

Representing and ‘Consuming’ the Chinese Other at the British Museum

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In this paper, I propose to analyse the way in which the British Museum perceives, interprets and addresses cultural diversity. As a case study, I consider the museum representation of the Chinese ‘Other’. Building on an analysis of the Chinese permanent gallery as well as of the temporary exhibition “The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army”, I set to investigate how the Museum portrays China and Chinese culture. What is exhibited and what is omitted? How is the image of China constructed? What forces – political, economic, social or other – contributed to shape it? Through these questions, I aim at pondering how the representation of China in the British Museum articulates with the expectations of its multicultural and increasingly globalized public.

The colonial past is often a key factor in the museum representation of other cultures, and as such it has legitimately been at the core of the reflection on museums’ approaches to alterity. However, I want to argue that the analysis should not be confined to colonialist or post-colonialist historical perspectives, but remain open to include contemporary socio-political and economic factors. The British Museum case study suggests that the economy of travel, the evolution of consumer tastes and demands, renewed opportunities for commercial exchange and business enterprise, an important Chinese community in London and the UK, and global scale media events such as the 2008 Olympic Games (hosted by China), are all factors that affect museums and museum representations, to the extent that they impact on audiences, on their tastes, interests and expectations. It is of crucial importance to acknowledge that museums are becoming increasingly receptive *vis-à-vis* such patterns of change, all the more if of global scale.

Methodologically, the arguments put forward in this paper rest on an analysis of the museological choices underlying the displays in the Chinese permanent gallery and the temporary exhibition “The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army” aimed at disentangling the narrative lines underlying the exhibitions.

Through this analysis I wish to suggest that the museum representation of the Chinese ‘Other’ at the British Museum rests on two different, though complementary, narrative lines. On the one hand, in the permanent gallery, the

Museum is carrying on its 'traditional' function as a public education institution. On the other, in the temporary exhibition, the Museum is responding to the demand for cultural consumption of its increasingly consumption-oriented audiences.

There is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical, a political act.
(Fabian 1983: 1)

Taking Fabian's provocative assertion as a starting point, I propose to analyse the museum representation of the Chinese 'Other' in the British Museum¹. Building on an analysis of both the Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities, where most of the Chinese collections are exhibited, and the temporary exhibition entitled 'The First Emperor. China's Terracotta Army', I set out to investigate the way in which the Museum portrays China and Chinese culture. What is exhibited and what is omitted? How is this image constructed? What forces – political, economic, social or other – contribute to shape it?

Through this investigation, I aim at pondering how the representation of China in the British Museum articulates with the challenges of globalisation and the expectations of its multicultural public. My reflection rests on the assumption that the way an institution, in this case the British Museum, depicts Otherness sheds light on how cultural diversity is perceived, re-shuffled and expressed by national museums, understood as public constituencies from which governmental cultural policies emanate. As one of the most prominent museums in the world, the curatorial choices made at the British Museum do bear significant political and social resonances. Unravelling such choices and their logic helps us to better understand the role that national museums play in the formation of individual as well as collective identities.

Methodologically, the arguments put forward in this paper rest on an analysis of the museological choices underlying the displays in the Chinese permanent gallery and the temporary exhibition. The investigation will focus, among others, on the organisation of space, layout, juxtaposition and sequence of objects, labels, panels and other museum texts.

China in the UK

A historical perspective allows a full appreciation of the changes that have been shaping the perception and representation of Chinese art and civilisation in the West, notably in the United Kingdom, over the last two centuries. Far from attempting to summarize the history of Sino-Western cultural and artistic relations in a few paragraphs, my aim here is merely to draw attention to the fact that the view of China and Chinese civilisation has sensibly varied over time as a result of changing international political and economic conjunctures. For instance, until the mid nineteenth century, the image of China in the UK was that of a model society, albeit considered 'exotic and unusual' (Pagani 1998: 28). But later, the break of the Opium War, in 1839, led to a neat decrease in the esteem that China enjoyed in the eyes of the British, to whom victory gave a sense of cultural and technological superiority. As Catherine Pagani remarks, in the second half of the nineteenth century 'China was regarded as a marketable commodity just as were her products' (1998: 29). At the turn of the century, at a time when progressivist ideas were spreading in the UK, the interest for 'things Chinese', especially for late Qing items, was at its lowest. The increasing demand for chinoiserie, a form of art and craft imbued with exoticism, signalled the decline of China's artistic lead 'at the very period when the West, in particular Britain, was enforcing its political and economic hegemony in the Far East' (Clunas 1987: 20). Things changed with the turn of the century, when the interest for Chinese artefacts was enhanced by a series of extraordinary

1 This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference *NaMu III: National Museums in a Global World*, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, Norway, 19-21 November 2007.

archaeological findings, gradually bringing to the light the cultures of Ancient China². Early Chinese art provided a source of inspiration (somehow echoing the role that primitive art had played for Cubist and Surrealist artists), a ‘novelty’ that came to refresh the image of Chinese art and material culture, notably superscribing the static and decadent qualities of late Imperial art, no longer able to arouse collectors’ interest (c.f. Clunas 1998).

I wish to ponder a few points of this brief excursus of the perception of Chinese art in Britain and the West. Over the nineteenth century, a cleavage gradually formed between worsening considerations of the Chinese people and a relatively high esteem for Chinese art and material culture. In this chasm one might see the seeds of a dissociation between the artistic production of China and its socio-political context – a dissociation that, I argue, persists in today’s museum representations, though in a different form. Indeed, Craig Clunas aptly reminds us that the very notion of ‘Chinese art’ is a creation of nineteenth century Europe and North America. This notion allowed the grouping of a corpus of artistic production spanning over two millennia and including an heterogeneous ensemble of materials, techniques, styles, references, values and meanings. Therefore, in line with Orientalist discursive practices, the notion of ‘Chinese art’ allowed for an emphasis of the differences *between* Chinese and Western art, and the contextual blurring of diversity *within* Chinese art (Clunas 1997a: 9). However, with time, fissures developed along the lines of what was considered art by Chinese *versus* what was considered art by the British colonizer. Once more, Clunas remarks that ‘Chinese elite categorizations of art, as expressed in texts, as well as in the practices of the art and craft markets, excluded much of the Chinese material subsequently displayed in the museum context in Britain’ (1997b: 418). Such a discrepancy between the Chinese and the British concepts of art is intriguingly mirrored by museum Chinese collections. I will take the examples of bronze vessels, jade carvings and calligraphy. Although iconically Chinese, these items rarely constitute highlights in the Chinese collections of British (and for that matter, Western) museums – which rather tend to focus on ceramics, silks and furniture (c.f. Clunas, 1987). In contrast, these same items are almost invariably at the core of collections and exhibitions in China. As a partial explanation for this, I should like to emphasize that the appreciation of these artefacts tends to require a ‘skilled vision’ (Grasseni 2007), intertwined with what I would call a ‘cultured vision’: these items (and associated artistic practices and traditions) embody and convey a system of references that is firmly enshrined in the Chinese cultural universe. Thus, their full appreciation requires some knowledge of, and sensitivity to, their cultural salience. So for instance, Chinese audiences will normally be familiar with the historical ritual use of bronzes to symbolize the legitimate detention of political authority, or the historical associations between calligraphy and the literati class. Consequently, the prominence granted to these artefacts in museum exhibitions in China is not only unquestioned, but indeed expected.

As we have seen, for centuries China and Chinese art have attracted (with various degrees of success) the interest of Western audiences, and this movement of interest extends to the present day. Indeed, I would say that over the last two decades, we have been witnessing a marked renewal of interest for Chinese art. An indicator of that is the total refurbishment, in the early 1990s, of the Chinese galleries of two major museums in the UK – the Victoria&Albert and the British Museum. So, what is happening, why are we today more than ever so fascinated by China? As an explanation of the interest for China over the first half of

2 I refer for instance to the archaeological findings of the Anyang site, Henan, in 1928, followed, among the others, by the excavations in Mawangdui, Hunan 1972, the discovery of the Terracotta Army, Xi'an, Shaanxi, in 1974, of Shang funerary complexes in Anyang and Shaanxi, in 1976, the tomb of Yi Marquis of Zeng, Hupei, in 1978, and the Ancient Shu civilisation, Guanghan, Sichuan, in 1986.

the twentieth century, Craig Clunas argues that, following the disappearance of the old ‘empires’ – the Russia of the czars, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman – the ‘nostalgia for one empire slid across into nostalgia for all and souvenirs of empire became fetishes of consolation’ (1998: 48). Although I am not persuaded that the disappearance of the old empires generated a collective need for consolation, I feel that with the references to nostalgia and the souvenir-fetish, Clunas is touching upon crucial knots of the process of encounter with the Chinese Other, knots that, as I try to show in this paper, are not confined to the past. Building on Clunas’ insights, one might caution that the frenzy for culture consumption that accompanies ‘blockbuster’ exhibitions such as ‘The First Emperor. China’s Terracotta Army’ may be framed as a collective attempt to appropriate both the past (with the demand for ‘souvenirs’) and the Other (with the demand for ‘fetishes’). I will return to this point in the conclusive remarks. To disentangle these questions, one might start with an analysis of one of the main loci of representation of China in the West: the exhibition rooms of the British Museum.

The Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities

The Chinese collections are exhibited in what is today known as the Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities, thoroughly refurbished in 1992 in respect with the original architecture dating back to 1914. The gallery is part of the former department of Asia (previously Oriental Antiquities, created in 1933³). The department’s art-historical approach to artefacts was emphasized following the destination of part of the collections to the department of ethnography in 1946 (from which they were separated and again incorporated into the department of Asia in 2005). Today, the gallery appears as a wide, bright space where Western neoclassic architecture and mahogany glass cases counterpoint the ‘Orientalism’ of the exhibits (Figure 1).

Figure 1: View of the Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities, British Museum.



Photo by the author.

3 In 2003, the Departments of Oriental Antiquities and Japanese Antiquities merged to form the Department of Asia.

It is known that the architecture of a museum is a statement in its own right, it sets the tone and complements the museum experience (see for instance Giebelhausen, 2003). The Hotung gallery is no exception: its neoclassic style, the ascending steps, the grandiose doorways and imposing colonnades implicitly suggest and induce a formal, respectful, almost reverential approach. At the same time, the reference to ancient civilisations such as the Greeks and the Romans asserts a continuity with that past and its values: beauty, symmetry, harmony, purity of forms, rationality, rigour and overall, political, intellectual and moral authority – these elements are particularly relevant in a permanent gallery devoted to non-European cultures. The objects on display include bronzes, ceramics, decorative items and religious sculpture, spanning from the Neolithic to the late Qing Dynasty. The collection is the outcome of over two centuries of scattered collecting activities, mostly conducted in the framework of the colonial system, hence inspired by the idea of *revealing* China to Western audiences. Although the aesthetics of objects is taken into account (as witness the detailed descriptions of decorative patterns for instance) several elements suggest that the educational dimension primes over artistic concerns. I refer for instance to the historical-ethnographic style of the layout, where sets of objects are grouped by periodicity and function so as to create sequences showing the variety and the evolution of forms (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities, British Museum.



Photo by the author.

An educational approach is also elicited by the use of demonstrative models to illustrate technical processes such as bronze casting techniques, or the cutting and carving of jade. In a similar vein, a ‘hands-on’ table allows visitors to physically familiarize themselves with some artefacts. But objects are not merely defined by their materiality: texts supply ample information about the socio-political historical contexts of production and use. Consistently, extensive labels offer not only basic details such as material, period and location, but also information about the utilitarian or ritual functions, the significance and value of the item. For instance, text panels include extracts from Chinese classic texts (such as the *Book of Songs*) and poems to explain at length the ritual relevance of bronze vessels and jade accoutrements. In addition, it is interesting to note that the exhibition includes items of the material culture of non-Han peoples, although these do not refer to present-day ethnic minorities, but are archaeological findings relating to ancient cultures dating back to the third century BC (reference is made to ancient Mongolian bronze ornaments and weapons, and Yunnanese bronzes). A comparative approach emerges from the exhibition, which emphasizes the uniqueness of Chinese cultural traits, implicitly juxtaposing them to their Western correspondent (or their absence). The gallery’s main introductory text announces in fact that ‘the gallery illustrates ways of life and systems of belief very different from those valued from Western cultures’⁴.

In spite of the variety of materials, styles and epochs, the exhibits in the Oriental Antiquities gallery share an important feature: they are mostly ceremonial, ornamental, or prestige items. They speak of the refinement, the technological advancement and the social organisation of the Chinese civilisation, whose development is presented here as a linear progression almost deprived of hiatus. So historicized and essentialized, China is constructed as a unified, homogeneous entity crystallized in both time and space. For instance, non-Han material culture is presented as peripheral in relation to the centrality of the Imperial system and its Court culture, ultimately resting at the core of the display. In a successful, though anachronistic exercise of objectification, the Hotung gallery delivers the image of a refined, cultivated, elitist, male, urban, Imperial China – an image that is made to signify ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’ in the eyes of the world.

The Temporary Exhibition “The First Emperor. China’s Terracotta Army”

From September 2007 to April 2008, the British Museum is hosting the exhibition ‘The First Emperor. China’s terracotta army’. To describe it, the media have talked of a ‘show’, ‘a grand theatre’, a ‘blockbuster exhibition’ a ‘life-time event’. Let us then take a closer look at it.

The display includes some 120 objects on loan from Chinese Museums including twenty figures from the Qin Shi Huang Terracotta Warriors and Horses Museum, in Xi’an. The exhibition is divided into two sections. The first describes the accomplishments of the Emperor during his reign, the second focuses on the after life, and notably on the funerary set. The achievements of the Emperor are illustrated through warfare implements, decorative items and symbols of authority (such as seals and Imperial standards: money, measuring cups and weights), whilst the tomb accoutrements mainly revolve around the famous terracotta soldiers. In proportion to the number of objects on display, the exhibition presents a relatively important amount of information support material. This includes for instance large scale pictures, replicas (a chariot, a wooden bow), a model of the Imperial palace, as well as two short videos, the first an extract from a Chinese epic film, the second a computerized virtual reconstruction of the tomb interiors. The exhibition layout privileges a relatively small number of objects in large glass cases, individual glass boxes and, as in the case of the

4 Museum panel, Joseph Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities, British Museum. Last visited October 2007.

terracotta warriors, the elimination of physical barriers allowing an all-round, unmediated appreciation of the details. Heavy use is made of contraposition techniques: objects are immersed in cones of light against a very dark background – tomb-like, precisely. Contrasting effects are also created through materials, surfaces, textures, whereby the rough, irregular, porous texture of terracotta contrasts with the polished surfaces of floors and panels, and the smoothness of background textiles. This layout is the outcome of a specific museological approach to objects – an approach that can be found in many of the most recent art and history museums in China as well. In this museological paradigm, artefacts are alienated from their contexts of creation or use. In a somehow ironic twist, these objects – which are in fact the outcome of a mass-production system (see Clunas 1997a, Ledderose 2000) – are today exhibited as individualized works of art in their own right. It is intriguing that, as Ladislav Kesner notes in his meta-critique of the sculptures, Chinese archaeologists tend to similarly focus on the sculptures’ materiality, highlighting for instance their ‘realism’, the wealth and precision of details, the correctness of proportions and so on. However, their vision is not guided by aesthetic concerns, but rather, explains Kesner, is imprinted with the Marxist approach to art, whereby “‘realism’ per se stands for a sign of artistic quality and evolutionary progress’ (1995: 117). Conversely, Craig Clunas notes that it is not so much the material, nor the aesthetics, nor the realism of sculptures that deserve note, but rather the scale and the techniques employed: a modular system combining sets of prefabricated parts. This remarkable feat, requesting an unprecedented mobilization of resources, has made Clunas comment “the army is a triumph of bureaucracy as much as of art” (1997a: 30). But crucially, this does not emerge from the exhibition, which rather stresses the objects’ individuality, in an attempt to singularize them, to emphasize their materiality, their charismatic aura, their aesthetics and ultimately assert their status of art objects. Consistently with such a view, objects have to be aesthetically pleasant, ideally complete (for instance, efforts have been made to disguise the mutilation of a one-legged acrobat sculpture), and aseptic (any sensory appreciation, other than visual, is carefully removed: any trace of soil, dust, stains, smell of mould or of smoke that the visitor might witness in Xi’an, would most probably be perceived as highly inappropriate in this specific context)⁵.

Thus ‘epurated’, the exhibits are suitable to unfold the hagiography of the First Emperor. Through the singularisation of his funerary accoutrements, the exhibition substantiates the singularisation of the Emperor’s persona. The catalogue accompanying the exhibition adds a further, illuminating statement: ‘[*the First Emperor*] has become a symbol of China’s long and coherent cultural history and, now that China is rapidly developing, it reminds the world of China’s future potential’ (Portal and Duan, 2007). Following a practice largely employed by museums in China, a parallel is drawn between Ancient and contemporary China, whereby the admiration for the splendour of the Chinese past is projected onto its present. This is achieved through what Prasenjit Duara calls the strategy of ‘superscription of symbols’, whereby ‘what we have is a view of myth and its cultural symbols as simultaneously continuous and discontinuous. (...) cultural symbols are able to lend continuity at one level to changing social groups and interests even as the symbols themselves undergo transformations’ (1988: 779). In our case, it could be said that, paraphrasing Duara, the cultural symbol ‘The Terracotta Army’ is interpreted in such a way as to lend continuity to the myth of the ‘First Emperor’, making it relevant for the present. However, the discourses in which this cultural symbol is embedded in its British Museum representation vary sensibly

5 My point here is not so much to lament the lack of non-visual sensory appreciation, as to acknowledge the potential for a different exhibitionary approach. More to the point, I refer to a recent museological orientation that advocates a (re-)introduction of the senses in the museum landscape. See for instance Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006.

from those of its Chinese counterparts. From the point of view of Chinese archaeologists and museologists, who, as noted, interpret the findings through the prism of Marxist theory – whereby the past is a dark era of oppression – the army represents, in the words of Fowler, a ‘visible symbol of the strength and genius of the People throughout three millennia of oppression that ended in 1949’ (1987: 239). In the British Museum, in contrast, the People are virtually absent, the narrative being entirely centred on the figure of the Emperor, constructed as an icon of the long, mythical, mysterious and magnificent Chinese past, crucially made to reverberate on China’s present. Framed through these lenses, and with the obvious endorsement of the Chinese government, the exhibition is an invitation to acknowledge China’s contemporary international status, to reassert the good diplomatic relations with the host of the 2012 Olympic Games, and possibly, more subtly, to ‘correct’ and improve on the opacities of an international image still suffering from a poor human-rights record, the environmental hazards of a ill-regulated industry sector, and the unpredictability of the Communist leadership. But China’s present is overall, and foremost, market-lead. A fact of which the visitor is abruptly reminded when at the end of the visit, leaving the dimly-lit, soft and solemn space of the exhibition, one suddenly finds oneself projected into the heart of the souvenir shop, for the occasion crammed full of First Emperor gadgets and merchandise (Figure 3).

Figure 3: British Museum souvenir shop, October 2007.



Photo by the author.

Discussion: comparing the gallery and the temporary exhibition

Through this analysis of the two displays of Chinese material culture – in the permanent gallery and the temporary exhibition – I wish to suggest that the museum representation of the

Chinese Other at the British Museum rests on two different, though complementary, narrative lines. On the one hand, in the permanent gallery, the museum is carrying out its 'traditional' function as a public education institution. On the other, through the sensationalism of the exhibition, it is promoting the entertaining aspect of the museum experience. To some extent, such division of functions between temporary and permanent exhibitions echoes Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's reading of Franz Boas's partition between 'the "exposition method" of commercial exhibits and the "museum method", which was systematic, scientific and educational' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 36). And yet the two representations share two major features: both essentialize Chinese culture, and both hark back to China's past, painstakingly reiterating its importance to understand a present that is actually eluded in both museum representations. Although there exists some kind of complementarity, to the extent that the temporary exhibition is actually 'filling a gap' in the permanent collection (very poor in objects of the Qin period), there is no patent link or cross-reference between the two displays. Although only a few meters distant, they appear totally separate, encapsulated in two distinct time/space, conceptual and museological bubbles.

I want then to ask: how is one to make sense of such an incongruous representation of the Chinese Other? I want to argue that in differentiating its offer – as didactic and leisure locus – the British Museum is negotiating its colonial past to adjust to political, economic and social changes at large. In step with the political agendas of both countries, the British Museum is interpreting and reflecting on the growing prominence of China in the UK and on the world scene. The booming economy of travel, the evolution of consumer tastes and demands (coupled with a more general trend of cultural consumerism), renewed opportunities for commercial exchanges and business enterprises, an important Chinese community in London and the UK, and global scale media events such as the 2008 Olympic Games (hosted by China), are all factors that affect the museum representation of China, to the extent that they impact on audiences and on their expectations. Operating on a responsive mode, the British Museum is striving to satisfy the demand for cultural consumption of its increasingly cosmopolitan, multicultural, informed and consumption-oriented audiences.

Commercialisation frames a new form of cultural appreciation, whereby leisure and consumption appear intricately linked. We are invited to 'buy' the Other, to bring it at home and consume it. Here the exhibition catalogue, the merchandise and the gadgets in the museum shop have metaphorically replaced the colonial trophies. But in this new form of cultural colonialism (or cultural cannibalism?) the ancient dualisms Empire/periphery and colonizer/colonized have thoroughly dissolved, giving way to an atomization, whereby each individual is given the option of enacting his/her own form of colonialism, of appropriation of the Other, or as Craig Clunas puts it, of 'private fetishism' (1998: 50). Daniel Miller has theoretically framed consumption practices as strategies through which individuals define their own identity (or identities) (Miller 1987). Drawing from Miller's insight, we might then see the 'consumption' of cultural diversity as a particular form of identity construction whereby the definition of the self involves the appropriation of the cultural Other. Here, citizenship and cultural boundaries collapse and gradually fade against a background where individual and collective cultural identities seem to be increasingly defined by (cultural) consumption practices.

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