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Navigating creative partnerships and cross-cultural collaboration: a case study between China and the UK

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ABSTRACT

Within recent years, China has experienced growth in the construction and development of museums. Encouraged by financial and cultural policy measures, China's public museums have opened to the world with the aim of introducing Chinese culture to a broad audience and connecting with the global cultural marketplace. Cross-cultural collaboration has formed a prominent part of this strategy, functioning as a diplomatic tool to nurture mutual understanding between nations. Using empirical data from a research project that examined the production and consumption of an overseas exhibition hosted by Nanjing Museum (南京博物院: *nanjing bowuyuan*), this paper explores the processes of negotiation and avenues of innovation that emerged from the production of the exhibition and collaborative research project. By reflecting on the lessons learned from this partnership, practical solutions are offered to help inform future strategies and ways of working that may promote sustainable engagement and collaboration between UK and Chinese cultural institutions.

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years, China has witnessed an exponential growth in the number of museums opening across the nation (see Bollo & Zhang, 2017; Courty & Zhang, 2022; Laishun, 2020; Silverman & Blumenfield, 2013; Zhang & Courty, 2021). Since 2004, this rapid expansion has occurred alongside an accelerated transformation in public cultural services, where state policies have been introduced to subsidise cultural investment and stimulate the museum sector (Zhang & Courty, 2021). As such, Chinese visitors have experienced greater access to a wider range of cultural experiences, wherein admission

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fees to a vast majority of museums have been free or offered at a reduced rate, and many of China's cities have witnessed an increase in the opening of smaller, locally managed museums (Huang, 2018; Zhang & Courty, 2021).

To a large extent, this implementation of policy and investment in the cultural sector has been motivated by two primary objectives. The first relates to the role of culture and its importance in forging a distinctive national identity within the post-Mao era, one that closely adheres to China's ideological infrastructure and the central tenets of the "Chinese model" or what is often referred to as "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Keane, 2000; Keane & Zhao, 2014). The second objective reflects the increasing economic importance of the cultural industries – a legacy emerging from Deng Xiaoping's market reforms and Open Door Policy introduced in 1979 – and the strategic emphasis upon the export of cultural goods and services (e.g. visual art, music, and film) that has contributed towards the development of China's GDP (Yi et al., 2020). As a consequence, there has been a need for Chinese museums and heritage organisations to respond to the shifting dictates of wider socio-economic policies, adapting to the requirements of a market-orientated economy and aligning with central government policies that seek to establish a coherent national identity, thriving cultural economy, and soft power agenda (see Denton, 2014; Ho & Li, 2016; Laishun, 2015; Varutti, 2014; Wang, 2017). With an emphasis upon developing China's cultural industries and enterprises, both central and local governments have encouraged the establishment of joint projects between overseas partners in the museum sector, culminating in the staging of international exhibitions and the promotion of cultural exchanges (Bollo & Zhang, 2017; Varutti, 2014). Conversely, the "opening up" and internationalisation of China's museums has afforded overseas organisations the opportunity to draw upon cultural diplomacy initiatives to enhance their own organisational development, economic growth, and, in some instances, national identity (Amsellem, 2013; Cai, 2013; Nisbett, 2013).

Set within the broader context of China's rapidly developing museum sector, this paper draws upon an example of cross-cultural collaboration between one of China's largest public museums – Nanjing Museum (南京博物院) – and UK stakeholders in the museum, culture and heritage sectors to critically explore the challenges that emerged through the process of hosting an international exhibition and the completion of a joint research project. Building upon research that has examined the growing evolution of Chinese museums (see Bollo & Zhang, 2017; Denton, 2014; Lu, 2014; Varutti, 2014; Zhang & Courty, 2021), this paper seeks to provide a grass-roots account of cross-cultural collaboration, focusing upon the shared practices and lessons acquired from this experience. Using interview data from UK and Chinese personnel, this paper further contributes towards the field by revealing insight into the motivations attached to this process of cultural diplomacy and the core values and practices that are currently shaping the administration of China's public museums. In doing so, our reflections seek to inform future approaches to collaborating with cultural institutions throughout China.

Prior to introducing the case study, we provide a broad overview of public museums in China and the wider context shaping their role within contemporary society. This is then followed by a brief review of the literature examining cultural diplomacy and the role of museums within this process, placing particular emphasis upon the Chinese context. In drawing upon this contextual background, we move on to introduce the main findings and discussion of the study.

Public museums in contemporary China

Much has been documented concerning the rise and development of both public and private museums throughout China (see Bollo & Zhang, 2017; Denton, 2005, 2014; Lu, 2014; Varutti, 2014; Yim, 2005; Zan, 2007). Whilst we acknowledge the importance of this work, it is not the intention of this paper to provide a further in-depth overview of such considerations. Rather, we seek to focus on a broad explication of the institutional arrangements that currently govern the practices and administration of public museums in contemporary China. By contemporary, we are referring to the wider contextual issues that have come to shape these cultural institutions shortly after the introduction of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the late 1970s.

Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese government implemented an open-door policy in late 1978 that sought to pursue economic growth through the active introduction of foreign capital, influencing cultural policy and China's museums to adopt an ideological agenda of state-led nationalism (see e.g. Denton, 2005; Riyun, 2009; Varutti, 2014). The prioritisation of cultural production as a national strategy and investment in the cultural industries was perceived by central state authorities as a long-term policy for economic development, political legitimisation and a desire to assert China's international status and cultural influence on a global stage (Keane, 2004, 2009; Peng & Keane, 2019). Following the sixth plenary meeting of the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, the subject of cultural reform emerged as a leading issue, emphasising the importance of cultural "soft power" and investment in image projection through the promotion and exchange of cultural products (Edney, 2012; Shambaugh, 2015; Zhang, 2010). The arrival of policy preferences seeking to stimulate China's cultural creativity and soft power agenda further positioned museums as political tools, institutions that could adapt to the growing market economy and assist in the endorsement of legislation that paved the way for export growth and increased international cultural exchange (Varutti, 2010).

Located within an increasingly commercialised and globalised society, China's public museums and heritage sector have looked to develop private interests in the form of profit-maximising projects – for example, paid entry to high-profile international exhibitions – that serve the wider agenda of local economic development through tourism promotion (Zan, 2007; Zhang & Courty, 2021). The increasing encroachment of private enterprise within China's cultural sector has also reframed the relationship of state to consumer-subject (Keane, 2004). Chinese public museums have increasingly sought to engage with models of entrepreneurship that appeal to the consumer values of a wider general public, guiding managerial and administrative decisions surrounding the curation of historical displays, the hosting of specific exhibitions, and the introduction of commercial enterprise (e.g. cafes, bookstores, shops) (Denton, 2014; Zan, 2007). Furthermore, some of China's museums have become assimilated into larger commercial development plans of urban renewal and regeneration that embody local state officials' aspirations for accelerated economic growth (Lee, 2020). Despite this, the Chinese state continues to maintain a prevalent and important role in guiding the management and administration of public museums (Bollo & Zhang, 2017).

Under the current leadership of Xi Jinping since 2013, the endorsement of traditional Chinese culture and the promotion of socialist ideals have come to the fore, promoting a

nationalistic programme that is increasingly authoritarian in nature (Pozzi, 2021). However, localism has become a fundamental characteristic of China's economic transition, expressed through localised institutional diversity and a varied belief systems that has come to frame social organisations (see Herrmann-Pillath, 2005). China's public and private actors now intersect to pursue entrepreneurial endeavours and co-evolve through networked partnerships in the interest of developing local political and economic conditions (Herrmann-Pillath, 2005). Thus, autonomy from the centre exists at the local level, wherein provincial, municipal and district state authorities work with cultural organisations and private enterprise to implement commercial initiatives or activities under the influence of their own interpretation of central state policy directives (see Keane, 2001; Keane & Chen, 2019; White & Xu, 2012). As such, China's contemporary public museums are said to be living spaces of contested identities that have come to embody the dichotomies stemming from the nation's post-socialist era of transformation (Denton, 2005, 2014; Varutti, 2014). Whilst these cultural institutions are still firmly anchored by principles aligned to the pedagogic merits of patriotic nationalism, they are equally a crucial component for the development of China's cultural economy and soft power agenda (Ho & Li, 2016).

Cultural diplomacy, cross-cultural collaboration and the role of the museum

The concept of cultural diplomacy in its traditional sense has been defined as "a tool and a way of interacting with the outside world" (Gienow-Hecht, 2010, p. 11). Such interactions are facilitated through the use of cultural activities between countries to promote a positive self-image, enable the exchange of ideas, or to foster mutual understanding among nations and their people (Cummins, 2003). Organisations, such as museums, have traditionally played an important role for facilitating cultural policy ambitions tied to national directives, either by enabling diplomatic dialogue between countries, developing bridges across borders through the promotion of cultural tourism and exchange, or shaping collective values and a national consciousness in accordance with educational programmes (Grincheva, 2013; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; McLean, 2005). Within this context, public museums are particularly effective in appropriating soft power as a political means to meet economic and social objectives. As mediums for the promotion of particular "selected" versions of nation, exhibitions can prove to be beneficial tools for the exchange of new ideas and values between stakeholders, to enhance the cultural attractiveness of the locality concerned, generate private interests and re-allocate profit into select activities, and to nurture the positive appreciation of a national identity overseas (Amsellem, 2013; Cai, 2013). Often museums operate in a hybrid form of cultural diplomacy to achieve these objectives, which may require strategic partnerships with foreign government, state actors, private patrons, and overseas stakeholders (Grincheva, 2015, 2020; Walden, 2019).

Much like cultural organisations in the West, the importance of intangible resources for establishing a more accurate assessment of national power have always been prominent in the minds of China's political elite (Edney, 2012; Wang & Lu, 2008; Zhang, 2010). Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, there has been an emphasis upon promoting cultural "soft power" to enhance the spirit of China's socialist civilisation, demonstrating a distinct

and deeper emphasis on the strategic importance of culture within China (Galikowski et al., 2019; Keane & Chen, 2019; Keane & Zhao, 2014; Shambaugh, 2015). Investment in image projection through cultural products and a widening of networks through cultural exchanges in the arts, film industry and education sector (e.g. Confucius Institutes) has increased the government's confidence in raising its international influence and pursuing overseas political advantages (Ding, 2010; Peng & Keane, 2019; Su, 2015; Zhu, 2022). As part of China's museum boom, new practices such as cross-cultural collaboration with international academic institutions, overseas museums, government agencies, and private organisations has also become increasingly commonplace (Rodewald, 2018). The arrival of temporary international exhibitions to China's museums has helped to facilitate these collaborations and knowledge exchange between institutional partners (Denton, 2014). However, the presence of high-profile overseas exhibitions has, in some cases, required China's public museums to engage with new and emerging practices – such as charging for entry and engaging with entrepreneurial activities – and readjust their outlook towards a more visitor-oriented focus (Denton, 2014; Varutti, 2014; Wang & Chen, 2018). It is within this context that we seek to reflect upon the challenges, practices and innovation that emerged from a process of cross-cultural collaboration between UK and Chinese cultural institutions.

Case study: cross-cultural collaboration at Nanjing Museum

This paper utilises an exhibition entitled *"Romantic Scotland"* hosted by Nanjing Museum in 2017 as its case study. First established in 1933, and covering an area of 70,000 square metres (17.3 Acres), Nanjing Museum is one of the largest public museums in China with over 400,000 items in its permanent collection and two main exhibition halls dedicated to Chinese history and art. The *"Romantic Scotland"* exhibition was conceived by Historic Environment Scotland and a Scottish-based exhibition design company, both of which had established a working relationship with the Museum through the completion of previous projects.

The exhibition featured a wealth of Scotland's built heritage and cultural landscapes through selected depictions of the nation, organising artwork and artefacts around the themes of "castle", "land", and "sea" (Bailey et al., 2018; Manley, Silk, Chung, Wang, & Bailey, 2023). 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 (HES). In addition, a slideshow of present-day aerial photography of Scotland was presented in each thematic section and one commissioned marketing video near the exit of the exhibition. Curatorial decisions were initially proposed by the Scottish stakeholders, with the content finalised through negotiations with Nanjing Museum's management team.

To highlight the challenges, processes of negotiation and avenues for innovation associated with its collaboration, this paper draws upon interview data with key stakeholders connected to the implementation of the exhibition and the development of a two-year research project examining cultural production and representation. As part of this 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). All Scottish stakeholders were involved with either the design and implementation of the 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 wider research project.¹ All interviews with Chinese participants were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and, where needed, a translator was present. Prior to analysis, all data were translated to English with the benefit of a bilingual research team that could ensure key subtleties in the data were not overlooked. The research team was led by personnel working for an executive non-departmental public body, and consisted of academics with extensive experience of undertaking research in China. Prior to any data collection, consent to conduct the research project was given by the Director and Curator of Nanjing Museum. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of both the Chinese and UK universities involved with the research project. Access to UK participants was granted through the project lead as gatekeeper.

Cross-cultural collaboration in context

The *Romantic Scotland* exhibition and research project incorporated a varied range of stakeholders, each with differing vested interests in facilitating this connection.

Organisations associated with Scotland's tourism sector and business enterprise placed importance upon outcomes related to nation branding and the acquisition of information to better understand the Chinese market:

For me, the other angle is around potentially trade and investment, so are there opportunities for Scottish product that can be sold through the exhibition? Is there an opportunity to showcase Scotland and Scottish food and drinks, Scottish textiles etc.? I liked the exhibition and is there an opportunity to network with potential investors in Scotland whilst in China. (Jill Birch, Scottish Enterprise)

I think having the insights and the research in terms of overall worldwide opportunity but then drilling it down to actually having consumers that you can go to and talk to and say "what do you think of this" ... and then tailoring that into our marketing that we are getting so our campaign can be pretty targeted. (Jane Beasley, VisitScotland)

Stakeholders viewed the exhibition and research outcomes as potential tools to enhance "select" portrayals of nationhood and acquire information to influence long-term plans in support of the visitor economy. They were reflective of the strategic motives associated with public diplomacy, conveying key messages of national identity and the outward projection of core cultural values through a unilateral approach (Goff, 2013). The exhibition presented an opportunity to facilitate cultural and political connections between Scotland and China as discussed by the National Galleries curator:

My organisation is very interested. In the beginning I had to fight quite hard to be allowed to be involved in this project because normally if we send a large number of works abroad there might be financial incentives for doing it and this is not an exhibition which brings financial incentives. It's one that has perhaps more political credibility. (Liz Nicholls, National Galleries)

Cross-cultural collaboration often presents the possibility for cultural organisations to raise their profile and accelerate the populist expansion of their role as they engage with cultural diplomacy initiatives (Wallis, 1994). The “political credibility” sought by the National Galleries through this project was inherently tied to reaffirming institutional relations with Nanjing Museum and promoting their reputation as a significant centre for cultural consumption. Operating within this global network of material collaboration further reinforces the political role of such cultural institutions, functioning as instruments to facilitate connections between nations and as vehicles to cultivate national character through culture (Grincheva, 2013; Luke, 2002; Rectanus, 2011). For staff at Nanjing Museum, the exhibition and research project presented an opportunity to collaborate with familiar partners and meet key objectives deemed pertinent to the museum itself. Notably these objectives were associated with replicating the similar success and notoriety that had been afforded to previous cultural exchanges:

A few years ago, we held the “Tale of Two Cities” exhibition in the same exhibition hall that Romantic Scotland is in now, and the theme of that was a side-by-side comparison and contrast of Edinburgh and Nanjing. Nanjing was our first stop, and we also went to Edinburgh to hold the second stage of the exhibition, where the exhibition got an extremely good reception. So, on the basis of this good precedent of collaboration, when they proposed this Romantic Scotland exhibition to us several years later, we gladly accepted. We hoped that this exhibition would resonate well with the local audience. (Li Wu, Chinese curator)

The exhibition and research project presented the opportunity to achieve multiple outcomes for Nanjing Museum. The collaboration was perceived as a valuable enterprise for enhancing the capacity to conduct research and engage in knowledge transfer and exchange:

I thought it was a great thing. I thought everyone involved, including Nanjing Museum, and all the people working on the project, would be able to attain the various information they need, or perhaps the experiences they were looking for. So I think this was the most important factor when everyone was initially weighing up this project, because China's current museum system really lacks this kind of thing, so there's a huge amount of room for more research. (Zhang San, Social Services)

Thus, motivations to participate in the exhibition and research were diverse and shaped by the convergence of interests located among government, cultural institutions, and private organisations. An appeal to engage with the nationalist foundations of cultural diplomacy through this process of collaboration was clearly evident; however, the local context through which the exhibition and research was delivered required consideration (Chung, Manley, Wang, Silk, & Bailey, 2023). Such engagement and the inclusion of multiple institutional partners across the collaborative network inevitably created challenges, reflecting the need to draw upon principles allied to a dialogic mode of communication and a sensitivity towards interpreting the “many-to-many”

interactions that have come to frame the wider context surrounding contemporary cultural diplomacy initiatives (Bound et al., 2007).

The challenges of cross-cultural collaboration

As with many initiatives that seek to draw upon national exhibitions as a form of cultural diplomacy (see Wallis, 1994), challenges surrounding issues of curation were identified, specifically in relation to the conceptual underpinnings of the exhibition and how this would resonate with the local Chinese audience:

We actually had quite a lot of discussion – some of it very negative because they [Nanjing Museum] weren't convinced it was a concept that would work for their visitors. (Sally Mews, HES)

Additional concerns regarding curation focused upon the (re)presentation of national culture and how the inclusion of certain artefacts may influence and foster international understanding:

A lot of these images, and we have one with the Naismith view of Edinburgh, is a complete fiction. It's painted at a time when the landscape has completely changed, but he's looking back ... normally when you do an exhibition, you think about who the audience is anyway, you tailor it, but because we don't know huge amounts about the Chinese audience in a way, I suppose it's putting things out there and doing it retrospectively and getting a sense of what it could be for them. (Liz Nicholls, National Galleries)

These concerns were also raised by the Chinese curator when reflecting on the final selection of the exhibition content:

Because there weren't that many exhibit items, so it was kind of an incomplete picture, it was missing some substance. The videos were more diverse and showed more perspectives, whereas the exhibit items were more focused around the Romantic era in the 18th and 19th centuries, so they have quite a different look compared to modern Scotland. Even the lay of the land that you see in those paintings has changed now. (Li Wu, Curator)

Of key concern for Nanjing Museum was whether this representation would attract the attention of local audience members and create an engaging event. China's public museums are increasingly moving towards an ethos where ideas such as customer experience, cost-effectiveness, and marketing strategies are becoming more relevant to museum practice, management, and administration (Denton, 2014; Varutti, 2014). The popularity of potential exhibits and artefacts was evaluated online prior to the launch of the exhibition. This was perceived as a common practice by Nanjing Museum, but essential to ensuring that the Chinese curatorial team could offer the most engaging experience for their audience members:

We want to match our production of the exhibition with their [visitor] expectations. And before we start planning a new exhibition, we carry out preliminary assessments of the expected audience, on the internet. We select sample audience members and carry out on-site assessments. For example, before the Scotland exhibition, we carried out a public exhibition review using our public account on WeChat (微信). We had prospective audience members vote on their favourite exhibits, so that we could identify them and make them centre-pieces in the exhibition. Likewise, we identify exhibits that prospective audience members are less interested in, and position them somewhere less prominent in the exhibition scheme. (Li Wu, Curator)

Concerns regarding audience footfall and engagement also manifested in a request from Nanjing Museum to include artwork – preferably a notable “masterpiece” – that would attract a wide audience:

They [Nanjing Museum] say, “You have to have a masterpiece, you have to have the biggest name.” But, what’s really difficult for us to understand, and for them to communicate to us, is who the Chinese people have actually heard of. Because we’ll put forward somebody like Turner, thinking “This is really big that we’re bringing a Turner!” And then they don’t know who Turner is, “Can you please bring a van Gogh?”. Then you have these conversations that go around again about van Gogh not being Scottish, not painting Scottish landscapes. (Sally Mews, HES)

Providing content that would capture the local target market to generate footfall highlighted additional challenges faced by Nanjing Museum, these primarily centred on the need to demonstrate impact through the exhibition in a bid to achieve continued financial support from central and provincial state authorities:

Interviewer: So, if they can record that more people are visiting ... what’s the consequence of that for Nanjing Museum ... would they receive extra support from the provincial government?

Zhang San: Yes. That’s definitely how it is. Nanjing Museum is one of the eleven most important museums in China – it’s part of a group of museums called the “eight plus three”. There’s a special fund that these eleven museums receive every year from the central government. In addition, local government invests money in the museum. That’s the current state of affairs ... Because our numbers are going up across the board, I believe that the attention we receive from the central government and the provincial government will also increase.

The need to create a prominent visitor attraction was also referenced in relation to key political motives. As with many of China’s public museums, senior personnel are consistently seeking to curate and stage international exhibitions that will generate wide-spread acclaim and secure political recognition from local and central state officials. Thus, challenges arose concerning the political risks associated with hosting the exhibition, and the need for Scottish stakeholders to demonstrate the cultural value of the work exhibited:

I think that ... presumably, they know their audience better than I do, but I think that there’s always a nervousness of taking any risk in China. That’s the way the leadership works. Because Scotland is a small country, and because the way that most leaders are thinking about kudos all the time, I think that as a concept it’s insignificant to them. An insignificant country. An insignificant concept. (Phillip Upton, CEO Design Company)

As with many of China’s creative projects that incorporate public institutions, decisions made by senior officials within such organisations are often driven by the pursuit of government achievements (Shan, 2014). For Nanjing Museum’s staff, additional pressures arrived in the need to successfully meet a wide range of metrics enforced through rigorous state-administered assessment. Among them, this included: the number of exhibitions and educational activities museums provide, number of volunteers museums host, and how much revenue museums generate. Ultimately, the value in terms of cost was identified as an issue that almost led to the abandonment of the exhibition itself,

reinforcing the perceived risks and financial implications associated with hosting an overseas exhibition:

- Zhang San: ... so this exhibition was very nearly abandoned.
 Interviewer: Because there's a fear no one will come to see it?
 Zhang San: I think the main thing is that the price is too high, and it's not worth it.
 Interviewer: The running costs are too high, right?
 Zhang San: Yes, we think that with the same amount of funds, we could keep the price lower, and we could put together a better exhibition.

The research project delivered in conjunction with the exhibition also generated additional concerns for Nanjing Museum's staff, including the capacity to analyse data collected from multiple methods and the ability to apply the findings in practice. The cross-national dynamics that frame collaborative projects can be sensitive and require a broad consideration for the expectations, potential rewards, demands and constraints that guide the actions of differing stakeholders invested in such partnerships. The issues arising from this process of cross-cultural collaboration were not uncommon, yet demonstrated the influence of political factors and local institutional contexts that can exacerbate challenges associated with projects involving intercultural communication and cooperation (Davidson & Castellanos, 2019). Therefore, of key concern to overcoming these challenges was the need for stakeholders to draw upon their understanding of the local cultural context and engage in a process of active negotiation, allowing for issues to be resolved effectively and for avenues of innovation to emerge.

Navigating challenges and diverse ways of working

For Nanjing Museum's staff, anxieties were expressed surrounding the core concept of "romanticism" and how this would translate to a Chinese audience interpretation. However, this issue was quickly resolved once the museum had undertaken focus group interviews with audience members of Nanjing Museum. The focus group members were selected on the basis that some had a deep understanding of Scotland (e.g. through educational experiences), whereas others had none. This approach was used regularly by Nanjing Museum to inform the exhibition design and marketing, and to provide an experience that could, according to Li Wu (curator), "bring the audience and the exhibition closer together". The specific issues surrounding the central concept of the exhibition and the process of resolution were also reiterated by the project lead:

One of the very basic concerns was the word "romantic", because they said, "Romance is between a man and a woman." ... it's not between people and a place, or a concept. ... they [Nanjing Museum] then went away and had a focus group and discussed it with people ... Eventually they came back and said, "Actually, we think we can make it work" ... It [title of the exhibition] also translates really well into Chinese, I understand. Because that can be a problem if your translation ends up as something really clunky. (Sally Mews, HES)

An additional strategy was adopted by Nanjing Museum to ensure that visitors could connect with the conceptual theme of the exhibition. This involved pairing *Romantic Scotland* with *Poetic Jiangnan* (诗意江南), an exhibition featuring the museum's own collection of Chinese landscape paintings. Nanjing Museum's curatorial staff proposed this to

the museum's leadership team who, in turn, presented this idea to HES. Following negotiations, it was mutually agreed upon to host the exhibitions side-by-side:

The idea was to make a comparison with certain elements of the Scotland exhibition. The themes of the two exhibitions date back to basically the same historical time period. One of the elements we compared was the Scottish wilderness landscapes, and the hills of the Jiangnan region ... In this way, we hoped to increase audience member's interest in foreign exhibits, and to create a psychological and cultural connection. (Li Wu, Curator)

It was revealed that the pairing of the exhibitions was also implemented for more instrumental reasons, predominantly to ensure that a wide audience was attracted and metrics surrounding visitor numbers could be met:

Interviewer: Was the decision to have the exhibitions next to each other also related to increasing the number of visitors?

Li Wu: Yes. Because in our Jiangnan exhibition, we included some artworks by Chinese master artists. So they worked as opposite numbers for Turner and Reynolds. So we had some very famous Chinese artists like Shen Zhou, one of the famous Ming painters.

The demand to incorporate high-profile artwork that would satisfy the internal political concerns for Nanjing Museum's leadership team, and address issues surrounding visitor attraction, was resolved through an additional agreement to include two "masterpieces" – artwork by Joshua Reynolds and Joseph Mallord William Turner – with a justification for the importance of this artwork in terms of its cultural significance and broad appeal:

We did have to promise two masterpieces, or three masterpieces. We had to sell them as masterpieces ... crazy things like showing that one of the paintings was used on the side of a bus as a major marketing campaign in Bristol, so, clearly it was a key work if it was on the side of a bus ... we actually added what has turned out to be the most popular painting in the exhibition, the Reynolds portrait ... the reason we put it in is because it's by Joshua Reynolds, and he's the most famous of our artists – bar Turner – in the exhibition. So, we added it as a kind of jewel in terms of its fame, but made sure it linked with the theme ... It worked really well in the exhibition, so I'm really pleased with it. So it was great that they pushed us to add that even if it wasn't quite as deliberate. (Sally Mews, HES)

The inclusion of artwork by renowned artists was of utmost importance to ensuring that the exhibition would be delivered, and was of significant importance to Nanjing Museum for attracting visitors, ensuring internal metrics could be attained, and for securing a sense of prestige among China's local and national cultural institutions:

Interviewer: How important is it for Nanjing Museum to have a piece of well-known art in an international exhibition?

Li Wu: I think that's a matter of considerable significance, because in the past we have held exhibitions on some relatively famous artists, like one exhibition was "Rembrandt's era", and the audience was very interested in the Rembrandt paintings we had ... It's the same situation with Turner – audiences who like art will make a special trip to the museum to see his work. This is the first time Nanjing has had an exhibition with an original piece by Turner, in fact Nanjing has never had anything like this – the father of

impressionism – even Nanjing’s Jiangsu Art Gallery has never had an exhibition like this, and yet it was Nanjing Museum that got to host it in the end.

Central to resolving many of the challenges presented throughout the development of the exhibition and research project was the Chinese notion of *guanxi*. This concept has been referred to – either separately or concurrently – as a relational network, as social practices of developing and utilising personal relationships to gain advantages in professional contexts, or as a transactional mechanism that includes a web of mutual obligations to react to requests for assistance (Bian, 1997; Chen et al., 2013; Herrmann-Pillath, 2010). The importance of establishing a personal relational network and a culture of mutual understanding was central to the successful creation, development and delivery of the exhibition and research project itself:

Nanjing Museum has a director, but it has several deputy, or vice, directors. One of those deputy directors was a guy that was approaching retirement age, and he’d been the person, pretty much, that I’d worked with for a decade, so my *guanxi* was mostly with him. We certainly developed the Romantic Scotland proposal, initially, with him ... He passed over to another deputy director. He was much younger. We had the advantage of having the deputy director come to open our Ming exhibition in Edinburgh in 2014. At that point we took him down to the Scottish Galleries and he was shown the Scottish collection when he was in Edinburgh ... with the former deputy director withdrawing from Nanjing Museum, we were hugely concerned that the project was going to drift without his support. But, because the new deputy director was coming to Edinburgh, we were able to get him in front of the collection in the National Gallery, to get him shown around that by Liz Nicholls [curator] and that he would end up as an advocate of Romantic Scotland because he’d be telling everybody how wonderful these paintings are. (Phillip Upton, CEO Design Company)

I learned that everyone is focused on different things. I find it is very easy to understand that behind everyone’s work, there are lots of different kinds of “bosses”, so everyone is coming at this research project from a different starting point, and there are different factors motivating people. So there was a mutual understanding between the different people involved. I think “mutual understanding” is the key word for this project. (Zhang San, Nanjing Museum Social Services)

Whilst the varied range of stakeholders invested in the exhibition and research project added to the complexity of administering cross-cultural collaboration, this arrangement was also perceived as a useful asset. The diverse nature of this partnership provided a source of knowledge transfer that could help innovate Nanjing Museum’s current and future approach to audience research:

Our experience collaborating with people from different organisations in different countries has helped Nanjing Museum to improve the quality of our audience research in terms of how we conduct this work as an integrated team. The project has also taught us about the theory and practice of different methods of audience research within different cultural and operative frameworks. I think this is a very important point. (Zhang San, Nanjing Museum Social Services)

The challenges presented from the initial development of the exhibition and research project through to its delivery were by no means unique to China, yet the manner in which some of these challenges were navigated required a deep consideration for the local cultural context and framework within which individuals operated and where

interactions occurred. These challenges also provided further insight into the contemporary perspectives that are influencing decision-making and guiding administrative practices within China's public cultural institutions; an aspect of the research that spoke to the wider shifting trends that have emerged within China's cultural and heritage sectors (see Evans & Rowlands, 2014; Keane, 2004; Keane & Zhao, 2014; Varutti, 2014).

Discussion and conclusion

The primary aim of this contribution was to reflect upon the challenges that emerged from a process of collaboration between UK and Chinese organisations located in the cultural sector and, in doing so, provide practical recommendations on future ways of working with China's cultural institutions. The challenges that arose from this particular case study spanned across a range of issues related to cultural representation and the interpretation of exhibits, the diversity of partners involved in the exhibition and research project, and a need to meet the demands of all stakeholders with a specific emphasis on understanding local institutional requirements. Although these challenges are not uncommon when considering the staging of international exhibitions – specifically in relation to issues of cultural representation (Wallis, 1994) – an understanding of local contextual factors was of upmost importance in the pursuit of a successful collaborative experience.

The concept of *guanxi* was central to overcoming many of the challenges faced by partners involved with the exhibition and research project, an aspect unique to the Chinese context. Drawing on this case study, emphasis was placed upon the importance of building personal relationships, creating strong ties and fostering mutual understanding. The concept of *guanxi* has been likened to a mode of relational collectivism where, “the degree to which social exchange in networks determines social action and to which interests of partners are taken into consideration” (Herrmann-Pillath, 2010, p. 340). Here added importance is placed on the obligations and commitments made to others over one's own self-interest (Chen et al., 2013; Hui & Graen, 1997). Work to create strong foundational relations with Nanjing Museum's Deputy Director was in existence prior to the *Romantic Scotland* exhibition and aided in securing the support required to initiate the project; an integral relational aspect that ensured an underlying sense of support was present when challenges arose. Cultural visits to Scotland were also initiated with the incoming Deputy Director to enhance relational ties with Nanjing Museum. Fulfilling obligations linked to the inclusion of masterpieces within the exhibition – although mutually agreed upon through negotiations – and the incorporation of a parallel exhibition to celebrate Chinese artwork also demonstrated the reciprocal nature of relations present throughout this process of collaboration. Whilst literature has indicated that the concept of *guanxi* has become less critical for creating connections with the arrival of economic reform (Chen et al., 2013; Yi & Ellis, 2000; Zhang & Keh, 2009), one should not underestimate its relevance concerning the governance of local cultural heritage in China (see Evans & Rowlands, 2021; Zhang, 2021), and its importance in cultivating interpersonal trust and a strong network of social ties through mutual understanding when engaging with projects of cross-cultural collaboration.

Equally, a strong understanding of the local institutional context was of importance to ensuring that challenges could be overcome. The transformation of China's public

museums since the late 1980s has led to a change in practice, where such cultural institutions are now seeking to experiment with a more visitor-orientated approach to exhibitions and their displays (see Denton, 2014; Ho & Li, 2016; Varutti, 2014). Simultaneously, Chinese central government and local officials view public museums as an integral component of the cultural and ideological infrastructure required to enhance national identity, and are governed by cultural policy agendas and personal preferences that may influence and guide key decisions concerning international cooperation (Author, 2022; Shelach-Lavi, 2019). This was no different at Nanjing Museum, where alterations to administration have focused on promoting visitor-oriented exhibitions that can appeal to a wide demographic, meet the demands of institutional metrics, and appease local government officials (Wang & Chen, 2018). Challenges specifically associated with cultural representation and the need to create a product that satisfied these particular demands required an acknowledgement of such local institutional arrangements and, as with many cultural diplomacy initiatives, a willingness to engage in negotiation and persuasion to achieve a mutually beneficial relationship (Bound et al., 2007; Easterby-Smith & Malina, 1999).

The inclusion of a research project alongside the exhibition also aided in convincing local officials of the benefit to cross-cultural collaboration. Including a diverse group of cross-disciplinary academics from UK and Chinese institutions presented the opportunity for knowledge transfer and capacity-building. The interdisciplinary environment allowed for new methods to be trialled and innovation to occur, acting as a vehicle for knowledge diffusion and to generate a deeper understanding of visitor behaviour at Nanjing Museum. The importance of this research project to the Chinese partners was reiterated by the CEO of the UK design company, stating on reflection that the collaboration had morphed into a, “research project with an exhibition deliverable, rather than an exhibition with a research project deliverable” (Phillip Upton).

As with any project that involves cross-cultural collaboration and cross-national research, there is exposure to the demands of multiple stakeholders who are enabled and constrained by the political systems within which they reside (Punch, 1986). Yet cross-cultural, sectoral and disciplinary collaboration within China can provide the foundations for sharing original ideas and experiencing new approaches to achieve common goals (Rodewald, 2018). Based upon the experiences encountered with this case study, we present the following recommendations to inform future collaboration with China’s cultural institutions. The first is to emphasise the relevance of *guanxi* for assisting in the development of projects. Drawing upon the specific case study, the importance of creating strong social ties, interpersonal trust and a reciprocal obligatory relationship was integral to establishing the exhibition and research project and ensuring its continued success. Secondly, a firm understanding of the local institutional context, and the manner in which China’s cultural industries are engaging with market forces, is a key requirement for collaboration (Keane & Zhao, 2014). Yet despite this, China’s cultural and creative sectors are still aligned with state interests and tied to central policy agendas, where there is a degree of autonomy afforded to local officials to engage in preferred activities (Keane & Chen, 2019; Shelach-Lavi, 2019). An understanding of this evolving landscape – and the demands associated with state-private relations guiding China’s cultural sector – is of great benefit to anticipating key requirements when entering into any form of cooperation. Thirdly, the capacity to provide activities that allow space for innovation, knowledge transfer and exchange is perceived by China’s museum

management to be of great significance. To propose activities that afford project partners the capability to operate outside the echo chamber of their own ideas, and engage with new initiatives that allow all participants to benefit from each other's expertise, will provide added value to potential collaborations and is strongly encouraged (Rodewald, 2018). Such work may lead to a more integrated and creative approach towards working practices and provide significant professional development for all involved.

We are aware that these recommendations are based upon the experiences acquired from one single case study, and we should be mindful when attempting to generalise results, many of China's cultural institutions will have differing approaches towards international collaboration and the administration of their own practices (Hui & Ryan, 2012). Moreover, these relations may be significantly affected by China's broader approach to international engagement under the doctrine of Xi Jinping and an increasing shift towards notions of "hard authoritarianism" (Shambaugh, 2016). However, Nanjing Museum does provide an accurate representation of the wider population of China's public museums, adopting an approach to international collaboration and the hosting of temporary exhibitions that places emphasis on catering to the general public and demands from government officials (Wang & Chen, 2018). In moving forward, future collaborations with China's cultural institutions that look to provide exchange and training activities – bridging cultural difference in appreciation and deployment of different ways of working – will no doubt provide benefits for all and foster sustainable working relationships.

Note

1. This paper reflects upon data captured from a larger research project that was framed by an integrated multi-methodological approach. The project addressed, amongst other things, audience consumption, behaviour and spatial utilisation of the exhibition and visitor perceptions of western cultural heritage. The methods used to acquire this data relied up observations gathered by an audience tracking app, the collection of graffiti notes, written text messages, focus group interviews with volunteer audience members, and audio-visual recordings capture through a large digital tablet installed within the exhibition. However, for this particular paper we are only interested in unpacking the nuance of cross-cultural creative partnerships and, therefore, only include reference to data that speaks to this particular issue.

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