

Representing China in the British Museum: Do Museums Perpetuate Historical Biases?

Hongsuli Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Suzhou Foreign Language School, Suzhou, 215011, China*

a. surizhang025@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Museums have never been neutral. Public museums and exhibitions that originated in colonial times are accused of passing on biases that feature Euro-centric interpretations of history. This paper investigates the nature of bias and the history of museums and their biases, and then focuses on the representation of China in the British Museum as an elaborate case study. The paper argues that from the British Museum's virtual collections and public resources, the descriptive text and collection highlights in the China galleries reflect implicit and biased historical perspectives of China in the UK, exhibiting a contrast between the British appreciation of exotic Chinese art and contempt towards China's social status arising from colonial trade. This paper provides a specific statement and analysis of western biases for colonial discussions and could contribute to decolonization actions taken in museums.

Keywords: the British Museum, Chinese artifact, cultural bias, museum, colonial times

1. Introduction

Museums of the past were accused to be heavily biased [1]. Moving into the 21st century, globalization has set reforms in exhibitions to introduce a globally inclusive narrative and pushed forward the decolonization of museums that originated in imperial and colonial times. Yet controversies surrounding museums and globalized cultural representation persist. Public doubts and protests continue against the biased representation of Asian, Latin American, and African historical narratives presented in world-famous museums [1]. Regarding relevant issues in this paper, I set to propose and investigate a few questions: What is a bias in a museum? How did museums and their biases develop? Do museums perpetuate historical biases and to what extent? Through the inquiries, I aim to put forward a background analysis of museums and biases referring to historical records, debates, and essays, and progress to answer the final question in a case study of Chinese collections in the British Museum.

2. The Nature of Bias

Before approaching to ask whether museums perpetuate historical biases, what exactly is a bias when it comes to museums? Moreover, should museums be biased?

To establish the basis for discussion, the nature of "bias" in the proposed questions should be clarified in the context of museums. The word is recognized broadly by the public as the prejudice in favor of or against one thing, according to Oxford Dictionary, and is generally regarded as a negative

behavior opposite to “neutrality”. Speaking of neutrality and bias in museums, some see neutrality as the representation of *everything* and bias as exclusivity [1]. Besides exclusivity, tailored and inaccurate information presented is also accused of creating a misleading bias. Yet is it ever possible for museums to be neutral? Any inaccuracy can be corrected, however, to every inclusion, there is always an erasure of other contents under the space limitations and theme requirements in museums. The most neutral narratives possible are those which make explicit their biases, i.e. the intended arrangement and omissions in advance. As will be outlined in the following section, undeclared biases are often deep, historical, and easily passed on, raising real concerns that disrupt museums’ functions as trusted public institutes of information. Therefore, the paper focuses on the perpetuation of biases that aren’t made explicit in exclusive museum representations due to historical and political reasons.

3. Museums and Their Biases

As the nature of bias discussed in this paper is laid out, the paper progresses to analyze the history of biases, exhibitions, and museums.

The history of museums commenced with the history of collecting. The earliest forms of museums originated from personal collections, “wonder rooms” or cabinets of curiosities, of curious natural and artistic objects belonging to elite individuals, families, or institutions [2]. The entrance to these collections was limited to mostly elite, well-connected people. The collections on display enabled a new encyclopedic and systematic system of arranging knowledge and communication.

Developed from private collections, museums gradually became public institutes alongside the shift in European historical and political development from the 18th century. At the same time, the bodies of collections in Europe expanded due to the imperial plunder, using granted, traded, or looted objects to portray the non-European world under Western perceptions. As colonialism articulated with art historical narratives, biases in cultural interpretation had been noted throughout the early history of public museums and exhibitions, notably in displays depicting the non-European world.

The World as Exhibition by Timothy Mitchell opens with a description of the Egyptian Exhibit by Egyptian delegates in the World Exhibition in Paris, France, 1889:

Only one thing disturbed them. The Egyptian exhibit had been built by the French to represent a street of medieval Cairo, made of houses with overhanging upper stories and a mosque like that of Qaitbay. “It was intended,” one of the Egyptians wrote, ‘to resemble the old aspect of Cairo.’ So carefully was this done, he noted, that ‘even the paint on the buildings was made dirty.’ [3].

This was later referred to in the passage as an example of “the European mischief”—The exhibitions rendered the non-European objects and people up to be viewed in a European concern [3]. Being in a position of power in relation to the rest of the world during the imperial and colonial times, Europe dominated in writing, interpreting, and representing history, including only the desired aspects of other cultures to serve a Europe-oriented story. In the ongoing superiority and control colonialism gained in interpreting non-European cultures, the Euro-centric intention and stereotypical perceptions were faked into neutrality and never made explicit. Museums were then products of the relationship between power, representation, and cultural identity—showcasing whose and how history is written and shared.

Thus, a concern is raised that those concealed historical biases can easily perpetuate in museums: Historical accounts of particular artifacts and cultures used and referenced in exhibition planning may turn out to be the victor’s narrative disguised as the rightful history; Even though history and art historical interpretation can be revised with updated facts, a culture’s stereotypical perception toward another culture, shaped by past historical and political interactions, may tip the scale.

4. Chinese Collections in The British Museum

Given the background introduced, this case study of China in the British Museum is set to reveal whether there are perpetuating and unclarified historical biases in a specific museum, answering the question “Do museums perpetuate historical biases?” to a level of specificity. The paper aims to identify and inquire about possible biases of the museum collections articulated with the colonial past. Methodologically, arguments will be put forward after investigating the history of the British Museum as well as a historical perspective taken of China in the UK, by analyzing online resources available about the Chinese exhibitions in the museum.

The British Museum is a world-famous museum of human history, art, and culture. The museum was founded in 1753 based on the private collections of Sir Hans Sloane [4]. For the following 260 years, the British Museum gradually developed its public role and dramatically expanded its collections with the development of the United Kingdom in relation to the international world. In 1759, the museum made its first public opening allowing well-connected visitors to apply for its tickets and attend personal tours, and from the 1830s onwards, it progressed to offer open and free access to all, rising as an influential public institute [4]. In the meantime, besides the acquisition of objects from donations, excavations, and sales, the collections in the museum were accused to grow with the British colonial history, when artifacts were traded or looted under colonial governments or missionary activities [5]. As the first public national museum in the world, bearing a long and representative history of development intertwined with the colonial and imperial past, the British Museum carries evident value for inquiry.

To decipher the potential biases in the representation of China in the British Museum, the paper employs a historical perspective of the changes in Western relations to and perceptions of Chinese art and civilization in the United Kingdom. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, China was viewed in the UK as a model society, despite being deemed ‘exotic and unusual’ [6]. But subsequently, as the Opium War broke in 1839, the British, for whom victory had engendered a cultural and technological superiority, sharply reduced their regard for China. The sharp decline of the esteem China held as a society and the colonial trade and looting gave the British a sense of control and superiority over exotic Chinese art and craft. By the second half of the nineteenth century, according to Catherine Pagani, “China was regarded as a marketable commodity just as were her products” [6]. The metaphor indicated the contempt towards the socio-political context of China in the mere recognition of Chinese material belongings. The demand for Chinese objects later experienced a decline with progressivism popularizing in the UK and rising interest in chinoiserie [7]. With the turn into the 20th century, remarkable archaeological discoveries highlighting ancient China then refreshed impressions of Chinese art and material culture and offered novel inspirations, arousing a new round of focus [8].

There are a few points to ponder from the historical perspectives in the following, with references to the summary given by Varutti [8]. Firstly, given that the Qing government implemented a continuous policy of isolation (referred to as Bi Guan Suo Guo, cutting China off from the international world) before the Opium War, few interactions with foreign societies had reached the country. Consequently, rarely did the intention to distinguish China from other cultures emerge natively. As Craig Clunas mentioned, the very notion of “Chinese art” is a creation of nineteenth-century Europe and North America. The notion was to mark a distinction between Western art and the massively-introduced Chinese art, yet it blurred the richness of diverse styles and historical contexts within what were monopolistically classified as “Chinese” [9]. Secondly, under the colonial background, China as well as its works were commodities. Owning no esteem in political or social status, China had only gotten recognition for its artistic production from the Western world. In appreciation of Chinese artifacts, the political and social development of China that art historical

studies should reflect on was often absent. Therefore, it was concerning that an over-focus on Chinese skills and crafts over other contexts was perpetuated. Moreover, the worsening and conflicted view of the Chinese people and their government in power starting from the Opium War and the favor for exotic Chinese art resulted in a “dissociation between the artistic production of China and its socio-political context” [8]. These biased perceptions towards interpreting Chinese art were all likely to be secretly perpetuated in museums from the 1800s into the 21st century.

Thus, I proceed to analyze the galleries of Chinese collections in the British Museum, aiming to locate traces of the following biases:

- I. The blurred diversity of Chinese art
- II. The over-focus on Chinese skills and crafts
- III. A dissociation between the artistic production of China and its socio-political context

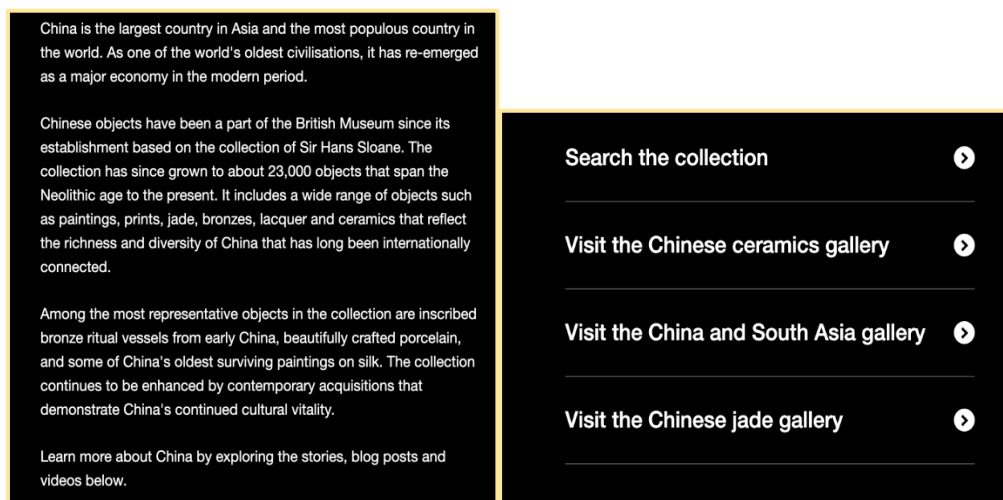


Figure 1: Descriptions on the British Museum’s website about the “China” collections in general (left); Divisions of galleries of Chinese objects (right) from Charlie Jones. “China.” The British Museum, www.britishmuseum.org/collection/china. Accessed 28 Sept. 2022 [10].

The analysis is based on online research from the British Museum’s official website *Britishmuseum.org* and analytical essays. The Chinese collections are exhibited in the Chinese ceramics gallery, the China and South Asia Gallery, and the Chinese jade gallery in respectively Room 95, Room 33 (The Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery), and Room 33b in the museum.

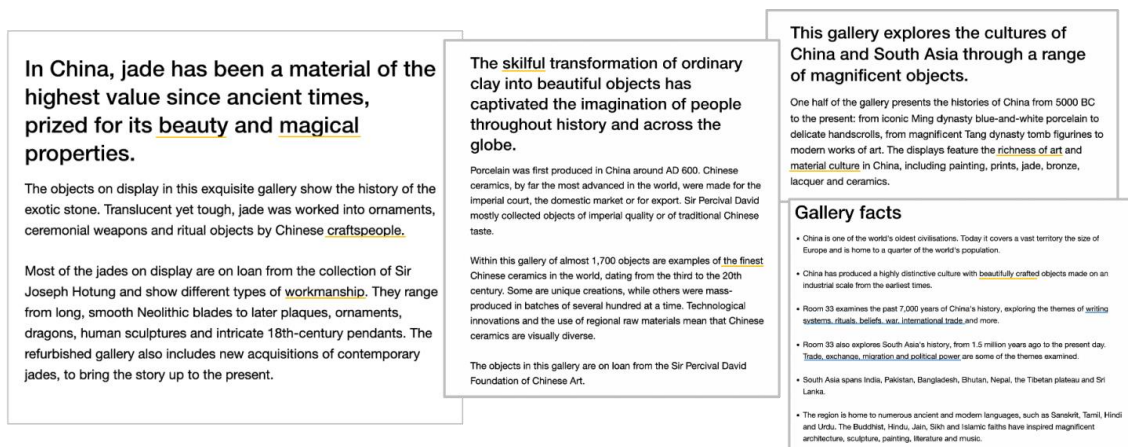


Figure 2: Descriptions on the British Museum’s website about the Chinese jade gallery, the Chinese ceramics gallery, and the China and South Asia Gallery displayed from left to right [11,12,13].

The following paragraphs are set to analyze the general descriptions of the galleries on the museum web page (see fig.1; fig.2) first, then go on to bring several highlighted exhibits into examination. The descriptive text should effectively reflect the museum's attitude towards and presentation of Chinese arts in general terms since they are introductions to the galleries posted by the British Museum as a public resource; The individual exhibits provide supportive evidence of the ways of presentation analyzed.

In terms of the diversity of Chinese art, the text adequately provides information on the ranges of creations (see fig. 2). Though the broad divisions of Chinese jade or ceramics (see fig. 1) may point to a loss of grouping within Chinese art, the British Museum has done its job presenting an overview of Chinese art forms within an international exhibition complex with inevitable space limitations. In addition, especially in the China and South Asia gallery and the ceramics gallery, viewers are able to tell evident style and functional differences of many artifacts by eyes (see fig. 3).

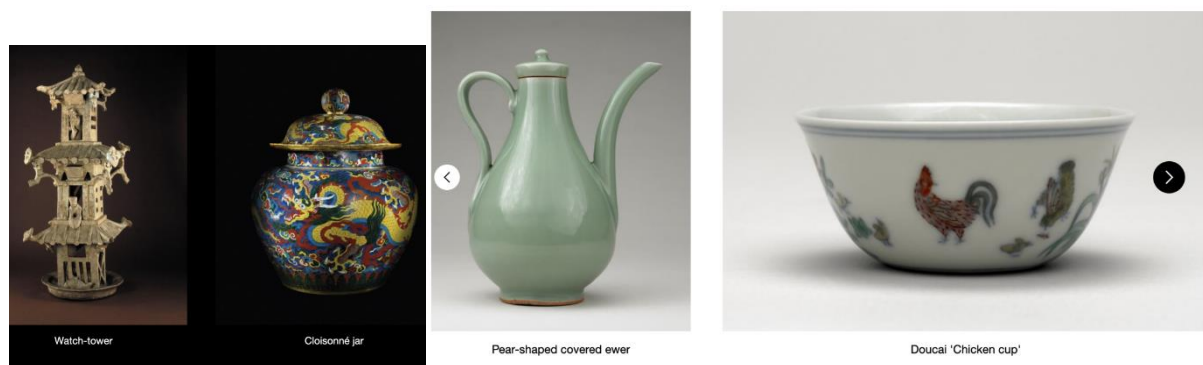


Figure 3: Highlights of collections showing distinct styles and functions [10,11].

Some of the keywords underlined in yellow, “workmanship”, “skillful”, “beautifully crafted”, “finest”, etc, are very good demonstrations of the recognition of Chinese art making in Western society (see fig.2). Moreover, the division of galleries into jade- and ceramics-oriented themes indicate the categorization of Chinese art narratives based on materials (see fig. 1). In the introduction written on Chinese jade, the beauty and magical properties are emphasized, indicating the museum's interpretation of the beautiful crafts and their ritual properties. Easily, one can find that the descriptive text mainly falls on the craft, workmanship, and materials, and that jade's ceremonial and ritual properties are only introduced in a few words. Similarly, the description of Chinese ceramics is more inclined to the material quality and skillful production. However, except for the text provided on the China and South Asia Gallery that mentions the featuring of “richness of art and material culture” and outlines themes of “writing systems, rituals, beliefs, war, international trade”, viewers can see no clear clarification stating that the galleries mainly showcase the artistic production of Chinese objects. It is thus reasonable to suspect an over-focus on Chinese skills and crafts with substantial dissociation between the artistic production of China and its social, or more importantly, political context, and such suspicion is further confirmed when one compares “writing systems, rituals, beliefs, war, international trade” as themes presented of China to the museum's examination of “trade, exchange, migration, and political power” in South Asia (see text underlined in blue in fig. 2). Perceiving information as the British Museum generally terms the collections “China” without making any apparent notions of exclusions, viewers are very likely to take an incomplete recognition of the exotic country as the whole story. The analysis, identifying the focus, omissions, and ambiguity in a museum representation, leads to a reasonable conclusion that the biases over-focusing on Chinese skills and crafts and dissociating between the artistic production of China and its socio-political context do lurk as a persistent historical perspective in the British Museum.

To prove the statement with further details, the paper approaches to analyze a selection of exhibits in a specific gallery and the interpretation offered of these artifacts. The investigation of the Chinese jade gallery could reveal the tilted balance towards presenting artistic production over socio-political development in China. In the highlights of the Chinese jade gallery, the presentations of jade cong and matched pair of dragon pendants are selected to be analyzed and compared with those in Chinese museums (see fig. 4). Jade is a typical Chinese imagery that reflects both developments in craft and in society, and in many Chinese museums, jade artifacts are interpreted to outline the historical advances in ritual, social, and political structure in ancient China in addition to the artistic appreciation. The Suzhou Museum, as an example, organizes jade congs from Liangzhu Culture and jade pendants from the Zhou Dynasty in an exhibition hall to address, with the help of historical context, the shift of jade's position in nature-worshiping rituals to that in Li Yue ritual system set up with Feudalism to emphasize the superiority of noble classes. Thus, jade implies that, from the Neolithic to the Warring States periods, ancient Chinese civilization developed from a nature-dependent primitive society to a complex social and political structure with various classes and ranks of power as one of the most civilized societies at that time. The jade cong and pendants highlighted in the Chinese jade gallery are from the same origins and periods as those in the Suzhou Museum. In contrast, neither of the two objects is interpreted with enough historical context. The description about jade cong falls onto its shape and shortly compliments the intricate skills needed for its creation, briefly mentioning the importance of the piece. The explanation about the dragon pendants fails to interpret the Li Yue and Feudalism system as the socio-political reasons vital for the piece's popularity and meaning to the "important people" in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. In terms of the display of individual exhibits, an over-focus on skills and a dissociation between the artistic production of China and its socio-political context remain evident.

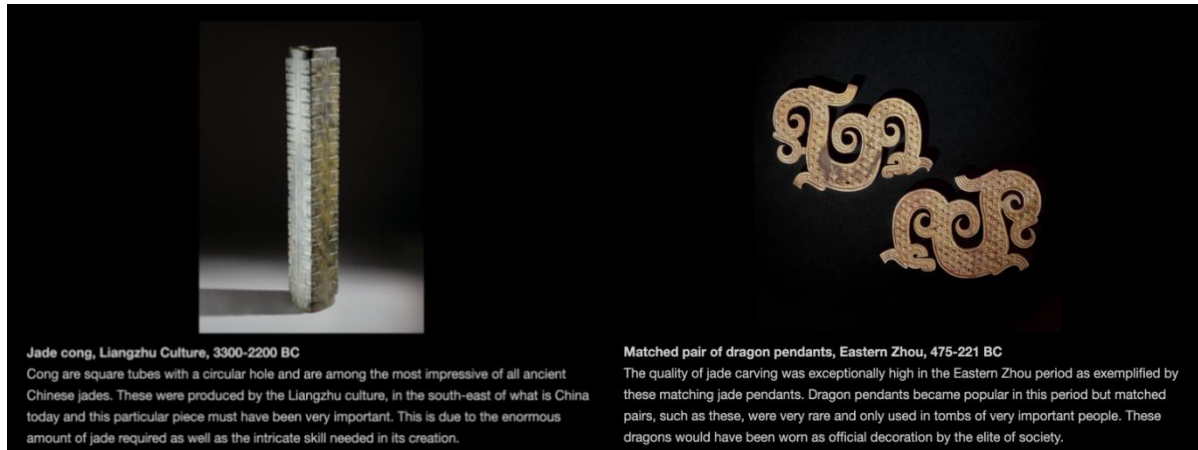


Figure 4: Highlights of the Chinese jade gallery: Jade cong (on the left) and dragon pendants (on the right) from Ali Brooks. "Chinese Jade." The British Museum, www.britishmuseum.org/collection/galleries/chinese-jade. Accessed 28 Sept. 2022 [12].

5. Discussions

Some argue that the focus on Chinese skills and crafts in current museum exhibitions is not necessarily related to the aforementioned historical perspective anymore. The full appreciation of artifacts often necessitates a "skilled vision" as well as a "cultured vision" enshrined in a specific cultural universe [8, 14]. Though a "skilled vision" is easy to obtain by a mere appreciation of craft and beauty, one must be aware of and sensitive to their cultural relevance in order for a "cultured vision" to function [8]. Chinese audiences are largely aware of the ritualistic and political

symbolization of jade and the social and ritual development of ancient China. In contrast, it is unlikely for the British, or other foreign visitors to possess the same level of relevant knowledge and to process the information within a single exhibition. It is thus not only normal but also expected that a “cultured vision” will be given placement in museum exhibitions in China, yet a “skilled vision” is more emphasized in the British Museum. However, one can argue that the loss and under-representation of a “cultured vision” in Europe is initially associated with the colonial past and the European act to place China around the Europe-centered vision.

6. Conclusion

Colonial history acts as the main source of inexplicit and concealed biases in museums and exhibitions. Of the three possible biases proposed by analyzing the British perception of Chinese art with a historical perspective, two of them, the over-focus on Chinese skills and crafts and a dissociation between the artistic production of China and its socio-political context, were evident in the British Museum without explicit clarifications. This paper only investigates the representation of one culture in one specific museum, yet reflects potential biases perpetuating in museums around the world by suggesting and proving the lasting effects of colonial history. Further explorations have to be done by putting together and comparing various museums with distinct yet interacting histories, and another round of questions need to be asked: How is a museum to treat such an incongruous representation?

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