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Framing China: performativity and narrative in museum displays of Chinese porcelain

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CONCLUSION

The work presented in the previous chapters throws light on the performative qualities of the museum display of Chinese porcelain. Evidence for this research has been drawn from two sources: primary sources from museum archives and curators; and secondary literature from various fields, which provided conceptual tools to underpin my close readings of museum displays and exhibitions. Bringing together these sources, this dissertation has presented a group of case studies to explore the underlying ideological potential of the apparently apolitical presentations of Chinese porcelain in museums. It has revealed how the techniques of display work together to construct narratives, and examined the spatial narratives produced by specific viewing orders as well. It has traced the shifting values and meanings of Chinese porcelain in changing museum settings and considered the juxtaposition of porcelain with other objects from different places as a cultural practice that can manifest ideologies related to the shaping of various Self-Other configurations.

In the British Museum, the drawing together of Chinese Ming pilgrim flasks with other objects in the galleries of China, India, West Asia, and Europe maps out the extensive circulation and exchange of things, styles, and techniques. This allows china to be identified as not only Chinese but also Indian, Persian, and European. Such a scheme of juxtaposition helps the museum to make its statement about global connectedness—a loosening or transcending of Self-Other boundaries—with a more coherent display throughout the galleries. In the Rijksmuseum, the multiple values attached to the pieces of Chinese porcelain on display contribute to the development of Dutch self-affirmation and national identity. The museum's Asian Pavilion, on the one hand, signifies the importance of the museum's Asian art collection in that it acquires a special, exclusive gallery space; while, on the other hand, the obvious difference between the museum's main building and the Asian Pavilion in terms of building style and object organization, perhaps, undesirably, raises an awareness of Self-Other differentiation. The underlying narrative of the Dutch domestication of Asian goods found in the Rijksmuseum's exhibition *Asia > Amsterdam* indicates a process of re-identification in which *they* (Asian material objects) were gradually embedded in *our* (Dutch) material culture; ultimately, *they* have become part of *us*. Such a message, comparatively, is not so evident in its twin exhibition, *Asia in Amsterdam*, at the PEM. The exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass* at the MET stages the process of exoticization. Its strategies of display enact a conceptual boundary that fixes the identity of Chinese porcelain and other Chinese collection pieces shown as a stereotypical Orientalist Other, readily mysterious, erotic, and effeminized. Compared to the aforementioned case studies, the National Palace Museum in Taiwan is deeply rooted in a more complex Self-Other configuration because of the intimate and yet remote (if not increasingly hostile) relationship between China and Taiwan. The museum's innovative policies of collection, display, and interpretation are correlated with the development of Taiwan's self-identity, from both Chinese and

Taiwanese to just Taiwanese. This redrawing of Taiwan's boundaries of cultural identity has a great impact on the museum's policy-making and self-positioning.

Although the discursiveness of museum display has been broadly acknowledged, few studies have adopted an object-focused approach to closely examine the effects intended in and produced through the way an object is put on display. This study has been an attempt to fill this gap by analyzing the performative aspects of selected semi-permanent and temporary exhibitions featuring Chinese porcelain. It seems to me that an object-focused approach is needed because, as this dissertation has sought to demonstrate, it enables the performativity of museum display to be measured in the context of various political and ideological forces. Methodologically, this dissertation has also shown that a close reading of museum displays in combination with conceptual tools from relevant disciplines is productive, even necessary, in order to better grasp and elucidate the artificiality of museums and the performativity of display. At the same time, to provide more dynamic, contextualized readings, contact with and publications from the curatorial side of things are equally important sources of reference.

This dissertation has adopted an object-based perspective and a case-study format to examine the performativity of museum display which, of course, has its limitations. The most obvious one of these is the small size of the sample: evidently, many important exhibitions of Chinese porcelain are not discussed in this thesis. As I have mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation was not intended to be a comprehensive exploration of porcelain display in the museum world, and my case selection was purposeful and restricted. Nevertheless, this selection was not just a limitation; it also served to narrow down the study to a manageable scope.

In the following, I recapitulate the main points that have been made over the previous five chapters and seek to outline areas for future research. I then draw the themes of this dissertation together to further consider the performativity of museum display in conjunction with the idea of showing framing.

Overview and Outlook

The notions of object biography, the global lives of things, and transculturation were used in the first chapter as conceptual tools to analyze the current distribution of Ming pilgrim flasks in the British Museum's China, India, Middle East, and Europe galleries. The wide-ranging trajectories of Ming porcelain make it a class of objects with often shifting identities, based on changing ownership and location. This chapter proposed that the trans-border arrangement within the British Museum maps out the narrative of transculturation. This narrative enables one to perceive the cultural-geographical boundaries that the gallery walls stand for as existing but traversable. The trans-border arrangement of Ming pilgrim flask and the underlying narrative of transculturation, I argued, constitute a narrative of transculturation that helps to move the museum beyond its centuries-old Enlightenment idea of universality.

The trans-border arrangement of Ming porcelain performs a blurring or transcending of the dominant, deterministic museum categories based on cultural-geographical division. It shows the potential of the museum to incorporate alternative spatial parameters to break apart such established spatial units as nation-states, regions and empires. It is here that such a scheme of arrangement is tied to

an increasingly global understanding of art history and material culture over the last three decades or so. As mentioned, the global turn in art history moves away from thinking of categories such as art, style, period, and nation as fixed and essential, placing more emphasis on material transfer and technical exchanges across existing cultural-geographical boundaries. This chapter discussed how trans-border thinking not only opens up new interpretative approaches to museum collection, but also promotes a rethinking of the imperialist metaphor of museum-as-map by revealing a more dynamic and fluid understanding of cultural identity in the postmodern world.

Of course, the British Museum is not the only museum that seeks to make a more coherent and interconnected display to emphasize cultural connection and exchange or to challenge the classification and display of objects based merely on their places of origin. For example, the seas and oceans filigreed with interregional trading networks have come to be a useful framework for museums to thaw monolithic categorization, as I briefly discussed in this chapter.⁵⁵¹ It is imaginable that there are other schemes of display, other approaches to reconsider the spatial qualities of museums in line with trans-border thinking. This leaves room for further research, aiming to identify innovative ways to move museums beyond culturally-bounded categorization as well as to investigate the effects produced by such movement. Moreover, how the digital space of the museum—which is not my focus here—can be engaged in promoting narratives of transculturality and understandings of the polysemous nature of collection pieces is another area that might be addressed in future research.

The second chapter traced the process through which Chinese porcelain has been imbued with decorative, historical, aesthetic, art-historical, and symbolic values through its display in the Rijksmuseum from the 1930s to today. I drew on the idea of the ‘extended self’ proposed by Russell Belk, the idea that part of one’s self-identity is defined by one’s possessions, to carry out a critical assessment of the effects occasioned by two schemes of juxtaposition: Dutch portraits with Chinese porcelain, and Dutch mapped landscapes with Chinese porcelain. I discussed how these schemes of juxtaposition are performative in that they make china an important factor in Dutch self-fashioning. This chapter also considered the effects that are both intended in and unintentionally generated through the contrasts in architectural style, interior design, and object arrangements between the museum’s main building and its annex Asian Pavilion.

This chapter showed the interplay between the collection history and presentation history of Chinese porcelain in the Rijksmuseum. As discussed, Chinese porcelain has been collected by and displayed in the galleries under the museum’s Departments of Sculpture and Applied Art, History, and Asian Art. Each department’s mission impacts the way Chinese porcelain is displayed and interpreted. The connections between the performativity of display and the collection histories and departmental structures of museum are worthy of future inquiry. Specifically, in terms of the Rijksmuseum, what deserves further attention are the institution’s recent efforts to move a bit beyond its deeply-rooted patriotism. The museum is now managing to engage in conversations about decolonization in the museum world. An evident example of this is that the museum will host a major special exhibition in Spring 2021, *Slavery*. For the very first time, the museum will hold an exhibition dedicated to revisiting the Netherland’s colonial past, and will do so by incorporating more diverse perspectives and voices

⁵⁵¹ For related exhibition practices, see Chapter 1 of this thesis, especially the section 1-3.

instead of retaining a Dutch-oriented point of view. Could this exhibition and the accompanying activities mark a new orientation that deviates from the museum's Dutch-centric positioning? Also, how will the Rijksmuseum's new developments bring new meanings and values to its collection pieces? These questions are left for future research.

Focalization was conjured up in the third chapter as both a narrative strategy employed by museums and an analytical tool that I applied to explore the potential ideologies of two museum exhibitions: *Asian > Amsterdam* at the Rijksmuseum and *Asia in Amsterdam* at the PEM. The two co-organized exhibitions share the same topic and overlapping objects. However, as I have shown through comparing their overall narrative structures and adopting focalization as a method of analysis, *Asia > Amsterdam* suggests a process of Dutch domestication of Asian goods, while *Asia in Amsterdam* brings more attention to the moral cost of the seventeenth-century Dutch presence in Asia. This chapter demonstrated how focalization can be a fruitful tool to analyze ideological overtones and reveal possible subjective interpretations of a museum exhibition. As Mieke Bal notes: "The significance of certain aspects cannot be viewed unless [they are] linked to focalization."⁵⁵² More extensive analysis of how the strategies of display create specific forms of focalization and thereby impact the messages produced would be an interesting direction for further investigation.

In the fourth chapter, I argued that the display strategies in *China: Through the Looking Glass* at the MET make the Chinese objects on display, including blue and white porcelain, into fetishized surfaces serving Orientalist stereotypes. This chapter revealed how the displayed Chinese objects are here reduced to a set of surface patterns that signify exoticness, mystery, and Chinese-ness, indiscriminately. It also demonstrated how Chinese porcelain in the exhibition is gender-coded, the porcelain body becoming a metonymy for female skin and flesh. This recalls an Orientalist gender paradigm: that is, the Orient as feminine and effeminized. This chapter demonstrated how a misleading scheme of arrangement can lead to a disparity between curatorial intentions and the resulting effects of a display.

Two observations in this chapter provide possible avenues for further research. The first regards the ideological dimension of sensory experience provided in museums. In this chapter, I proposed that the rich sensory experience the exhibition provides to its audiences—a dramatic lighting scheme and carefully designed juxtaposition together promote the textural details of the displayed objects, thereby inviting an embodied spectatorship—acts as more than just a visual feast for hungry eyes. Rather, this special sensory experience has an ideological underpinning in that it reflects the exhibition's proposition of an avowedly "less-politicized" Orientalism based on pure aestheticism. I argued that such a viewing experience potentially runs the risk of reducing the rich meanings of Chinese decorations to a set of surface patterns that can only evoke exoticism. From this perspective, the sensory experience the exhibition creates carries an undercurrent of Said's Orientalism. How techniques of display create specific sensory experiences that serve certain ideological interests is an area for more consideration.

The second area that could be expanded upon is the gender coding of museum objects. In this chapter, I analyzed the overt association of china/China and femininity through the exhibition's techniques of display, including the object arrangement, lighting scheme, and selected film clips played.

⁵⁵² Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Second Edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997[1985]), 171.

The issue of how a material object becomes a material expression of certain gendered qualities in a given social and cultural context has been examined in the fields of archaeology, art history, and material culture. It seems relevant to expand this field of research to museum studies, to see how the agency of display works to construct certain gendered identities. Upon which objects? For what purposes? Occasioning what intended and/or unintended effects? This would help us to understand how the gender coding of objects is not only generated by their physicality and usage in a given cultural context, but also enacted by the way they are displayed in museums.

Finally, chapter five compares the changing strategies of display and interpretation of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan with the Taiwanese self-consciousness as it has developed over the last decades. The historical background of the museum and the source of its collection make it a strong political symbol. Hence, the performativity of the museum's display and its produced effects need to be understood in the context of the broader political relationship between Taiwan and China, and in relation to diverse aspects of the changing national and cultural identity in Taiwan. The effects of the museum's use of a pan-Asian interregional framework to move beyond a Sinocentric one needs further assessment as this strategy continues to be put into practice. Identifying other cases in the museum world that also suggest a correspondence between changing display strategies and changing formations of national and cultural identities is another area requiring more attention.

Overall, this study has drawn on close readings and theoretical materials to explore how display techniques affect the meanings and values attributed to Chinese porcelain. Display techniques are presented here as the coordination between spatial configurations, object arrangements, label and installation designs, and the institutions' visions and the exhibitions' objectives. Woven throughout the chapters is the idea that display techniques can *act* upon Chinese porcelain, making the object a medium through which multiple Self-Other configurations are expressed. Specifically, the display techniques that I focused on make various such covert processes visible: transculturation (dissolving the monolithic ideas of the Self and the Other from a transcultural/global perspective), appropriation (making objects from other cultures major contributors to Self-affirmation), differentiation (enhancing the conceptual boundaries between the Self and the Other), domestication (de-exoticizing the Other and re-identifying it as part of the Self), and exoticization (stereotyping and fetishizing images/objects of a given Other, identifying it as quite different from the Self). As mentioned in the introduction, the case studies presented here provide points of reference with which to assess the performativity of the ostensibly ideology-free china displays. The case studies showed us how a biographical approach to the porcelain display creates a transcultural narrative in association with today's reflection on (art) historical discourses; how the lighting and juxtaposition of Chinese porcelain and objects from other places changes the way china is perceived and identified; and how the collection history and the socio-political context of a porcelain collection are crucial for understanding the changing policies in display and interpretation imposed on the collection; in a word, the case studies together showed us the agency of display.

Showing Framing

The museum world is changing fast. During the several years that I have been writing this thesis, many changes have taken place just in the museums involved in my case studies. For example, since the end of 2015, the Rijksmuseum has been devoted to a critical assessment of the terminology it has used up until this point, trying to remove the digitalized titles and descriptions of some collections that are deemed to be racially offensive;⁵⁵³ inspired by the experience of curating *Asia in Amsterdam*, the PEM opened its reinstated Asian Export Art Gallery in 2019, with more emphasis on the moral costs behind the dazzling Asian export products; and the MET shared its anti-racism plan in 2020, after the outbreak of the Black Lives Matter protests;⁵⁵⁴ These developments offer a glimpse of the rapidly changing museum world, which itself resonates with the wider transmutations underway in the present world. However, if one considers the scholarly efforts to de-naturalize the museum over the past few decades, efforts to reveal the institution's ideological dimension with such concepts as 'new museology' (1989), 'the discourse of the museum' (1996), 'the power of display' (1998), 'the agency of display' (1998), and 'performing museology' (2000), then perhaps the museum world is not changing so rapidly.⁵⁵⁵

Despite the fact that the performativity of display has been a recurrent motif in museum studies, the calculated, constructed nature of display remains largely off-stage in museum settings. In a general sense, the acts of framing behind the process of exhibition-making—the tension between salient and silent, included and excluded, and visible and invisible—are invisible in museums. For example, exhibition catalogues, which have long been an important medium for presenting pioneering art-historical studies, tend to present the displayed objects as they are, without referring to/documenting the design of the installations within which these objects are *framed*.⁵⁵⁶ Images in catalogues often represent objects in an apparently *unframed* composition, instead of showing how these objects are actually staged in gallery spaces in relation to other objects. What is often overlooked here, and perhaps in other kinds of texts produced by museums (e.g. wall texts), is information about how objects are displayed to perform certain messages in line with certain ideological predispositions. Could this mean that museums in

⁵⁵³ See the Rijksmuseum's website 'Terminologie': <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/onderzoek/terminologie> [Accessed January 20, 2021].

⁵⁵⁴ See the MET's website "Our Commitments to Anti-Racism, Diversity, and a Stronger Community:" <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2020/the-mets-plans-for-anti-racism> [Accessed January 20, 2021].

⁵⁵⁵ Peter Vergo, *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989); Mieke Bal, "The Discourse of the Museum," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 145-157; Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Museum as Catalyst," Keynote speech presented at *Museums 2000: Confirmation or Challenge*, ICOM Sweden, the Swedish Museum Association and Swedish Travelling Exhibitions/Riksställningar, September 29, 2000 at Vadstena, Sweden. Online at: <https://www.coursehero.com/file/41546651/vadstenapdf/> [Accessed January 20, 2021].

⁵⁵⁶ For more about the absence of frames (e.g. painting frames and architectural frames) in photographic reproductions of objects in museums' catalogues, and how this absence greatly changes the way we see and understand meanings of objects, see Barbara E. Savedoff, "Frames" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 3 (1999): 345-356. For more about how art museums' exhibition catalogues contribute to propelling art-historical inquiry, see Bai Qianshen 白謙慎, "Yishushi yanjiu zhong de tulu—cong 'gudian de fuxing' tan qi" 藝術史研究中的圖錄—從《古典的復興》談起 [Catalogues in Art History Research—Talking from *Renaissance of Classics*], *Xin meishu* 新美術 [Journal of the National Academy of Art] 9, (2019): 21-30; see also Charles W. Haxthausen, ed., *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University* (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002).

general still tend to view themselves as ideologically-neutral vehicles for the transmission of useful, and (seemingly) unmediated and incontrovertible information to their audiences? Could the display itself be displayed?⁵⁵⁷

This dissertation has endeavored to present the pervasive ideological framing in museums; even the most seemingly apolitical porcelain display can be made to evoke certain political overtones. It has sought to demonstrate that the manner of its display is the essential precondition enabling Chinese porcelain and the constellations it forms with other objects to express discursive meanings. Perhaps, if the museum indeed sees itself as a performative agency, or, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has noted, “a technology in its own right—a set of skills, techniques, and methods,” the institution can adopt a more reflexive and critical stance in relation to its own acts of framing, making arguments, and inviting interpretations.⁵⁵⁸ In pursuing a critical and revisionist approach to art historical scholarship, Kitty Zijlmans proposes that “art history must be more willing to show its colours. [...] it should expose the particular frame of reference that is being deployed and the concept of art that is implicitly present.”⁵⁵⁹ Similarly, as a unique medium, with its own narrative mechanism and performative quality, the museum can, presumably, provide audiences an opportunity to more critically and analytically engage with displayed objects and the display *per se*—it can show more actively and publicly, more of its underlying ideological colors, or, framing.

⁵⁵⁷ The Amsterdam-based, Dutch contemporary art venue *Framer Framed* provides an interesting example to show how exhibition environment can become a dialogic platform that brings together curators, audiences, source communities, artists, and academics to rethink the role of art and the politics of curatorial practices and institutional frameworks. See the website of *Framer Framed*: <https://framerframed.nl/en> [Accessed January 20, 2021].

⁵⁵⁸ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The Museum as Catalyst.” Similarly, Mieke Bal calls on museums to foreground their “metamuseal function” by showing their “ideological position of framing” to audiences. Mieke Bal, “Telling, Showing, Showing Off,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (1992): 579.

⁵⁵⁹ Kitty Zijlmans, “Pushing Back Frontiers: Towards a History of Art in a Global Perspective,” *International Journal of Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2003): 203.

