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Dutch-Chinese Museum Collaborations: Perspectives of Dutch museum professionals on the Chinese museum sector

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Dutch-Chinese Museum Collaborations

Perspectives of Dutch museum professionals on the Chinese museum sector



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
1. Introduction	4
2. Literature Review – Museums and Globalisation	8
2.1: Museum studies and globalisation	8
2.2: Cultural globalisation	12
3. Chinese Museums and Their Global Connections	16
3.1: Development of the Chinese museum sector	16
3.2: Chinese museums in the world	18
4. Methods	23
5. Analysis	27
5.1: Collaborating with Chinese museums as a financial opportunity	29
5.1.1: China’s economic growth and ‘wealthy’ museum sector	29
5.1.2: Economics as the main driver to seek opportunities in China	33
5.2: The state of development of the Chinese museum sector	41
5.2.1: The Chinese museum sector considered modern	41
5.2.2: Unique Chinese museum practices considered ‘unprofessional’	44
5.2.3: Western museum practices as ‘good examples’	46
6. Conclusion	49
Bibliography	53
Appendix – Interview questions	61

1. Introduction

The Chinese museum sector has grown dramatically in recent years. Since 2002, at least 100 new museums have been built annually across the country. In 2011, this figure reached a staggering 386 new museums – more than one per day (Johnson 2013). This rapid rise has not gone unnoticed, and attention to what is often referred to as the ‘Chinese museum boom’ in academic literature and media is increasing (Lord 2019; Wong 2015; Zhang and Courty 2020; Peng 2019). China’s museum boom is not unique; the number of museums built worldwide has increased drastically. Guerzoni (2015) estimates that since 1995, a thousand museums have been built each year worldwide, many of which have been erected in countries/regions that lacked them: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa; the Middle East; Central and South America; and former Soviet Bloc republics (Guerzoni 2015). Museums of these countries, considered ‘semi-periphery’ countries by world-systems theory, are now increasingly taking part in the global flows of museum-to-museum collaborations (Lord and Blankenberg 2015; Knell 2019; Wallerstein 1974; Rectanus 2010). Contemporary museums actively collaborate and operate within a global network through international exhibitions, conferences, workshops, professional exchanges, internship programmes, joint research projects, satellite museums and digital media (Goff 2017).

As museums expand these global connections, it has caught the attention of academics in various fields. International relations scholars are interested in the topic because museums and their international connections have become recognised as ‘soft power tools’ (Lord and Blankenberg 2015; Hoogwaerts 2017; Kong 2015). Economists and urban developers have

shown interest because of museums' power to attract tourists and economically transform cities and neighbourhoods – a process often referred to as 'the Bilbao effect,' named after the positive economic consequences that the opening of the Guggenheim Museum had in Bilbao (Guasch and Zulaika 2005; Peng 2019; Poulin 2010; Karp, Kratz, and Szwaja 2006). Most recently, museum studies scholars have adopted the idea that museums are valuable soft power tools but have shifted attention to researching the role of museum employees in this process (Cai 2013; Davidson 2019; Kong 2015; Wang 2018; Nisbett 2013). Within this discussion, the dominant argument has been that museum professionals have a high degree of agency in their international practices and that they, rather than governments, are the driving forces of international museum activities. This thesis builds on these studies. Assuming that museum professionals are the leading actors in the process of globalising the museum sector and considering the upcoming culture of museums in (semi-) periphery countries, it is interesting to study how museum professionals from 'central' countries perceive the museum development of 'periphery' ones. Hence, Dutch museum professionals were chosen to be the study group because of my access to the Dutch museum sector. I focus on Dutch museum professionals' perceptions of the Chinese museum sector because the Chinese museum sector is the fastest growing 'periphery' museum sector (Lord 2019). For this thesis 13 interviews were done, 11 of which with Dutch museum professionals.

Chinese museums have also been active in organising travelling exhibitions in museums around the world for decades. A prominent example of such an exhibition is the Terracotta Warriors exhibition, which was held in 18 countries between 2010 and 2020 (Jiang 2021). More

recently, Chinese museums have started to host travelling exhibitions of Western museums. These collaborations have drawn the attention of the international art world and general media. In 2020, prominent cultural sector newspaper *The Art Newspaper* reported collaborations between ‘superstar’ museums Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, and the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Shanghai Lujiazui Group, the West Bund Group and the China Merchants Group, respectively (Ruiz 2020a; 2020b). Western museums have also created a presence in China through pop-up stores and China-specific merchandise (Coates 2019; Whiddington 2020).

The focus on China and the Netherlands is especially productive because several Dutch museums have been involved in or sought collaborations in China. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also expressed interest in supporting cultural collaborations between the two countries, with special attention given to museum collaborations in the *Strategic Multiyear Plan 2017–2020* (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and DutchCulture 2017).

The central question of this thesis is as follows: *How do Dutch museum professionals perceive the Chinese museum sector?* The main purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the literature on international museum collaborations (Davidson 2019; Kong 2015; Cai 2013). The other academic discussion that this thesis contributes to is that of the development of the Chinese museum sector and its contribution to Chinese cultural diplomacy, as the thesis will shed light on how the Chinese museum sector is perceived internationally by actors in the museum field (Kong 2015; Zhang and Courty 2020; Wang 2018; Lord 2019). Outside academia, the analysis could be useful for Dutch museum professionals and can help to create awareness of how the Chinese museum sector is perceived internationally for Chinese professionals.

This thesis proceeds with Chapter 2 which presents a literature review of recent studies on museums and globalisation and discusses the theories of cultural globalisation. Chapter 3 introduces the literature on the Chinese museum sector and its international connections, including an overview of collaborations between Dutch and Chinese museums. After a presentation of the methods used in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 presents the analysis of this thesis in two sections that represent the two major themes derived through analysing the data. I will show that, first, the respondents strongly associated collaborating with Chinese museums as a financial opportunity, and second, the perception of the Chinese museum sector being ‘modern’ is based on developments that are in line with the responders own museum practices. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding these perceptions. The main argument presented to answer this question is that the respondents actively include the Chinese museum sector in the global museum sector. They do this because they perceive the Chinese museum landscape as globalised due to their perception of China as an economically important power and by recognising China’s museum practices as ‘modern’. However, in their perception of China’s museum practices as ‘modern’, the respondents adhere to perceiving their own practice as central and China’s as peripheral by recognising only those practices in line with their own practices as ‘modern’. Finally, an expectation that China’s museological development to follow the path of that of the West is detected.

2. Literature Review – Museums and Globalisation

In a sense, putting together ‘museology’ and ‘globalisation’ is as meaningless as discussing the relationship of humans to the air: we live in air, we depend on it, it is our physical medium.

(Young 1999, 14)

This chapter provides a critical analysis of the existing academic literature which is relevant to the research question: *How do Dutch museum professionals perceive the Chinese museum sector?* This literature review begins by examining how the interdisciplinary field of museology has approached the topic of globalisation and then focuses on studies that focus on the practice of international collaborations between museums. By closely examining similarities and differences between these studies, this thesis argues that these studies leave a gap in the theoretical approach to this topic, which can be filled by exploring international museum practices from a cultural globalisation perspective. This chapter then delves deeper into theoretical concepts of cultural globalisation as centre-periphery dynamics, homogenisation, hybridisation and modernity, which inform large parts of this study.

2.1: Museum studies and globalisation

As the opening quote to this chapter suggests, the topic of museums and globalisation is by no means simple or straightforward. Museums are affected by globalisation in several ways because

of museums' many (and ever-increasing) functions and because they themselves are active players in the globalising world (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996, 798).

Museum studies has identified two 'eras', commonly referred to as 'old' and 'new' museology. Old museology strictly focuses on methods of museum display, referring to museum administration, conservation techniques, registration methods, and exhibitions and programmes (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010). Peter Vergo (1989) introduced new museology with his influential book *The New Museology*. With this work, he shifts museology's focus away from methods only and argues for a theoretical exploration of museums and their role within society. New museology thereby set the scene for the study of museums and their relation to globalisation.

Conal McCarthy (2015) calls for widening the scope of museum studies by arguing for more depth in empirical studies of professional practice in museums. McCarthy (2015) understands museum practice as 'the broad range of professional work in museums, from the functions of management, collections, exhibitions and programs to the varied activities that take place within these diverse and complex organisations, as well as indicating a recognisable sphere of work' (4). With this, McCarthy emphasises that not just the study of what museums do is important but also how and why the professionals behind these actions take these actions. A variety of museum-related fields have adopted McCarthy's theoretical approach (Mancino 2016; Hakamies 2017; Conforti 2020; Goulaptsi, Manolika, and Tsourvakas 2020; Ho 2019). This thesis is situated within the study of practice, as the perceptions of the respondents are consequences of the international practices they have performed.

In recent years, a body of literature that focuses on the interaction of international museum collaborations and museum practice has emerged (Wang 2018; Cai 2013; Davidson 2019; Kong 2019; 2015). It is this body of literature that this thesis responds to most directly. These studies have several things in common. First, they all emphasise the agency and independence that museum professionals have in their international collaborations. Kong (2019) concludes, ‘Museums are no longer passive cultural diplomacy tools waiting to be called upon by the government. Acting independently, they exert their own influence on cultural diplomacy’ (97). Also, the studies all agree that museum professionals rarely consider cultural diplomacy as a driver for seeking international collaboration. Nisbett (2013) adds to this by stating that many museums now actually adopt a narrative of cultural diplomacy for their international collaborations for lobbying reasons. Cai concludes similarly that there is an importance in studying museum practice, especially within museums international practices, because the motives of museum professionals for international collaboration are often different from those of government officials. She argues that ‘cultural diplomacy is often seen [by museum professionals] as a funding opportunity to support their programming or as political gateways to gain access to the renowned museums overseas that would benefit their own objectives and missions’ (Cai 2013, 129). Davidson offers a model to structurally analyse the motives that museum professionals can have to seek international collaborations. In her ‘exhibition drivers model’, Davidson introduces three domains: market-related, mission-related and diplomatic. The market-related domain includes international museum practices that generate revenue. International collaborations can do this through loan fees paid by the host

institution, entrance fees to the exhibition and increased brand awareness abroad (Davidson 2019). The mission-related domain relates to the various aims of social change that museums, as nonprofit organisations, often have. Finally, the diplomatic domain arises when governments are involved in international museum collaborations. Governments are often prepared to invest large sums of money in promoting their culture and heritage abroad as part of larger ‘soft power’ strategies (Davidson 2019; Nye 1990). Davidson’s (2019) model suggests that while one domain dominates in any given case, most exhibitions are driven, to varying degrees, by two or more of these domains. Davidson argues, in line with the above-mentioned studies, that the diplomatic driver is not often the main driver for museum staff.

In terms of methodology, there is much overlap between Davidson’s, Cai’s and Kong’s studies; they all focus on a specific exhibition exchange as a case study. However, differences lie in some of the conclusions drawn. Davidson explores collaborations between museums in Mexico and New Zealand (arguably, two peripheral sectors) and concludes that these collaborations represent fertile ground for cosmopolitan and intercultural interaction (Davidson 2019). Conversely, Cai concludes that the Singapore-France collaboration central to her study is political because of the unequal power relationship between the two museums, as France is a former colonial superpower and Singapore a colonised state (Cai 2013). This thesis expands on the dynamics between museum professionals from center and periphery states.

Other academic accounts of museums in a globalising world have focused on the political-economic agenda of such collaborations. The cultural franchising of museums in the form of Guggenheim Bilbao and Abu Dhabi Louvre, for example, attracted much academic

attention (Poulin 2010; Guasch and Zulaika 2005). Also, the soft power potential that museums offer has been much discussed (Peng 2019).

The above analysis of the recent literature investigating international museum collaborations shows that these studies have been preoccupied with deciding what drives museums to participate in international work and the effect on the museums and the governments they represent. The studies convincingly argue that museum professionals have, and actively take, agency in deciding when, with whom and how they collaborate with museums abroad. If museums do participate in government initiatives for cultural diplomacy purposes, it is usually because they gain from these collaborations themselves in areas they find important (e.g. it is good for ‘brand identity’, or there is financial gain) (Nisbett 2013; Cai 2013; Davidson 2019). However, what is missing is a deeper understanding of how museum professionals behave in the international museum landscape and how they perceive different participants within it. This thesis aims to address this gap by focusing on how professionals from a ‘central’ country (the Netherlands) perceive those from a ‘periphery’ country (China). The proposed theoretical focus to fill this gap is theory of cultural globalisation, this will be outlined now.

2.2: Cultural globalisation

The phenomenon of globalisation began to appear in the literature of economics in the 1960s. Thereafter, it has grown into a major analytical model for analysing the ever-changing world (Young 1999). Besides economics, major topics in globalisation have been politics and technological and cultural globalisation (Crane, Kawasaki, and Kawashima 2002a). Museums

are involved in all these strands of globalisation through their ability to generate significant economic changes in their environments (Poulin 2010; Guasch and Zulaika 2005) and politically by being significant soft power instruments (Lord and Blankenberg 2015). However, as this thesis aims to focus on the perspectives held by Dutch museum professionals on the Chinese museum sector, theories of cultural globalisation are most relevant.

Crane, Kawasaki, and Kawashima (2002a) refer to cultural globalisation as ‘transmission or diffusion across national borders of various forms of media and the arts’ (1). One of the most pressing debates within cultural globalisation surrounds the question: What is the effect of the circulation of cultural products or artefacts that occur amongst countries? Two answers divide the debate on this topic: homogenisation and hybridisation. Here, I will focus on a review of the main theoretical models that have shaped this debate.

The best-known model of cultural globalisation that assumes homogenisation is cultural imperialism theory – which emerged in the 1960s, building on ideas from world-systems theory. Cultural imperialism theory argues that global economic systems are dominated by a core of advanced countries, while third-world countries remain at the periphery of the system with little control over their economic and political development (Tomlinson 2002, 37). Cultural imperialism theory translates this to culture and refers to the imposition of particular nations’ beliefs, values, knowledge, behavioural norms and lifestyle upon other countries (Salwen 1991). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) argue along this line of thinking that globalisation is a pseudoconcept and consists of imposed power discourses since globalisation is based on a framework of institutions and ideas from the dominant countries. Some argue this process is

purposeful because it corresponds with the interests of capitalist societies (White 1983). Modernisation theories also assume a process of homogenisation of world culture but have traditionally been more positively inclined about this change. Post-World War II modernisation theory offered a forecast of where the world was heading, which involved the prediction that this was where the West actually already was (Hannerz 2015). According to theorists such as Anthony Giddens, modernisation is an inevitable consequence of globalisation (Giddens 1990). As countries interact, periphery countries adopt more from central countries than the other way around. What all these theories have in common is that they assume a power relation between hegemonic and peripheral sectors and that increasing flows of culture will lead to more dominant Western cultures.

The cultural flows or network model offers an alternative conception of the transmission process of culture, assuming that increased global activity will lead to hybridisation. In this model, cultural globalisation corresponds to a network with no clearly defined centre of periphery (Crane, Kawasaki, and Kawashima 2002a). Globalisation is an aggregation of cultural flows or networks, is a less coherent, unitary process than cultural imperialism and is one in which cultural influences move in many directions. An influential scholar with this line of thought is Arjun Appadurai (1996), who has identified five ‘-scapes’ in which culture flows: ethnoscapas: flows of people migrants, tourists, refugees, guestworkers; technoscapas: flows of machinery, equipment, information; finanscapas: flows of money, currencies, stocks, commodities; mediascapas: flows of information and especially images; and ideoscapas: ideological flows (e.g. democracy, freedom, ethnic purity). The flows that these ‘-scapes’ cause

are likely to lead to cultural hybridisation rather than homogenisation. Concerning, theories of cultural flows, attention to the multicentricity of culture has been growing; many commentators have become less inclined to accept the assumption of passive reception at the periphery (Hannerz 2015). Cultural globalisation is widely recognised as a complex and diverse phenomenon consisting of global cultures originating from many nations and regions (Crane, Kawasaki, and Kawashima 2002a). However, this view originates from studies of the actual workings of markets. Research into how participants in global cultural markets perceive their sectors still suggests that participants perceive themselves within a centre-periphery dynamic (Kharchenkova 2018). The way actors within cultural sectors perceive themselves and their position within the globalised markets can differ from how the market actually works. This paper aims to address this by providing an empirical study of the perspectives of Dutch museum professionals towards the Chinese museum sector.

This chapter has reviewed literature relevant in two academic areas. First, it has considered literature in museum studies, specifically academic accounts that have dealt with the international work of museum practice. This section indicated that the dominant angle in which this topic has been researched has been in relation to international relations. This study offers a different perspective by specifically reviewing the perspectives held by museum professionals who work internationally. The second reviewed academic area is the proposed theoretical framework of cultural globalisation. Cultural globalisation theory was split into two major trains of thought: theories that assume homogenisation of culture and those that assume hybridisation as a result of interaction between centre and periphery countries. The analysis of this thesis will

discuss where on the spectrum of these theories the perspectives held by Dutch professionals can be placed.

3. Chinese Museums and Their Global Connections

This chapter provides an overview of some important voices in the discussions about museums in China. The main point of focus is the literature on the history, current developments and international connections of the Chinese museum sector. The purpose of this chapter is twofold: it will identify a gap in the literature about international museums' collaborations with Chinese museums and provide a useful background for understanding the experiences and perspectives of Dutch museum professionals in the analysis chapters of this thesis.

3.1: Development of the Chinese museum sector

Varutti (2014) has provided the most comprehensive history of museums in the English language with her study of representation practices in heritage policy and nationalist narratives displayed in museums. Besides early Chinese museums (which she traces back to 478 BCE, when temple-like structures were established where people could pay their respect and study how to conduct rituals and ceremonies), Varutti argues that much of the rest of the history of Chinese museums is closely connected to the country's relationship and attitude towards the West. A second type of museum, focused on natural history, appeared in China in the 1860s, initiated by foreigners in the coastal areas close to Shanghai. Sofia Bollo and Yu Zhang (2017) argue that many visitors responded enthusiastically to these new types of museums established by Western organisations (Bollo and Zhang 2017). Peng (2019) states these museums were seen as 'foreign wonders' and 'disseminators of modernity' (36). This interest in the West grew further after the imperial era

ended. The postimperial political framework was outward looking, and within these ideas, museums found fertile ground. However, this political climate did not last long, and under Communist rule, museums were mainly conceived as propaganda tools. Great investments in museums were made during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961); however, with the start of the Cultural Revolution (1966), museums quickly became a target. During the Cultural Revolution, a large number of cultural relics was destroyed, and museum staff were physically injured and mentally affected.

It was not till 1977 that authorities began to build and restore museums. The late 1970s were marked by the ‘open door’ policy, the process of reforms of domestic institutions and cautious opening to the outside world. At the same time, there was an increase in the number, quality and institutionalisation of museums through the creation of several museum associations for the different kinds of museums. These domestic reforms coincided with China opening up to Western and international museology by joining the International Committee of Museums. This history shows that the development of the Chinese museum sector has been closely linked to the official government’s political stance towards the West (Varutti 2014).

Since 2002, the number of museums has gone up drastically, and the quality of museums and the institutionalisation of the sector has improved (Peng 2019). Studies have focused on the development of the sector as an industry (Bollo and Zhang 2017; Peng 2019) and on the changes inside museums focused on changing collection and display methods (Lu 2014; Denton 2013). The aim of this chapter is to give an idea of the structure of the sector, as this is what the participants of this study mostly responded to.

Bollo and Zhang (2017) argue that the emergence of a ‘museum boom’ can be explained by several factors. Foremost, they argue that the development of museums in China is the result of favourable measures in terms of financial and cultural policy. The increase in the budget allocated to culture was essential for the growth of museums. From 2011 to 2015, a total of 140 billion RMB (approximately €18 billion) in public funds was allocated to cultural heritage protection (Bollo and Zhang 2017). However, other initiatives also played a role. Local councils started looking to the Bilbao model to attract tourists with new cultural landmarks through the extension of existing museums, many (former) state-owned companies opened trade or industrial museums and many specialised museums appeared (focusing on, for example, science, natural history, art or intangible heritage). Peng (2019) names economic prosperity and urbanisation factors as the cause of the Chinese museum boom. These two factors have also caused museum booms in other areas of the world.

3.2: Chinese museums in the world

Da Kong provides, so far, the only in-depth English-language study of the Chinese government’s international political ambitions through its museums. Her study focuses on the cultural diplomacy efforts made by China through international exhibitions to British museums. Kong’s study gives a comprehensive account of the system that supports international museum collaborations. It is useful to review this here to understand the supporting structures for international collaborations, as the system is run by a government body some respondents encountered in the process of collaborating with a Chinese museum. The State Administration of

Cultural Heritage (SACH) is the overseeing institution for museums in China and was established in 2003 under the supervision of the Chinese Ministry of Culture (now: Ministry of Culture and Tourism). SACH oversees the management of museums and ancient artefacts. Besides overseeing the museum sector domestically, SACH concerns itself with all incoming and outgoing loans and museum collaborations, as well as publishes five-year plans for museums and cultural heritage. For many years, the institution has been specific in its call for more systematic promotion of international collaboration and the enhancement of international impact. In the early 2000s, Art Exhibitions China (AEC) was established as a separate institution under the direct supervision of SACH to oversee international museum collaborations. The establishment of AEC coincided with the Chinese government's increasing emphasis on cultural diplomacy. AEC coordinates exhibitions on archaeological discoveries and ancient arts, including planning and hosting outbound Chinese exhibitions and inbound foreign exhibitions. The duties of AEC have evolved from sending exhibitions out only to focusing on both sending them out and bringing foreign exhibitions into China. According to Kong (2015), this reflects the Chinese government's sophistication on cultural diplomacy by focusing on learning from other cultures and promoting Chinese culture hand in hand with other countries, instead of only going one way.

Recent collaborations between the world's 'superstar' museums and Chinese cultural initiatives confirm there is an increased focus from Chinese museums and government on bringing international culture into China. Moreover, smaller presences, often in the form of pop-up stores, of international museums in China have received attention – the Dutch Van Gogh Museum is part of this list (Coates 2019; Whiddington 2020). The latter are commercial

activities from Western museums that do not fall under collaborative museum practices; however, this thesis considers some of these commercial activities because they indicate a general interest from Dutch museums in the Chinese market. Renowned artist Ai Weiwei publicly criticised these collaborations in *The Art Newspaper* ‘for being compliant with the violent Chinese regime’ (Ruiz 2020a). Online, the debate on this topic gained some attention; however, no academic accounts exist of this mode of museum collaboration between European and Chinese museums (Ruiz 2020b).

It is important to note that museum collaborations can be organised in many ways. A differentiation can be made between museums that have worked in collaboration with Chinese museums to organise exhibitions in the Netherlands and those that have done this to organise in China. Het Drents Museum has been active in ‘importing’ exhibitions from China. The highly successful exhibition *The Terracotta Army from Xi’an – Treasures from the first Emperors*¹ was organised in collaboration with Emperor Qinshihuang’s Mausoleum Site Museum in Xi’an in 2008. For the second exhibition of Chinese art – *The Great Liao* (2011) – Het Drents Museum worked closely with several Chinese museums². The Hermitage Amsterdam displayed *Ming: The Global Empire* in 2008, but Hermitage staff did not deal with Chinese museums directly, as this exhibition was organised through commercial exhibition agency Nomad Exhibitions³. Exhibition agencies exist all over the world and are frequently employed by museums as middlemen. Het

¹ Own translation, original Dutch title: *Het Terracotta Leger van Xi’an - Schatten van de eerste keizers van China*

² More on: <https://drentsmuseum.nl/en/exhibitions/great-liao>

³ More information on: <https://www.nomadexhibitions.com/exhibitions-for-hire/ming-the-golden-empire>

Drents Museum, for example, uses Chinese exhibition agency Shaanxi Yi Space Culture & Media to display travelling exhibitions from their collection in China. The first exhibition like this was planned for early 2021 but was cancelled due to COVID-19 measures⁴. Museum Boijmans van Beuningen organised an exhibition – *The Future of Fashion Is Now* – at OCT Contemporary Art Terminal in Shanghai and Art & Design Gallery in Shenzhen in 2016⁵. The Rijksmuseum presented *Rembrandt and the Golden Age* in 2008 at the Shanghai Museum⁶. Van Gogh Museum worked with a commercial Chinese partner to organise *Meet Vincent van Gogh Experience*, a virtual experience of Vincent van Gogh's life for which no original art was transported, in Beijing in 2016⁷. The Anne Frank Museum organised two exhibitions in China (2007 and 2017). Most recently, Museum van de Geest organised the exhibition *New Dutch Masters* in collaboration with the Chinese Ocean Flower Island Museum⁸. This thesis limits its scope to collaborations between museums. In principle, it, therefore, eliminates purely commercial activities of Dutch museums in or aimed at China. These activities involve, for example, marketing efforts of Dutch museums on Chinese platforms, such as WeChat, or efforts of Dutch museums to provide for Chinese tourists within their own museum by offering

⁴ More information on: <http://syiscm.com/en/detail-22.html>

⁵ More information on: <https://www.boijmans.nl/en/exhibitions/the-future-of-fashion-is-now-china#:~:text=Museum%20Boijmans%20Van%20Beuningen's%20exhibition,Contemporary%20ART%20Terminal%20in%20Shanghai.>

⁶ More information on: <https://www.ing.com/Newsroom/News/Press-releases/PROld/Rembrandt-in-China.htm>

⁷ More information on: <https://jingculturecommerce.com/van-gogh-museum-partnership-signals-china-push/>

⁸ More information: <https://museumvandegeest.nl/actueel/tentoonstelling-nieuwe-hollandse-meesters-te-zien-op-chinees-ocean-flower-island-in-hainan/>

Mandarin language audio, guided tours or information booklets. Occasionally, the lines between museum-to-museum collaboration and other China-focused activities are blurry; hence, some elements of nonmuseum partnerships might be mentioned in the analysis, such as marketing methods in China employed by Dutch museums to attract Chinese museum visitors surrounding international exhibitions.

This chapter has reviewed English-language literature on the Chinese museum sector, focusing on accounts of the structure of the sector rather than collection and display practices. Furthermore, the chapter has also identified a lack of academic studies on the processes concerning collaborations between Western and Chinese museums in China. Whereas studies of China-West collaborations exist for collaborations taking place in Europe, those in China have received journalistic attention but lack academic focus. This thesis considers perceptions of Dutch museum professionals who have been involved in collaborations going both ways (from China to the Netherlands and from the Netherlands to China). This means the thesis both adds to Kong's account of China's 'outgoing' exhibitions and provides a first account of collaborations between Western and Chinese museums taking place in China.

4. Methods

This thesis relies on qualitative data analysis to research how Dutch museum professionals perceive the Chinese museum sector. The data for this thesis was collected through interviews. This chapter will explain, in depth, why this research method was chosen and how it was applied to effectively answer the research question.

The *SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Research Methods* defines ‘perception’ as ‘a mode of apprehending reality and experience through the senses, thus enabling discernment of figure, form, language, behaviour and action. Individual perception influences opinion, judgement, understanding of a situation or person, meaning of an experience, and how one responds to a situation’. A common way of defining perception is “how we see things” (Barker 2004, 607). A deep understanding of an individual’s use of language, behaviour, actions and opinions needs to be established to create an understanding of perception. This understanding can be obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Flick 2018; Kvale 2012).

To reach respondents with particular experience, I used targeted sampling and snowballing (Flick 2018). First, some respondents were found through my network, as I was working as an intern in a museum during the time of writing this thesis. Others were contacted through ‘cold’ emails to various museums or directly to individuals that I knew would have relevant experience due to their role within the given museum. From there, many respondents were recommended to me. Overall, I experienced no difficulty in finding participants. A sample set of 12 professionals was generated. At that point, research saturation was reached.

Of the 12 interviews conducted, 10 were with museum professionals. Two of the participants are working on the periphery of the museum sector in politics. One as ambassador of cultural relations between China and the Netherlands, the other in consulting – specifically on the topic of Dutch-Chinese cultural collaborations (including museum collaborations) – with many years of experience. The length of the interviews varied from half an hour to an hour and a half. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, a process that all participants gave permission for. All interviews were conducted in Dutch; quotes used in this thesis were translated by me.

For this thesis, a ‘museum professional’ was considered any person working for a museum. However, a strict requirement was that the individual had to be involved in international practices within their job. This means that some jobs are more likely to be represented in the sample. In practice, it turned out that most interviewees worked in exhibition management or curation. Prior experience of working with China was not required since this research explores perceptions rather than experiences. However, eight out of 10 museum professionals who responded to this study did have experience working with a Chinese partner. The kinds of experiences varied: Two participants had experienced organising a travelling exhibition in a museum in China, while another two had experienced travelling an exhibition to a nonmuseum environment in China. Two other respondents had worked in collaboration with Chinese museums to realise exhibitions of Chinese art in the Netherlands. These six participants made, on average, 2.6 trips to China during the process of organising these exhibitions. Another two participants made research trips to China to scout collaboration partners but had been unsuccessful. Four of the respondents who already successfully work with a Chinese partner

indicated that they actively keep up with Chinese museum developments to see if there are future opportunities; two of these respondents travelled to China for this purpose.

Since many of the participants were found through snowballing, it turned out that many of the participants did actually have experience working with China. This is because when recommending someone to talk to, participants were mainly excited to recommend someone they knew had also worked with China before. Some contacts were also made through ‘cold’ emails to general email addresses of museums; these were often responded to by someone who had experience working with China. Other participants were contacted directly; some of these people include the few participants in this study who did not have practical work experience with China.

The participants were promised anonymity. This is especially important because many of the respondents know each other; any indication of identity can therefore make it easy to identify a respondent. Hence, the participants’ names, genders, job titles and employing museums are all anonymised. Pseudonyms are used in the analysis to represent the respondents.

I chose to conduct this research amongst a variety of museums (in terms of specialisation and size). The main requirement was that the participating museums had to be active internationally. This led to most participants coming from the larger-sized museums that have the capacity to work abroad. The participants came from eight different Dutch museums, ranging from contemporary art museums (2) and museums focused on Dutch heritage (5) to international heritage museums (1).

A thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted, which involved coding all the data before identifying and reviewing key themes. The first round of coding contributed to the choice

of the theoretical framework. Thereafter, each theme was examined to gain an understanding of participants' perceptions and motivations.

All interviews were done by phone or video call. A preference would have been given to in-person interviews, but due to the timing of this research (during the COVID-19 crisis), this proved impossible. Wherever possible, video calls were used, as they more closely resemble in-person interviews.

5. Analysis

I really hope to collaborate with China again because the food there is fantastic.

(Jamie)

World-systems theory has traditionally considered China as a semi-periphery country, whereas the Netherlands is included in the central countries (Wallerstein 1974). This hierarchy has, however, been troubled, as China is economically and politically becoming recognised as a global power (Hannerz 2015). This thesis explores how Dutch museum professionals perceive the Chinese museum sector in terms of this centre-periphery dynamic. The following chapter is presented in two parts, which represent the two main themes that were detected amongst the respondents. First, the perception that collaborating with Chinese museums is financially interesting for Dutch museums will be discussed. The second part will focus on the perceptions held by the respondents about the state of development of the Chinese museum sector.

Before diving into the two main topics of this analysis, I want to express some general observations made during the process of data collection. First, it appeared from the process of recruiting respondents that ‘China’ is a relevant topic for many Dutch museums. I was able to find participants for this study easily. The initial response of individuals I reached out to was, in all cases, positive and excited. On several occasions, participants expressed that they believed it was a ‘smartly chosen’ (Alex) and ‘relevant’ (Misha and Jamie) topic to discuss. Almost all

participants also clearly stated that they would be interested in seeing the results of this study, mainly because they believed it could be useful for them professionally.

I believe there are multiple reasons for this positive response. First, Dutch museums are increasingly focusing on their international activities, so addressing this wider topic in an academic way was perceived as an exciting development. Second, my quest to discuss China specifically was positively received because many Dutch museums have experiences of collaborating or attempting to collaborate with China. Professionals that have worked on such projects considered it a special experience (some even claimed it is the highlight of their career so far) and, therefore, were excited to share their experiences. Others had simply heard of other museums doing projects with China and were interested in learning more, often to see if this could be something for them as well. Even though this does not directly show that China's museum sector is seen by the respondents as central to the global museum system, it does show that there is significant interest in the sector.

Another common denominator amongst all interviews was that participants responded more confidently to questions related to collaborative practices with Chinese museums than to questions directly focused on their knowledge of the Chinese museum sector. Most of the interviewees indicated signs of being uncomfortable or insecure when answering questions about their knowledge of the Chinese museum sector. Questions in line with 'What do you know about the Chinese museum sector?' were answered with, for example, 'So much is happening. I don't know how to explain' (Sam) or 'All I can tell you is that they have built an incredible amount of museums in the past years. You probably know way more' (Alex). However, when asked about

opportunities and challenges for collaboration, most participants had many thoughts, ideas and opinions. This difference was interpreted as a sign that the participants considered collaboration with Chinese museums before having a detailed understanding of the sector. Thus, there is an expectation that collaboration with the Chinese museum sector is possible without extensive background knowledge. This attitude is a sign that the participants assume a level of globalisation within the international museum sector and include China in this global museum system.

5.1: Collaborating with Chinese museums as a financial opportunity

The respondents perceive the Chinese museum sector as a central part of the global museum sector because they closely associate it with China's global economic power. Because of the perception of China as wealthy, the participants consider the Chinese museum sector as a place they can potentially profit from financially. This chapter will first show how the participants perceive the global importance of the Chinese economy and how this perception is perpetuated in their image of the Chinese museum sector. This leads to the image that there are financial opportunities for Dutch museums in China. It is then argued that this perception causes the respondents to actively seek opportunities in China.

5.1.1: China's economic growth and 'wealthy' museum sector

The respondents perceived China as a major global economic power which will continue to develop. This image of China is in line with the dominant global one that has been around since

the 1990s, when China's economy started to be prominent on the world stage as a result of Deng Xiaoping's 1979 economic reforms (Broomfield 2003). The respondents were no exemption from this perception, as Luca illustrates when talking about a perception held amongst their colleagues in the Dutch museum:

There is a common perception that China is an important global economy and that the demand for international art and culture is developing [in China].

This sentiment was shared by other participants – who recognised, for example, the rapidly developing art market and growing cultural industry. This is also seen through the awareness of the participants of China's rapid museum developments, which the respondents linked directly to the country's economic rise.

LvdB: 'How does your expectation to collaborate with a Chinese museum compare to your expectations with museums in other places?'

Jamie: 'I think it has become⁹ more or less the same'.

LvdB: 'Why the emphasis on "become"?''

Jamie: 'China has just become way more economically prosperous. Recently, we were negotiating an exhibition with this Chinese museum, and we had to cancel all the plans

⁹ Underscore to reflect emphasis in their voice

because the fee they asked was just so ridiculously high. We just couldn't do it, and we are actually quite used to high fees. That shows there is a lot more confidence there now'.

They want to participate on the global level. They feel like they have been disadvantaged for decades and that the world has treated them as a third-world country, and they don't want to be that anymore. So they want to show what they are capable of because China is definitely not a third-world country anymore. They want to show that to the rest of the world. That is why these changes are happening so quickly. (Sam)

Both quotes show that the participants understand China as having grown into a central position within the global economy and link developments in the museum sector to this economic prosperity. Jamie explicitly expresses the perception that the Chinese museum sector has grown confident in their international practice based on the fact that the museum they dealt with asked for a hefty sum for an international exhibition.

Some participants experienced working with China in different periods. Without exception, these participants expressed that they were highly impressed by the development that Chinese infrastructure had undergone, as shown in the following quote by Alex:

We went back with a different exhibition 10 years later, in 2017 [...]. The place was completely different. In 2007, China was really a developing country; in 2017, suddenly,

there were superfast trains between Beijing and Shanghai. It was a completely different country, completely modernised.

Alex specifically mentioned being impressed by the general, rapid developments in China, and this same perception, shared by other participants, was also related to the image of China as a global economic power.

We were so impressed when we first went; everything was brand new and incredible quality. (Sam)

I know that they are building loads of museums, all sorts of architecturally amazing buildings that are incredibly impressive. (Jessie)

The use of ‘incredible’ and ‘impressed’ by Sam and Jessie show admiration for the work that was done in the course of developing the Chinese museum sector. Sam specified that the specific ‘impressive’ elements of the museums they encountered were the architecture of the buildings, the infrastructure in terms of climate control and art storage facilities, the security and the way museum staff handled art. Sam does not include anything about the quality of the museums’ own collections or exhibitions. Like Sam, no other respondents commented on the quality of the collections or exhibition styles of Chinese museums. For the respondents, the luxurious

architecture of new museum buildings and state-of-the-art facilities stood out as the predominant ‘impressive’ element of the Chinese museum sector.

My analysis is that this image of luxury buildings perpetuates the perception that the Chinese museum sector is economically prosperous and that abundant financial resources are available for the display of art. However, the art collections of Chinese museums are not held highly. The perception of China as a global economic power and recent developments in the museum sector that are perceived as ‘impressive’ work together to create an image of the Chinese museum sector as a globally important one. Thereby, participants are aware of the developing interest in arts and culture in China and growing investments in museum infrastructure, which leads to the perception that there is a market developing for museum work in China that Dutch museums could profit from.

5.1.2: Economics as the main driver to seek opportunities in China

The perception of China as a global economic power with an increasing market for arts and culture has consequences for the way the respondents behave towards the Chinese museum sector. The overwhelming majority of the participants viewed collaboration with Chinese museums as a financial opportunity for their museum. Expecting financial gain from international collaborations is not in itself an unusual expectation in the Dutch (and, more generally, Western) museum sector. ‘International exhibitions’ have become an established source of income for museums (Amsellem 2013; Crane, Kawasaki, and Kawashima 2002b). With the increasing privatisation of museums and ever-decreasing subsidy opportunities in many

Western countries, international exhibitions have become a way for museums to increase their profits. However, due to the nonprofit nature of museums, profit is not often the only reason for museums to seek international collaborations, as seen in Davidson's exhibition drivers model. Within her model, she argues that a combination of market, diplomatic and mission-related drivers are present when a museum seeks international collaboration; the distribution of how much each driver is present is variable per project (Davidson 2019). The respondents for this research were highly driven by market-related incentives to seek opportunities for collaboration in China, as evident in the following quotes:

We have a commercial department, and they were, of course, interested in investigating what we can do in China. (Sam)

It is undeniable that there is a market in China. China has a large population, so there are, naturally, many potential museum visitors there. The Chinese are also travelling way more. As a museum, we don't want to miss out on attracting Chinese tourists. We work from that perspective. (Ali)

I think we could make money with this as a museum, or I actually know that for sure because there is always a financial element to these things. Thereby, there are a lot of Chinese people, and it would be beneficial if they come to our museum when they are travelling. (Jessie)

The quotes above clearly demonstrate that the participants perceive a relation between the Chinese museum sector and financial opportunities for their museums. These opportunities come in different shapes, with the dominant two being financially gaining from organising an international exhibition in China by asking loan fees for these exhibitions and profiting from Chinese tourists when visiting the museum in the Netherlands. Organising an international exhibition can achieve both goals – as it can create a general ‘presence’ in China, with the goal of creating ‘brand awareness’. The idea behind this is that if people get the chance to visit the Netherlands, they would come to the museum and pay an entrance fee. Ali and Jessie expressed that they understand the Chinese tourism sector is up and coming and is a potentially large source of income for Dutch museums, as it provides the possibility to attract many visitors to the museums.

Some Dutch museums also employ different methods to attract Chinese visitors. Jessie’s museum, for example, resorted to noncollaborative methods of attracting the Chinese public. Jessie explained that for their museum, China shared second place in ‘target audience’ together with the American market, only behind the ‘home’ market (which includes the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany). Hence, Jessie’s museum had many methods in place to attract Chinese tourists besides seeking opportunities to organise an international exhibition in China. The museum had put significant effort in but without success. In the meantime, the museum set out active marketing campaigns, created a presence on WeChat (for which a special bureau was employed), organised a yearly visit of a group of influencers whose coverage of the trip could be

shared on the museum's WeChat page and provided a translated version of the museum's website in Mandarin. This way, the museum hoped to appeal to a diverse group of Chinese tourists, from young single travellers to older people, on tour-operated holidays.

Revisiting Davidson's 'international exhibition drivers', the only noneconomic motivation detected amongst the participants was mission-related. This is evident in Luca's statement:

One of our missions is to show our collection to as many people as possible. It is impossible for everyone to travel to Europe, so when we organise an exhibition in China, it allows many people to see the art.

Luca expressed that for this mission alone, the museum would not risk travelling and undergoing the complicated process of collaborating with a Chinese museum. The only reason Luca's museum would do this is if there was a financial opportunity. No participants mentioned being driven by diplomatic reasons. This is in line with recent research into international exhibition practices, which argues that museum professionals are often not motivated by diplomatic reasons but are happy to embrace this consequence of their work, as it often means that governments provide funding for projects (Cai 2013; Kong 2015; Nisbett 2013).

Jip (independent consultant) argued, however, that the perception that Dutch museums can make revenue from organising a travelling exhibition in China is often a misconception:

When Dutch museums work on international exhibitions, they expect that the host museum will pay them a fee for borrowing this collection. This is also how it works in Japan, Korea, Brazil and the US; everyone accepts that system. If you want something, you have to pay for it. It works differently in China, though. They say, 'We are finally being viewed as equals. We have been humiliated for years by Western countries. So now, we are open for your culture, but you have to bring it to us. We will do the opening and receive you with open arms, but we won't pay a fee for borrowing your display of culture'.

Jip, hereby, suggests that it is unlikely that there would be a direct financial benefit for organising a travelling exhibition in China. Several respondents had experienced this issue and had to resort to alternative funding methods to execute their international exhibitions in China:

They are not as prepared to pay as Japanese organisations. Organisers of exhibitions in Japan are usually backed up by big insurance or media companies who have money to sponsor these exhibitions. In China, this seems to be unavailable. I also worked for [a Dutch bank] in their sponsorship department, and I remember already in 2008, [a Dutch museum] came to us to enquire if we wanted to sponsor them to organise an exhibition in China. (Mika)

I made exhibitions that we sold, so we made money with those. We sold those in America, Canada, Japan and many more countries in different shapes and sizes. But in China, we didn't get paid; they don't do that there. For us, it was kind of more a promotional event for [a Dutch bank], which paid us to organise the exhibition in China and thereby used it as PR material. (Misha)

Ali experienced a similar situation – where their exhibition was paid for by the Dutch government, something they described as an unusual event because the Dutch government had in no other circumstance provided for the museum's international activities. Jip expressed that the Dutch government provides relatively little for international cultural activities and tends to leave museums to take care of their own finances for these projects – unlike in France and Germany, where funding for international museum collaborations is more easily available. Of the four respondents who have direct experience with organising an international exhibition in China, only Alex expressed that it went the way they were used to; they were paid by the receiving museum. What they did say was that this only happened after extensive negotiations, which led to the museum transporting less original pieces to China than initially planned and the museum was left with only a small revenue. All other three respondents with experience collaborating with Chinese museums said they resorted to unusual methods, such as a commercial sponsor or the Dutch government providing the loan fees that usually get paid by the receiving museum. In Misha's case, the exhibition, arguably, became a commercial product because it was organised as PR material for a Dutch bank. The museum that Mika refers to is different from Misha's, and this

museum never got to execute their international exhibition in China.

For Ali, Misha and Mika, their experience with this difficulty has not stopped them from attempting new projects in China, and they continue to assume that these will come with financial opportunities. Ali travelled to China in 2018 to scout new opportunities, Mika's colleagues did the same in 2017 and Misha confirmed that their museum maintains warm contacts in China to see if there are opportunities in the future. They did, however, confirm that it does have to be commercially interesting for them to do it. The occurrence of this misconception means that the participants act on the assumption that the Chinese museum sector operates in the same way as the globally accepted system – the 'if you want something, you have to pay for it' system accepted in many countries, as Jip expressed above.

Some respondents expressed feelings of hesitation towards collaborating with Chinese museums. This hesitation was mainly based on the potential for identity harm that could be done by collaborating with a Chinese partner because of China's political reputation. Jessie and Charlie mentioned the human rights violations happening in China, with issues such as breaches of privacy by the government and the treatment of Uighurs, as issues their institutions do not want to be associated with. Several respondents expressed that institutions such as museums are increasingly being held accountable by the public for associating themselves with 'wrong' partners. This is a real fear, as this happened to museums such as Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou and the Victoria and Albert Museum after their announcements of involvement in China (Ruiz 2020a; 2020c; 2020b).

I can imagine that we would have to think seriously about associating ourselves with China. There is so much unrest in China and enough reason to be critical about their politics and human rights violations. I think this could play a role because as a museum, we are increasingly being held accountable for our actions, and rightfully so. (Jessie)

I will always be of the opinion that we should avoid association with countries that are involved in human rights violations or other horrifying activities. (Charlie)

Jessie and Charlie refer here to the Chinese government's actions they do not want to support.

This point was made by two participants who had not actually collaborated with China nor made serious attempts to do so. None of the participants who had been involved in collaborations with Chinese museums expressed this sentiment.

To sum up, the respondents perceived the Chinese museum sector as a financially strong sector which is quickly developing. This leads to the perception that Dutch museums can make money by collaborating and/or creating a presence in China. This perception comes from the general conception of China as a global economic power. It is important to consider that the self-conception of the Dutch museum sector is especially at the moment of interviewing low. The Dutch museum sector has flourished over the past years in terms of visitors; however, due to cuts in subsidy budgets, museums have struggled to keep up. Thereby, at the time of interviewing, the COVID-19 crisis had caused Dutch museums to be closed for several months, causing serious financial issues (Thompson 2021). Sam addressed this topic directly by stating,

They [Chinese museums] can even keep developing now, because there is no COVID-19 there at the moment.

It is important to recognise this because how the respondents perceive Chinese museums is inevitably interlinked with the way the respondents perceive their own sector (Madsen 1995). It is believed that different respondents were affected by this differently. Sam, for example, has been severely affected; their museum has cancelled all international activities until July 2021. However, some respondents work for museums that are still expecting to organise exhibitions abroad later in the year or are still actively seeking international opportunities. It is expected that, overall the effect of the Dutch museums' financial status does contribute to the participants perceiving China as 'wealthy'.

5.2: The state of development of the Chinese museum sector

There are two aspects to the perception of the development of the Chinese museum sector held by the respondents. On the one hand, the respondents frequently used the words 'modern' and 'professional' to describe elements of the Chinese museum sector. On the other hand, many typically Chinese museum practices were overlooked or seen as 'unprofessional'. 'Modern' is a contested concept which, in the eyes of many academics, renders the process of becoming modern, at least in the first instance, with endogenous European development (Bhambra 2011; Valade 2015). This chapter will first demonstrate how the words 'modern' and 'professional'

were used by respondents and what specific properties of the Chinese museum sector were considered to qualify for these terms. This will show that the basis on which the respondents consider China's museum practices modern is indeed based on elements of the Chinese museum sector that overlap with their own museum practices. The respondents did not mention unique Chinese museum practices when not specifically asked about them or perceived them as 'unprofessional'. Only a few signs of the respondents being inspired by unique Chinese museum practices were expressed.

5.2.1: The Chinese museum sector considered modern

Here, I delve deeper into the meanings of 'modern' and 'professional' implied by the participants when using the words to describe elements of the Chinese museum sector, showing that these were only used to describe elements that resemble the respondents own museum practices. This sentiment is evident in the following quote by Ali:

The new [Chinese] museums comply with modern museum requirements, but we [Ali and colleagues] always visit to really make sure everything is perfect. We do this for every collaboration, anywhere in the world. We check not only if the building is modern, if there is climate regulation and if there is enough space but also what the security is like, if the staff speaks English, if they can communicate well and if they have worked with international museums before.

That Ali equates new Chinese museums with ‘modern’ is clear from the first sentence, implying that in their experience, Chinese museums are modern buildings that have climate regulation and enough space, security and English-speaking staff that can communicate well. Regarding communicating well, Ali implied that the staff is easy to reach and responsive to emails. However, this quote also shows that Ali expects specific requirements of museums worldwide. These requirements strongly overlap with how the responders operate in their own museums. Jessie for example indicated that their museum knows ‘everything’ about climate control, and that this is something that needs to be negotiated whenever artworks travel to a different museum. Also when it comes to security many responders considered their own practices the norm, expecting and requiring museums around the world to operate with the same standards. This expectation is in some ways understandable. The respondents mentioned frequently that they see their job mainly as protector of the collection that their museum holds, it is at the core of their task as a museum professional to show this collection to people but also to preserve it for future generations. No risks when it comes to the art or artefacts can therefore be made. They need to therefore ensure security when organising traveling exhibitions. However, Ali also sets standards that are not purely necessary to protect the collection. ‘Speaking English’, ‘communicating well’ and ‘work[ing] with international museums before’ are standards that make it easier to collaborate, but they also fall under practices that Dutch museums already do. The respondents therefore expect the Chinese museum sector to operate just like or similar to their own museums.

Similarly to ‘modern’, the respondents clearly held specific requirements for what it means to be professional, as stated by Sam in the following quote:

The most impressive thing is the professionalism. So much has changed in the past years [...]. They know what they are talking about now. We look at the way museums are built, how they can regulate climate, the level of security and the way they deal with the art, all of that developed really quickly.

Similarly to Ali, Sam praises the Chinese museum they worked with for being professional for exactly the skills that are already present in Western museum practice and compares the current situation to that of some years ago when these elements of Chinese practice were not yet present. The statement ‘They know what they are talking about now’ in this case means that Chinese museum professionals keep up with the standards accepted in Western museum practice. The perspective is that Chinese professionals are the ones that adjusted and can now ‘keep up’ with Western practice. Like the meaning of ‘modern’, ‘professional’ is also understood by the respondents as a move made towards the standards that are held in Western museum practice. This is in line with the understanding of modernism.

The respondents refrained from orientalising the Chinese museum sector. Under orientalising, comments would be considered views that assume the ‘other’ as inferior, exotic, static and stuck in a fixed ancient time (Said 1978; Fabian 1983). As shown in the previous section, rather than ‘static’ and ‘stuck’, the participants perceived China’s museum sector as

‘dynamic’ (Ali) and ‘rapidly evolving’ (Sam and Jamie). However, the recognition of the Chinese museum sector as evolving is strongly based on its move from being underdeveloped some years ago to being similar to Western museum practice. Alex, for example, expressed that in their experience, organising an exhibition in China in 2007 was completely different from his second experience in 2017. The major difference Alex indicated was that in 2007, almost everything needed to be communicated through a translator, but in 2017, they could communicate directly because the museum staff spoke English well. For Alex, this made the experience in 2017 much more professional. This is another case in which a Western way of communicating, in English, is equated to professionalism.

5.2.2: Unique Chinese museum practices considered ‘unprofessional’

Respondents considered unique Chinese museum practices unprofessional. This was most clearly demonstrated by Ali, who experienced bringing an exhibition to China as part of a project organised by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This project was in itself already new to Ali since it was required to be organised on short notice and in collaboration with a partner chosen by the ministry. Ali’s biggest frustration with this was that the exhibition was held in a nonmuseological setting. The location for the exhibition was temporarily transformed for the purpose of this exhibition. Ali expressed being nervous about this project and experiencing it as ‘stressful’:

We are very used to working with strict museological requirements, and in China, we did have to explain to them quite often why we wanted them to do things a certain way. It did need more explanations and more back-and-forth communication. We kept repeating, 'Do you understand?' At the same time, we had to give them some freedom, of course.

This quote shows that Ali had doubts about the professionalism of the people they worked with due to the unusual situation. Jip, who is an independent consultant, expressed a different view on this topic by stating that this experience could have been a great learning curve for the Dutch museum in terms of public engagement – a topic that is of great significance for many Dutch museums, as they struggle to reach more diverse audiences. The exhibition in question was held in close proximity to a public place with high levels of foot traffic. Hence, the exhibition reached people who would not likely visit a museum. Jip considered the project very successful for this reason and stated that this method could also have been seen as inspiring by Ali and their museum. According to Jip, exhibitions like this one are relatively normal in China. Ali indicated, however, that they are only interested in working in China again if it is in a museum setting. In the following quote, they explain why:

Museums speak the same language, and that works a lot nicer. You understand what you are talking about.

From this quote, it becomes apparent that Ali seeks similarity and safety when seeking collaborations. Their preference is to stay doing similar things rather than learn new practices. They overlook the possibility that the Chinese partner actually had a good idea. By putting these strict requirements on international collaborations, Ali actively participates in a process of homogenising global museum culture because there is a chance that some museums will finally comply with their strict requirements.

5.2.3: Western museum practices as ‘good examples’

The rest of this chapter argues that the respondents imagine their own practices to be inspiring for Chinese museum professionals and are simultaneously not open to being inspired by Chinese practices. This contradicts recent literature in museum studies about museums’ international practices. Davidson (2019) argues that international museum collaborations are specifically valuable ‘contact zones’ for cosmopolitan encounters, meaning that international museum collaborations constitute a give-and-take process of sharing knowledge and practices. This process is directly linked with network models of cultural flows – that is, interactions between centre and periphery countries lead to an interaction between cultures in which both sides learn and adopt. However, throughout all interviews, only one participant mentioned having been inspired by the museological practices they encountered during a collaboration project with a Chinese museum:

We learned so much, our organisation really became much more professional there [in China]. We started seeing the value of cultural heritage and our own collection. We also learned how to deal with our collection better. (Jamie)

This shows the multidirectional give-and-take process that Appadurai (1996) argues for in his network model of cultural globalisation. According to Appadurai, these kinds of interactions lead to hybridisation. Ali recognises that international collaborations can be valuable for museum staff as an experience to learn and grow, much in line with what the literature on museum studies emphasises (Davidson 2019; Cai 2013). The only other topic in which participants showed concrete signs of having experienced or expecting to experience Chinese museum practices was in the use of technology. Chinese professionals are, according to the participants, ahead in terms of use of technology, as expressed in the following statements:

I was so surprised about the professionalism – the way they worked with computers, for example, they just knew so much more than me. I was so impressed. (Alex)

They have a focus on the contemporary and the future – which is reinforced by their focus on technology, in which most people in Asia are much better at than we are here. I think we are catching up in this field, but there is still some way to go. (Mika)

These statements aim to express that the foreign practice is inspiring and indicate the willingness to include this in their own practice. However, most of the respondents did not assume the bidirectional working of this. In the following quote, Ali states that Chinese museums want to collaborate because they want to learn from the professionalism of Western museums:

I think that they are looking for new opportunities to learn and develop their museological practice and professionalism. It is a valuable experience to work with museums in different countries, and because they are working so hard on their professionalism, they really want to learn from international museums. They want to learn from our way of working.

This assumption that Chinese museum professionals are interested in learning from Western museums was also reflected in a programme run by the Louvre and Van Gogh Museum in 2019. Jip expressed that the two museums, together, tried to organise a collaborative ‘museum masterclass’ for Chinese museum professionals. This masterclass was set up as a commercial activity for both museums, asking a fee for participation from Chinese professionals. The assumption of the Louvre and Van Gogh Museum was that Chinese museum professionals would be willing to pay the fee to learn from the big names in the international museum world. Ali’s statement and the museum masterclass show that the perception exists that China’s museum sector will, and wants to, develop similar practices to that of Western museums. This section showed that the study respondents consider the Chinese museum sector as modern but also

showed that this classification is predominantly based on elements of Chinese museum practices that mimic those of the respondents museum sector.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has considered the following question: *How do Dutch museum professionals perceive the Chinese museum sector?* First, the data indicates that the respondents actively include the Chinese museum sector in the global museum sector. This behaviour is mainly derived from the perception that collaborating with Chinese museums can be a financial opportunity for the respondents' museums. This perception, held by the respondents, is the result of the more general image of China as an important global economic power. As a result, the respondents actively seek collaborations. This is evident from the fact that many Dutch museums have conducted research in China and are closely monitoring developments. A second major theme derived from the data is that the participants consider many elements of the Chinese museum sector to be 'modern'. Newly built museum buildings are considered 'high quality', the way art is dealt with is 'up to standard' and other museological practices are 'professional'. However, within the same chapter, I concluded that the basis on which the Chinese museum sector is considered modern relies on elements that resonate with the respondents own practices – that is, the respondents make sense of the Chinese museum sector vis-a-vis 'the West'.

Some findings were surprising. I had expected that Dutch museum professionals would perceive collaborating with China as a financial opportunity. In fact, one of the inspirations for this thesis was a series of articles in *The Art Newspaper* about big international museums making large amounts of money from their collaborations in China (Ruiz 2020c). What I did not expect was the finding that this is not often the case. Many of the respondents who had organised a

travelling exhibition in China before expressed that they had only been able to do so because of available alternative funding for their projects because the Chinese museums would not cover loan fees. The most usual course of action when big exhibitions of international art are to be held in China is that the lending museum's government funds it as an action of cultural diplomacy or a museum finds a commercial sponsor that has an interest in creating brand visibility in China. For the few Dutch museums that have exhibited in China, this was also the case. A related surprising finding was that the Dutch government is especially passive when it comes to cultural diplomacy. Dutch museums only occasionally receive funding from the government to engage in international activities, whereas some countries are more active in funding acts of cultural diplomacy. France was mentioned by the respondents as particularly active in supporting international museum collaborations between French museums and those in other countries.

The main conclusion of this thesis is that Dutch museum professionals, as part of a 'central' museum sector, perceive the 'peripheral' Chinese museum sector as a valuable potential collaboration partner. However, in terms of the cultural development of the Chinese museum sector itself, Dutch museum professionals still regard it as peripheral in the way that Dutch museum professionals assume that Chinese museums are, and will increasingly become, like 'Western' museums.

This thesis adds to the still small, but growing, body of museum studies literature that combines a focus on practice theory with the international work of museums (Kong 2015; Cai 2013; Davidson 2019; Mason 2013) by taking on a different theoretical approach. Where Kong's, Cai's and Davidson's discussions on international exhibition practice rely heavily on cultural

diplomacy, this thesis has been based on the theory of cultural globalisation (Kong 2019; Cai 2013; Davidson 2019), focusing on the perceptions of museum professionals rather than the actual consequences of their work. This is seen as a valuable step towards understanding the work of museum professionals and the consequences of their perceptions for the course of the globalisation of the global museum sector. This thesis also adds to the literature on the Chinese museum sector and Chinese cultural diplomacy by exploring how the Chinese museum sector is received by an international community.

This thesis was written at a time when some of the processes of globalisation were interrupted, and phrases such as ‘ever-increasing global flows’ suddenly became questioned. The whole world has been greatly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, and it has had a great impact on the professional work of the participants in this thesis. Hence, it is possible that the respondents temporarily felt differently about their global practices. Some respondents feared for their jobs and had already witnessed colleagues getting fired. One respondent even had to let go of the whole international exhibitions organising team that they managed. It is expected that some participants will be more careful with being hopeful about international collaborations in the near future.

The conclusions made in this thesis are specific to the relationship between Dutch and Chinese museum sectors. However, it is possible that some of the conclusions carry over to views held by museum professionals of other ‘central’ countries towards ‘peripheral’ ones. These could include countries such as France, the US and Germany, which all have many museums that are active internationally. Museums in countries such as Brazil, New Zealand and the UAE,

which have a shorter history of museums but are rapidly expanding, could be possible ‘periphery’ countries to consider. Besides looking at how ‘central’ museum sectors look at ‘peripheral’ ones, it would also be valuable to look at this dynamic the other way around and assess how ‘peripheral’ museum sectors perceive specific ‘central’ ones. This thesis shows that the perspectives that museum professionals have of museum sectors in different countries does affect their behaviour towards these sectors. It is, therefore, important to create a deeper understanding of how museum professionals perceive the course of development of other museum sectors, especially as more and more museums from ‘peripheral countries’ take part in international museum collaborations.

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Appendix - Interview questions*

Introduction questions:

1. How long have you been working in the Museum sector?
2. Have you worked in different sectors? What kind of positions?
3. Within your current role, how often do you work internationally? Weekly, monthly, annually?
4. What are the international activities that you are involved in? (ask for multiple)
5. When you work internationally, who do you work with? Are these museums, commercial parties? Agencies? What does this depend on?

Question about the international roles of museums

1. Why are international activities important for your museum?

Questions about collaborating with China

1. Do you have experience with working with Chinese partners? If yes:
 - a. Can you describe this experience? (make sure to ask if there are multiple experiences)
 - b. How did this collaboration emerge? Who initiated it? And why was the initiative taken?
 - c. Can you explain how the communication was done?
 - d. What did you know about the Chinese museum landscape before starting the collaboration?
 - e. What did you learn from collaborating with the Chinese partner? Did you expect to learn this?
 - f. Did your opinion of the Chinese museum landscape change after this experience? Why and how?
 - g. What were the similarities/ differences between working with this Chinese partner and partners from other countries you have worked with?
 - h. Do you think your organisation will seek collaboration with a Chinese partner again? Are there any things you would do differently?

- i. Do you think that the collaboration had any effect on your organisation?
2. If no:
 - a. Why do you think you have not yet been exposed to collaborating with China within your international work?
 - b. Have you considered seeking out opportunities for collaboration in China? why/ why not?
 - c. What would be the main reason for seeking out collaboration with a Chinese partner?
 - d. Do you know if your institution has ever considered a collaboration with a Chinese partner? Do you think people would be interested?/ why not?
 - e. Have you heard of other museums working with or in China? What do you think of these projects?
 - f. What do you know about the Chinese museum sector?

General questions about the Chinese museum sector

1. Do you have personal experience with China?
2. Where do you get information about the Chinese museum sector from?
3. Are you aware of a general image of the Chinese museum sector amongst colleagues? If yes: can you describe this image?
4. Do you feel like you are up to date with what is happening in the Chinese museum sector? If yes: what are the most important developments and what do you think of those?
5. What are the main differences between Dutch and Chinese museums? Similarities?

* Questions were originally in Dutch, this translation is done by myself