



Students observing visitors and analyzing labels in the Zhejiang Provincial Museum

After two years of preparation and quite some trepidation about visas (they were obtained only days before taking off), the workshop *The 'Participatory Museum': opportunities, risks, issues* for 20 Chinese master students and 6 PhDs in museology of the Zhejiang University in Hangzhou kick-started with a pre-conference. Riemer Knoop, Reinwardt professor on cultural heritage, and An Laishun, Reinwardt alumnus, guest professor at Zhejiang and a high-ranking museums representative specially flown in from Beijing, lectured on museum theory and the Chinese perspective on eco-museums for students and faculty, presided by Prof. Yan and associate professor Dr Hui, our executive hosts.

Wednesday 16, the real start of the workshop, we introduced our programme and took the students through a day-by-day break down of the month ahead. Our method would be immersive and confronting: all students are expected to carry out assignments, and give presentations to the group, in English. To get them used, we invited all to share their best (or worst) museum experience in a short narrative. This worked, and gave us an impression of their English language level, and them a feeling to freely speak out. Most students, we later found out, thought us “scary” and were afraid to use their voices. But the personal stories were quite insightful: a museum can feed your pride, lets you taste something new, gives you a feeling of coming home, shows you beauty, is a place where you can do something. Diverse, and all had a reasonable command of English, though they spent a lot of time looking up words online on their smartphones.

The opening week we tried to broaden the students' perspective. The first lecture was about visitors, participation theory and segmentation of audiences. To practice we moved to the provincial (more than twice as big as the Netherlands, 56 M inhabitants) Zhejiang Museum “Wulin branch”. They had to do visitor observation: what do visitors actually do in a museum, what kind of behaviour do they display, what information does the museum feed them, and what do you think will the visitors take home with them? The students took the assignment very seriously, followed visitors (sometimes quite literally so), engaged in conversations with them, and analysed labels and interpretation.

The next day, working in groups, they presented their findings in convincing, impressively made PowerPoint shows. Then we asked them to associate the most important concepts they had presented. A fruitful harvest, but the next step, to rank these through (public) voting proved a bit too tough. But our goal was to have them think about key differences between traditional and participatory museums. Every group had to come up with an answer about the three main differences between traditional and participatory dealings with one of a museum's core functions - *preservation, acquisition, communication, intellectual care*. The result was a surprisingly clear and articulate scheme, which gave them and us much food for discussion and thinking .

At the end of the week we tried to reflect with them on the course so far. That did not work out very well, perhaps because it is difficult to criticize *and* to do so in a group. One-on-one talks did work, though, and offered a positive image: they were liking what we're doing, thought it's inspiring, but everything is totally new, both the way we have them work and the subject matter. With that, they told us that it's also quite demanding.

The second week, on the theme *participatory presenting = sharing*, Marjelle did on her own (Riemer had to briefly return home) but was less packed. Tuesday a lecture on a participatory approach to the museum's role and the efforts to accomplish a new design of communication and interaction. Marjelle illustrated it using the example of *Do it yourself* in the Van Abbe Museum and *The Reading Room* of the Wellcome collection in London. To put this into practice, the students were asked to come up with a seriously participatory question a museum might ask its visitors. What was at stake was genuine *curiosity* - as it happened the word that was ranked highest the previous week. They also had to consider design: how do you ask something from your visitor in such a way that invites to participate? The assignment had to be carried out within the context of the provincial museum that we had already visited together, or else in the 'collection room' at the university. After designing their question they had to put it to other groups and assess the reactions. How did it work, what kind of answers were given? Lots of laughs! The various presentations offered an interesting repertory:

- With a time machine, what period of (Chinese) history [in this history museum] would you like to visit, and why? Excellent question! Would it make a difference to ask at the start or after the visit?
- A classification issue: "we don't know what this is - would you know?"
- An *app* to complement the faces of Tang dynasty statues. What shape do you think the brows are? With a QR code you were led to the real image.
- Another group proposed to inquire after the marital status of visitors in order to connect them to marriage and other passage rituals shown in the museum.

The last day an assignment was given in the Hangzhou Arts and Crafts Museum (HACM), which houses several units like the Knives&Scissors Museum, the Umbrella Museum and the Fan Museum. In the latter the students were expected to think about the impact of participatory exhibition design. It's not only that visitors may come up with something that the museum then puts on show, but staff should articulate its choices: to what degree are we going to engage with this, does it enhance our identity, and if so, how? Surprisingly, most groups reacted a bit one-sidedly: participation is done through technology, though games, online contexts or uploading of pics. Perhaps not so surprising given the age of our students (23+) and their connectedness to Wechat. But we wanted to move somewhere else, as did the museum's head of exhibitions, pointing out time and again how important it is to keep in mind what's the museum for. One of the issues for next week is to make clear that participation and technology are two different things, and technology just a tool!

Language is truly something. All student seemingly understand it, read it without problem, and surely know how to use their smartphone translate apps. But we teachers have to remain aware of a gap, we speak slowly and precisely, have to use sometimes rather much abundance. A cheeky student speaking too snappily, any remark we make that is equivocal, or a well-spoken Chinese colleague going to rapidly: then we have to restart.

But what an interesting experience, and how aware we are becoming of the limitations of our own paradigms!

### **Participatory Acquisition**

The third week (Riemer had returned) opened with looking back. How would the students position their interventions, and with what arguments, in an "activist" matrix (from the EERC: grade of participation against bottom up - top down)? And how would they position the China Fan Museum? We received a quite unexpected counter question: "professor, what is *bottom up* and what *top down*?" The result generated quite some discussion, which led us to once again go into the notions of 'contributions', 'acting together', 'deciding together' and the grades of liberty for communities and visitors in all those different positions. Surprisingly, the China Fan Museum could be put, according to different logics, on various points in the matrix.

Riemer treated in this week's lecture various participatory practices in acquisition, introduced by a historical survey of looking at collections and dealing with significance. Most Chinese museums offer strictly linear, chronological narratives. Alternatives are rare. To break out of this condition, we had the students try their hands at making a mindmap, taking their cue from an object or theme they had selected and photographed in the Fan museum. How can you freely associate on a theme, explore new avenues, and connect new themes with an object, without quoting the usual facts and dates? We like very much seeing the students fully engage with the assignment. All mindmaps were joined, on the classroom's wall, into a pop-up exhibition.

Thursday October 1 was a national holiday (Mid Autumn Festival, about family values), the beginning of a week off for the whole country. For Hangzhou 13 M visitors in a week, we read later. But we didn't know that and cheerfully unaware we took our students to the Umbrella Museum. Riemer would first 'interview' a staff member of the acquisitions department in order for the students to get the hang of how things normally go. Quite differently than expected, we met tree collections specialists, not acquisitions, while few spontaneous answers were available. Perhaps it was the staff's problems with English, or the fact that the art of improvising in public is not the Chinese way. However that is, when the students got going, they hit their goal. They had to come up with suggestions, upon research of the galleries, with two perspectives on what they saw. What information or interpretation would you add in order to make what you see more participatory? Or what objects or themes would serve the same goal? And, in addition, how does the presentation articulate an object's or theme's relevance and significance? (biggest, oldest, famous maker, etc.)?

The following day they presented back at the university their findings, though sadly without the presence of the three museum staff (no official time). Also now we were struck by the students' keen eye. They had paid particularly critical attention to labels and assessed them on articulation of significance. Even though the theme 'acquisition' remained vague, which is no surprise since few labels go into it. The students' results were quite interesting. A special one was the group that came up with giving visitors a starting question: 'What expectations do you have of umbrellas?', to then don a true designer's gown in order to engage with actual problems that have a bearing on umbrellas: wind, sustainability. Another group invented a new theme: 'Umbrella culture in Chinese Folk art', illustrated by a series of everyday objects. Why not create new year's cards with umbrella stories, of paper cut-out art objects and then collect visitors' stories about them? Others were even more radical ('An umbrella is not a normal object but a way of living', advocating a new awareness of aesthetics), or emotional, like a proposal to take human relationships as a starting point. Take a picture, gone viral on the web, of a father in pouring rain sheltering his little son with his umbrella while becoming soaking wet himself, the pair seen on the back. This group proposed to enrich the museum's collection with stories about cherished personal memories (real people - real life - real emotions). We liked this result and tried to have them make the next step: challenge each other by formulating good questions, not what you think but which would vary the subject or issue forward. It worked!

Including lunch (new to us: Chinese students take a 1.5 h lunch break!) you've quickly covered five hours or so. Time for some relief, in this case making a Statement of Significance on an object. The cases of Gouda *stropwafels* (syrup waffles) came in handy. After tasting them, the students had to come up with statement of significance for these munchies, much too sweet for the Chinese palate. In an amazingly short while they were able to research and find, thanks to the smartphone!, the relevant meanings, both historical and social of it. And we were quite pleased with their correct Dutch pronunciation. Giving something back we stressed how well this small, multidisciplinary group research fits in with the processes by museums to assess the relevance of objects.

We did an open call for the free Saturday: whoever wanted could join us on a trip to the Hangzhou Cuisine Museum. Ten students and two friends who liked to meet the professor showed up on what turned out to be a joyful and interactive event on eating turtle, watching plastic food replicas, and the authenticity of historical feasts representations. Thank to the gods the museum was nested in a true restaurant ecosystem for literally thousands of guests. Two students later showed us around in the municipal museum and one of Hangzhou's famous historic streets. No surprise: thousands of people again.

### **Connecting the dots**

The last week focused briefly on the theme Participatory Knowledge = Networking, but mostly on connecting the dots. Riemer's lecture covered the e-cultural aspects of museum knowledge management, and the possibility to hence evolve from a collection with a network to a network with collections. He

finished by going into three examples of both extremely participatory and bottom up examples of successful museums or heritage initiatives: Derby Silk Mill, The Memory of (Amsterdam) East, and the Naples Rione Sanità area. Among the conclusions: When museums become more participatory, they are likely to be more about the actors themselves (incl. the museum) and have ever more connections to outside the museum. Also, there are few truly “participatory museums” though there are many participatory practices; museums have a double focus: collection and audience. The point is finding a balance.

And then the final assessment: design a concept for your own participatory museum, using all the ideas and assignments we have gone through this month, *and* make sure it fits the Chinese context. Guiding questions: what is your ideal metaphor, which images do you want to work with, what key words to you use? The students came up with a plethora of imaginative ideas. Museums about Childhood memories, Toys, Pregnancy, Sleeping, Desserts, and Fashion, all deftly presented in image and life speech.

In between we had paid a visit to the far away Liangzhu Museum, a quite grandiose thing about an relatively unknown, regional Neolithic civilisation (the Jade Culture), 5,000 year old. The building was designed by UK star architect David Chipperfield. The assignment, this time resulting just in verbal input in plenary discussion in the museum, was how this perhaps rather distant and surely massive museum could be made somewhat more participatory. A truly difficult question, and quite rightly so, since we wanted the students to already combine the various subjects we had treated previously. And how glad were that they were able to deliver the goods: more relation with the neighbourhood and the landscape, more attention to archaeology as a discipline and with hands-on opportunities, and more ways to physically engage with the precious jade as raw material and fine engraving it as a craft.

The final workshop day was dedicated to presenting the students’ ideal museum concepts. For us a moment of truth. How many concepts, ideas and questions had they be able to absorb and process? And to what degree would they be capable of integrating new ways of thinking about museums? It was an extraordinary experience. Many things finally fell into place, or else came together. At the same time we noticed a perhaps Chinese predilection for chronology and analytical explanations. Many a historical survey about how people sleep, fashion from all dynasties, a textbook toy typonchronology. Apparently all this is needed to chew and digest for the students prior to becoming creative. But once there, they didn’t disappoint. They gave us a new governance model for the Museum for Childhood Memories (depending on the visitors’ roles and relations in and towards the museum). In the Pregnancy Museum they proposed a warm and cosy ‘living room’ with many objects donated by the visitors, as well as ‘exchange rooms’ to share own experiences during pregnancy. This museum took the perspective from the fathers in order to enhance their respect for women. The students of the Museum of Toys visualized what would change when visitors would play different roles: when children play together its about co-operation, but a cild playing with a adult it’s about transgenerational interaction. The Museum of Sleeping was founded on the being awake-being asleep rhythm, between 10 pm and 7 am: ‘what do you read before you go to sleep’, “midnight snack”, “insomnia”. A Dessert Museum offered a space with round tables, essential for ‘easy communicating and sharing recipes’. The group of the Fashion Museum articulated the various roles and functions: the museum as a workshop, studio for talent, platform for sharing knowledge, with an inviting attitude and initiatives in order to engage with audiences at best as possible.

Our purpose with this assignment was ‘connecting the dots’, which surely happened, though there remained some loose ends and new trails to go explore. We considered the turnout of this free and abstract assignment to be very good.



All and everyone, at Certificate Ceremony. Front row: faculty and guest teachers; second and third row: Master and PhD student, participants in the workshop.

The closing ceremony consisted of handing out, by the Faculty Dean Huang and the Institute's professor Yen, of individual certificates, co-issued by Zhejiang University and Reinwardt Academy, and signed by Riemer and Marjelle. Many nice speeches and cheerful words, in addition to those already mentioned, also by ms Elva Ma, press and cultural affairs responsible of the Dutch Consulate General in Shanghai. Her deft speech as well as the orange sunglasses she had brought for all students were a great success.

Along with many compliments and quite some jokes (we had been *activist* teachers since we broke into the sacred Mid-Autumn Holidays!), we received beautiful presents, among which two personal and endearing Memory Books from the students, and modern recreations of Celadon ceramics. We replied with the latest Reinwardt Memorial Lecture publication by prof. Kavita Singh. Our stay, and the month together was crowned by a luscious dinner in a wonderful restaurant, not only with faculty, but together with all 26 students and guests!

What did all this mean? First of all an innovative impulse in the Faculty's education. All and everyone appreciated our "workshop approach", which is a way of dealing with students perhaps not very wide spread in China. Next: also a participatory perspective on heritage and museums may be innovative here. The most obvious challenge is getting rid of the idea that anything interactive is also participatory. Not unimportant: English as a communication language. It is taught to everyone in high school, but mostly as a reading tool. In our workshop, we combined listening to and talking English with presenting and working as in groups, *and* critically reacting, in public, on each other.

Finally, what we were after was also out of the box thinking. To our great delight that happened increasingly, every day. Understanding that creating relevance by museums implies being aware of people as carriers of intangible heritage, also and especially outside the museum. We are already engaged in thinking and talking, with Dr Hui, about a possible follow up, and, perhaps, applying this method on other Reinwardt subjects.

And why would this be interesting for us? Well, we are learning from these experiences very much ourselves, too. We orientate on another culture and a world which, at the end of the day, Netherlands society will have to take stock of and, more practically, where we get (master) students from and where we send (bachelor) students (internship) to. In addition, it's also about the Reinwardt's and the Amsterdam University of the Arts's reputation. These institutes are increasingly positioning themselves in the international arena, exploring new business models, and by doing so are perhaps shaping a new Dutch *cultural footprint* abroad. Sharing expertise in the field of vocational training in the arts might be as worthwhile as and perhaps even more sustainable than showcasing the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.