

## **Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Cultural Production within China's Public Museums: Examining the Challenges and Practices Guiding Administration**

### **Abstract**

The transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy with socialist characteristics has had a profound effect on China's cultural industries. This paper adopts a case study approach to illustrate the challenges that have shaped the administration of public museums as a consequence of China's economic reforms. By drawing upon an example of cross-cultural collaboration between Western cultural institutions and China's Nanjing Museum (南京博物院: *nanjing bowuyuan*), we uncover the tensions that exist between China's cultural policy preferences and the encroaching values of the market economy. In doing so, this article contributes towards a richer exposition of the local practices guiding cultural management, reflecting the broader challenges endemic among China's cultural industries. Primarily, we seek to illustrate how market imperatives have influenced local practices, creating a context unique to China that deviates from the central tenets of neoliberal development and market management.

**Keywords:** China, cultural policy, museum management, state entrepreneurialism

## **Introduction**

Since the arrival of Deng Xiaoping's reforms in 1979, China has undergone a process of transformation characterised by the embrace of marketisation, privatisation and rapid socio-economic development, repositioning the nation's identity amidst the infiltration of global cultural production (Kang, 2012). This historical transition opened an avenue for China to assimilate into the world economy and, for some of the nation's citizens, reshape public opinion towards the revolutionary ideology established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Arrighi, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Tong and Hung, 2012).

Despite the apparent contradictions and tensions that arose from China's post-socialist development, the legacy of state-centred patriotism is said to be best preserved and legitimised through its cultural institutions, of which museums form a key component of this particular strategy (Vickers, 2007). China's museums have placed a strong emphasis on the preservation and interpretation of cultural relics and have actively undertaken the responsibility of delivering patriotic education to Chinese citizens (Denton, 2005; Vickers, 2007). Most significantly, museums in China have now been viewed as a symbol of the nation's cultural strength and, since the mid-1990s, have upheld a specific ideological foundation deeply wedded to a nationalist discourse (Varutti, 2014). Whilst China's push to promote cultural development has often been attributed to the purpose of enhancing soft power (see Albro, 2015), museums in the Post-Mao era have adopted a variety of differing roles; more recently contributing towards the nation's leisure economy (Wang, 2001). Thus, Chinese museums as bastions of nationalist sentiment are now operating within the parameters of the global cultural sphere and, as such, have increasingly adhered to core principles aligned to the ideology of the free market (Shan, 2014).

Utilising empirical data from a research project that sought to examine the production and consumption of an international exhibition hosted by Nanjing Museum (南京博物院:

*nanjing bowuyuan*) PR China, we demonstrate the manner in which the ‘becoming cultural of the economic, and the becoming economic of the cultural’ (Jameson, 1998: 60) has influenced the current practices and administration of China’s public museums. In drawing upon one of China’s largest cultural institutions as a case study<sup>1</sup>, this paper seeks to highlight the tensions between China’s cultural policy preferences allied to a nationalist sentiment, pedagogic values and the encroaching principles of the market economy (Hsu, 2017). In doing so, we reinforce the importance of local state actors as agents operating *through* the market—rather than at the behest of the market—to achieve certain political and economic outcomes attached to China’s cultural policy. Building on an emerging scholarship that examines China’s boom in museum growth (see Bollo and Zhang, 2017; Zhang and Courty, 2020; Varutti, 2014), this article contributes toward a richer insight into the policy and administration of Chinese public museums, exposing the broader challenges that can be reflected across China’s cultural industries. The paper further contributes towards the field by adopting a ‘bottom-up’ and ‘micro-focused’ approach that seeks to expose the particular realities, behaviours and actual structures that shape the context in which China’s cultural sector workers must operate within state-owned institutions. Such an approach provides an important vehicle to explicate how China’s practices within public museums may be enacted at the local level to reflect the wider political and economic relationships that govern China’s cultural management (see Vickers, 2007; Varutti, 2014).

Prior to exploring the empirical findings of the study, we review literature surrounding the historical role of Chinese museums as an extension of patriotic education. This is followed by a discussion on the transformation of China’s museums since the late 1980s. Finally, an understanding of the museum within China’s post-socialist leisure economy is introduced to reflect the dominant ideological alterations that have determined emergent and contested perceptions of cultural identity.

## **Chinese museums as ideological and pedagogical tools**

In 1956, China held *The National Conference on Museum Work*, which outlined the nature of Chinese museums during this period as three-fold: scientific research institutions, cultural-educational organisations, and main agents for collecting and preserving spiritual-cultural relics and natural specimens (Su, 1995). During this era, and under the guidance of Mao Zedong, museums became integral sites for reinforcing state-sanctioned education (Denton, 2005). With the death of Mao, the dissolution of the Cultural Revolution and the instigation of new economic reform under Deng Xiaoping, cultural institutions were re-directed to adopt and extol moral virtues such as collectivism, self-sacrifice and nationalist loyalty through their displays and exhibitions (Su, 1995). Following the Tiananmen protests and military crackdown of June 4<sup>th</sup> 1989, China's Communist government enacted the patriotic education campaign to displace socialism with nationalism for the primary purpose of restoring and securing loyalty among the population and to build support for the government (Zhao, 1998). Under Deng Xiaoping's continued quest for economic liberalism and capitalist growth, the patriotic education campaign was successful in repositioning the CCP's leadership under the guise of state-led nationalism—as opposed to a strict focus on Communist ideology—consolidating power for the central government and fostering patriotic sentiment amongst the general population (Riyun, 2009).

Within the post-Mao era China's museums have embodied four core cultural values: the value of verifying history, through conducting research; the value of knowledge, through displaying and exhibiting objects that represent a special system of knowledge; the value of aestheticism, through delivering aesthetic experiences for visitors of different cultural backgrounds; and the value of morality, through publicising virtues that celebrate national spirit (Vickers, 2007). The four values reflected China's ambition to preserve Chinese civilisation—its long-standing history, its rich culture and achievement—presenting and

communicating this to the public. However, the educational component of museums appeared as most central to their operational ethos. Fundamentally, education has been the primary function of museums for many nations and, as such, are viewed as cultural spaces with which to provide learning opportunities for a diverse array of visitors (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 2007). However, museum visiting is more than a learning experience; it is by its very nature a communicative action and a form of cultural production where political and cultural consequences remain inherently tied to the pedagogic function of the museum itself (Smith, 2015). With the arrival of a new set of ‘Guidelines for Patriotic Education’ introduced at China’s National Conference on Education in June 1994, pragmatic nationalism became the major theme of ideological education in schools, with museums designated as bases for patriotic education (Mitter, 2000; Wang, 2008). In 2004, the state’s decision to make entry to state-run museums free for all schoolchildren encouraged school visits and further strengthened links between museums and their role in delivering the core aims of the patriotic education campaign (Zhao, 1998).

As such, museums within contemporary China are predominantly viewed as an extension of patriotic education, a role synonymous with China’s distinct political identity and the nation’s progressive transition away from state-socialism (Vickers, 2007). This link remains strong as the state continues to pursue a nationalist and ideological role for museums, an aspect of China’s heritage industry that draws upon the power of the spectacle and operates as a ‘technique of enchantment’ to present a state-sanctioned version of national history; exacerbating the pedagogical function of the museum as it continues to develop in accordance with key political directives (Denton, 2014; Wang, 2017). In this instance the development of museums plays a central role in ‘promoting the vision of a modern but uniquely ancient, progressive but essentially changeless China’ (Vickers, 2007: 380).

## **The evolving role of museums in China**

Since the late 1980s, and caught up in the guise of cultural nationalism, China's museums and their cultural and historical richness have become a source of political legitimisation and a new political tool (Varutti, 2008). Following the state's re-evaluation of Chinese history and heritage as a platform for demonstrating national pride and cultural prestige, museums further gained a new directive in relation to presenting China as a member of the global economy. In the late 1990s, the rapid development of Chinese museums became synonymous with the political desires to promote a 'harmonious society', reduce social inequality, improve the cultural experience of China's citizens, and accelerate the international profile of the nation (Laishun, 2015; Zhang and Courty, 2020). Thus, the growth of modern museums in China were established as monuments to civic pride, landmarks of urban (re)development and as gateways to connect to the global museum industry (Yim, 2005; Qin, 2004). China's investment in the creative industries and cultural economy has been perceived as a long-term strategy for economic and national development (Keane, 2004; 2009; Peng and Keane 2019), with the concept of culture appearing as a prominent component of China's rapid process of urbanisation (Kong, 2007).

Following the sixth plenary meeting of the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, **the subject of cultural reform emerged as a dominant issue, and with that an emphasis upon promoting cultural 'soft power' (see Edney, 2012; Shambaugh, 2015; Zhang, 2010).** Investment in image projection through cultural products and a widening of networks through cultural exchanges—for example, visiting art performances and the import and export of films, **the establishment of China's overseas educational Confucius Institutes and the staging of international exhibitions—demonstrated the underlying strategies used to develop culture as a soft power resource (see Ding, 2010; Li and Song, 2015; Peng and Keane, 2019; Su, 2015).**

Operating within this new political landscape, Chinese cities increasingly sought to adopt powerful and innovative design in museum buildings to forge a modern and sophisticated self-image (Yim, 2005). In doing so, these iconic urban infrastructures became entangled in the symbolic representation of a new China, reinforcing a sense of nationalism and cultural pride and promoting ‘spectacular spaces’ of cultural consumption (St John, 2014). While Chinese museums became aware of their role in demonstrating the ‘soft power’ of the nation through employing arresting architectural designs, a rising awareness of visitor needs and expectations emerged in accordance with the international museum community. This instigated a shift towards embracing new forms of display and interpretive strategies, adopting an ‘aesthetic approach’ to exhibition design and architectural styles (Vickers, 2007). Under the influence of the ‘culture craze’ or ‘culture fever’ (文化热 *wenhua re*), this emphasis on innovative display strategies and mode of presentation mirrored the growing importance of visitor satisfaction determined by the quality of presentation that sought to aid learning (Chen and Ryan, 2012). Through revolutionising display strategies that replaced the traditional chronological method, museum visitors were provided with the opportunity to enjoy ‘new pleasurable experiences rather than simply endure an education in ideology’ (Varutti, 2010: 307). This emerging emphasis on aesthetic appreciation and the leisure needs of the visitor encouraged many of China’s museums to introduce foreign national cultures to domestic audiences through the exhibition of overseas artefacts, whilst simultaneously exporting national culture to overseas institutions through increased cultural exchange (Denton, 2014). Museums also functioned as important instruments for the nation’s growth through cultural tourism, projecting a national identity that could aid in constructing a positive self-image and position the country as a key member of the global cultural economy (Keane, 2009).

Museums have undertaken a drastic alteration with the arrival of Deng Xiaoping's reform era. The increase in numbers has featured as an integral part of China's cultural economy, contributing towards the global establishment of the nation's identity, its accelerated process of urban transformation and the leisure and tourism markets. While China's public museums have been expected to deliver a cultural service and pursue scientific research, the underlying pedagogical and propaganda principles have attempted to remain central to their philosophical characteristics through the promotion of patriotic education. However, with China's rapid socio-economic development and their establishment as a dominant political power on the world stage, these values are becoming increasingly contested, and where such cultural spaces were once perceived as validating political authority through patriotic education, we now see the reflection of a contested and somewhat contradictory cultural identity (Kang, 2012).

### **Museums in China's post-socialist leisure economy**

In 1979 The National Conference on the Work of Museums issued *The Working Regulation of Museums at Levels of Province, City and Autonomous Regions*, in which the cultural essence of the museum sector was re-evaluated (Su, 1995). As previously identified, new national museums emerged in the 1980s as the product of a paradigm shift, whereby Maoist aesthetics gave way to 'cultural nationalism' (Varutti, 2010, 2014). This development occurred at a rapid rate, where one museum within mainland China was set up every ten days during the period between 1980 and 1985, and up to the end of 1993 a total of 1,130 museums had been funded by the Chinese government at varying levels of administration (Su, 1995). Moreover, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage officially called for China to have 3,000 museums by 2015, including at least one fully-functional museum for every large or medium-sized city (Vickers, 2007). This rapid growth of museums mirrored

China's new ideological agenda, one that sought to enhance the international reputation of Chinese culture and favour new patterns of leisure activity (Bollo and Zhang, 2017).

With the implementation of the 'double leisure day' (known as the weekend in the west) in 1995, a leisure culture began to infiltrate into the everyday lives of Chinese citizens; particularly among urbanites who were keen to fill the void of 'free time' (Wang, 2001).

During this era, campaign actions were instigated by the Chinese state to actively encourage an engagement with leisure through the promotion of particular activities. For example, in 1996, the Department of Propaganda of Beijing City Commission published the *Civilization Contract with Beijing Residents*, and launched a nine-month campaign of the double leisure day, in which several major leisure activities were promoted including visiting museums (Wang, 2001). This was then followed by an investment of 5 billion RMB in building cultural spaces including museums, bookstores and libraries, an initiative implemented to capitalise on the cultural heritage of Beijing in response to the Municipal Political Consultative Committee's slogan, 'founding the capital through culture' (文化力度 *wenhua lidu*).

This increased investment in the cultural economy gave greater impetus to the development of cultural tourism. The expansion of museums and heritage sites boosted China's tourism industry and the wider economy by 'affording the new middle classes more opportunities to spend their earnings' (Vickers, 2007: 369). At the same time, the construction and renovation of museums and heritage sites were utilised to rebrand China's revolutionary past, with the local and provincial-level government placing an increased interest in acquiring heritage status recognition to capitalise on the lucrative profits generated by the country's renewed drive to promote heritage tourism (Evans and Rowlands, 2014). China's growth in heritage tourism has transformed museums into contested sites, where cultural preservation, political and developmental considerations each vie for a position of prominence. The introduction of market reforms has contributed towards increasingly

complex sites of cultural representation, embodying the dichotomies that exist between China's political ideology and an embrace of free market forces (see Hung, 2018). However, with the power and capacity to organise economic development activities, local state officials now maintain a strong presence in shaping and implementing China's cultural policies, which seek to meet the national interests and state ambitions of place promotion and the recognition of China's cultural influence on a global stage (see Karvelyte, 2020; Zhang, 2003). Therefore, this paper draws upon a case study to examine how broader market imperatives have influenced China's cultural management at the grassroots level, and how this has been negotiated by local state workers as they seek to adhere to central cultural policy preferences.

## **Case Study**

### *Exhibiting Romantic Scotland at Nanjing Museum*

Nanjing Museum is one of the largest national museums in China. Its predecessor was the National Central Museum, established in 1933 by the National Government, in answer to the proposal of Chinese modern democratic educationalist, Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the National Central Museum was renamed as National Nanjing Museum, under the direct supervision of the national heritage authorities in 1950. Since 1954, Nanjing Museum has been affiliated to, and supported by, the Jiangsu Provincial Government. The museum houses over 400,000 artefacts from the Palaeolithic period to the contemporary era, including stoneware, earthenware, jadeware, bronzeware, chinaware, painting and calligraphy, embroidery, bamboo carving, folklore and contemporary art. More than 1,000 cultural relics are deemed the highest national grade. The Museum's primary work involves display and exhibition, academic research, cultural exchange, and public service.

The exhibition entitled '*Romantic Scotland*' was part of a project engineered primarily to introduce and communicate the richness of Scotland's culture through selected depictions of national heritage, facilitating knowledge exchange between academic and cultural institutions in Scotland and China. The exhibition was conceived by Historic Environment Scotland and a Scottish-based exhibition design company and was delivered in partnership with Nanjing Museum. **A working relationship had previously been established between the design company and Nanjing Museum through the completion of earlier projects. This connection was integral to the production of the exhibition and reflected the increasing willingness of China's cultural industries to collaborate with privately-run overseas organisations, all be it under the auspices of state-led support (see Keane, 2004; Zhao, 2022).**

The content and focus of the exhibition itself were primarily driven by a desire to display Scotland's built heritage and cultural landscapes, with artwork and artefacts organised around the themes of 'castle', 'land', and 'sea'. A total of 81 exhibits were displayed, including oil paintings, historic photographs, and cultural relics from the collections of the National Galleries of Scotland and Historic Environment Scotland. A slideshow of present-day aerial photography of Scotland was also included in each theme of the exhibition, as well as one commissioned marketing video. Curatorial decisions were initially proposed by the Scottish stakeholders, with the content finalised through negotiations with Nanjing Museum's management team. The concept of romanticism underpinning the exhibition was conveyed through a view of Scotland that developed from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as seen predominantly through its landscape (see Author, 2020; Bhandari, 2016; Gold and Gold, 1995). **This portrayal of Scotland's cultural heritage was represented with minimal reference to the historical or contemporary tensions that have come to frame the political discourse of Scottish nationalism (see Robertson, 2018).** However, artefacts on display from

Queen Mary's room within Edinburgh Castle (visitor's book, lock and key) did provide a site for Nanjing Museum staff to introduce and discuss historic relations between Scotland and England on small organised group tours.

Through the process of curation, the Scottish stakeholders were responsive to Nanjing Museum's initial request for artwork and artefacts that embodied a vision of Scotland predicated upon the nation's natural landscape, the legacy of its built heritage and iconic tartan imagery. Despite this, a concern for visitor attraction and the desire to deliver an exhibition that reflected positively on the Museum's management team under the eyes of the provincial government was critical. A directive to make the exhibition more masterpiece-based—requesting artwork that had little connection to the overall theme—was presented by the Museum's Director prior to finalising the agreement. After careful negotiation, the Scottish stakeholders were able to secure two additional paintings from the National Galleries of Scotland (Sir Joshua Reynolds's iconic portrait of John Murray, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Dunmore and Joseph Mallord William Turner's Bell Rock Lighthouse) that met the Museum's request and the official agreement was finalised. The exhibition opened at Nanjing Museum in April 2017 and was successful in attracting over 100,000 visitors during its three-month period (28 April-28 July 2017).

### **Method and data analysis**

In this paper we aim to focus on a critical engagement with qualitative interviews conducted with key stakeholders connected to the implementation of the exhibition and the development of the research project. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following Scottish stakeholders: Linda Hamilton and Jill Birch, two members of staff located at Scottish Enterprise—a non-departmental public body of the Scottish government who encourage economic development, enterprise and investment in business; Liz Nicholls, a

curator at the Scottish National Galleries; Jane Beasley a member of staff at VisitScotland—the national tourism organisation for Scotland—Phillip Upton, the CEO of an independent exhibition design company; and Sally Mews a staff member based at Historic Environment Scotland (HES)<sup>ii</sup>. All Scottish stakeholders were involved with either the design and implementation of the *Romantic Scotland* exhibition or the associated research project. In-depth semi-structured interviews with Chinese stakeholders included the following: Zhang San, a staff member of Nanjing Museum's Social Services Department and Li Wu, one of Nanjing Museums curators. Both Zhang San and Li Wu were key partners in the exhibition-making process and the early stages of methodological design concerning the research project.

In an effort to capture individual reflections on the processes of exhibition-making, and to acquire a firmer understanding of the aims and objectives of all stakeholders involved with the exhibition and research project, interview questions were directed towards the role of each individual, key negotiations associated with the production of the exhibition and their reflections on operating in a cross-cultural collaborative context. All interviews in Mandarin Chinese were translated into English and data were sifted, sorted and thematically coded (Bryman and Burgess, 1994). This process of open coding allowed for the data to be closely examined, identifying how different considerations and the intended role of a state-funded museum were at play in the making of the exhibition (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008). A number of complex issues emerged from the data that collectively represent the experiential landscape across which participant views were aired. These issues have been organised in line with the following themes: the process of production and cross-cultural collaboration, the role of market forces and the influence of cultural policy preferences.

## **The co-production of cross-cultural collaboration**

Upon discussing the role of the exhibition in China, Scottish cultural intermediaries immediately identified with the commercial and promotional opportunities that could arise from cross-cultural collaboration, expressing the following:

I think we, at Scottish Enterprise, would be interested in what we could convey to local businesses so that they could change their product and adapt it and talk about what Chinese visitors are looking for and what their expectations are. (Jill Birch, Scottish Enterprise)

It's about learning about the visitor and the target audience, but also about really raising awareness of Scotland in general, but also about how to maybe use that opportunity to link with other press or travel trade, airlines, or other key influencers who are in the Chinese market, who bring people to Scotland already. (Jane Beaul, VisitScotland)

Through the active production and promotion of select portrayals of nationhood—typically manifest in the display of carefully curated iconography, artefacts, rituals or cultural heritage—exhibitions are able to communicate specific cultural values that are commonly aligned with a cohesive and uncontroversial account of a nation's traditions and past (see Anderson, 1983; Barrett, 2011; Bennett, 1995; Bolin, 2011; Paschalidis, 2009). This process of nation branding through exhibitions and within the framework of the museum affords the opportunity to amplify the marketable qualities of a nation, to shape its image, to influence public opinion and attract the attention of international tourists (Bolin and Miazhevich, 2018). Thus, it was perhaps unsurprising that the Scottish stakeholders involved with the

development of the exhibition focused attention on notions of product differentiation, and the capacity to compete for attention and a prominent position within the global tourism market:

From my point of view, I think it's understanding the potential future Chinese visitor, how they react to that Scottish message, that cultural thing that we're putting in front of them, and seeing are there learnings there in terms of how we might shape product for the future that would attract them to visit Scotland, and how much does something like that then make them go, 'Oh, that's now on my wish list; a trip to Scotland' (Linda Hamilton, Scottish Enterprise).

This aspect of production was further reinforced when discussing the original curatorial process of the exhibition with staff at the National Galleries of Scotland, demonstrating the importance of cultural exchange to generate wealth through the creative economy:

It [China] is an important audience for Scottish Government...I think partly because the Galleries hasn't had much to do with China, was quite nervous about China, just doesn't work with them, hasn't done it before, but now just in the last year there has been a lot more interest within the organisation about making the most of this [*Romantic Scotland*] from a commercial point of view. (Liz Nicholls, Scottish National Galleries)

While the internationalisation of exhibitions has enabled public bodies and private enterprise—specifically those aligned with the cultural industries and tourism sector—to capitalise on nation branding exercises (see Roche, 2000; Throsby, 2010; Smits and Jansen, 2012), the production of the *Romantic Scotland* exhibition incorporated Chinese staff and

dignitaries at Nanjing Museum who were guided by their own institutional practices and politics. Upon negotiating the exhibition content, Nanjing Museum's management team were interested in artwork that accentuated the stereotypical signifiers of Scotland's dominant destination image—however mythologised—that is often portrayed to overseas visitors:

If we show them images that we enforce of their stereotypes of Scotland, we were giving them what they wanted. That romantic vision of what Scotland is in China was precisely what we could show them...The wilderness. The tartan. The highlanders. The remote, crabby castles. The paintings that were there would tap perfectly into that (Phillip Upton, CEO Design Company)

In discussing content that was missing, Nanjing Museum's curatorial staff further reinforced the desire for iconic markers of Scottish national identity (see Gold and Gold, 1995; McCrone, 2001), primarily focusing upon the clothing:

If we had more exhibits, we could have added some more elements to the exhibition, and made Scottish clothing a highlight feature. This would provide a more exciting look at the customs, and what Scotland is like. (Li Wu, Chinese curator)

Additionally, the positioning and translation of the exhibition within a distinct local context was of key concern for Nanjing Museum's curatorial staff, placing significant emphasis on appealing towards the interests and expectations of the intended audience. Based upon preliminary audience research captured online, Li Wu—Nanjing Museum's curator—highlighted the importance of positioning exhibits to optimise the visitor experience:

We want to match our production of the exhibition with their [visitors] expectations. And before we start planning a new exhibition, we carry out preliminary assessments of the expected audience, on the internet...For example, before the Scotland exhibition, we carried out a public exhibition review using our public account on WeChat. We had prospective audience members vote on their favourite exhibits, so that we could identify them and make them centre-pieces in the exhibition. (Li Wu, Chinese curator)

The success of the exhibition was dependent upon understanding the interests of the dominant market constituency, acquiring potential visitor perceptions and closing the gap between the production-delivery process (see McLean, 1997), an aspect that was further highlighted by Nanjing Museum's Social Services staff:

Everyone knows that if you want an exhibition to succeed, it would be wrong not to take into account the audience's opinions, especially now that Chinese museums are undergoing a transition, if we want to evaluate the quality of an exhibition, two very important factors to consider are audience opinion, and market feedback, especially market feedback. (Zhang San, Nanjing Museum Social Services)

Although the pedagogical experience of the exhibition was portrayed as an important concern throughout the production process, meeting the demands of the domestic audience and competing amongst other cities and provinces to attract visitors was considered Nanjing Museum's primary priority:

Nanjing museum's position is that the local audience is our primary concern, and 'local' includes not just Nanjing city centre, but also neighbouring provinces and cities, like Zhejiang province, Anhui province, Shanghai, and other neighbouring areas in the greater East China region. (Li Wu, Chinese curator)

The Museum's focus upon visitor numbers and the desire to create a product that would appeal to a broad domestic audience was further reinforced by the CEO of the Scottish-based design company responsible for the initial conception of the exhibition:

I think it's, firstly, an issue that they say [Nanjing Museum] that they're interested in their audience...and that everything is delivered for the benefit of their visitor, but I suspect that's not altogether true. Ultimately, it's all about numbers, and it doesn't really matter what the experience is for the visitor as long as they deliver the numbers. (Phillip Upton, CEO design company)

In recent years, museums in China have experienced a reconfiguration of policies in a bid to adapt to the dictates of the market economy (Bollo and Zhang, 2017). **As part of this transformation, China's public museums are adopting a more prominent role in serving local economic development and tourism to support the cultural industries (Graburn and Jin, 2017; Shan, 2014; Zhang and Courty, 2020).** Additionally, those with vested interests in the promotion and development of museums are guided by multiple and contending parties that are subjected to ambitious targets aligned with China's socialist central planning policy (see Hung, 2018; Keane, 2011; Keane and Zhao, 2014; Shan, 2014). As a product of cross-cultural collaboration involving a diverse array of stakeholders—each incorporating a multiplicity of practices, ideologies and values—the *Romantic Scotland* exhibition served as

a space through which to (re)present and reinforce a national culture predicated on a clearly defined ideological framework. This was, in part, guided by a desire to generate potential economic growth through overseas tourism promotion, and local institutional requirements that reinforced the importance of placed-based competition for increasing Nanjing Museum's domestic visitors, providing a cultural product that would fulfil market demand and support the museum and city's wider tourism economy. As such, insight into the production process of the exhibition revealed the key priorities associated with international cultural exchange, and demonstrated the importance of China's public museums in serving the nation's broader cultural policy agenda; an aspect that was further reinforced through the need to create pedagogic value versus adherence to market demand and metrics closely aligned with central policy directives.

### **Public service and market imperatives**

The *Romantic Scotland* exhibition was established on a non-commercial basis and free to enter like many of the permanent exhibitions held at Nanjing Museum. Free entry is a result of the Chinese state's policy to promote the use of museums and heritage sites as part of the cultural education of China's citizens (Denton, 2005; Vickers, 2007). This policy emphasises the public orientation of China's large state-funded museums, setting aside the importance of a profit-driven operational approach to concentrate on the educational value of such cultural institutions; an aspect of China's cultural policy that was reiterated by Nanjing Museum's Social Services staff:

Exhibitions in China are fully funded by the government, so often it's the overall benefit to the public that receives the most attention, and much less attention is paid to

the running costs. They care more about the educational value to the public and spreading this educational value as widely as possible.

Education is perceived as an integral function of China's museums, encouraging learning through various outreach activities targeted towards diverse populations and promoting inclusivity through the free-admissions policy (Laishun, 2020; Varutti, 2014). The *Romantic Scotland* exhibition sought to incorporate relevant educational initiatives (e.g. curator-led talks, creative workshops) and develop interpretive material (e.g. explanatory texts, images) that could familiarise visitors with Scottish cultural heritage, form a deeper connection between audience members and the museum, and fulfil the educational requirements prioritised by China's public museums. The importance of educational activities for a diverse audience was further emphasised by Li Wu, the Chinese curator, highlighting the need to encourage understanding, inclusivity, and cooperation:

Part of our work was also designing targeted educational activities for different population groups, like adult audiences, young people, and also young children, split into different groups, like nuclear families, schools, neighbourhoods. The main thing was establishing connections between the audience and the people from the museum involved in the exhibition.

While the exhibition provided a platform to facilitate learning and adhere to key public service requirements, Nanjing Museum faces constant scrutiny from the state to demonstrate impact. As one of the eleven nationwide state museums to receive funding from both the provincial and central government, emphasis is placed upon achieving targets aligned with a

strict evaluation system. Visitor footfall is considered one of the key performance indicators and an important metric to focus on for continued financial investment:

If one of these 11 museums doesn't reach their targets, or their numbers go down, there's a whole evaluation system in place for museums in China, which gives each museum a score. If a museum's numbers are the worst, or second worst in the group of 11, then that museum will be removed from the group of 11, as will the investment. (Zhang San, Nanjing Museum Social Services)

To attract a wider audience, Nanjing Museum paired the *Romantic Scotland* exhibition with *Poetic Jiangnan* (诗意江南), an exhibition featuring the museum's own collection of Chinese landscape paintings. This curatorial decision arose through negotiation between HES and Nanjing Museum, revealing continued concerns surrounding the attractiveness of the Scottish exhibition, importance of audience metrics and the desire to appease senior delegates:

They [Nanjing Museum] also felt that if they paired the exhibition with their own content then that would also be a better fit for visitors, a better attraction for visitors.

It gave the senior management...I don't know, more reassurance. (Sally Mews, HES)

Although major cultural institutions within China receive national subsidies, this level of financial remuneration is inherently tied to target-driven policies that accentuate the economic value of cultural heritage as it pertains to notions of sustainability (Evans and Rowlands, 2014; Shan, 2014; White and Xu, 2012). The focus on economic value—and concern surrounding market demand and organisational reputation—was further reinforced

when discussing the potential cancellation of the exhibition within the final stages of negotiation:

**Interviewer:** Why was the exhibition almost abandoned?

**Zhang San:** Because it was too expensive. And the cost performance, or the value for money, wasn't high enough...In the modern Chinese museum market, for the price that it costs to get exhibitions in from Europe or North America, we could create a better exhibition if we did it ourselves.

They [Nanjing Museum] are a product, a victim of their success probably. That certainly affected their view of this exhibition, which they are probably delivering under some duress. I think if it hadn't been for the research project, we would have found it much more difficult to get the exhibition through. (Phillip Upton, CEO design company)

The importance of evaluating the exhibition in economic terms, and the desire to sustain a strong institutional status, speak to the evolving trends currently guiding China's cultural market management (see Shan, 2014; Yi, Throsby and Gao, 2020). **An emphasis on the economic feature of cultural policy has accentuated an approach to management that places increased strategic importance on the cost-benefit analysis of heritage, notions of accountability, and an encroaching demand from central government to demonstrate 'value for money' (McLean, 1997; Throsby, 2010).** Although China's public museums work to uphold the values of a collective interest—serving the people through their educational agenda—the progression of a socialist market economy has placed added emphasis upon monetary rewards for work (Su, 1995). **As such, the educational narrative that runs**

throughout state-funded museums in China has become somewhat diluted by additional priorities allied to the leisure needs and expectations of the visitor (Denton, 2014; Varutti, 2014). The change of ethos within China's museum community—placing added attention towards visitor experiences, footfall and, in some instances, the desire to generate revenue—further highlights the influence of market principles when evaluating the performance of exhibitions, as reiterated by Nanjing Museum's Social Services staff: '(...) we've seen more and more exchange and cooperation between Chinese and foreign museums, and this is slowly leading to some convergences of norms and criteria for evaluating an exhibition's success or lack thereof'. A keener concentration on tourism has stimulated China's museums to open up to world cultures and histories. However, in doing so, it has been argued that this approach has impacted upon the perceptions and conceptualisation of the social role of the museum (Varutti, 2014); placing added emphasis on the creation of a spectacle in an attempt to attract audiences and compete for recognition in the midst of inter-city rivalry.

### **Cross-cultural collaboration, place-making and political prestige**

State-owned provincial museums in China are, for the large majority, managed at the local or regional level, whereby Chinese provinces compete among one another to acquire support and legitimacy from the central government (Bollo and Zhang, 2017). In doing so, successful provincial cultural institutes can capitalise on increased financial resources and an enhanced cultural pride (Bollo and Zhang, 2017). Thus, state authorities—specifically at the provincial and district level—have an established interest in strengthening the cultural attractiveness of their localities, a strategic consideration towards place promotion that can often be achieved through hosting high-profile touring international exhibitions (see Amsellem, 2013). Concern surrounding the inability of the *Romantic Scotland* exhibition to facilitate Nanjing Museum's cultural reputation—attracting visitors to the city and appeasing wider provincial policy

objectives—was highlighted upon discussing the curatorial process and increased pressure to incorporate high-profile artwork:

It was evident, in 2015, that with the changing of the senior management personnel in Nanjing Museum that we were being pressed to change the collection to make it more masterpiece-based. We kept getting increasing requests to include impressionist masters and other things that weren't relevant to the exhibition theme but were just big-ticket paintings. Specifically, that the director felt their audience was going to come and see. (Phillip Upton, CEO design company)

They were very worried about people not having heard of the artists, and all our work with China reinforces that all the time. They say, 'You have to have a masterpiece; you have to have the biggest name'. (Sally Mews, HES)

Museums have become an integral part of China's leisure culture (Vickers, 2007; Wang, 2001), and with the encroachment of market principles into the nation's wider political economy, they have faced fierce competition with other leisure providers. Hosting a 'big name' exhibition—in particular a foreign themed one—has become increasingly prevalent across Chinese museums (Varutti, 2014), perceived as a necessary strategy for attracting audience members and establishing a strong reputation in competition with cultural institutions located throughout China's cities:

We have a Russian exhibition here in Nanjing Museum, but at the same time, there's a Russian themed exhibition being held in Sichuan, and no one had communicated about this beforehand. And it was the same with the Egypt exhibition which we had here in

Nanjing last year – at the same time, there was an Egypt exhibition in Shanghai. So there's definitely a big box office out there for exhibitions with these kind of themes. (Zhang San, Nanjing Museum Social Services)

**Interviewer:** If you were to do another international exhibition, would Nanjing Museum automatically look for an artist who has a big name, or would you do like what you did with Romantic Scotland, and just have one piece?

**Li Wu:** We would definitely consider doing that, because it has a direct effect on our audience numbers. Even if it was a piece by a great artist that didn't have a strong, clear connection with the overall theme of a future exhibition, we could still use that piece as a selling point or a factor that can help us entice audiences.

Acquiring high-profile touring exhibitions was perceived as an important strategy for the Museum to increase audience figures and acquire recognition, yet also functioned to serve Nanjing's wider visitor economy:

Our audience is becoming more diverse, to the point that Nanjing Museum has become an important destination for tourists from all over China visiting Nanjing. So, these numbers are increasing (Zhang San, Nanjing Museum Social Services)

The emerging demand for foreign themed 'big box office' exhibitions in Chinese museums signifies the progression of a customer-oriented approach to the production process of exhibition-making (Varutti, 2010). However, cross-cultural collaboration is also seen as a political gateway to achieving institutional objectives and securing favour with provincial state authorities. The need to create a prominent visitor attraction was referenced in relation

to the political prestige desired by Nanjing Museum's senior management team, and highlighted the dominant role of local state actors in the production of exhibitions:

An exhibition with a couple of masterpieces gets the kudos because people view the masterpieces...They [Nanjing Museum] are wanting to book exhibitions that have such appeal, kudos, that's reflected upon them for obtaining them. I think booking an exhibition from Scotland was not going to give them any reflective glory, and of course leaders need that all the time. (Phillip Upton, CEO design company)

The view of the Chinese museum industry is focused on market benefits, so it's not like in the past when many foreign exhibitions could easily come to China. Now, the tastes of Chinese audiences, and also of the decision-makers in the museums, and their sense of aesthetics, means that more niche exhibitions might not be accepted by the Chinese museum market. (Zhang San, Nanjing Museum Social Services)

As many of China's public cultural institutions receive financial investment from central state authorities, decisions made by senior officials within such organisations are often motivated by the pursuit of government achievements (Shan, 2014). Whilst some autonomy does exist, state authorities—at the provincial and district level—will have a vested interest in capitalising upon the political legitimation and wider economic contribution that specific cultural projects may generate (Shelach-Levi, 2019). With strong ties to the Jiangsu Provincial government and local state authorities, it was imperative that Nanjing's senior management team were convinced of the benefits of the exhibition, namely its capacity to attract a broad audience. Thus, the exhibition could only be agreed once the management team could be assured that local state authorities in the required department would approve:

At some point in the negotiations an awful lot of it was about satisfying the senior management team at Nanjing. So, the team we worked with were pretty enthusiastic all the way through, and the vice director we worked with was pretty enthusiastic, but he was having difficulty convincing the senior management team that this would attract visitors (Sally Mews, HES)

A consideration of China's underlying economic development, growing trends in cultural tourism, and the process of negotiation that must occur between curators and Party officials have contributed towards the framework within which Chinese museums and cultural heritage sites operate (Denton, 2005; Zan, 2007; Zan and Baraldi, 2013). At the local level, the consolidation of identity and pride plays an important role in the management and administration of China's museums, specifically in relation to establishing a sense of political prestige and as an important component of the cultural infrastructure required to serve the wider tourism economy (Shelach-Lavi, 2019). As identified through the data, the perceived decline in demand for niche or specialist exhibitions can be viewed as a reflection of the common principles guiding China's contemporary approach towards cultural exchange among public museums, favouring visitor-oriented attractions that may enable the achievement of key economic and policy directives. Thus, the objectives attached to cross-cultural collaboration and the staging of overseas exhibitions—typically those associated with political legitimation and local economic development—highlight the tensions and challenges that exist between China's differing cultural policy preferences (Zan, 2014). As with Varutti (2014: 41), the Chinese museum industry is in a state of transition 'loaded with inconsistencies and contradictions', seeking on the one hand to push a policy of national identity building and inclusivity, and on the other, seduced by high-profile or profit-

maximising projects that seek to establish a strong institutional presence to empower the development of local economic growth (Shan, 2014; Zan, 2014). However, the development of China's cultural projects still requires heavy intervention from provincial and municipal governments (Keane and Chen, 2019). Whilst revenue and market imperatives may be considered important factors moving forward within the Chinese museum sector, institutional practices are still instigated in response to the central government's desires—rather than being submissive to the market—and administered by local officials seeking to capitalise on the political currency attached to the potential success of creative projects.

## **Conclusion**

While Chinese public museums must continue to demonstrate their pedagogic value through the delivery of public services, there appears to be a gradual turn towards a new museum ethos (Kotler and Kotler, 2000), where market principles have become increasingly prevalent throughout their practice. **This has, in turn, partially re-centred the role of China's museums to serve as institutions for obtaining knowledge, aesthetic enjoyment and as attractions for both domestic and international tourists (Denton, 2014; Varutti, 2014).**

In drawing on the case of Nanjing Museum and this example of cross-cultural collaboration, the influence of neoliberal tendencies manifested in the form of clear market-oriented concerns and a growing emphasis on the investment gains—both political and economic—of hosting international exhibitions. However, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that such principles have become a dominant force in guiding China's museum practice or wider approach to international exchange within the cultural industries. **The complex relationship between China's policy networks and the market have created a party-controlled framework that maintains a tight grip on the production of cultural products (see Chang, 2009; Keane and Chen, 2019; Keane and Zhao, 2014; Keane, 2013).** Conversely,

within this framework there exists a local narrative that allows for state authorities at the provincial or district level to cultivate entrepreneurial activities, implementing centrally driven agendas based upon their own loose interpretation of government policies (Keane, 2001; Shelach-Lavi, 2019; White and Xu, 2012). As evidenced within this paper, the management and administration of China's public museums are seeking to engage with market imperatives and experiment with entrepreneurial activities that speak to local issues of institutional pride, place-making, and support for the wider cultural economy. **Yet despite this, the interventionist role of the Chinese state—at both the central and local level—in planning, implementing, and controlling such activities presents a narrative that differs from the neoliberal sensibilities often associated with overseas cultural administration (Keane and Chen, 2019).**

The transformation of China's museums since the late 1980s has followed a route entrenched in a complex network of interactions between central government, the market, and differing determinations of state actors and institutions at the local level. While political entrepreneurs and their material interests have provided a key role in China's transition towards a socialist-market economy, the role of market entrepreneurship in (re)orienting China's cultural industries and practices is said to operate, 'on the basic assumption of dependency from the state' (Herman-Pillath, 2005: 21). Thus, of key importance is the central government's role in shaping this dynamic, overseeing a premature market system that is unable to overshadow or control the state. As a result, China's cultural industries operate in rather a unique framework that requires political and market entrepreneurs to, 'jointly negotiate the role of the 'state' as a reservoir of resources, both material and immaterial' (Herman-Pillath, 2005: 21). Here the development of China's cultural projects and associated entrepreneurial activities are not devised in response to an overwhelming market logic, but reliant on the state to operate as an agent acting *through* the market and under the

guise of principles commonly aligned with ‘state entrepreneurialism’ (see Duckett, 1996).

The hosting of the *Romantic Scotland* exhibition at Nanjing Museum provides a reflection of this framework in action. This example of cross-cultural collaboration involved a network of actors—both public and private—who were primarily driven by a dependence on the influence of provincial and local government intermediaries and their concerns for how this exchange could contribute towards sustaining institutional reputation. While market concerns were readily expressed, the exhibition was not instigated on economic terms, but always perceived as a tool that could operate through the market to facilitate wider economic ambitions.

To conclude, our study has sought to provide insight into the current tensions between policy preferences that exist within China’s cultural industry, and how they are shaping practices and management at the grass-roots level. In doing so, this micro-focused approach speaks to wider issues of governance and the way in which public museums are operating amidst China’s thriving mass culture and competing forms of entertainment (Denton, 2014). As with Zan and Baraldi (2013), we recommend that future research continues to examine China’s cultural and heritage sectors at the local level, placing added attention on individual cases and practices as they alter at the ‘shop floor’. By acquiring this insight further inferences can be made regarding the actual structure, current behaviours and present performances guiding China’s cultural organisations. Such exposure may enable us to address whether China’s current politico-economic system has led to a standardisation of practice within the culture sector and, if so, the extent to which this may guide China’s future collaboration and exchange within the wider global cultural economy.

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<sup>i</sup> Nanjing Museum (南京博物院) is located in the city of Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu Province in East China, and contains over 400,000 items in its permanent collection, making it one of the largest in China and widely recognised as one of the top three museums in the country.

<sup>ii</sup> All interviewees have been provided with pseudonyms to protect their identity.