

TOOLS, FRAMEWORKS, AND CASE STUDIES

“Who’s Ready for the Cave?” Thailand’s Tham Luang Rescue Museum as Teaching Case Study

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This article demonstrates how a teaching case study approach can benefit museum studies courses. It takes as its focus the widely reported rescue of a boys’ football team from a flooded cave in Thailand (2018). The success of this multinational effort led to immediate calls for the establishment of a “living museum” dedicated to remembering what became known as the “Tham Luang cave rescue.” Discussion of the potential form and function of this envisaged museum plus its wider ramifications formed a key component of a newly validated international MA program taught in the UK and China by local academics and practitioners. Issues addressed include collections management, interpretation and display as well as ethical considerations relating to funding and forward planning. These were debated through groupwork, student presentations and report writing. The article reflects on this experience and the lessons it has for studying museums. It advocates the use of other topical events as the basis for similar teaching case studies on the grounds that this best equips students with the knowledge and skills required in the workplace.

Keywords: China; museum; student-centered learning; teaching case study; Tham Luang; Thailand; university; vocational training

“Who’s ready for the cave?”

Everybody was.

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*¹

Case study is “a chunk of reality.”² Dump a hunk of real-life into the classroom and you have an immediate talking point. This capacity for triggering debate has proven so

effective that the case study is now a staple feature of teaching across the academic field.³ Sustained analysis of a given reality chunk casts light on it and other such fragments. Put those bits together and a picture of the whole promises to emerge.⁴ Insight occurs through a process of joint enquiry, information gathering and problem solving.⁵ It is this that makes “teaching-practice case study” particularly serviceable when it comes to vocational training.⁶ Case study encourages learning that is relevant and topical, equipping students with the knowledge and skills required in the workplace.⁷

Caving in, checking out

The case study at the heart of this article is a massive “chunk of reality:” Tham Luang Nang Non, a 10-kilometer-long cave system beneath the Doi Nang Non mountain range in the Chiang Rai Province of northern Thailand. In June 2018 it became the focus of global media attention when rising floodwaters trapped a dozen boys deep inside. It took more than a week for them to be located on a raised rock shelf, several kilometers from the mouth of the cave. They were eventually recovered by an international team of specialist divers. This task was completed on July 10, by which time the boys had been underground for seventeen days. A press conference was arranged immediately afterwards, during which the jubilant head of the rescue operation informed the world’s media that the “area will become a living museum, to show how the operation unfolded.” He also spoke of establishing “an interactive data base.” The intention was that it would “become another major attraction for Thailand.”⁸

These remarks came just as plans were being drawn up for the inaugural delivery of an MA in Museum and Heritage Development at the Communication University of China in partnership with Nottingham Trent University (NTU). The first

half of this two-year program is taught at the Faculty of International Media (ICUC) in Beijing by academics from both universities, before the students move to Nottingham for their second year. Being modelled on a long running UK-based course, it had to be adapted for teaching in China. This included the opening, semester-long module, “Purpose, Planning and Development.” At NTU this component is run in collaboration with partner museums in England’s East Midlands region. Recent events in Thailand proffered a radical replacement. The putative cave museum was utilized as the “teaching case.” This was underpinned by general literature, including a pair of recently published introductory readers.⁹ These were deemed to be suitable in terms of introducing the key issues in an accessible manner for non-native English speakers, the majority of whom were undertaking language training alongside their subject-specialist classes. The chapter headings of the two course books provided the thematic spine of the module.

Each weekly meeting began with theoretical discussion actualized through an array of empirical examples. This debate was then used to initiate conversations as to how the issues might inform a museum dedicated to the cave rescue. Topics addressed ranged from collections, interpretation and display to considerations of management, funding and forward planning. At the outset it was necessary to begin with first principles: what is a museum? This far-from straightforward question is not confined to the classroom.¹⁰ The profession is constantly re-evaluating the term.¹¹ ICOM, for example, is currently contemplating an updated definition, for the seventh time.¹² One reason for this mutability is the fact that museums differ so markedly in scale, purpose, constitution, function and remit.¹³ Museums are, moreover, legacy institutions that exist in the ever-changing present. As values shift, so too do attitudes towards museums. Change is necessary to ward off the nagging sense of obsolescence that bedevils

museums.¹⁴ Indeed, an attempt to guard against this was apparent at the above-mentioned press conference. The call for a “living museum” implies that the regular variety are moribund: sepulchral repositories of inanimate objects from the dead past trapped inside haunted mausolea.¹⁵ The boys in the cave escaped such a fate. It would be deeply ironic if their legacy should be entombed in a fusty museum. Their spectacular liberation also explains the proposal’s expansive remit: the “*area* will become a living museum.” This raised ambitions beyond a walled institution in a manner analogous to the ecomuseum concept; an apposite solution, perhaps, given that it is said to prioritize an ecological and cross-disciplinary approach carried out with the active involvement of local communities.¹⁶

Further incentive to transcend a conventional ark of physical things came with the call to establish “an interactive data base.” This positioned the anticipated visitor as an active participant in the selection and shaping of knowledge rather than a passive recipient of a preconceived object-led exhibition. This in turn drew attention to the interpretative space between the collection and the visitor, and gave rise to additional imponderables. What should be collected and why? Who should do the selecting and with what resources? How could the story be told? Where? For whom?

The fact that so little was settled represented a strength rather than drawback. In a classroom scenario it is not necessary to know everything about the matter at hand. Teaching cases are left “deliberately incomplete.”¹⁷ This is just as well given that our “chunk of reality” was in truth little more than a sliver. Extensive prior information could not therefore be provided in the manner of casewriters crafting “teaching vehicles” for their business school students.¹⁸ Instead, a collegiate picture emerged incrementally through group discussion that oscillated between extant institutions and the nascent cave museum. This was possible because, while museums differ according

to their specific circumstances, they share general features and raise similar issues. Uniqueness and commonality are always at play in case work. The instructor need know enough of “the territory” to mine it for ideas to extrapolate.¹⁹ This territoriality related to the museum field rather than any geographical knowledge of Thailand.²⁰ The goal in all this was not to produce a group of experts on Thai museums, but an ideas-rich cohort, aware of underpinning theory and its potential application in a broad sense. The Thailand story provided the means of “anchoring” the discussion but without curtailing enthusiastic debate or dampening imaginative engagement.²¹

Any structuring narrative, however, demands demarcation to be effective: all manner of phenomena can be used to create a case so long as the object of study has “identifiable,” “proper” and “appropriate” boundaries.²² This fencing requires careful consideration when applied to a concept as mutable as the museum. It is telling that ICOM promotes membership of its organization under the mantra: “Museums have no borders, they have a network.”²³ Compounding this is “the uncertain reality of Thailand” given the ambivalence of its ethnic identity and national frontiers.²⁴ This confirms the assertion that “boundaries are not found; they are made by social actors, including by researchers.”²⁵ A compulsory 2,000-word report tasked students with establishing their own “research agenda.”²⁶ A report format facilitated a structured statement of facts and ideas. Students deployed LexisNexis – a news and media monitoring service – to access an international compendium of English-language reports about the cave rescue. Complementing these articles were the two core museum texts and a select bibliography of academic literature, all supplied in electronic format via NTU’s online learning portal. This corpus provided students with the means of substantiating their reports, testing their ability to read and reflect while honing referencing skills and appreciation of the need for source evidence. Students wrote a

draft version of the report at an early stage to check understanding and receive initial feedback and individual support from the course leader. Allied to this were a series of unassessed presentations allowing the piloting of ideas and sharing of findings; undertakings deemed essential if students are to “fully explain the phenomenon being studied.”²⁷ The participants thus learned as much from each other as they did from the “expert” instructor. This contrasted with the type of teacher-centered learning familiar to Asian students in which the classroom is hierarchically structured, with communication typically flowing one-way from an authoritative leader who disseminates knowledge to passive, unquestioning groups of students. The latter do interact, but normally only after periods of reflection, and especially in one-to-one discussions. Casting the teacher in the role of “facilitator and coach” who encourages critique and group debate as part of a student-centered approach is challenging to those used to another style of learning. Nevertheless, considerable benefits can be accrued from “blending both Asian and Western educational system[s].”²⁸ The two-year NTU-CUC program actualizes this through the exchange of UK staff and Chinese students. And the results set out in the following section show what can be achieved as a consequence.

Teaching cave study

The case study exercise generated a wide variety of responses from the eight group members. This was in itself significant. Any museum can be conceptualized in all manner of ways. So too can each object in its collection. Discrete artifacts are “agile” in terms of being open to “interrogation from any number of disciplinary standpoints.”²⁹ Thus a museum to the Thailand cave rescue that prioritizes the natural sciences would in all likelihood feature rock samples and specimens of flora and fauna. As a technology

museum one might expect to find diving equipment and water pumps. Meanwhile, the walls of a media museum would be alive with 24-hour news feeds recalling a period in time when Tham Luang was “the most reported place on Earth.”³⁰ And in terms of anthropology, telling the human story could involve intangible heritage such as music and dance plus offerings left at the mythical “cave of the reclining lady” (*Tham Luang Nang Non*).³¹ Inserted into this realm of legend is a shrine to Saman Gunan, the 38-year-old diver who tragically died during the rescue operation.³² In addition to these sacred associations, the museum could safeguard a collection of profane artifacts and ephemera – boots, bicycles, backpacks and a bucket of KFC – recalling what the boys left at the mouth of the cave and fantasized about eating once they were free.³³



Figure 1. *KFC Family Bucket*. National Museum of American History. Accession number: 2014.0120. Image: Smithsonian Institution.

The conceptual framing of the museum will determine its collecting policy. Thanks to the “museum effect,” even a humble fast-food carton can be revered like a hallowed relic (Figure 1). Display techniques “affect how we look and what we see” by providing “contextual stimuli” that “capture visitor attention.”³⁴ Some strategies are easily missed. The influence of lighting, for instance, was demonstrated by a group

visit to *Landscapes of the Mind: Masterpieces from Tate Britain (1700-1980)*, a theatrically-lit temporary show then hosted by the National Art Museum of China



Figure 2. *Landscapes of the Mind: Masterpieces from Tate Britain (1700-1980)*. Curator: Richard Humphreys. National Art Museum of China (September 13 – November 6, 2018). Image: Stuart Burch.

(Figure 2). Meanwhile, an exhibition about human evolution at the nearby Beijing Museum of Natural History afforded an additional comparative example (Figure 3). It features a mock cave with mannequins brought to life by

a video projection of prehistoric artists busy painting animal pictures of the kind preserved at Lascaux in France. The latter is the subject of a new museum that opened in 2016. The partially submerged building contains laser-scanned facsimiles of the prehistoric paintings. The museum is “immersive” in that it provides “an exhibit [which] effectively involves, absorbs, engrosses, or creates for visitors the experience of a particular time and place.”³⁵ In this case, members of the public are encouraged to imagine that they are walking in the shoes of the four teenagers who discovered the paintings in 1940. It deploys atmospheric controls to mimic the impression of a damp, dingy grotto. This artifice is necessary because the actual cave has been closed for decades in order to preserve the paintings. An earlier replica adjacent to the original



Figure 3. *The Origin of Human Beings*. Curator: Zhou Guoxing. Beijing Museum of Natural History (October 22, 2015 to date). Image: Stuart Burch.

opened in 1983, while another is a touring exhibition that has travelled the world “to promote the area far beyond its own borders.”³⁶

These precedents could inform the Thailand initiative. The cave rescue has already had a major impact on tourism, making the site one of northern Thailand’s most visited attractions.³⁷ A museum in situ would further enhance its profile. Alternatively, it could be sited in the regional capital, Chiang Rai on the grounds that this “often overlooked” city is “the logical base from which to plan excursions to the more remote corners of the province or abroad.”³⁸ Museums can be used instrumentally as drivers of economic regeneration, with evidence to suggest that “museums in peripheral locations help to promote change, especially in terms of image and urban transformation.”³⁹

A location in Chiang Rai would put it in proximity to many local schools, allowing it to realize its educational potential. The abovementioned “agility” of objects means that a museum about the cave rescue could feature in the curricula of a variety of subjects. The ill-effects of oxygen-deprivation, malnourishment and darkness experienced by the boys during their prolonged stay underground would enliven any

biology lesson. The same incident could inspire a literature class to read Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). Its most memorable scene is that in which Tom and Becky get lost underground, and the sense of panic as the guttering of their final candle plunges them into "the horror of utter darkness." The return of the "famished and woe-stricken" pair led to "the greatest night the little town had ever seen."⁴⁰ Twain's classic captures the lure of going underground, the fear of loss and the joy of discovery – all of which were experienced for real in Thailand in 2018. The rescue could be a catalyst for creative writing, inspired by the handwritten letters the parents exchanged with the boys whilst they were still in the cave. Museums exist to safeguard such precious documents. Their display would be a spur for family education programs (with families taken in the broadest sense and education understood as participative, recognizing that "children and adults teach one another").⁴¹

Going beyond the classroom, a museum to the Thailand cave rescue could inspire sporting initiatives. The boys were all members of the Wild Boar football team. Following their rescue, they were invited to visit Manchester United's home ground as well as River Plate's Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires. They also met LA Galaxy's striker Zlatan Ibrahimović during a television appearance. This demonstrates the popular appeal and global reach of soccer – a status that in 2016 propelled Leicester City to the top of the English Premier League under the chairmanship of Thai billionaire, Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha. These financial associations could be tapped for commercial purposes through sponsorship, celebrity endorsement and donations.

That financing is not a separate issue from academic or professional museum studies is confirmed by the pithy remark: "Museums and money go together."⁴² But what ought to be the nature of that association? Should the planned museum charge an entrance fee, for instance? Other sources of income might be the shop and catering

facilities, which – aside from generating money – can also play a role in its educational remit and in terms of public relations.⁴³ The sale of cave-themed souvenirs and replica Wild Boar football shirts would seem uncontentious. However, would it be acceptable to franchise the museum restaurant to KFC and sanction the marketing of special “Kentucky Fried Cave” offers? Or is this unwarranted commercialization?⁴⁴ One argument in favor of such a move is that this global restaurant chain is already a part of the story.⁴⁵

Funding from public coffers is potentially no less contentious.⁴⁶ This is particularly true in a politically turbulent country such as Thailand, where the military has intervened repeatedly.⁴⁷ It is revealing that the man who proposed the museum in the first place has been embroiled in political intrigues linked to his campaign to fight corruption.⁴⁸ The wider geopolitical situation is no less fraught. Prior to being thrust into the limelight, the team coach and three of the boys were stateless citizens.⁴⁹ The human rights of minorities and the displaced led some to argue that “statelessness should be the take-home message from the saga.”⁵⁰ Could or should this inform the museum’s agenda? A potential precedent to follow is *Myanmar Up-Close* at Bangkok’s Museum Siam (2016), which sought to confront Thai hostility to Burmese migrants through a temporary exhibition and associated education program. The latter featured a series of plays performed by a dozen children of guest workers. Question-and-answer sessions after each performance enabled these young people to recount their settler experiences and hopes for the future. This was all part of Museum Siam’s commitment to intercultural dialog through a recognition of “our shared humanity.”⁵¹

This attempt to counter prejudices and misperceptions is a reminder of museums’ capacity to tackle controversial issues. An institution dedicated to the Thailand cave rescue could therefore address the one notably discordant aspect to an

otherwise harmonious story of international cooperation. This centered on billionaire tech entrepreneur, Elon Musk. He supplied the rescuers with a “kid-size submarine” dubbed “Wild Boar.” This, however, was disparaged as little more than a publicity stunt by one of the British divers involved, prompting Musk to take to social media to brand his detractor a “child rapist.”⁵² One might argue that this unseemly incident has no part to play in the story. Yet one of the reasons the cave rescue attracted so much attention was because it provided a welcome antidote to the sort of “toxic masculinity” given respectability by the election of US President Donald Trump.⁵³ Should Musk’s grossly offensive remarks preclude the submarine from the museum’s collection? What if Musk offered financial support, but only on the understanding that the museum was forbidden from mentioning his legal wrangles?

Cave to cosmos

These types of ethical dilemmas arise whenever a “chunk of reality” lands in the classroom. The preceding account gives the merest indication of the many ideas we shared. It transpired that the Thailand cave rescue was a particularly conducive case study. Yet other topics were likely to have been equally propitious. One such contemporary candidate was the calamitous fire that swept through the National Museum of Brazil in September 2018, destroying over 90% of the 20 million items in its collection. That inadequate funding might well have contributed to this disaster is a reminder that advocates are needed to champion the vital cause of museums. The pedagogical approach set out here is intended to nurture just such ambassadors and help ensure that they become the human face of China’s museum boom.⁵⁴

Because museums matter. They can change the lives of visitors.⁵⁵ And there could be no better story for a museum to tell than the fortitude, fellowship and ingenuity

that led to the rescue of “probably the best team in the world.”⁵⁶ It definitely has the museological “hook” required to confirm that “rock formations link me to other people and times, the larger cosmos.”⁵⁷

That ought surely to be the enduring legacy of this saga. A museum seems therefore certain.⁵⁸ This article serves as a record of our discussions and a reminder to a future reader that nothing about the museum was inevitable or given: decisions permeated every aspect of Thailand’s Tham Luang rescue museum – from its very existence to its location, remit, collections policy, funding and interpretative strategies. The amount of thought given to the museum’s purpose, the thoroughness of its planning and the contingencies put in place to ensure its future development will determine whether it does justice to a story that deserves to be told and retold for generations to come.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

Figure captions

Figure 1. *KFC Family Bucket*. National Museum of American History. Accession number: 2014.0120. Image: Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 2. *Landscapes of the Mind: Masterpieces from Tate Britain (1700-1980)*. Curator: Richard Humphreys. National Art Museum of China (September 13 – November 6, 2018). Image: Stuart Burch.

Figure 3. *The Origin of Human Beings*. Curator: Zhou Guoxing. Beijing Museum of Natural History (October 22, 2015 to date). Image: Stuart Burch.

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Notes

- ¹ Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, 219.
- ² Lawrence, "Preparation of Case Material," 215.
- ³ Gomm et al., *Case Study Method*, 1-7.
- ⁴ Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 65.
- ⁵ Giordano, *Solving Education Problems Effectively*, 215.
- ⁶ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 19.
- ⁷ Garvin, "Making the Case," 56.
- ⁸ Narongsak Osottanakorn in Panu Wongcha-um, et al., "Thailand's Tham Luang Cave to Become Museum to Showcase Boys' Rescue," *Reuters*, July 11, 2018. Nexis UK.
- ⁹ Ambrose and Paine, *Museum Basics*; Mason, Robinson and Coffield, *Museum and Gallery Studies*.
- ¹⁰ Paül i Agustí, "Differences in Location of Urban Museums," 493, n. 1.
- ¹¹ Mason et al., *Museum and Gallery Studies*, 17-20, 30-35.
- ¹² Brown and Mairesse, "Definition of the Museum."
- ¹³ Ambrose and Paine, *Museum Basics*, 9.
- ¹⁴ Burch, "Museum Landscapes," 51.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Oates, *Hazards of Time Travel*, 157-166.
- ¹⁶ Engström, "The Ecomuseum Concept is Taking Root," 206-207.
- ¹⁷ Garvin, "Making the Case," 60.
- ¹⁸ Roberts, "Developing a Teaching Case."
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.
- ²⁰ Burch, "Museum Landscapes."
- ²¹ Lawrence, "Preparation of Case Material," 215.
- ²² Gerring, *Case Study Research*, 19, 82, 108. The word "appropriate" appears in italics in the original.
- ²³ ICOM, <https://icom.museum/en/network/membership-card/ICOM>.
- ²⁴ King, "The Social Construction of Heritage," 7.
- ²⁵ Bartlett and Vavrus, "Comparative Case Studies," 903.
- ²⁶ Garvin, "Making the Case," 64.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ²⁸ Loh and Teo, "Understanding Asian Students' Learning Styles," 198-199, 205.
- ²⁹ German and Harris, "Agile Objects," 248.
- ³⁰ Jonathan Head, "The Thai Cave Rescue: What Happened Next?" *BBC*, December 25, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-46538252>.

- ³¹ Wongcha-um et al., “Thailand’s Tham Luang cave.”
- ³² Amy Sawitta Lefevre and Panarat Thepgumpanat, “Dancers, Pig Heads and Sweets: Thais thank cave spirits for saving boys,” *Reuters*, July 16, 2018. Nexis UK.
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- ³⁵ Bitgood in Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson, “Intrinsic Motivation in Museums,” 74.
- ³⁶ “Lascaux III,” *L’Atelier des Fac-Similés du Périgord*, <http://www.afsp-perigord.fr/realizations/#lascaux-3>.
- ³⁷ Ronan O’Connell, “Thai Cave Famous for Football Team Rescue Now a Tourist Hotspot,” *Guardian* (London), November 27, 2018. Nexis UK.
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- ³⁹ Paül i Agustí, “Differences in Location of Urban Museums,” 493.
- ⁴⁰ Twain, *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, 248.
- ⁴¹ Otaka, “Museum Family Programmes,” 40.
- ⁴² Ambrose and Paine, *Museum Basics*, 411.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 92, 97, 412-414.
- ⁴⁴ Mason et al., *Museum and Gallery Studies*, 138-139.
- ⁴⁵ Philip Sherwell, “Boys Thank Saviours – and Dream of KFC,” *Sunday Times* (London), July 15, 2018. Nexis UK.
- ⁴⁶ Mason et al., *Museum and Gallery Studies*, 136-137.
- ⁴⁷ King, “The Social Construction of Heritage,” 26. “Thailand Election Date Set and Campaign Ban Lifted,” *BBC*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-46519396>.
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- ⁵⁶ Ibrahimović in Warren Muggleton, “Man Utd Fans Label Zlatan Ibrahimović ‘a GOD,’” *Star* (London), October 16, 2018. Nexis UK.
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- ⁵⁸ Within months of the rescue a provisional exhibition had been put together in a Bangkok shopping mall. It featured a pretend cave, through which the boys were directed to crawl, much to the consternation of child psychologists. Jamie Fullerton, “‘This is History’: Bangkok Mall Opens Thai Rescue Display, Featuring Plastic Cave,” *Guardian* (London), September 1, 2018. Nexis UK.

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