

With a focus upon curatorial methods and aims, in what ways does *PRESENCE: A Window into Chinese Contemporary Art* engage with the complexities of exhibiting 'China' today in the UK?

The University of Salford is currently presenting their 'New Collection of Chinese Contemporary Art' in its entirety for the very first time.¹ The exhibition, *PRESENCE: A Window Into Chinese Contemporary Art*, will run from the 9 February - 3 June in the vaults of Liverpool's St. George's Hall.² *PRESENCE* is part of the ongoing 2018 *China Dream* season; spanning from February to October, the programme aims to celebrate the 'long and rich relationship' between Liverpool and China while telling 'the stories of Chinese Diaspora living in the UK'.³ Ai Weiwei strongly asserts that 'without a firm grasp of China's history [...] it is difficult to gain any profound understanding of contemporary Chinese culture.'⁴ Thus with this in mind, the focus of the essay is not upon presenting a didactic account of 'Chinese culture' in general, but rather an attempt to gain greater insight into the motivations, curation and reception of a specific instance of exhibiting 'Chinese' contemporary art.

I was invited as a delegate to the conference 'PRESENCE: A window on engaging with Chinese Contemporary art' which took place on the 12 May at St. George's Hall. The discussions were aimed at 'curators, directors and students who are interested in learning about contemporary art from China.'⁵ Robin Kemp, Head of Creative Development at Culture Liverpool, introduced the event by stating that the *China Dream* Festival aims to 'overcome the stereotypes about Chinese culture' and 'avoid risk of Eurocentrism.'⁶ While this statement is imprecise, it does demonstrate an awareness of the complex history of exhibiting 'Chinese' art in the UK. Certainly past and present are systematic parallels, as stated by Edward Said, the way that we 'represent the past shapes our understanding and views of the present.'⁷ Therefore I believe it would be fruitless to view the exhibition in a vacuum; while *PRESENCE* focuses upon the 'contemporary', the curatorial and museological decisions are inevitably informed by apriori systems of knowledge and teleological paradigms which must be considered.

Writing in 1979, Jerome Ch'en affirms that 'the progress of the West in the 19th century threw China into sharp contrast'; there emerged a consensus that 'China' was stagnant, a binary opposite to the development

¹ "PRESENCE: A Window into Chinese Contemporary Art", Artcollection at Salford. 2018 <<http://artcollection.salford.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/FINAL-Catalogue-PRESENCE1.pdf>> [Accessed 18 April 2018].

² Moira Leonard and Carol Emmas, "What's On, Current Exhibitions", *Art In Liverpool*, 2018, p. 18. <https://issuu.com/artinliverpoolmagazine/docs/april_2018a> [Accessed 11 May 2018].

³ "China Dream", *Visitliverpool.com*, 2018 <<https://www.visitliverpool.com/whats-on/china-dream-zhong-guo-meng-p421051>> [Accessed 23 April 2018].

While it is essential to pay reference the *China Dream* programme, due to the word limit of this essay I have not attempted to analyse the event as a whole as there is much too consider; rather, I have mentioned the programme in order to provide an immediate context in which the PRESENCE exhibition is occurring.

⁴ Ai Weiwei, 'The Multiple Predicaments and Upturns of Chinese Contemporary Art', in *Mahjong - Contemporary Chinese Art From The Sigg Collection* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005). p.14.

⁵ "PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art And Culture", Eventbrite, 2018 <<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/presence-a-window-on-engaging-with-chinese-contemporary-art-and-culture-tickets-44592951719#>> [Accessed 1 May 2018].

⁶ Robin Kemp, 'Welcome to China Dream' in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George's Hall, 2018).

⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (London: Vintage, 1994), p.3.

seen in the so-called West.⁸ Such an East/West binary evokes Said's seminal writings on 'Orientalism' and postcolonialism, nevertheless in 2015 Ming Dong Gu strongly asserted that such theories are 'a square peg in the round hole of Chinese-related material.'⁹ A major reason for this being that China was not directly colonised by the UK and so knowledge of China produced using studies of colonised communities is erroneous. I was surprised by the frequent mention of 'Eurocentric', 'exoticism' and 'Otherness' during the conference; clearly these longstanding issues were a major consideration when planning the event. In line with such thoughts, C.J.W.L. Wee suggests that 'participating in an endless round of critiques of Eurocentrism often has the negative result of returning art and cultural discussions to Western institutions'.¹⁰ While to a large extent I do agree with Wee, it is crucial to question the motivations of 'Western institutions' when choosing to exhibit 'Chinese art'.

Alongside the University of Salford and Culture Liverpool, the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art in Manchester (CFCCA) aided the development of *PRESENCE* by working with the University to expand the collection. CFCCA formed in 1986, a time where the preconceptions of Chinese contemporary art 'were still very closed' and so the organisation aimed to 'develop a progressive curatorial practice.'¹¹ To provide a historical backdrop, 'since the process of economic reform began in 1979, an exceptionally diverse and dynamic art scene [has been developing] in post-Mao China.'¹² This belief is shared by Silvia Fok, who highlights the 1979 *Stars Exhibition* as marking 'the beginning of contemporary art in the PRC.'¹³ Alongside this, Uli Sigg, renowned collector of Chinese art, expresses that the 'Venice Biennale in 1999 really broke down barriers,' which is supported by Sajid Rizvi's 1997 article which states that 'until a year ago venues showing contemporary Chinese art in Britain could be counted on fingers.'¹⁴¹⁵ The development of Chinese contemporary art in the 21st century was rapid; by 2007 '5 of the 10 best-selling contemporary artists at international auction were Chinese.'¹⁶ At the aforementioned conference, I was taken aback by the mention of a 'gold rush in China', that China is a 'goldmine' for the future of contemporary art; I do not disagree that art made within PRC deserves international attention, yet I found the discourse surrounding 'China as goldmine' disconcerting.¹⁷ Speakers from the British Council and Arts Council England focused on 'maximising resources' and the financial gains to be made through establishing connections with China's dynamic cultural sector. I am not criticising this focus as public facing institutions must consider how to manage financial partnerships; further emphasised in a Post-Brexit Britain as Theresa May is encouraging engagement with different Chinese sectors in the hope that 'signing a free trade agreement with the world's second biggest

⁸ Jerome Ch'en, *China And The West* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1979). p.40-1.

⁹ Ming Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative To Orientalism And Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2015). p.2.

¹⁰ C. J. W.-L. Wee, "'We Asians'?: Modernity, Visual Art Exhibitions, And East Asia", *Boundary 2*, 37.1 (2010), 91-126. p.108.

¹¹ Zoe Dunbar, 'Introducing Chinese art into the UK context' in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George's Hall, 2018).

¹² Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner, *'Mahjong - Contemporary Chinese Art From The Sigg Collection'* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005). p.9.

¹³ Silvia Fok, *Life And Death: Art And The Body In Contemporary China* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013). p.3.

¹⁴ Uli Sigg in conversation with Matthias Frehner, in *'Mahjong - Contemporary Chinese Art From The Sigg Collection'* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005). p.19.

¹⁵ Sajid Rizvi, "Contemporary Chinese Gallery Scene: The Past In Tea Leaves", *Eastern Art Report*, 1997. p.28.

¹⁶ Jane Debevoise, *Between State And Market: Chinese Contemporary Art In The Post-Mao Era* (Leiden: BRILL, 2014). p.1-2.

¹⁷ Professor Juan Cruz, 'Working with China, maximising resources' in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George's Hall, 2018).

economy' will be made simpler.¹⁸ I had assumed the conference would focus on the cultural motivations of *PRESENCE*, but it is important to show an awareness of the long-term monetary incentives.

When interviewing Olivia Walker, the exhibition manager of *PRESENCE*, she conveyed how 'amongst the [curatorial] team there has been a lot of talk of 'soft power' [as] art can be a non-threatening form of diplomacy.'¹⁹ The focus upon 'soft power' is significant; Hongying Wang explains how 'soft power' continues to be a crucial component of the Chinese Communist Party's policy.²⁰ Jian Wang strongly asserts that 'nowhere else has the idea of "soft power" been as widely discussed and appropriated as in China [...] there is general agreement that how a country is perceived abroad is crucial [to] the presence of international legitimacy.'²¹ I find this concern for 'international legitimacy' curious; while Wang was writing in 2011, his statement harks back to 19th century nation-building, the symbolic importance of projecting a cohesive national identity through world expositions and national museums.²² This exemplifies how the curatorial methods of today show a 'self-conscious effort to historicise [China] and to contextualise it in the present'; Walker certainly believes that an awareness of the interconnectedness of past and present is essential when considering future partnerships and exhibitions.²³

Alongside these concerns for financial and diplomatic partnerships, the Salford Art Collection is using *PRESENCE* as an opportunity to encourage future collaborations. While in the past certain pieces have been loaned individually, Stephanie Fletcher, assistant curator of *PRESENCE*, highlights that the entire collection is available for loan, meaning that *PRESENCE* is an 'excellent way for organisations to see the potential of works in-situ.'²⁴ At a very basic level, Fletcher explained that the collection is held for 'the benefit and enjoyment of the public, our students and staff, so we are always keen to have it on display' yet furthered this through expressing how 'Contemporary Chinese art is not widely collected in the UK and we felt it was important to bring [this focus] to China Dream.'²⁵ While 'the shifts brought about by identity politics in the 1980s [resulted] in an interest in representing non-Western artists in the metropolitan art world', I agree with Fletcher that it is essential institutions continue develop this inclination, to find more successful ways of presenting so-called 'non-western' artists.²⁶

Lindsay Taylor, co-curator of *PRESENCE*, clarified what is meant by the use of 'Chinese' in the exhibition title, stating 'we use "China" in the wider sense of the word, referring to mainland China, Hong Kong, Tai-

¹⁸ Neil Connor, "Why Britain Is Cosying Up To China", *The Telegraph*, 2018 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/30/britain-cosying-china-beef-plastic-free-trade/>> [Accessed 3 May 2018].

¹⁹ Olivia Walker, interviewed by Poppy Jones-Little, (St. George's Hall, 12 May 2018)

²⁰ Hongying Wang, "Chapter Three: China's Image Projection And Its Impact", in *Soft Power In China: Public Diplomacy Through Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 37-57 <<https://www.dawsonera.com/readonline/9780230116375>> [Accessed 13 May 2018]. p.37

²¹ Jian Wang, "Chapter One: China's Search for Soft Power", in *Soft Power In China: Public Diplomacy Through Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) <<https://www.dawsonera.com/readonline/9780230116375>> [Accessed 12 May 2018]. p.1.

²² Kavita Singh, "The Museum is National" in *No Touching, No spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 207- 131. p.207.

²³ Satish Deshpande, "Making 'Asia' Mean: Towards A Response To Sun Ge", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2.1 (2001). pp.145-150. p.149.

²⁴ Stephanie Fletcher, interviewed by Poppy Jones-Little, (St. George's Hall, 13 April 2018).

²⁵ Stephanie Fletcher, interviewed by Poppy Jones-Little, (St. George's Hall, 13 April 2018).

²⁶ C. J. W.-L. Wee, "'We Asians'?: Modernity, Visual Art Exhibitions, And East Asia", *Boundary 2*, 37.1 (2010), pp.91-126. p.103

wan and the diaspora.²⁷ Robin Kemp confirmed that the entirety of the *China Dream* season upholds this definition. While referencing China ‘in the wider sense’ is ambiguous, I was reassured that it is purposefully vague as the season aims to encompass a range of events, to voice the ‘individual stories’ of those that identify as ‘Chinese’.²⁸ While the focus on mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan suggests a geographical specificity, I find the mention of ‘diaspora’ curious. Hongmei Li states, in reference to Benedict Anderson, that ‘like nations, the diaspora are also viewed as imagined communities.’²⁹ Anderson believes the ‘community’ is imagined as members may never meet each other, ‘yet in the minds of each lives the image of communion.’³⁰ Li challenges how ‘some scholars have attempted to list the characteristics of diaspora’, criticising this as a means of essentialising, with a disregard for development and particularity.³¹ For *PRESENCE*, ‘diaspora’ is defined as ‘Chinese [...] living in the UK’, suggesting a core, shared ethnicity which somehow links these individuals and their experiences.³² In viewing exhibitions, I have often felt obliged to respect the authority of the exhibition team when making such decisions; Spencer Crew and James Sims speak of this inclination as an ‘enforced social contract between audience and museum [...] the exhibition team must settle on a voice that will run threadlike through the exhibition.’³³ Nevertheless, while the overarching focus on ‘Chinese Contemporary Art’ is suggestive of a ‘threadlike’ narrative, Fletcher strongly urges that the “window into Chinese Contemporary Art” subtitle reflects that the collection is an introduction to multiple voices and thus not a presentation of a singular voice.³⁴

Yet I do find the exhibition title problematic. For me, the ‘window into’ subtitle suggests a ‘framing’ of works that have been carefully selected to represent an idea ‘Chinese Contemporary Art’; an application of an extrinsic ‘Chineseness’ which is presented as intrinsic to the works included. A ‘window’ provides a transparent means of observing and scrutinising from a distance; a mode which is almost metaphoric for the 17th/18th century interest in collecting objects, imposing a taxonomic framework and presenting items as curios within glass cabinets, ‘with each individual piece standing metonymically for a whole population.’³⁵ There is a suggestion through the use of ‘window’ that the exhibition provides a ‘crystal clear’ view, an opportunity to peer into a fabricated and comprehensive scene; this is not fitting for the multifaceted works nor for the museological aim of presenting complex and multiple voices. Moreover, it should not be ignored that windows can be fitted with frosted glass, obscuring or only allowing for a one-way viewing; I am implying that a window does not always allow for a reciprocal mode of seeing. However, I am not accusing the exhibition team of deliberately utilising a superior, dominant gaze often associated with Eurocentrism, but rather

²⁷ Lindsay Taylor, ‘Introduction’ in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George’s Hall, 2018).

²⁸ Robin Kemp, ‘Welcome to China Dream’ in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George’s Hall, 2018).

²⁹ Hongmei Li, “Chapter Eight: Chinese Diaspora, the Internet, the Image of China: A Case Study the Beijing Olympic Torch Relay”, in *Soft Power In China: Public Diplomacy Through Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 37-57 <<https://www.dawsonera.com/readonline/9780230116375>> [Accessed 13 May 2018]. p.138

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On The Origin And Spread Of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2006).p.6

³¹ Li, p.137.

³² "About China Dream", Culture Liverpool 2018, 2018 <<https://www.cultureliverpool.co.uk/china-dream-about/>> [Accessed 15 May 2018].

³³ James E Sims and Spencer R Crew, "Locating Authority: Fragments Of A Dialogue", in *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics And Politics Of Museum Display* (London: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990). p.163.

³⁴ Stephanie Fletcher, interviewed by Poppy Jones-Little, (St. George's Hall, 13 April 2018).

³⁵ James Clifford, "On Collecting Art And Culture", in *The Predicament Of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, And Art*. (London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.227

questioning how ‘a window into Chinese Contemporary Art’ perhaps contradicts the clear awareness and conscious efforts made to curate a ‘progressive’ exhibition.³⁶

However, as voiced by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan ‘the attempt to be politically correct without sterility is admittedly an enterprise that risks failure.’³⁷ Effort must be made to achieve ethical curatorial practices; it is only through trying that progress can be made. Jiang Jiehong (the curator of *This is Shanghai*) discusses curating as an attempt to ‘cross the boundary of language and culture, a barrier that curators must consider.’³⁸ The idea of a ‘barrier’ or ‘boundary’ between different ‘cultures’ is peculiar, (surely it is such thinking which reinforces these obstructions?) nevertheless the issue of translation was a key consideration when displaying this collection. Museological considerations are ‘socially reliant’ meaning that the labels accompanying the works need to be ‘relevant to the immediate reality of the audience’ yet with an awareness of large-scale debate.³⁹ In line with this, the labels and catalogue are written in ‘English, simplified Chinese, and traditional Chinese’.⁴⁰ The curatorial team hoped this would make the exhibition ‘accessible by our audiences’ with such translations being used across most of the China Dream programming.⁴¹

When questioning Stephanie Fletcher as to why *PRESENCE* has been situated within St. George’s Hall, she expressed that ‘the building has a great history and architecture, which visitors can enjoy [...] the venue have been keen to use this space more.’⁴² I am not satisfied with this response, especially considering that *PRESENCE* is the first collection of works to be displayed in the vaults of St. George’s Hall, i.e. in the ventilation system underground the building. In 1839 Harvey Lonsdale Elmes began designing St George’s Hall and the building was completed in 1854 by Robert Rawlinson; interestingly, Elmes took ‘inspiration from the Roman and Greek empires.’⁴³ The positioning of the exhibition beneath the monumental ‘Neo-Classical Greek-Romano building [which is] classed as one of the finest in the world’ cannot be ignored.⁴⁴ There emerges an interesting dialogue between the building and the aims of *PRESENCE*. Completed in the mid-19th century, a period of great empirical dominance and assumed European superiority, the building is contemporaneous to major events such as The Great Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. There is an element of irony in that the curatorial team were aware of avoiding the Eurocentric thought which had reached its climax during this era. While this may be considered a contraction of sorts, I believe it perhaps acknowledges the contested history of collecting and museumising, highlighting the progress that has been made over the last two centuries.

Moreover, the vaults complement the range of works; wall hangings and TV monitors successfully occupy the ample wall space and alcoves, whereas film pieces respond innovatively to the architecture, creating un-

³⁶ Zoe Dunbar, ‘Introducing Chinese art into the UK context’ in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George’s Hall, 2018).

³⁷ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real And Imagined Women: Gender, Culture And Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1996). p.1.

³⁸ Jiang Jiehong, from Birmingham City University and the curator of ‘This is Shanghai’ in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George’s Hall, 2018).

³⁹ Olivia Heron, Assistant Curator at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George’s Hall, 2018).

⁴⁰ Olivia Walker, Exhibition Manager, *PRESENCE: A Window into Contemporary Chinese Art* (17 May 2018)

⁴¹ Stephanie Fletcher, interviewed by Poppy Jones-Little, (St. George’s Hall, 13 April 2018).

⁴² Stephanie Fletcher, interviewed by Poppy Jones-Little, (St. George’s Hall, 13 April 2018).

⁴³ James Stevens Curl and Susan Wilson, *The Oxford Dictionary Of Architecture*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). p.72.

⁴⁴ "Heritage, St George's Hall", St George's Hall, 2018 <<https://www.stgeorghallliverpool.co.uk/about/heritage/>> [Accessed 17 May 2018].

expected presentations. For example, Chen Ching-Yuan's video installation *Flare(s)* (2013) is viewed from a raised bridge, the viewer looks through an arch to see the video framed by darkness with wrecks of rowing boats laying far below. Depicting a tempestuous sea at night, the viewer watches as six boats gradually come into view; the use of electric blue creates a complementary contrast between the striking animation and the neutral stone surroundings of the vaults. The video illuminates the space with flashes of light which arise from a figure sending rescue signals into the sky; the sound of the flares exploding creates 'an unsettling cacophony [...] the signs of crisis paradoxically become celebratory fireworks as the boats sink.'⁴⁵ The work elicited various emotions for me; the sense of hopeless isolation and vulnerability was saddening, this inability to communicate 'enigmatically mirrors Taiwan's geo-political situation and the global failure to comprehend Taiwan's precarious situation in relation to China.'⁴⁶ Nevertheless, I believe the piece also suggests endurance; an endurance of hope and of bodies. Silvia Fok expressed in 2013 that:

'The growing interest in employing the body in art in contemporary China might be attributed to the awareness that the body is effective not just as a form of self-expression as it is in consumer culture, but also as an effective means of self-empowerment and symbolic resistance against the suppressed state contemporary Chinese society.'⁴⁷

Fletcher stresses that there were several potential layouts, with the curatorial team deliberately not displaying the works chronologically or via a particular enforced narrative.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the works are connected subtly; underlying themes of communication, generational differences, everyday monotony etc. allow for multiple perspectives to augment each other fluidly. In viewing the works, I felt the element of endurance was most striking; particularly evident in works such as Kong Chun Hei's *Hand Practice* (2017) and Li Binyuan's *Deathless Love* (2015). Both of these performances, (displayed in video format) focus upon physical strength and the mental capacity for perseverance.

Such bodily perseverance is reflective of how the body of material exhibited at Liverpool's World Museum as part of the *China's First Emperor and the Terracotta Warriors* exhibit has endured throughout history. Councillor Wendy Simon, of Culture and Events at Liverpool city council, described the two exhibitions as 'juxtaposing' as 'we have some of the world's oldest pieces of Chinese art and we are shining a light on the creative talent which is thriving today.'⁴⁹ At the PRESENCE conference, Fiona Philpott, the Director of Exhibitions at National Museums Liverpool, expressed how the Terracotta Warrior exhibition took 2 years to negotiate; the exhibition team worked with two 'Chinese scholars and Chinese specialists' to construct the chronological framework and had an agent in China to secure the agreements with the Shaanxi Cultural Heritage Bureau.⁵⁰ Philpott aimed to create 'a major tourist attraction in the city [and to] help engage visitors in understanding more about Chinese history' while also running 'cultural awareness schemes' to highlight that

⁴⁵ "PRESENCE: A Window into Chinese Contemporary Art", Artcollection at Salford. 2018 <<http://artcollection.salford.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/FINAL-Catalogue-PRESENCE1.pdf>> [Accessed 18 April 2018].

⁴⁶ "Exhibition Catalogue Online", Artcollection.Salford.Ac.Uk, 2018 <<http://artcollection.salford.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/FINAL-Catalogue-PRESENCE1.pdf>> [Accessed 12 May 2018].

⁴⁷ Silvia Fok, *Life And Death: Art And The Body In Contemporary China* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013). p.5-30

⁴⁸ Stephanie Fletcher, interviewed by Poppy Jones-Little, (St. George's Hall, 13 April 2018).

⁴⁹ "Contemporary Chinese Art Collection Comes To Liverpool", *Liverpool Express*, 2018 <<https://www.liverpoolexpress.co.uk/contemporary-chinese-art-collection-comes-liverpool/>> [Accessed 1 May 2018].

⁵⁰ Fiona Philpott, 'China's First Emperor and the Terracotta Warriors exhibit' in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George's Hall, 2018).

I was shocked that there was no mention that the exhibition is a clear rerun of the *China's First Emperor: Terracotta Warriors* exhibition which took place between 13 September 2007 – 6 April 2008 at the British Museum. I have been questioning why this knowledge been completely ignored.

‘Liverpool is home to the oldest Chinese community in the UK.’⁵¹ The exhibition has attracted 2000 visitors a day with approximately 300,000 tickets having been sold; when asking members of the curatorial team to comment upon the clear disparity of interest between this exhibition and *PRESENCE*, it was expressed that it is not a fair or accurate comparison.⁵² While I understand that the warriors are an international sensation and thus have mass appeal, I agree with James Clifford in that it is important to ask ‘what are the differential values placed on old and new creations?’⁵³

There is a mere 4 minute walk between the World Museum and St. George’s Hall vaults, and both exhibits are connected through the overarching *China Dream* festival; these clear contextual and conceptual links led me to believe that the exhibits would share an audience, but clearly there is an unfortunate imbalance. When discussing feedback for *PRESENCE*, Olivia Walker acknowledged that, ‘at least half the visitors have calligraphy scrolls or ancient ink drawings in mind’ when entering the space; this suggests that the majority of viewers share harmful misconceptions of ‘Chinese Contemporary’ art.⁵⁴ Such assumptions are rooted in the aforementioned troubled history, (such as the 18th Century belief that ‘China’ is stagnant) thus fuelling myth and fetishising the past.

The collection of works exhibited as *PRESENCE* are invigorating and thoroughly relevant; while I have stated that an awareness of past events is essential, I do not believe the past should overshadow or take precedence over the present. This essay has examined the vast motivations of all institutions involved, criticised the exhibition title and inquired into public reception. Despite constant questioning, *PRESENCE* does provide an informative yet critical exhibit of 19 artists from various socio-economic and geographical backgrounds, all of which are working today to ‘voice’ their artistic concerns. Yet, I strongly believe this rich collection deserves not to be designated ‘Chinese Contemporary Art’ but rather appreciated as ‘Contemporary Art.’

⁵¹ Fiona Philpott, ‘China’s First Emperor and the Terracotta Warriors exhibit’ in *PRESENCE: A Window On Engaging With Chinese Contemporary Art*, (St. George’s Hall, 2018).

Philpott expressed that the ‘Chinese loan conditions were rather very strict’, only allowing 10 figures from the first emperors graves to be transported and exhibited; responses on social media made it evident that general public were disappointed as many were expecting the entire army! Yet in total there are 180 objects on display, all of which are artefacts from the Shaanxi province.

⁵² Interview by Poppy Jones-Little, (St. George’s Hall, 13 April 2018).

⁵³ James Clifford, "On Collecting Art And Culture", in *The Predicament Of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, And Art*. (London: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.221

⁵⁴ Olivia Walker, interviewed by Poppy Jones-Little, (St. George’s Hall, 12 May 2018)

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