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# Museum Diplomacy

Exploring the Sino-German Museum Forum and Beyond

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## Abstract

In an age of globalised neoliberalism, prestigious museums have become a diplomatic milieu and their collections a significant token to manifest diplomatic ties between the West and China. This paper explores the 'clash' between 'universal museums' and returning cultural objects to their 'countries of origin' presented *in* and *by* the Sino-German Museum Forum. Both countries are seen to use 'the past' for current foreign affairs of political economy not only with regards to each other but also respectively towards Africa and Southeast and Central Asia. Germany, for example, utilises the Berlin Palace Humboldt Forum, while China has the One Belt and Road. Because national museums and their collections are often embedded in colonial histories and are commonly used to forge collective memory, cultural identity and nationalism, to engage critically with museum diplomacy becomes important as it can help to 'reconcile', as well as to provoke new, tensions regarding neo-colonialism.

**Keyword:** Museum Diplomacy, Political Economy, International Relations, Intercultural Communication, Universal Museum, Repatriation, One Belt and Road

## Introduction

In the late summer of 2016 at a chamber inside the Royal Palace named after the North Star (Zi-Wei) which signifies the Emperor in the Chinese astrology, a 'museum forum' was held without advance notice with an exclusive audience. The Forum had two presenters: the Director-General of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB) and the Director of this previously forbidden-to-be-approached-city and now the Palace Museum (PM). The audience included more than 400 art historians who had travelled from the world to attend the quadrennial Congress of the Comité Internationale d'Histoire de l'Art (CIHA) of the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH) of the UNESCO. The two Directors talked about the histories and current developments of their respective institutions. While the former promoted the SMB as a 'universal museum', the latter claimed that the collections of the PM are 'clean'. The Forum ended with the two shaking hands under the invited journalists' camera and a contract was signed for 1) a loaned exhibition of Ming and Qing's portraits from the PM to the SMB, and 2) a digitisation programme of a Buddhist booklet by SMB to share with the PM. The first project was interpreted by the SMB as a way of marking the 60-year anniversary of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, and by the PM the 45 years of Sino-German diplomatic relations. The second project involved a manuscript of Changkya Khutuktu (the 5<sup>th</sup> spiritual leader of the Gelung lineage of Tibetan Buddhism) of which half is preserved at the SMB and another half at the PM, and is described by Chinese media as 'a lost national treasure coming home in an alternative way'. Many audience members found themselves bewildered and one asked 'why is this Forum held in our Congress?' In reply, the host speaker said, 'it is to introduce the programme of museum collaboration'. However, rumours were in the air that there must have been something more to this narrative of straightforward collaboration, and my research into this topic has been undertaken in order to find out what that missing factor was. In an interdisciplinary manner, this study involves

museology, international relations and intercultural communication with methods such as participatory observation, media analysis, text and speech analysis, as well as archive and literature reviews. The main tasks include reading the Forum symbolically, analysing the talks contextually, exploring the entangled history of the two national museums, and discerning their comparable roles as significant actor-agents of foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—an era of globalised neoliberalism which has tended to reinforce cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism in various ways. The findings suggest that it is critical to use (universal) national museums as protagonists in public diplomacy because of the colonial pasts they are often embedded in and the nationalist sentiment they are used to create. Whether to reconcile with formerly colonised countries or to provoke new tensions of neo-colonialism can be the question which the directors of such museums face, as seen in the Forum as well as in cases where, for example, for direct foreign investment projects Germany applies the concept of ‘universal museum’ in order to reconnect with its colonial legacy in Africa, or where China reinvents the historic idea of ‘silk roads’ in order to reach out financially to Southeast and Central Asia.

## Museum, Culture, and International Relations

Before tackling the Forum in more detail it is necessary to lay out the conceptual framework of this paper. I argue the following: that the features of national museums make them a powerful token by which diplomatic ties are made manifest; that culture plays an important role in international relations, and so museums, being part of the broader diplomatic milieu, can be approached critically by way of intercultural communication; and that such museum diplomacy as it stands out amidst the closely related fields of cultural diplomacy and heritage diplomacy can be seen to represent or convey political gestures of the highest level. Such gestures have been used

to solicit military, financial, and political backing in the past, and today are similarly used to benefit negotiations over important deals in the international political economics.

### Features of National Museums

Designated as spaces for the display of culture (Lumley 1988; Karp and Lavine 1991), museums are the windows to the historical and contemporary arts and culture of a country. In general, the governance of such public institutions is integrated with a country's administrative divisions and thus the museum world is rigidly hierarchical. Not only does the administrative status of museums range from municipal, regional, provincial, to national (and international or 'universal'), but also that the collections of museums are ranked according to their 'importance' or 'value'—be it educational, aesthetic, or historical. Accordingly, the collections of (universal) national museums often belong to the highest rank and bear the name of '(world) national treasures'. Protected by law, to tour such 'important collections' abroad is likely to need special permission from state council or parliament (Sir Boyd and MacGregor 2006; NPC 1982).

The establishment of modern museums in Europe and the world over has been mostly resulted from national reform, for example in shifts from feudalism to democracy or from colonised region to independent state. Imperial collections of high art and high culture thereby became 'nationalised' in such socio-political transformations and came to be regarded as the cultural symbols of modern nation-states and even as the political symbols of legitimate sovereignty. As well as this being intertwined with the radical development of national politics, major Western museums have also been deeply involved in colonisation. For instance, during the time of New Imperialism the British Museum (BM), the Musée Guimet, and the Ethnology Museum in Berlin (now part of the SMB), in addition to receiving colonial collections, have commissioned experts to explore foreign terrains to Africa or Asia for the purposes of archaeology and acquisition. Such expeditions often included secret missions to gather military intelligence for

diverse colonial agendas (Halén 2008; Galambos and Koichi 2012). This chapter of world history has made many national museums of the former colonial powers the hosts of 'important collections' of 'world civilisations', where the term 'world civilisations' (or 'cultures') has been used to replace 'ethnology' or 'ethnography', due to the self-reflection and self-criticism of anthropology and archaeology since the post-colonial era of the 1980s (Wylie 1985; Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Moro-Abadía 2006).

Furthermore, national museums have become integral to the diplomacy of the modern nation-state where high-level foreign guests might be received. By touring abroad, their collections are used to lobby for political backing or economic cooperation. Directors of such museums become 'cultural diplomats', an increasingly important role in this post-conflict era. It is worth noticing that such a position often also involves domestic politics; as a government functionary, a national museum's director is usually appointed by the power centre of leading polity. Although the 'national identity' that such a museum contributes to forming can be contested domestically by various polities with specific political ideologies (McCrone et al. 1998; Counce 2004; Bond 2006), it is seldom in doubt that, internationally, national museums speak of the 'nation' and defines or presents the nation's cultural identity. With a mix of public and private funding they perform social functions such as collecting, researching, exhibiting, and educating, and, by virtue of being a meeting point for government and citizens, museums are a powerful instrument of cultural policy and political propaganda. Besides, on the stage of public diplomacy, the cultural heritage of high art and culture that a museum holds makes it a perfect veil, soft and beautiful, to assist negotiating the hard power struggle of political economy. Apart from being a 'destination tourism' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), such museums have become a seemingly neutral but in fact substantially political platform to extend domestic political ideology to international relations.

## Culture and International Relations

In the field of international relations, amidst a wide range of theories of realism, liberalism, constructivism, postmodernism, post-colonialism, and non-Western thoughts (Amitav 2011), the role of culture has gained significant attention since the 1990s (Chay 1990; Reeves 2004) and a 'Chinese school' (Cunningham-Cross and Kristensen 2014) has emerged to address the Chinese 'Tien-xia' (the world under heavens) worldview, non-confrontational Confucianism and tributary system (Fairbank 1964, 73-74). In a general way, Richard Lebow (2008) claimed that basic human motives like spirit, appetite and reason not only create culture but also forge the history of international politics and relations. From the perspective of popular culture, Kyle Grayson (2015) even suggested that culture is 'the source of, and solution to, all of international relations' problems'. In actuality, the definition of culture can vary from discipline to discipline. 'Culture', in this paper shall denote both 'the intangible worldviews and social customs of peoples' and the tangible manifestations of them. The former can be seen in the discussion of intercultural communication which is used to decode the Forum, and the latter in specifying the high art and high culture preserved in national museums that are carrying out public diplomacy.

### *Intercultural Communication in a Diplomatic Milieu*

As a matter of fact, intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication is mainly applied in the domain of cooperative and business management and marketing to decrease misunderstanding and enhance communication (Kim and Gudykunst 1988; Aneas and Sandín 2009). Language remains the core concern, yet social customs and cultural patterns are also taken into consideration as people from different traditions may perceive, interpret, and react to the world differently (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey 2003). As Akira Iriye (1979) has suggested, international relations are intercultural relations due to each country's different social conventions, cultural traditions and political concerns (Shani 2008; Kristensen and Nielsen 2013).

Intercultural communication serves as an important approach to inspecting and analysing the messages conveyed in a diplomatic milieu, including what is said and what is left unsaid. After all, in spite of the argument of cultural studies, both 'structure' (norms, mores, traditions, values, and institutionalised ideologies) and 'primacy or agency of structure' (the capacity of individual to act independently) can shape 'human behaviour' (Barker 2014, 5), including the one of a diplomate. Thus in addition to speech analysis, decoding the diplomate's 'cultural language' from the perspective of intercultural communication may contribute to revealing the unspoken messages which may be truer than the spoken ones.

### *Cultural Diplomacy and Heritage Diplomacy*

In international relations, using culture for public diplomacy is not a new invention, although it has become a more significant field in recent years both in practice and scholarship (Cull 2013). In the West, public diplomacy can be traced back to Renaissance Italy (Saharan 2013), while in China it is considered to be an ancient legacy (Palit 2013). Language is one of the most prominent components of culture—the gate through which one might enter its most important areas—and accordingly previous colonial powers including Britain, France and the United States are seen to continue sponsoring language instructions at local libraries and cultural centers, thereby propagating a favored ideology for the implementation of cultural diplomacy (Maack 2001; Luke and Kersel 2013). Such tactics are now utilized by China with its Confucius Institute. Considered by the West to be a tool of China's 'sharp power' (Nye 2018), this is a further move for China to assert itself on the World stage as part of its proclaimed 'peaceful rising' and is different from previous times. For example, during the Cold War, China used culture—orchid cultivation, ping pong (Yan and Gao 1996, 433), ballet, and the Go game—to bond with its 'allies' in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia and to approach 'enemies' like the United States and Japan (Ye 2011).



UNESCO promoted intensive training of diplomates in the 1970s for the purpose of ‘international cultural cooperation’ (Köchler ed. 1978, 142) and a heritage diplomacy was gradually built upon those international heritage protection charters, conventions, and laws (Winter 2015, 997-1015; “Heritage as Aid and Diplomacy in Asia” 2016). Various programmes of financial aid and expert-knowledge dissemination regarding conservation and management have been carried out in order to reach out to developing countries, conveying an implicit ‘universal value’ as democracy or human rights embedded within the pursuit of cultural tourism or cultural economics. Such heritage diplomacy reached China in the 1980s. After recognising or ratifying particular charters and conventions and joining UNESCO’s many heritage organisations, since the late 1990s China has become increasingly active and engaged in international forums of arts and culture. For example, while the economic success has entailed a prosperous art market and museum boom, China has become the first-time host of several important cultural events that were otherwise part of long European traditions. For example, the Olympic Games (the modern version of which started in Athens in 1896) were held in Beijing in 2008, with the Games’ 4<sup>th</sup> Cultural Festival also held in Beijing in 2006. The World Exposition (which began in London in 1851) took place in Shanghai in 2010, together with the triennial General Conference of the International Committee of Museums (ICOM) (which began in Paris in 1948). And the CIHA quadrennial Congress (which began in Brussels in 1930) was organised in Beijing in 2016.

## The Sino-German Museum Forum

As mentioned, the Sino-German Museum Forum was inserted into the CIHA’s programme without prior notification. CIHA, which was founded in Vienna in 1873 as ‘the only true global organisation’ of art history (Anderson 2012) and became affiliated to CIPSH-UNESCO-UN in the 1960s, actually became ‘global’ in the 1970s by accepting non-Western members and including ‘global art

history'. In 2008 its congress was held for the first time outside Europe, in Australia, and in 2016 it was held for the first time outside Western countries, in China, with theme *Terms*:

*[...] highlight the Chinese art's longstanding tradition and strengthen its status in world arts and culture... to emphasise the equal importance of Western and Eastern civilisations... to reconsider each's value and contribution to world cultures and to create a new phase of world art history for Asia, Africa and Latin-America (CIHA 2016, 3)*

This statement by CIHA China echoed Mao's foreign policy of uniting with the Third World (Yu 1977) during the Cold War, where, as discussed, 'soft power' became an important tool for public diplomacy (Library of Congress USA 2008). It is evident that the Forum is rather more in a diplomatic milieu than solely an academic one.

### Participatory Observation

Regarded as the 'Olympics of art history' (Chen 2016), CIHA China provided a high-level reception for the Congress: The opening ceremony was held at the Fangfei Villa of Diaoyutai State Guesthouse (a venue typically reserved for prestigious guests of the Party and the People's Republic), several exhibitions were organised for the participants, and an exclusive tour of the PM was arranged for them to see a series of ancient Chinese paintings that had never before been shown in public. The representatives of the two hosts (Italy and Brazil) of the next quadrennial congress even expressed their concern about how to compete with such an extraordinary hospitality (CIHA 2016b).

The first talk was given by the Director-General of the SMB, who has detailed the historical development of this national museum and promoted its current project of rebuilding the Berlin Palace for the Humboldt Forum in order to host the 'non-European collections' that will be

relocated from the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and the Museum of Asian Art (both under SMB). The location of this Berlin Palace is on Museum Island, the very site of a ruined monastery, a 16<sup>th</sup> century cabinet of curiosity, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Art Chamber of the royal palace for the Electors of Brandenburg (Kings of Prussia and German Emperors), and a public museum since 1918. The non-European collections, he said, are resulted from the outstanding achievements of German archaeologists during the time of German Empire (1871-1918). With slides of architectural blueprints, the Director-General presented the 'museological' development of the SMB and how the rebuilt Berlin Palace of the SMB, a 'universal museum', will become a cultural forum which is open for everyone in the spirit of the Humboldt brothers.

The PM's Director's talk was entitled *How the Museum Shall Meet the Needs of the Public*. He discussed the PM's longstanding history from 1420 to 1912 as a home to 24 Chinese Emperors, and how since 1912 it has been a public museum. Being the world's largest palace-architectural compound, it holds some 1,807,558 items including paintings, ceramics, seal, stele, sculpture, inscribed ware, bronze, enamel, etc. Several photographs were projected to show how popular a special exhibition celebrating the PM's 90-year anniversary in 2015 was, as well as the brand-new museum shops, the cutting-edge interactive exhibitions, the expansion plan involving suburban Beijing, and the restoration project of the Yianxi Mansion, which was a former residence for concubines built in a Western style but ruined by fire. Currently being repaired by German architects, this Mansion will host and display the PM's 'foreign collections'—the European clocks and watches of the highest quality. 'They are all clean', the Director said, 'because they were brought to the Palace as gifts by missionaries or ambassadors. [We are] unlike those who went to the land of the Other's and took the things that belong to the Other's'. This satirical remark won him big rounds of applause from local audiences and became the headline in several newspapers the following morning (Liu 2016; Chang 2016).

Afterwards, a few questions were allowed, including the aforementioned 'why is this Forum held in our Congress'? As also mentioned, the answer was not wholly satisfying. After the contract-signing ceremony, the attendees were led out of the chamber to continue their delayed schedule. Among the crowd to join the guided tour, the German Director-General was spotted unattended and seemingly irritated while the Chinese Director disappeared into the deep Palace right after the spotlights were switched off.

### Interpretation of Intercultural Communication

This onstage and offstage diplomatic show is a performance of 'museum diplomacy'. In order to decode the nuanced signification of what has happened in the Forum, it is necessary to analyse and interpret the non-verbal and verbal signifiers from the perspective of intercultural communication.

#### *Non-Verbal Dialogue*

- Milieu: the PM as the location of the Forum is not a politically or historically neutral choice (the Congress took place in Peking University and the Central Academy of Fine Art), as it is the place where the Kowtow episode of the British Envoy McCartney occurred in 1792, and it is the place where countless imperial collections were looted and sacked during the heights of Western colonisation, especially by the Eight-Nations Alliance in 1900 which was officially led by the German Empire.
- Social Norms: The informal understandings which govern the behaviour of members of a society are also important in revealing the unspoken messages.
  - Language: The German and Chinese Directors do not speak the same language (the Forum was equipped with instant translation service). One spoke in international English and in seriousness with a vocabulary of museology, and another in mainland Chinese in the eloquent but humorous style of a politician.

- Costume: The fact that the Chinese Director was wearing a modernised traditional robe-suit rather than a Mao suit (Zhongshan suit) or common Western-style lounge suit at a formal occasion is rather unusual given that the sartorial performance in China has been a battlefield of political ideologies over the past century (Finnane 2015, 37-52). His choice can be interpreted as an expression of cultural confidence or pride in delivering a sense of ‘recovering’, from the ‘century of humiliation’ (since the end of which China started its route of Westernisation) or from the ‘cultural revolution’, since which all things ‘traditional’ have been considered obsolete.
- Hospitality: It is extremely odd and contra to traditional hospitality for a Chinese host to leave his guest, a contract signee-partner, a high-ranking and distinguished public officer, alone in the crowd (Shih 1990, 141-142; Bruckermann and Feuchtwang 2016, 213-223). Typically, there should at least have been an interpreter or local guide (Di-Pei) from the host organisation to accompany the honoured guest, and a lunch reception would be provided separately from the common buffet prepared for ordinary participants.
- Expression: Both Directors praised their institutes and in so doing a ‘conflict’ has appeared between the lines of their respective discourses about ‘universal museum’ and ‘clean collections’.
  - Public Manners: This ‘conflict’ is not processed by open debate or arguing, as often seen in Western cultures and academic circles. In fact, upfront argument or confrontation is considered rude in Oriental cultures, where disagreement or rejection is often shown in private or in an implicit way for ‘face’ concern (Jones 1976; Oetzel and Ting-Toomey 2003; Hammer 2005). This implies that the

conflict between 'universal museum' and 'repatriation to the country of origin' in terms of 'colonial collection', as subtly presented in the Forum, is not one that can be solved through dialogue or discussion.

- Rationality and Emotionalism: The idea of the 'universal museum' represents a rationale or discourse. However, words such as 'not clean' (or 'dirty') are but simple yet heavy adjectives loaded with emotion mixed with disgust and anger, which was so strong that Chinese social conventions were flouted, resulting in bad hospitality. Both rationality and emotionalism are important and should be considered in interpersonal, international or intercultural communication. If both parties fail to respond to each other's way of expression, they risk endangering peace.
- Legal and Moral: The rhetoric of the 'universal museum' is grounded in the 'lawful' ownership of collections and the fact that such museums have 'safeguarded' collections over decades. As it is difficult for a 'country of origin' to solicit legal documentation and to trace proof of pillage or sacking which happened during the colonial era and wars, times prior to the existence of current laws and conventions, the way they can respond, as seen in the Forum, tends to be speaking from a 'moral' standing, one that can be subjective, and which has no legal force.
- Ideology: The idea of the 'universal museum' embodies an epoch of New Imperialism where a diplomatic tradition rooted in Christendom was in practice. In Christendom, all Christian kingdoms are considered equal, while non-Christian states should be reached out to (Dittmer and McConnell 2016). This idea implies a cultural (religious) supremacy that sets out to convert the 'Others'. However, the 'tributary system' of the Tien-xia

worldview (Zhang 2015), signified by the ‘clean’ gifts brought to the Chinese imperial court, is a comparable diplomatic legacy because likewise it suggests that the ‘Others’ are of lower status and thus ought to submit to Chinese superiority.

### *Speech Analysis*

If the unspoken messages reveal a ‘clash’ between the two national museums and the ideologies at work in the background, the spoken ones point to an entangled history of the hard-power struggle between the two countries. The German Director’s talk is actually an official statement of the SMB:

*The extraordinary achievements of German archaeology during the years of the German Empire resulted in huge swathes of objects being brought to Berlin, so that the museums soon began to rival much older comparable collections in Paris and London and they represent a universal museum, spread over several sites across Berlin, all dedicated to the preservation, study, and public appreciation of art and cultural treasures from all epochs of human history. Its collections cover areas of European and non-European art, archaeology, and ethnology of almost all nations, cultures, and periods. (SMB n.d.)*

However, on the opposite page of this grandiose narrative rests a not-so-grandiose chapter of the PM’s history. In fact, the colossal collections mentioned by the Chinese Director are but what have survived the ‘century of humiliation’ (and numerous civil wars). Many royal or imperial collections inside and outside the Palace (for example, at the Yuanming Yuan (Old Summer Palace), the Sanhai (royal gardens named South-Sea, Middle-Sea, and North-Sea), and the Yihe Yuan (Summer Palace)) were reported to be plundered by the armed troops of Western colonial powers during

the Second Opium War in 1860 and the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900 (Chang 2000). The latter was led by Alfred Count von Waldersee, the German First Allied Supreme Commander.

What remains untold is the fact that many of the collections at the SMB were destroyed during WWII and the Berlin Palace was demolished by the East German Communist Regime in the 1950s. Also most of the movable 'national treasures' of the PM were removed to Taiwan by the Nationalist Party and many of the remainder of the collections were spoiled during the Cultural Revolution. In any case, it is clear that what the SMB strives to recover—the glory of German Empire—is much like what the PM grieves to remember, the 'century of humiliation', which has been written in every school textbook for Chinese students to this date. Being the most history-minded people on earth (Skidelsky 2015) with 'contextuality and correlativity' as key cultural characteristics (Qin 2012), it should not have been a surprise to see the Chinese Director, audience and media associating the making of Berlin's 'universal museum' with the unmaking of Beijing's 'national museum' in the context of the Forum, particularly given that there was direct linkage between the two in the Eight-Nation Alliance, where the German Emperor Wilhelm II told his soldiers at the port of Bremerhaven on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July in 1900 to 'fight fiercely without mercy so the Chinese dare not to underestimate the Germans in a thousand years' as the Huns who had made their name in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Europe (Schmitz 2012). In *Indiscreet Letters from Peking* (1907), Putnam Weale wrote that while guarding the Forbidden City the German troops looted most of the important artefacts from the Inner Court. By the winter of 1900, more than half of the Palace's holdings were seen to be lost (Chang 2001, 37; Xiang 2007, 109). Except the 'cutting of China-pie' in Beijing as what was illustrated in *Le Petit journal 16 janvier 1898*, many 'important collections' from other parts of China were brought to the West as well. For instance, the archaeological finds by the curator of the above mentioned Ethnological Museum (now part of the SMB), Albert Grünwedel and his successor Albert von Le Coq, were removed and brought from the



Turfan area of Chinese Central Asia—where the Great Game between Britain and Russia was played—to Berlin and put on public display until 1944 before being bombed by a British air raid (Liu and Meng 2001).

## The Entangled History

In discussing the rise of popular culture in international relations, Grayson (2015) has suggested that we should not to treat cultural differences as a black box of ‘affect, primitivism, mystification and irrationalism’, and this can be applied to understanding the Forum. However differently the opinions are presented, the conflict between ‘universal museums’ and the ‘countries of origin’ resulting from the entangled colonial history remains.

### Declaration of Universal Museums

In fact, the concept of the ‘universal museum’ first appeared in 2002. Immediately after the Greek Minister of Culture brought the official demand in person to the Director of the British Museum (BM) for the Elgin (Parthenon) Marbles to be returned to Greece, the British Museum published on its website the *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums* composed by the Bizop group, an informal club of directors from the world’s largest museums (Opoku 2010), and signed by 18 of them. The former Director-General of the SMB has also written a strong position paper defending the *Declaration* (Schuster 2004) in which he emphasised that the collections in question were acquired in a different time, and through caring for them they have become the heritage of the hosting countries, and that universal admiration for ancient civilizations would not be so deeply established today were it not for the influence exercised by the artefacts of these cultures, widely available to an international public.

### *The Practice of Repatriation*

Nevertheless, returning artefacts to their 'countries of origin' was not always a strange idea among former colonial powers within Europe. For example, the Treaty of Paris in 1815 had effectuated the restitution of a number of artworks confiscated during the Napoleonic Wars, as did the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 with regard to collections looted during WWI. Similar practice was applied to those artworks plundered by Germany during the Holocaust (Knöfel 2015), and Germany is still dealing with Russia regarding artworks removed to St. Petersburg during WWII (Merryman 2006; Henry et al. 2007; O'Donnell 2012). In fact, it was precisely out of a desire to protect movable as well as immovable cultural properties from armed conflict that a series of charters, conventions, and laws were created by UNESCO ("Conventions" n.d.). Consequently, the restitution of objects acquired from illegal trafficking or recent war spoils has now become an ethically and politically correct practice, as seen in certain cases involving those very 'universal museums' that signed the *Declaration* (Gill 2010). Nonetheless, restitution remains an unresolved issue in terms of those cultural properties obtained from the former colonies outside Europe during the colonial epoch. In 1978, the Africa-originated Director-General of the UNESCO wrote *A Plea for the Restitution of an Irreplaceable Cultural Heritage to Those Who Created It* and founded the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation under UNESCO (Lewis 1984). Several countries have joined Greece, like Turkey and Egypt, yet the plea has remained merely as a plea.

### *Resorting to Hard Power*

The topic has aroused ardent debates in the field of museology and heritage studies. Scholars like Gill (2008), Sowole (2010), and Flynn (2012) sympathised with countries of origin, while curators such as MacGregor ("The British Museum" 2003) and Cuno (Cuno 2011, 2013) advocated for universal museums. Although ICOM has suggested that the term might be modified

into 'encyclopaedia museum' to avoid connotations of 'religious universalism', the concept remains intact. The reason to not return the Marbles specified in the *Declaration* was that they 'are among a selected group of key objects which are indispensable to the museum's core function to tell the story of human civilisation, the sculptures cannot be lent to any museum, in Greece or elsewhere'. Nevertheless, the real reason was elucidated by Flynn as 'revenue generation and sustaining the reassurance of long gone empire' and the fear that 'the institutes would be emptied, people impoverished, and tourism seized if collections that contributed to the legacy of Enlightenment shall fall into the hands of nations driven by radical nationalism without curatorial skills and museological expertise to care for their material of culture' (Flynn 2012).

Although Greece had started to process the demand since the 1980s in UNESCO, the idea of returning the Marbles did not in fact first come from Greece, but Britain. In WWII, a small number of high-level officials of the British government had suggested it as a way to thank Greece for fighting the Axis in 1941 (Hitchens et al. 1998; Vrettos 2011). The argument given by the British government to support the return was that wherever the Marbles should be installed the knowledge-making of it would not be affected. However, this proposal has since been cancelled with Britain becoming one of the Big Five after WWII and Greece has undergone Civil War with communists. Notwithstanding the difficult pursuit of the Marbles, restitution of cultural heritage in a similar nature did happen twice to China, as a result of international treaties after the two World Wars, first by Germany after WWI and then by Japan after WWII. The first involved the Astronomy Observatory built in 1442 on the east wall of Peking (Beijing). During the period of the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900, the entire Observatory was taken down and shared by the armed troops of Germany and France after the German Emperor gave permission without regard to the objections of the American commander and the Chinese official (Chang ed. 2001). Defeated by the Allies whom China had joined in 1917, the Treaty of Versailles obligated Germany to return its

share of the Observatory to China while it also gave Germany's concessions in the Shandong province to Japan. Like Britain, after WWII China became one of the Big Five. Nonetheless, under the watch of the United States (Zhang 2011, 23-27), Japan has returned only a small portion of its war spoils as antiquities, artworks, and archives (Song 2011, 9). In order to solicit loans for weaponry and political backing to fight the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Civil War with communists, the Nationalist Party of China sent groups of 'national treasures' from the PM to exhibit in Britain in 1935 (Pinyon 1936; Wu 2004), in Russia in 1944 (Sung 2011), and in the United States in 1961 (*Chinese Art Treasures, Exhibition Catalogue* 1961). It has seemed clear to China that restitution of cultural property as such is hardly an issue of 'justice' but rather of international hard power struggle.

### Beyond the Forum

Although not making any official demand to major Western museums, China's wish to recover its 'national treasures' lost during the 'century of humiliation' from overseas has nevertheless seemed to be clear. Following the economic boom, at the turn of the last millennium several publications addressed the issue with a nationalist sentiment (Chang 2000; Chang 2001; Liu and Meng 2001). Such wish has been manifested as well by the new rich, whose purchases in international auction houses like Sotheby's or Christie's have made headlines, like the bronze animal zodiac heads of Yuanming Yuan (Richards n.d.). This wish has been expressed as well by the media while describing the digital project of the Buddhist booklet concluded in the Forum as lost national treasure 'coming home in an alternative way'. The Beijing Daily went on to stress the 'national characteristics behind museum exhibition':

*China regards 'peace' as the highest principle in International Relations, as manifested by the Ming Voyages. The ambassador Zheng He during his sea excursions had brought silk*

*and gold as gifts to those countries that he visited but had not taken any of their properties back home to China.* (Fen 2016)

This was stated in order to paint an image of the rising China which would be different from that of German Empire. As the official archives of Ming's 'ministry of army (Bin-Bu)' had long been destroyed, the real purpose of Zheng He's sea excursions could no longer be truly known. However, it has been found, for example, that Zheng He intervened in the domestic politics of those Southeast Asian regimes that were Ming's important trading partners (Fernandez-Armesto and Xie (trans.) 2012, 230-231). In 2007, the Premier Hu said in a speech delivered in South Africa that Zheng He visited the east coast of Africa four times and what he brought there was a 'wish for peace and sincere friendship but not weaponry, killing, looting, or slavery' (*Xinhua News Agency* 2007). In 2015, a Singaporean scholar spoke at Harvard University and argued similarly that Zheng He had brought joy and laughter to the 'west sea' (of China), but not colonization and deprivation (Mahbubani 2015). In fact, while the CIHA Congress was being held in Beijing, the seventh Chinese Museums and Relevant Products and Technologies Exposition was taking place in Sichuan where a special section entitled *National Museums along the One Belt and Road: Treasures from the Silk Roads* was included. A total of 63 exhibitions from 14 Central Asian countries were present, and the current President of ICOM-UNESCO gave a keynote speech in which it was stated that 'museums are places of reconciliation as much as they are of collecting or education' ("Successful Mission to Chengdu for ICOM President" 2016).

Located at the other end of China's One Belt and Road (Zhang 2013; Garcia-Herreo and Xu 2016), Germany seems to employ a similar cultural foreign policy. In 2015 the exhibition *Germany: Memories of a Nation* was held at the BM to present 'elements of German history from the past 600 years in the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall 25 years ago' and MacGregor (the Director of

the BM) received the German Chancellor in person (O'Hagan 2015). Soon afterwards the museum director, who was 'acclaimed and coveted the world over', left Britain to head the Humboldt Forum (Knight and Brown 2015) in order to help resurrect this German equivalent of the BM, Louvre, or Hermitage, parting with the remark that 'Britain forgets its past; Germany confronts it' (Adams 2016). But which past does Britain forget, and which does Germany confront? Is it the British past relating to the Elgin Marbles (*Parthenon Sculptures (Return to Greece) Bill 2016-17* 2016) and the German past embodied by the 'universal museum' and which was forgotten due to the Holocaust (Scaturro 2015)? In a way, the rebuilding of the Berlin Palace, the most expensive cultural endeavour in Europe, can be seen as a sign indicating Germany's rise as a new power in Europe and the world (Jeffries 2013; Trenin 2014).

## Conclusion and Discussion

While Germany re-erects its long-gone Palace, China keeps its ruined one the way it was. In *A Story of Ruins*, Wu (2012) suggested that the Yuanming Yuan has been kept purposefully as 'war ruins' in order to remind people of the 'conquering and survival'. Lee (2009) thinks that it is in order to 'enjoy the national wound'. Here we do see 'different national characteristics', as the Beijing Daily put it. However different the museum displays may appear, both countries are 'using the past to change the present' (Ferguson and Dellios 2017). Although 'the past is a foreign country' (Lowenthal 1985), it is worth reconsidering 'which past should be referred by whom' in the milieu of public diplomacy, like the Forum. In fact, the Forum belonged to a series of cultural exchange programmes between Germany and China. Earlier in 2011 the exhibition *The Art of the Enlightenment* came to the National Museum of China from three major art museums in Berlin, Dresden and Munich as the 'remarkable highlight' of the series. It was initiated in 2005 and signed by the Chinese Premier Hu and the German Chancellor Köhler at the Great Hall of the People in

Beijing, yet China has since cancelled all high-level communication as a protest against Merkel's receiving the Dalai Lama in Berlin (Dempsey 2007). It was in 2009 that the exhibition contract was finally signed by Merkel and Wen at the German Chancellery in Berlin.

### Museum Diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

As a matter of fact, such universal or national museum led soft diplomacy between the West and China has become a new phenomenon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and it was pioneered by France. Already in 2000, a contract was signed by the Chinese Premier Jiang and the French President Chirac for a Chinese Culture Year to be organised in France in 2003 and a French Culture Year in China in 2004. Several important museum exhibitions and art programmes were exchanged. While China interpreted the exchange in light of the idea that 'both countries favoured multiculturalism against the United States' world domination' (Liang 2004), a series of Sino-French trading agreements were also concluded, and which have enabled the EU to surpass Japan and the United States as China's biggest trading partner. France becoming China's most important trading partner in the EU has meant important deals regarding aircraft, TGV, nuclear energy and weaponry ("Sino-French Economic Collaboration" 2004). This soft power diplomacy has been repeated by other Western countries: Chinese Culture Years took place in Russia and Italy in 2006, in Spain in 2007, in Australia and Germany in 2011, and in Britain in 2014 (Donaldson and Elliot 2015). Was Britain late to catch the trend? Of course not. In substantiating the 2002 *Declaration* which stressed that universal museums belong to all mankind (so to refuse Greece's demand for restitution) MacGregor (2010), apart from initiating a new education programme (*A History of the World in 100 Objects*), has tried to make the BM a 'museum of the world and for the world' by touring its 'important collections' outside the BM, first in the UK, then to mainland Europe. In 2004, for the very first time in more than 250 years of the BM's existence, prestigious collections have been let out of this oldest national museum in the world and have been toured to Asia (Sir Boyd and

MacGregor 2006). After Japan and Korea, in 2006 272 exquisite artefacts arrived in Beijing and Shanghai for the exhibitions *Treasures of the World's Cultures* at the Capital Museum of China and *Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum* at the Shanghai Museum. Together with these two tour exhibitions came a series of Sino-Britain 'museum collaborations' (IACASS 2015). The contract for this 'historic partnership with museums across China' was signed in 2005 in Beijing by the British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the company of MacGregor (BM 2005). Following the amicable cultural relations shown by this British '(universal) museum diplomacy', Chinese foreign direct investment in the UK grew from 35 million USD in 2006 to over 500 million USD in 2007 (Burghart and Rossi 2009, 6).

Such a phenomenon appears to suggest that museum diplomacy has been employed by the West in order to 'communicate' with China as a way of lobbying for important deals of political economy. The diplomatic mission of these major Western museums' tour exhibitions sent to China is not dissimilar to that of the PM's touring its 'national treasures' to the West, as discussed above. All these exchanges have signified that such high-level museum diplomacy is used in order to meet the needs of international hard power struggles, where that instead of militarised conflicts there are now economic and trading competitions in this age of globalised neoliberalism. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a certain impetus to avoid confronting or challenging the local public's sentiment seems to have been put in place, for example in programmes of cultural exchange led by Western museums, France chose 'impressionism' as the main theme, Italy focused on 'design', and Britain offered hundreds of 'important collections' from across the world—except those acquired from China during the 'century of humiliation' (IACASS 2015).

### Reconciliation or Provocation?

Following in the footsteps of the BM, the SMB as seen in the Forum appears to have gone further in its promoting the very concept of the 'universal museum' at the very site of the PM, and in the



museum collaboration programme to digitally reunify and 'return' a Buddhist collection acquired from China to the PM. In fact, 'digital repartition' as a new approach by far has been mainly applied by some Western museums in dealing with demands of restitution posed by indigenous peoples (Tythacott and Arvanitis eds. 2014). Why not to avoid topical theme like other Western countries? Or is it difficult to find a theme from 'the past' with China for the Forum and museum collaboration? As after the New Imperialism came the two World Wars where Germany and China were on opposite sides, then the Cold War where East Germany allied with China and West Germany with Taiwan. In the historic year of 1989 Germany reunited after the Berlin Wall was brought down but China has continued to be separated from Taiwan after the Tiananmen Square Protest. These socio-political realities have been reflected in the histories of the SMB and the PM as well. The collections of the former, once divided by the Wall, were reunified, yet those of the latter continued to be separated by the Taiwan Strait.

While China reinvents the concept of 'silk roads' so as to reach out to Central and Southeast Asia, Germany applies the idea of the 'universal museum' as a way of reconnecting with its colonial legacy in Africa. In early 2016, a meeting was held at the Goethe-Institute in Johannesburg where the former Director of the BM, now the head of the Humboldt Forum, MacGregor, told the African museum professionals there that Germany examines its past consistently and that the Berlin Palace Humboldt Forum, as a 'universal museum', belongs to all peoples, not only Germans. However, unlike the passive but radical protest made by the Chinese Director as seen in the Forum, the former Director of the National Museums of Kenya argued:

*We must not forget how these exhibits got from Africa to Berlin. The suffering that is associated with this must be recognized. But we also need to ask ourselves how this cultural heritage can portray modern societies today. In a way that it will not reinforce the old*

*colonial prejudices and structures; a world in which only some have a voice or a name, but many others do not* (March 2016).

Other questions were also being presented: How is the Berlin Palace going to deal with the Herero in former German-occupied southwest Africa, or the Maji Maji in Tanzania? What about the origins and the lawful possession of the exhibits? Why then should this new museum be in Berlin instead of Africa, if it is intended to be for the Africans too? The only answer to all these questions by MacGregor was that 'traveling exhibitions' should be sent from Berlin to Africa. The 'hope', one participant said, was that 'this Berlin Palace would be more than just a keyhole'. Nonetheless, while holding this 'museological conversation' in order to face colonial crime (Eckert 2016), Germany concluded a number of 'financial and technical agreements' with Namibia in 'management of natural resources, sustainable economic development and transport and logistics' totalling 71,9 million Euro (NPC 2016). Aside from touring the treasures of the world's cultures to China, MacGregor has affronted Greece and backpedalled from the *Declaration* by lending the Marbles to Russia (BBC 2014), and the Louvre has established a branch in Dubai rather than in Egypt (Tharoor 2015). Are 'universal museums' practicing a selective universality with regard to chosen countries only?

Without a colonial legacy as such, China is, however, rich in other 'past glories' that can be used as part of today's soft diplomacy. The Ming dynasty's inland silk roads and the sea excursions seem to be ideal candidates as they are in the far distant past, the Qing dynasty's achievement in making the largest territory seems not. Although prior to the 'century of humiliation' the Qing dynasty made Manchuria, Mongolia, east Turkestan, and Tibet 'Chinese', it was a regime established by the Manchu people instead of Han. Such a Han-centric cultural value, in fact, can be seen in the Chinese museum history too. For example, in 'rescuing' the rest of the Dunhuang

objects from those Western ‘devils’ (Hopkirk 1984) by bringing them to Beijing, only those manuscripts in Chinese were collected but those in Sogdian, Uighur, Sanskrit, Tibetan, or Mongolian were abandoned. As discussed, it cannot be known if historic China had brought only ‘joy and laughter’ to Africa or Southeast Asia, but it can be seen that several countries have started to reject the One Belt and Road projects of modern railways, ports and other facilities due to ownership arguments over future property, the environmental damage of infrastructure construction and related scandals of bribery and corruption related (MMTIMES 2018). Besides, roughly half of Chinese foreign direct investment is in the natural resource industries of Africa, South America and the Middle East, and the government-business relations is intriguing in China, where a market economy sits atop a stagnant communist regime (Li 2010). All these factors seem to call the China Dream of ‘peaceful rising’ into doubt.

### The Many Faces of Power

Oliver (2007) has noted that (universal) national museum like the Louvre was transferred ‘from under the crown’s jurisdiction to become public symbol of nationalism’, and Gray (2015) has analysed how museum has been used to exercise political power, ideology, and legitimacy. The phenomenon explored in this article has suggested that museum has further become a prevailing diplomatic asset of political economy as it is negotiated between the West, China and beyond. In an earlier TV programme the German Director-General declared himself to be a cultural diplomat. Avoiding the interviewer’s question on China’s human rights issue, he said:

*The exhibition [Art of Enlightenment] does not need to be ‘politicised’ as it is built from a cultural and art historical viewpoint. Being the path to human soul, culture does not have borders and having mutual understanding shall be the way to the future. (DW 2011)*

It is difficult to know how effective such an exhibition can be in increasing mutual understanding (Kirchner 2011) as little evaluation or visitor studies has been carried out, and the impact of cultural exchange often takes a long time to show. It is equally difficult to know how influential museum diplomacy actually is, as information related to national security or major economic issues are often kept confidential, at least for some time. To verify the substantial relationship between culture, politics, and economics is beyond the scope of this paper, which aimed rather to understand what lies behind the high-level international cultural exchanges led by (universal) national museums, from the perspective of museology, international relations and intercultural communication. Although the question of the extent to which the high art and culture of a national museum can represent the 'culture' of a nation is a contentious one considering that the most common definition of culture is 'way of life', the point of this paper is not to diminish the meaning of the 'cultural exchange' enabled by the high-level museum diplomacy as such. Eventually, just like the grass-rooted and rather borderless popular culture which can be pervasive in the everyday life of a global age, this kind of high-level cultural exchange of museum diplomacy will merge into the wide-ranging global phenomenon of transculturation, acculturation, or enculturation as known in cultural anthropology. But again, 'why is the Forum held in the CIHA Congress?' The answer seems to become clear by this research: it is because most of the actor-agents of museum diplomacy are art historians, including the German Director-General of the SMB, his colleague from the BM, and those directors of major Western museums who have signed the *Declaration* in 2002. The Forum does seem to have the best audiences for China to address the colonial past of universal museums and to promote its 'peaceful rising' as a new world power. It is true that arts and culture are 'the path to reach the human soul' as the German Director-General put it, yet sometimes they can also be powerful instruments to fabricate cages for the human soul, as seen in the making of national identity, collective memory and the hard power struggle of

international politics and economics that in return can confine a people's 'way of life'. To critically engage with museum diplomacy, thus becomes important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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