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

Yang, P.-Y.

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Author: Yang, P.-Y.

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SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the performative qualities of the museum presentation of Chinese porcelain. It focuses specifically on the display of porcelain from the Ming and Qing dynasties in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period which is marked by intensified cultural interaction via overseas trade. This object-based approach enables, on the one hand, an intensive analysis of what different techniques of display do to the same kind of object, and on the other, a more extensive set of connections between the resulting effects and the institutional and socio-political contexts of different museums. This study explores the capability of porcelain display to generate a body of surplus meanings with ideological overtones beyond informational content and the underlying Self-Other configurations. It also investigates how certain effects that the display performs are connected with specific viewing experiences. To illustrate these issues, it presents six case studies and provides close readings of the narrative framings built around Chinese porcelain, as well as the spatial narratives constructed by the positioning of objects and specific viewing orders in gallery spaces. The first two case studies are semi-permanent displays in two prominent national museums: The British Museum in London and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Following these two cases are three high-profile temporary exhibitions: the co-curated exhibitions *Asia > Amsterdam* (2015-2016) at the Rijksmuseum and *Asia in Amsterdam* (2016) at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem; and *China: Through the Looking Glass* (2015) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The final case study is a national museum that, compared to the institutions of the previous case studies, has a more confrontational attitude towards Chinese heritage: The National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan.

These case studies are carefully chosen in order to propose points of reference that add to the existing literature on the interplay between the performativity of museum display and the changing meanings, values, and identities of objects on display. The multiple placements of Ming vases in the British Museum's China, India, and Europe galleries show how the transformation of the museum's narrative scheme and spatial configuration can yield new interpretations of objects. The Rijksmuseum case study demonstrates the importance of the museum's Chinese porcelain collection history and departmental organization in exploring the relationship between showing china and showing an ideal Dutch self-image. Comparing the way porcelain is presented in *Asia > Amsterdam* and *Asia in Amsterdam* exemplifies the importance of focalization, as both a narrative technique and an analytical tool, in probing the subjectivized viewing experience and the accompanying ideologies in the exhibitions. The analysis of *China: Through the Looking Glass*, including its catalogue's image layout, its object arrangement, and its installation design, reveals how techniques of display may produce effects that are quite the opposite of the exhibition's initial purpose. The National Palace Museum case study illustrates how the museum manages to respond to ever-changing Taiwanese views on the Chinese imperial collection through broadening its existing exhibition perspective and collection policy. By combining close readings of the meaning-producing aspects of the selected display schemes and conceptual tools from the fields of research that are relevant to underpin my readings, this study attempts to de-naturalize these ostensibly immediate and ideology-neutral porcelain displays and exhibitions.

Chapter 1, 'Trans-Bordering: The Trans-Border Arrangement of Ming Pilgrim Flasks and the Narrative of Transculturation in the British Museum', revolves around the concepts of trans-border arrangement, object biography, and transculturation, and their significance to a critical theme in the British Museum today: cultural connectivity. This chapter distinguishes narratives of the oneness of the world based on Enlightenment universality from a narrative of transculturation based on the global biographies of objects. In the British Museum, the narrative of transculturation is mapped out through trans-border arrangement. Trans-border arrangement represents, in museum space today, the historical circulation of material objects across cultural-geographical boundaries. It is conceived through categorizing and displaying objects based on their life histories—their transfer, gifting, collection, consumption, and appropriation—rather than just their places of origin. This display scheme closely parallels the concerns of the global turn in art history that blossomed in the late 1990s, and it prompts reconsideration of the metaphor of museum-as-map rooted in nineteenth-century imperialism and colonialism. This chapter explores how the combination of Ming pilgrim flasks with other objects in the museum's galleries dedicated to China, India, and Europe maps out an extensive circulation and exchange of things, styles, and techniques. It explains how this arrangement allows Ming flasks to be identified as not only Chinese but also Indian and European. The trans-border arrangement of the Ming pilgrim flasks in the British Museum provides a promising example, showing the potential of the museum to be a place where different narrative frameworks (chronological and synchronic, cultural and transcultural) can coexist and complement each other. It demonstrates how museum presentation can explore and redraw the existing boundaries of art-historical categorization through the application of a transcultural perspective, a perspective that entails a loosening or transcending of Self-Other boundaries.

Chapter 2, 'Self-Fashioning: The Multiple Values of Chinese Porcelain in the Rijksmuseum', traces the process through which the collection history of Chinese porcelain in the Rijksmuseum has attached multiple values to china. With archival photos and old gallery guides, this chapter shows how the museum's changing display schemes from the 1930s to today have given its fine collection of Chinese porcelain decorative, historical, aesthetic, art-historical, and symbolic values. For the Rijksmuseum, the 1930s was a significant time, marked by a major reconfiguration in terms of spatial organization and display perspective, which helped cultivate a clear narrative of Dutch national development. This reconfiguration also marked the beginning of appropriating Chinese porcelain into a token of Dutch civic pride and national prestige. Drawing on the idea that collecting and possessing objects can act as a strategy for constructing selves as owners, this chapter demonstrates the incorporation of Chinese porcelain in Dutch self-fashioning with specific reference to two schemes of juxtaposition that are seen in the museum of the twentieth century and today: Dutch portraits and Chinese porcelain; and Dutch mapped landscapes and Chinese porcelain. This chapter also discusses how the separation of today's Asian Pavilion—an annex of the Rijksmuseum—from the museum's main building, as well as their contrasting architectural and interior styles, inevitably produces a spatial narrative that raises an awareness of difference.

Chapter 3, 'Focalization: Comparison of the Exhibition Narratives of *Asia > Amsterdam* at the Rijksmuseum and *Asia in Amsterdam* at the Peabody Essex Museum', reveals how these two co-organized exhibitions, which sought to present the transformative impacts of Asian luxuries on Dutch styles of life

and artistic creation in the seventeenth century, highlight different messages partly because of their distinctive use of focalization. Focalization, as both a narrative technique and an analytical tool notably used in literary and visual narratology, enables a better understanding of the communicative conception of vision in a narrative. In particular, this chapter draws on the cultural theorist Mieke Bal's focalization theory to propose that an instance of internal focalization is found in the gallery of *Asia > Amsterdam* where Chinese porcelain is combined with Dutch still-life paintings. This scheme of juxtaposition, plus a specific viewing order between them, promotes an embodied viewing experience which is filtered by the subjective sensory impressions of the Dutch artists: a viewing experience that draws audiences to see the visual and material qualities of porcelain as if through the eyes of Dutch artists. Compared to such a Dutch-grounded internal focalization, *Asia in Amsterdam* at the PEM tends to employ external focalization in an attempt to provide its audiences a less Dutch-centric narrative, allowing audiences to see both the flourishing of the Dutch East India Company's Dutch-Asian trade and the accompanying human cost. The concept of focalization enables this chapter to articulate the underlying narrative of the Dutch domestication of Asian goods in the Rijksmuseum's *Asia > Amsterdam* exhibition: that is, 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.

Chapter 4, 'Fetishization: Stereotypes and Exoticism in *China: Through the Looking Glass* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art', shows how the exhibition's display techniques may backfire, undermining its intention of deconstructing Orientalism. This chapter explores the ideological reach of the exhibition by analyzing the framing and layout of images in its catalogue and the arrangement of objects in its galleries. The exhibition fascinates audiences' eyes with combinations of Chinese objects (including blue and white porcelain) and haute couture. These groupings are not necessarily based on designers' ideas, but are instead the curators' invention. The installation design transforms, or reduces, the Chinese objects on display into a set of "fetishized surfaces"—a term borrowed from the art historian Kobena Mercer—given the power to evoke exoticism. From this perspective, the exhibition maintains, if not intensifies, a fixed Self-Other boundary where China, as a cultural Other subjected to the Orientalist imagination, is readily mysterious, erotic, and effeminized. Additionally, an Orientalist stereotype is engendered in the exhibition through feminine gender-coding of china and China (as a cultural entity). Drawing on the historical connection between Chinese porcelain and femininity, widely explored by art historians and literary scholars, this chapter gives a metonymic reading of the object layout in the exhibition's Chinese porcelain gallery to reveal the implied gender-coding, in which porcelain becomes a metonym for female skin and flesh.

Chapter 5, 'Repositioning: The Politics of Identity as Constructed by the National Palace Museum in Taiwan', analyzes the multiple configurations of the Self and the Other suggested in the museum's semi-permanent displays and temporary exhibitions in terms of transfer and transformation. The transfer referred to is the transfer of the Qing imperial collection from mainland China to Taiwan between late 1948 and early 1949, following the second Chinese Civil War (1946-1950) between Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist government and Mao Zedong's Communists. The relocation of the imperial collection served to denote the relocation of political legitimacy. The transformation referred to is the museum's shifting

self-positioning based on changing political frameworks: from the international situation during the Cold War in the second half of the twentieth century to the complex contemporary relationship between China and Taiwan. Focusing on some recent exhibitions at the National Palace Museum (NPM) and its southern branch (NPMSB), this chapter explains how the changing perspectives of showing the Qing imperial (porcelain) collection in the NPM and the NPMSB—from a Sinocentric perspective towards a pan-Asian interregional framework—correspond to the dynamic political relationship between China and Taiwan, shifting from the mid-twentieth century up to today. This chapter ends by proposing that a monolithic conception of both Chinese and Taiwanese identity is ineffective in addressing the issue of how to (re)interpret the NPM's collection in ways that could enrich its meaning and deepen its connection with Taiwan. Rather, it argues that broadening the scope of exhibitions to include more diverse perspectives and explore cultural exchange is a fruitful approach to making the most of the museum's collection today.

The conclusion recapitulates the complex ideological aspects explored in the previous case studies. It outlines possible areas for future research on the performativity of museum display, and demonstrates the importance of museums encouraging more critical and analytical engagements with displayed objects and display *per se* by foregrounding their acts of framing.