The situations of "following the same pattern of museums" and "homogeneous construction" still exist. Third, the structural problem of affiliation. At present, all kinds of museums in China are still dominated by state-owned museums. Although non-state-owned museums have developed, they are still relatively small in number. Fourth, the structural problem of investment. At present, the investment for construction resources of museums in China mainly depends on governments at all levels, scientific research institutes, and universities; in addition, the direct investments of enterprises and social forces are still relatively limited. Fifth, the structural problem of product supply. The main reasons are that there are more general public cultural services, but less differentiated medium- and high-end cultural services; there is more free supply of public welfare, but less market-oriented supply; there is a large supply of entertainment, but less service and contribution in scientific research and major issues of national development. Some of the supplies are still low-end and homogenized. Sixth, the structural problems of industry convergence. It is mainly due to the lack of deep integration with other industries, such as the tourism, film, and television industries; it has not entered the mainstream market of cultural consumption. Seventh, the structural problems of domestic and foreign supply. The main reason is that the supply products are concentrated at home, and there is a need for the cultural supply and influence in the world to be further expanded. Certainly, this is affected by many factors, such as international politics and diplomacy.

It is difficult to change some of the aforementioned structural contradictions and problems in a short period of time, such as the structural contradiction of collection, which is caused by the history of human modernization led by the west. Whether the concepts of "global" and "local" museums are correct will be discussed separately; however, it is a requisite to recognize this objective reality. Some are issues brought by the rapid growth and progress of Chinese museums. For example, state-owned museums are the mainstay. The state has invested heavily in the construction of museums, and the supply of public cultural services is sufficient. These are precisely the achievements of the rapid development of China's cultural

and museum industry, which has laid the foundation and premise for the practice of deepening the supply side structural reform under new historical conditions. Some are problems that need to be solved in the reform and development, such as “following the same pattern of museums,” low-end homogeneous supply, insufficient social investment, and so on.

Resolving structural contradictions is the main task of deepening supply side structural reform, and it is also the only way to expand effective, medium-, and high-end supply as well as reduce ineffective and low-end supply. The effective supply of Chinese museums or the effectiveness of the cultural supply of museums means that in a modern socialist country with Chinese characteristics, the cultural supply based on “museum objects” is balanced with the demand of public cultural consumption, and thus plays an irreplaceable role in the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese civilization in the process of modernization as well as in the construction of the new paradigm of modernization and the new form of human civilization. In other words, the foundation of the cultural supply of museums is the museum objects, which include tangible cultural goods and intangible cultural services. Secondly, the balance between supply and demand means that we should not only continuously improve the level of cultural production and supply on the supply side, but also guide the public’s cultural consumption intention and value judgment on the consumption side, carry forward the advanced fashion, and shape the advanced cultural consumption concept. Finally, the fundamental purpose of the balance of supply and demand is to promote the prosperity of the advanced culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Even if the supply is abundant and there is a rebalance in the supply and demand, it is impossible to meet the needs of China’s modernization drive if we deviate from this goal.

Whether the practice of deepening the supply side structural reform of Chinese museums is successful, or whether the supply is effective, a systematic and scientific evaluation standard is required. In short, the effectiveness of supply can be reflected in ten aspects.

First, the ability and level of museums to collect, research, and use “museum objects” dominated by cultural heritage have significantly improved, and the structural problems of the number and types of collections have been solved with greater mobility and sharing. Second, there are more types of museums available, in which special museums, non-state-owned museums, university museums, and rural museums have been fully developed; in addition, small and medium-sized museums can better solve the problems of funds and professionals perplexing development through multiple and effective ways, so as to obtain a better development environment. A modern museum system with complete types, different scales, and wide industry influence is gradually formed. Third, the participation of social consumption has increased significantly as exemplified by the number of visits to museums, in which the per capita number of visits reach one or more than two times per year, and the audiences are evenly distributed in all classes and age groups. Fourth, the public has strong willingness to consume the public cultural services provided by museums, and the level of public cultural services is in line with the development level of national modernization. Fifth, museums have achieved obvious market returns in industrial development, especially making significant improvement in their participation in cultural, creative, and tourism markets. There are not many museums with a scale of tens of millions of yuan in the cultural and creative market, but in 2019, the scale of China’s cultural and creative design service market alone reached 1.2 trillion yuan <sup>[5]</sup>. There is still a very obvious gap. Sixth, on the premise of improving market returns, the proportion of social investment in the industry has increased significantly, changing the current situation that national investment accounts for the vast majority and promoting the diversification of resource allocation in the museum industry. Seventh, museums are deeply integrated with other industries, becoming a part of the mainstream cultural consumption market in modern countries as well as receiving more general and sustained social attention. Eighth, it plays a more crucial role in scientific research and in solving major national development problems. Similar examples include the research by the American Museum of Natural

History on important scientific issues, such as the protection of biodiversity, climate and environmental changes, biological evolution, and the extinction process [6]. Ninth, the culture supply of museums can reasonably guide the public's scientific and cultural thoughts and modern value judgment as well as play a more important role in continuing and developing traditional Chinese civilization and enhancing the national cultural soft power. Tenth, it provides the international community with adequate cultural products and significantly enhances its influence and voice in the development of world museums.

The practice of deepening the supply side structural reform of Chinese museums is a systematic project involving many parties. For instance, if we want to strengthen the mobility and sharing of collections, a unified collection exchange and sharing mechanism as well as an exchange and utilization platform can be established; the marketization of the platform can be reasonably promoted; in addition, state-owned and non-state-owned museums of different types and attributions can be encouraged to participate. It involves collection identification, establishment of access standards, platform data management, market supervision, and so on, which cannot be accomplished by the cultural departments of governments at all levels. Just as the fundamental purpose of China's economic structural reform is to improve social productivity, the supply side reform of museums is also to continuously liberate and develop cultural productivity. Therefore, it must be gradually promoted with the improvement of national modernization, especially the modernization of China's system and capacity for governance.

## **Funding**

This paper is a phased achievement of the scientific research project, "Theoretical and Practical Research on Museum Supply Side Reform in the Field of Sichuan Cultural Relic and Museum" (Project Number: SCWW2021B13).

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## **References**

- [1] Xinhua News Agency Client, 2021, The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Held a Biweekly Consultation Forum to Discuss Government Affairs Around "Promoting the High-Quality Development of Museums in the New Era". National Culture Heritage Administration, May 29, 2021. [http://www.ncha.gov.cn/art/2021/5/29/art\\_722\\_168247.html](http://www.ncha.gov.cn/art/2021/5/29/art_722_168247.html)
- [2] Li H, 2014, American Museum Magazine Published "Digital Interpretation". China Culture Daily, November 4, 2014, (8).
- [3] National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020, China's Cultural Artifact and Tourism Statistical Yearbook in 2020. China Statistics Press, 220.
- [4] National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020, China's Cultural Artifact and Tourism Statistical Yearbook in 2020. China Statistics Press, 267.
- [5] National Bureau of Statistics, 2020, In 2019, The Operating Income of Cultural and Related Industry Enterprises Above Designated Size Increased by 7.0%. China National Bureau of Statistics, February 14, 2020. [http://www.stats.gov.cn/xxgk/sjfb/zxfb2020/202002/t20200217\\_1767761.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/xxgk/sjfb/zxfb2020/202002/t20200217_1767761.html)
- [6] Jiao Z, 2019, The Inheritance and Transformation of Natural History Museums from the Collection, Research and Dissemination of Science and Technology Collections: A Case Study of the American Museum of Natural History. Journal of Natural Science Museum Research, 2019(2): 14-21, 93.

**Publisher's note**

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.