

# SCIENCE MUSEUM

## COLLABORATIVE TOOLKIT FOR MUSEUMS AND CREATIVE FREELANCERS

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Reflections and lessons learned from the  
Communicating Time and Culture project

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# INTRODUCTION

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It is rare in an academic research project that you get to really open your inquiry to both a multidisciplinary scholarly context and to a multitude of audiences. But through this research, focusing on the concept of time across Britain and China, and the translation of that concept through the creative cultures of the two countries, we have been given a unique opportunity to do this.

'Communicating Time and Culture: Championing a Global Perspective in Science and Technology through Public Engagement' (CTC) is a follow-on project between the University of Leicester and the Science Museum in London, designed to showcase the historical clock trade as an important case study of global technological transmission, and build on our transnational understanding of the creative industries in the UK and China.

It has done so by organising a public programme of events that encouraged audiences to participate in historical research and raise awareness about the significance of UK–China creative collaborations in the past and present.

CTC acts as a natural extension of the original project 'Time, Culture and Identity: The Co-Creation of Historical Research and Co-Development of Visitor Experience in China and the UK' (TCI), which undertook research and knowledge exchange to support the development of the exhibition *Zimingzhong* 凝时聚珍: *Clockwork Treasures from China's Forbidden City*, which opened at the Science Museum in February 2024.

Highlighting 23 remarkable clocks from the Palace Museum collection in Beijing, many of which were made in Britain for sale in China, the exhibition showed that these devices are much more than just clocks: as technologies of the imagination, with their people, music and moving animals, they conjure up magical scenes of English arcadia alongside incongruent perceptions of east Asia.

You can hear more about the original research project to understand these unique objects and the development of the exhibition through our interview with Laszlo Montgomery for *The China History Podcast*, now available through YouTube and Spotify.

The original TCI project not only brought together an international community of academic experts who had studied these remarkable clockwork timepieces, but

also some of the leading creatives from Britain and China to explore how the stories of one machine, the country scene clock, might be brought alive for visitors. The result was an intriguing digital exhibit that sat alongside the *Zimingzhong* exhibition, highlighting the moving automatons and acting as an attractor for visitors.

In this next iteration of the research, the CTC project brings together an exciting programme of public-facing cultural events to develop creative approaches to audience engagement. The project is working with a group of volunteers, as well as cultural creatives and the Chinese Community Centre in Soho, to develop a musical clocks performance, a poetry event, a 'game jam' and a story-telling event, alongside creative responses to timekeeping on the Science Museum website. This is where museum collaboration with creative freelancers becomes an important point of discussion.

All these outputs help to support museum visitors and their wider communities to think about British and Chinese notions of time. They also give early career researchers experience of both east Asian and UK museum-scapes to help them explore creative, transcultural avenues for audience engagement.

At the heart of this research is the belief that the creative products of museums are enhanced by transnational and transcultural collaboration, and that exhibitions exploring objects across national boundaries need to be supported by cross-cultural dialogue and creative expression. It is not enough to loan and display objects from another country without fully exploring the meanings and multiple interpretations (both historically and in the current day) of those objects across cultures.

Museum objects can be understood not only as ways of knowing and understanding but as tools for contemporary creative expression. This approach enriches our understanding of museum collections, allowing us to reach more diverse audiences and explore the stories they want to tell. In doing so it gently allows us to transform the way that museums think about their role, not just creating authentic and accurate experiences but developing trusted and nuanced relationships with their audiences.

Professor Tilly Blyth  
Head of School of Museum Studies,  
University of Leicester



# PROJECT OVERVIEW



Visitor at the 铜镀金珐琅葫芦顶渔樵耕读钟 *Zimingzhong* with rich decoration through a moon gate in *Zimingzhong* 凝时聚珍: *Clockwork Treasures from China's Forbidden City*.  
Image: Science Museum Group

'Communicating Time and Culture: Championing a Global Perspective in Science and Technology through Public Engagement' (CTC) aimed to foster a global perspective on the historical case study of *Zimingzhong* through two main approaches:

- **Building a dedicated *yaji* focus group** among British, British-Chinese and Chinese members of the public interested in Chinese history, heritage and museology. This dedicated group exchanged knowledge and co-developed the public engagement programme developed by the CTC team.
- **Coordinating a range of public engagement events** in collaboration with creative freelancers and companies, as well as the *yaji* group, hosted jointly by the Science Museum and the University of Leicester.

Both the development of the *yaji* group and the curation of public engagement events were supported by audience research into the impact of these events on the transcultural perspectives of attendees.

## CONTEXT

The CTC project developed a series of public engagement events around the Science Museum exhibition *Zimingzhong* 凝时聚珍: *Clockwork Treasures from China's Forbidden City*. This was done through transcultural museological approaches and collaboration with creative freelancers and companies. Using this approach it developed understandings of new global perspectives on the objects in the exhibition.

Working closely with the Science Museum's Research and Public History volunteers and junior research associates, CTC also consistently conducted audience evaluation around these public engagement events. These findings will form the basis of a forthcoming CTC research paper on transcultural museologies at the Science Museum.

This project was made possible through funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

## OUTCOMES

CTC achieved the following key outcomes:

- Contributed to the understanding of experiences of creative companies and freelancers when working with museums.
- Identified ways in which museums can, and should, be more porous when working with their audiences and creative professionals.
- Understood from an audience point of view the benefits of co-designing museum-based public engagement programmes.
- Understood how the involvement of creative professionals and target communities can support new audiences, encourage different voices and foster transcultural understanding.



Constella Music at the Science Museum Chinese New Year Lates.  
Image © Tara Panesar



Christy Ku and Dan Simpson at the Science Museum Chinese New Year Lates. Image © Tara Panesar

## PUBLIC EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES

CTC developed a suite of public-engagement events and outputs including:

- **Knowledge exchange** sessions with creative freelancers.
- **Chinese clocks concert** at the Chinese New Year Science Museum Lates.
- **Zodiac-inspired drop-in poetry workshop** at the Chinese New Year Science Museum Lates.
- **'Clockwork Treasures from China's Forbidden City' podcast episode** with The China History Podcast.
- **Guided tours of *Zimingzhong*** delivered on a regular basis by Science Museum Explainers and volunteers.
- ***Zimingzhong*-inspired board game jam** at the Science Museum.
- **Guided reminiscence session** with the Chinese Community Centre elders group.
- **Guided storytelling and poetry session** with the Chinese Community Centre youth group.
- **Guided storytelling and poetry session** with the Chinese Community Centre elders group.
- **Weekly *yaji* gatherings** with Chinese, British-Chinese and British student groups and members of the public.
- **The Grand *Yaji* Gathering**, a symbiosis between a traditional academic conference, creative showcases and a guided poetry session.

## OUTPUTS

CTC also produced the following key outputs:

- **One academic research paper** in the *Science Museum Group Journal* (forthcoming).
- **Five reflective articles** on the CTC webpage.
- **Audience research reports** on the CTC webpage.
- **Two project films** that can be viewed on the Science Museum Group shared repository.

## PROJECT TEAM

### CORE TEAM

- Host institutions: **Science Museum, University of Leicester**
- Principal investigator: **Professor Tilly Blyth**, Head of Museum and Heritage Studies, University of Leicester
- Co-investigator: **Dr Carol Chung**, Science Museum
- Research assistant: **Dr David Francis**, University of Leicester
- Research engagement fellow: **Tara Panesar**, Science Museum



Laszlo Montgomery and Ethan Temkin with Abbie MacKinnon and Tilly Blyth recording The China History Podcast. Image © Tara Panesar

### RESEARCH AND PUBLIC HISTORY VOLUNTEERS

- **Mikayla Hu**, Imperial College London
- **Ying Luo**, University of Leicester/Kew Gardens

### JUNIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

- **Dr Wenjie Su**, University of Princeton
- **Qinhua Hu**, University College London
- **Hongqiu Su**, London School of Economics

### COLLABORATORS

- **Laszlo Montgomery** is the researcher, producer and host of *The China History Podcast*, *The Chinese Sayings Podcast* and *The China Vintage Hour*, and the founder of Teacup Media. Montgomery has worked in the China market for over 30 years and from this has developed deep appreciation and understanding of China's unique culture, history and stories.
- The **Chinese Community Centre** in Soho is dedicated to empowering the Chinese community in Britain, meeting its needs and preserving its culture, arts and heritage. It facilitates one-to-one support, outreach visits, talks, workshops and events. The centre is directed by Beverley Lin, with whom we worked closely to develop the CTC events.
- **Dr Daniela de Angeli** is a researcher, designer and event organiser with over a decade of experience creating interactive experiences and playful workshops for museums. She is currently a lecturer at the University of Bath and a co-director of Echo Games CIC, a company making 'seriously fun games' that educate and stimulate critical reflection.
- **Christy Ku** is a poet, actor and workshop facilitator. She has worked with the BBC, Sky Arts and the Barbican on projects such as poetry films, spoken word tracks and theatre shows. She is the founder of BESEA Poets, a platform for British-based east- and southeast-Asian poets.
- **Dan Simpson** is a writer, facilitator and coach. With over a decade of experience as a professional poet and spoken word artist, he is passionate about supporting others in their expression of creativity, authenticity and communication. He has previously been poet-in-residence at the Glastonbury festival, Imperial College and the National Memorial Arboretum.
- **Constella Music** is the creative powerhouse behind the award-winning composer and conductor Leo Geyer. It publishes and performs Geyer's music, which has been described by *The Times* as 'imaginative and beautifully shaped'. Constella Music has produced a wide selection of critically acclaimed performances, community collaborations and education projects.

# MUSEUMS AND THE CREATIVE ECONOMY IN THE UK AND CHINA: CONTEXT



The Grand *Yaji* Gathering at the Dana Research Centre. Image © Ryan Chapman

## THE CREATIVE ECONOMY IN THE UK AND CHINA

The creative economy has globally significant cultural and economic value, making it the centre of much discussion between researchers, urban planners and policymakers. In 1998, under the UK's Labour government, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport noted the creative economy to have the 'potential to create wealth and jobs through developing intellectual property'.<sup>1</sup> At the time, 'New' Labour's definition of the creative industries was focused on 'individual creativity' and 'independents' (creative freelancers, in other words) as the driving forces of the creative economy.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, these 'independents' of the creative economy were seen as agents of grass-roots creative practice, set to democratise cultural production in our cities. Not only this, but creative freelancers also contrasted with the top-down, imposed cultural production of the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) sector by providing a bottom-up alternative based on independent rather than mass-produced creative output.

In the contemporary Chinese creative economy, it is this form of bottom-up creative practice that is witnessing a considerable surge in popularity. China

is experiencing a boom of self-employed grassroots creative entrepreneurs, otherwise known as *wanghong* 网红, hosted on largely digital platforms. An emerging area of scholarly discussion, the *wanghong* economy in China is not completely divorced from state production but gains its appeal from the 'unlikeliness' or normality of its celebrity figures.<sup>3</sup>

These stars, such as Lizi Qi, are admired for platforming unique but otherwise mundane aspects of their lives. The organic production of their content (without large videography teams) renders it self-made and personal, in contrast to state-mandated media. Furthermore, entire social media platforms, such as Kuaishou, can operate using these self-made creative products.<sup>4</sup>

Although it is partially state-owned, the method of video production and dissemination on the popular social media platform Kuaishou is democratic and decentralised, with ordinary app users able to post short, candid videos that can attract hundreds of thousands of views. As explored, these videos are not meant to be perceived as hyper-produced; they are low-maintenance, quotidian creative outputs. On Kuaishou, Lin and Kloet state: 'In principle, everyone is treated equally by the algorithmic machine, whether they are a movie star or a migrant worker.'<sup>4</sup>

## COLLABORATION BETWEEN MUSEUMS AND INDEPENDENT CREATIVE FREELANCERS

The bottom-up creative practice of the *wanghong* economy on platforms such as Kuaishou and the continued emphasis on the grass-roots creative 'independents' in the UK are significant to museum practice today. Prior to New Labour's visions for the creative economy, public policy debates of the 1960s advocated for a 'participatory turn' in the culture sector that saw an increase in socially engaged art across the UK over the following two decades.<sup>5</sup>

This momentum continued into the so called 'social turn' of the 2000s, in which a 'recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration and direct engagement with specific social constituencies' emerged.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, this made its way into scholarly and professional discourse on the role of museums.

The participatory turn has become synonymous with community engagement, which itself is now a term relevant to a wide range of theory and practice across universities, cultural organisations and museums. According to Nuala Morse, participatory community engagement within museums can be whittled down to two main types. The first is concerned with museums' responses to calls for decolonisation, minority representation and social reform policy, while the second instead looks at methods of achieving more 'polyvocal' exhibitions and research.<sup>7</sup>

In relation to the collaborative efforts between museums and independent creative freelancers, Morse's second definition of community engagement as focused on the *co-development* of museum activities is most relevant to the CTC project. There has been much scholarly focus on co-development and co-creation within museums, which can be broadly defined as working with audiences to create something new, from labels and displays to events and tours.

Focus has usually been on the co-creation of exhibitions and exhibition materials, with less emphasis placed on public engagement events.<sup>8</sup> However, there is established dialogue around the potential for co-creation to foster types of knowledge beyond what is prescribed by 'experts' and museum professionals, and how this is facilitated through participatory and user-led activities such as 'world cafés'.

The participatory turn and its significance to the co-creation of public engagement events is linked to the previously discussed 'grass-roots creative independents' that are positioned as being integral to the democratisation of the museum space and its outputs. Instead of public engagement events being developed by a select few museum professionals, they can be *co-developed* with creative freelancers that have pre-existing knowledge of and connections with key communities.

Now more than ever, with austerity and cuts in public spending, plus the devastating impact of COVID on creative freelancers and the realisation of the fragility of museums as cultural sites and employers, we need to consider the way in which these collaborations happen and the porosity of the museum space to creative freelancers. Throughout this report our focus is on the logistics of meaningful co-creation and navigating organisational structures towards a truly 'participatory museum'.<sup>9</sup>



Yiran Duan presenting YICRAFTS at the Grand Yaji Gathering.  
Image © Tara Panesar

# 'COMMUNICATING TIME AND CULTURE' PROJECT ACTIVITIES: IN DETAIL

A key aim of the CTC project was to foster and document global perspectives in science and technology through public engagement. Central to the project's development of a public engagement programme was collaboration with creative freelancers and the *yaji* focus group. By working with creatives and the *yaji* collective, this series of activities in turn fostered transcultural interpretations of the historical clocks in the *Zimingzhong* exhibition.

These perspectives were also documented through consistent audience research organised by the CTC research assistant and have extended the 'Time, Culture and Identity' (TCI) project's efforts to interpret transcultural understandings of the historical case study through interactive creative cultural events.

The events and activities developed by the CTC team, creative collaborators and the *yaji* group can be split into three categories: **knowledge exchange**, **creative cultural events** and **learning resources**.

## KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

A core foundation of the public engagement programme was a series of Science Museum Group-wide and one-to-one **knowledge exchange meetings** with our creative freelancers and the *yaji* group.

At the beginning of the project, co-investigator Dr Carol Chung, research assistant Dr David Francis and research engagement fellow Tara Panesar held an afternoon session that communicated the research findings of the TCI project, the background of the *Zimingzhong* exhibition and the research aims of the CTC project. Furthermore, throughout October 2023, Chung and Panesar held one-to-one meetings with each creative practitioner to give them more relevant context about TCI, *Zimingzhong* and CTC relevant to their proposed activity.

Throughout the duration of the CTC project, research assistant Dr David Francis developed a working *yaji* group formed of a wide network of Chinese, Chinese-British and British members with an interest in Chinese history, museology and/or STEM. Acting much like a 'critical friend', the *yaji* group expanded outwards from the academic, professional and community networks of Francis as well as the project's research volunteers and associates.

Each week, the *yaji* members would put forward key readings on UK/Chinese history, heritage and museology for discussion. Alongside this, members would work with the research engagement fellow, Tara Panesar, on the

cultural appropriateness of CTC activities such as the board game jam. It was the project's privilege to also host a *yaji* gathering with renowned anthropologist Professor Wang Mingming.

The CTC project's regular *yaji* knowledge exchange sessions led to a final Grand *Yaji* Gathering held on 30 May 2024. In the spirit of a traditional Chinese *yaji* gathering, the whole-day event combined talks from the CTC core team and early career researchers, complemented by a talk from Yiran Duan, founder of YICRAFTS, and a guided poetry session with Christy Ku and Dan Simpson. At the end of the day, the CTC core team conducted a world café to evaluate the attendees' experiences of the CTC project.

To extend the knowledge exchange efforts to the student and early career researcher community, CTC supported **two Research and Public History volunteer positions** based at the Science Museum. These positions led to volunteers being involved in audience research and the development of creative writing outputs surrounding the *Zimingzhong* exhibition.

In addition, the project awarded early career researchers **three junior research associate positions** on a competitive basis. These associate positions were designed to encourage the CTC core team and creative practitioners to be involved in a bilateral knowledge exchange in which the early career researchers would be supported to develop their own independent research into the relevant themes of transcultural museology and concepts of time.

Still from the  
*Zimingzhong* and *Hanfu*  
creative clocks video.  
Image © Yuqiao Hu





## CREATIVE CULTURAL EVENTS

Structured around four themes inspired by the key findings of the TCI project – namely design, music, poetry and storytelling – the CTC project co-developed a series of cultural events with creative practitioners.

The first immersive cultural experience developed was a **Chinese clocks concert** inspired by the 'singsongs' of the *Zimingzhong* exhibition, presented by Constella Music with Leo Geyer as director. Performed on 1 February 2024 at the Chinese New Year Science Museum Lates, the music consisted of three sets.

Set 1 included Leroy Anderson's 'The Syncopated Clock' and the second movement from Haydn's Symphony No. 101 (*The Clock*), while set 2 featured Zoltán Kodály's 'Viennese Musical Clock' from *Háry János* and Beethoven's 'Pieces for a Mechanical Clock'. Set 3 was a bespoke composition directed by Geyer, called 'A Clock through Time'. Opening with the melody as played by the countryside scene clock in the *Zimingzhong* exhibition, the piece goes on a journey through time presented in the style of various composers all the way up to the present day.

During the same Science Museum Chinese New Year Lates, poets and facilitators Christy Ku and Dan Simpson ran a **zodiac-inspired drop-in poetry workshop**. This included a horoscope activity in which visitors wrote a prophetic poem to someone with predictions and what they wished for them in the Year of the Dragon, as well as a 'past, present and future' task for people to write a short sequence of poems reflecting on where they have been, where they are and where they might go. Finally, a 'lucky dip blessings' activity encouraged people to write a blessing for someone else at the Lates event, drop it into a lucky dip bowl and receive a blessing in return.

On 9 March 2024 collaborator Dr Daniela De Angeli organised a one-day **board game jam** inspired by the *Zimingzhong* exhibition. The workshop began with a morning tour of *Zimingzhong*, providing participants with insights and inspiration for the rest of the day. Subsequently, attendees had the remainder of the day to collaboratively develop their own board games. The attendees (26 in total) were *yaji* gathering members, members of the Chinese Community Centre and academics, professionals or members of the public with an interest in gaming.



Dr David Francis and Christy Ku holding a reminiscence session at the Chinese Community Centre. Image © Beverley Lin

Guided by De Angeli, each team of four or five had a different response to the prompt of the exhibition. The responses included:

- The player navigates through the Clock Hospital in Beijing to find different clock parts to make a whole. Problems faced by the game player included lights going out, running into guards, encountering spiders and the pressure of time.
- The player is a being from the fourth dimension who lands on Earth and must navigate different concepts of time including industrial time and agricultural time across western Europe and China.
- The player is a clock tradesman who must race against time to get a *Zimingzhong* to the emperor before 1796. Throughout the journey the player visits temples for blessings and various ports.
- A game of chance influenced by Chinese cosmology in which the player gradually builds up a board of coloured hexagonal tiles. The final product eventually symbolises a turtle's back.
- A game influenced by clocks' journeys between the UK and China, navigating the seas and ports. Throughout the journey the player collects money and resources for the tribute system.



Board game jam attendees viewing the winning game.  
Image © Tara Panesar

The next cultural activity was a creative **storytelling and poetry session** with the Chinese Community Centre youth group, hosted by Christy Ku and Dan Simpson on 4 April 2024. The event was held in the Science Museum's Academy and received generous support from the Learning team.

The session included a guided tour of *Zimingzhong* by research assistant Dr David Francis and worksheets crafted by Ku and Simpson, including a fun animal trail and sensory prompts. A relaxed lunch break of pizza and bubble tea provided a social opportunity for reflection and conversation with facilitators and museum workers (including Learning coordinators Gillian Davis and Hei Yin Cheung), and was followed by a group visit to the Science Museum's interactive *Wonderlab* gallery.

A similar **storytelling and poetry session** was held on 10 April 2024, aimed towards the Chinese Community Centre elders group. Also co-developed and hosted by our creative collaborator Christy Ku, the event attracted the Chinese Community Centre and members of the public alike to join a guided tour of *Zimingzhong*, followed by a guided session of word association and improvised poetry inspired by transcultural notions of time.

Leading up to this session, Christy Ku and Dr David Francis also held a **remembrance session** at the Chinese Community Centre to introduce the elders group to the themes of the exhibition as well as encourage them to reminisce on their own memories around the theme of time.

A final cultural activity coordinated by the CTC project was the **Creative Clocks Competition**. In keeping with a Chinese approach to the creative economy in which museums regularly hold competitions for early career designers to create *wenchuang* (cultural creative products), these videos took the form of a competition in which teams pitched their ideas to a panel of judges from Leicester University and the Science Museum. The three selected teams were each given £500 towards the making of their video.

Our competition winners were Coco Shi (University College London), Yuqiao Hu (University of Leicester) and Yula Kim (Royal College of Art) in collaboration with creative director Dan Stettler. All three videos can be viewed in the CTC section of the Science Museum Group shared repository.

## LEARNING RESOURCES

Laszlo Montgomery and Ethan Temkin of *The China History Podcast* joined us on 1 February 2024 to record an episode about the TCI project, *Zimingzhong* and the CTC project. From the team's first conversation with Montgomery it was evident that the podcast should take the form of an interview with staff representatives who could sufficiently represent all three projects.

Subsequently, Professor Tilly Blyth (principal investigator of the TCI and CTC research projects) was joined by Abbie MacKinnon, curator of the Science Museum's Technologies and Engineering collection.

With help from the Press team, Montgomery and Temkin arrived at the Science Museum in the morning to attend a press preview for *Zimingzhong*, which they thoroughly enjoyed as it gave them essential context for the podcast episode later that afternoon. The episode can be viewed on YouTube, Spotify and the Science Museum Group shared repository.

In March 2024 the CTC core team delivered a **lunchtime seminar** about the key themes of the project to a group of master's and PhD students at the University of Leicester's Department of Museum and Heritage Studies. This seminar led to one student giving a talk at the final Grand *Yaji* Gathering and winning the Creative Clocks Competition.

The CTC team also produced a ***Zimingzhong* guided tour**, inspired by the key findings of the TCI project, for existing Science Museum volunteers. These volunteers were trained by the museum's volunteering team and a total of 90 tours have been delivered to 995 exhibition visitors.



Qinhua Wu, Mikayla Hu, Ying Luo, Dr David Francis, Hongqiu Su, Dr Wenjie Su and Tara Panesar at the Science Museum Chinese New Year Lates. Image © Ryan Chapman

The **CTC website** serves as a repository for a series of informative articles written by the core team, research volunteers and associates, and our creative collaborators. The articles are:

- Sharing transcultural notions of time (Professor Tilly Blyth)
- Decorating time: musical interpretations of *Zimingzhong* clocks (Susan Carter, Constella Music)
- The biography of a countryside scene clock (Mikayla Hu)
- Three poems for *Zimingzhong* (Christy Ku and Dan Simpson)
- Transcultural poetry and storytelling at the Science Museum (Christy Ku and Dan Simpson)
- Exploring the symbols and sounds of *Zimingzhong* (Dr David Francis)

Finally, we worked with film-maker Ryan Chapman and his company Videoctopus to create **two films**: one short 'legacy' film and another longer, more in-depth film about the project. These are available via the CTC website and SMG repository.

## SUMMATIVE DOCUMENTS

- **One academic research paper** in the *Science Museum Group Journal* (forthcoming).
- **Lessons learned report** on collaboration between museums and creative industries.
- **Audience research reports** downloadable via the CTC website.
- Long-form **project wrap-up film** available from <https://f.io/yuq5xpN9>
- Short-form **project 'legacy' film** available from <https://f.io/sS1MQion>

# LESSONS LEARNED FOR COLLABORATION BETWEEN MUSEUMS AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES: IN DETAIL

## VALUING CREATIVE APPROACHES

Collaborating with creative professionals has allowed us to conduct a transcultural public history project through a number of original approaches. Instead of the museum prescribing visitors and event attendees set ways of thinking about the concept of time, the creative environments facilitated by the CTC project and its collaborators encouraged more polyvocal ways of thinking.

While visits to the *Zimingzhong* exhibition may have encouraged participants to think about time as defined and recorded by clocks, the cultural activities organised by CTC aimed to broaden these concepts.

A talk given by Yiran Duran, founder of YICRAFTS, at the Grand *Yaji* Gathering asked visitors to think about time in the context of Bai *zha-ran* handcrafts. Duran's provocation that 'one stitch is one second, one piece of cloth is a record of someone's million seconds' positioned time as something that is recorded by human labour as well as scientific instruments.

Through our drop-in poetry session with Christy Ku and Dan Simpson at the Chinese New Year Lates, visitors were encouraged to think about their past, present and future through a sequence of poems that utilised metaphors and sensory descriptions. The storytelling session with the Chinese Community Centre youth group (also facilitated by Ku and Simpson) encouraged its participants to consider not only what they think about time but also how they *feel* time, by writing a poem from the perspective of a *Zimingzhong* clock.

More broadly, collaboration with creative professionals at the Science Museum allowed us to push the boundaries of what is considered science and technology. During the world café at the Grand *Yaji* Gathering there was lively discussion surrounding the conceptualisation of 'crafts' as technology. Participants asked why the chemical knowledge and glass science used to decorate *Zimingzhong* with enamel was not also a focus of the Science Museum's exhibition.

Collaboration between CTC and creative professionals ultimately defined the cultural activities of the Science Museum as relevant for being 'more than science'.

## MUSEUM BUREAUCRACY

### NAVIGATING DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

Museums put a great deal of time and thought into their digital presence. Ample research has gone into the potential for digital outputs to extend the reach of museums towards different audiences as well as in fostering novel museum experiences. This is particularly important at a time when museums face increasing pressure from digital activists on platforms such as Instagram and X to consider issues of patronage and partnerships. There is a lot of awareness about how museums represent themselves and are represented online.

All museum-based researchers at the Science Museum are advised to form good working relationships with their website managers *before* talking to creative collaborators about their content being posted on the museum's main channels. The CTC project team took great care in making use of the Science Museum's digital presence, as our creative collaborators relied on these channels of communication to share their work. We also wanted to advocate for the benefit of creative work, and to avoid editing any of these works if possible.

We were less able to dedicate a lot of time to interdepartmental relationship-building, owing to the time constraints of a nine-month project. In retrospect, it would have been beneficial to develop a project web content strategy *with* the website manager to ensure that proposed content was 'on brand' before development and to avoid disappointing creative collaborators.

The Creative Clocks Competition brought to light discussions of ownership over digital content produced within the CTC project, as the museum naturally wanted more involvement in branding, creative direction and filming rights than individual content producers might feel is appropriate. In the spirit of *wenhuang* creative products (independently sourced, often unique cultural products popular in Chinese museum shops), it was important to reiterate that such social media products were not Science Museum Group films or CTC-directed films, they were a piece of social media made by external contributors. It may take time and sensitive navigation for museums, particularly national museums, to feel comfortable with this level of decentralisation of creative products associated with the museum.

## IMPROVING MUSEUM POROSITY

When representing the museum, it is important to encourage an open, honest flow of communication between the research team and the creatives in which they feel comfortable to express concerns and suggestions for improvement.

The CTC project team found it essential to know when to hand over control to creative producers, and to remember that these producers are experienced professionals in their field. For example, Dr Daniela De Angeli was incredibly knowledgeable in how to organise and advertise the board game jam, as she has created many events like this before. However, there is a line between the museum assuming complete control and providing direction in terms of research priorities and cultural appropriateness.

Finally, the CTC project followed the lead of *wenchuang* in China through the Creative Clocks Competition. To encourage grass-roots creativity, the creative products that stemmed from this competition were produced entirely separately from the museum, without the help of in-house talent and direction. This allowed for independent creative expression (and individual interests such as art, music and fashion) to enter the walls of the museum through digital products.

## PROJECT DESIGN AND CREATIVE DIRECTION

### MAKING THE MOST OF MUSEUM EXPERTISE

For the project to run smoothly, it was important to be clear from the start what the roles and capacities of the museum and project staff were. Furthermore, we made sure that creative professionals were briefed by relevant museum staff during the early phases of their activity development. This included briefing on the museum audience and museum coordination, making both sides feel involved and prepared. For example, guidance from the Learning and Communities team in the development of the storytelling session was helpful, as was the support from the Events team during the Lates events. Involving other teams from the start will also help avoid last-minute revisions to the event and any logistical issues on the day.

## EXCHANGING KNOWLEDGE

Consistent knowledge exchange and introductions to the context and nuances of the project are key. It is also important to consider the diverse types of creative collaborators that you will be working with. Thoughtfully cater to different creative practices and direction – there is no ‘one size fits all’ in knowledge exchange.

In retrospect, most of the ‘knowledge’ that the CTC team disseminated was in the form of academic papers and there were fewer images, videos and audio recordings of the clocks we could use because of copyright concerns and social media embargoes. This did not impact the more research-driven outputs such as the historical podcast, but it arguably affected creatives who relied on audiovisual stimuli.

## MUSEUM SPACES

It is good to make sure that the creative activities are rooted in the museum spaces and with the physical objects themselves. This can help the creative producers to connect to a new topic that they have not necessarily researched before. There was a significant difference in the impact that museum spaces had on the atmosphere of the event.

Each space within the museum and beyond will bring its own atmosphere and implications to the event. Throughout the CTC project it was noticed that some spaces such as the Academy were better for children owing to the toys and books available for use in the room. Equally, the café was more suited to the elders session as it was physically closer to the exhibition and amenities, and the Dana Studio emphasised the academic dimension of the Grand *Yaji* Gathering. Finally, the Chinese Community Centre became somewhere for the CTC team to build relationships with community members in a familiar space.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF WORKING AS A CREATIVE PROFESSIONAL WITH A MUSEUM**

Throughout the duration of the project, the team became aware of *why* creative professionals may want to (or not want to) collaborate with a museum and how museums can best design projects around these considerations.

### **POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS**

Interesting discussions were had with a collaborator about how some people in 'creative/freelancer circles' are put off working with museums because of political issues – mainly to do with patronage and museums as potential sites for protests.

### **RAISING CREATIVE PROFILES**

Creative freelancers with whom the project worked reported that involvement in museum-based projects such as CTC is a good opportunity to network. In response, museum professionals can encourage this by introducing creatives to other collaborators and museum staff with respectful and accurate details about their previous professional work and the value that their skills bring to the institution.

Equally, we should make sure that the creative collaborators are being appropriately spotlighted for the work that they do, and that we have sufficient and well-presented online platforms and digital communications to support the brand of the collaborator.

## **MAINTAINING POSITIVE RELATIONS**

### **A LOGIC OF CARE WHEN COLLABORATING WITH EXTERNAL CREATIVES**

Museum professionals should make sure creative professionals are aware of the practical side of the event/activity by making sure that the creatives know where the main facilities are, that they are provided with refreshments that are budgeted for, and that they have appropriate spaces/time to rest built into project activities. All of this contributes to the creative freelancer feeling valued by the museum.

Equally, inviting creative professionals to previews and events surrounding the project topic can help them feel part of the wider museum and research community, as well as stimulate ideas and inspiration for the project.

## **KEEPING IN TOUCH**

Museum professionals should try to maintain consistent communication throughout the duration of the project, even if it is light touch. This does not have to feel like a lot of work but can instead consist of updating collaborators on the progress of the project or asking them to be involved with other research-related happenings.

Furthermore, capturing the reflections of creative collaborators through articles and feedback forms offers creatives a way to continue their work with the project.

## **ADMINISTRATION AND LOGISTICS**

### **FINANCIAL AND LEGAL PROCESSES**

Museums, especially larger ones, can take a long time to process invoices, so try to do as much of this as possible in advance. It is important to make sure that freelancers and creative companies are fully aware of the financial processes, waiting times, how to make complaints and who to chase up with. For professional services, suppliers should (where possible) be set up before the project has begun.

Failure to demonstrate to collaborators – especially freelancers – that you are keeping an eye on their payment can lead to feelings of instability and uncertainty when working with a large organisation.

All creative collaborators that the CTC project worked with were employed on a freelance basis, including activity facilitators, musicians, videographers and writers. Because the collaborators are not on a payroll, the length of time that a payment will take to come through can be unpredictable owing to the workload of finance departments. Throughout the project it has proved useful to be honest with collaborators about the length of time payment may take to come through and to reassure them that their payment is constantly being chased up.

A similar approach to planning far in advance and being honest about the length of legal and contractual processes on the museum side is key to working smoothly with creative freelancers/companies.

## MUSEUM-BASED ACTIVITIES

For museum-based activities, in which creative professionals are using a space they have not seen before, it is important in purely practical terms that their equipment is tested in the space before the event itself to see if it is compatible. For example, podcast hosts may be used to using specific equipment or rooms for acoustic reasons, and it is highly likely that some rooms in the museum will be better than others. In our case we connected with the Science Museum's Press and New Media teams to help us scout appropriate locations and audiovisual equipment that would not compromise the quality of the creatives' work.

Museums and cultural organisations are also high-security spaces, and this needs to be considered for the benefit of the creative as well as the organisation. When collaborators were on site, CTC representatives made sure that Visitor Services, the museum's main control centre and the office reception desk were all made aware. As the collaborators are viewed as contractors through the museum's legal framework, contractor forms were also completed with the contact numbers of the CTC team attached. Lastly, we made sure that, whenever a creative was on site, a member of the project team was also on site as a first point of contact.

Large museums and cultural institutions can already be imposing, complex sites to navigate, and making sure that small logistical procedures such as these are in place can improve the collaborators' confidence and enjoyment when working in the space.

## BENEFITS TO THE MUSEUM

The benefits of museums and creative freelancers working together are unilateral. Creative intervention helped the youth group to connect to the themes of the exhibition in a more personal way, through play and self-reflection, while also bringing new, younger audiences to an exhibition that was not necessarily directed towards their age range.

Also, because this project was given a creative dimension, our Research and Public History volunteers and junior research associates felt empowered to think about different forms of science communication, resulting in original writing pieces and presentations.

Finally, the Creative Clocks Competition collaborators were briefed to bring their own personal stories and interests to the *Zimingzhong* exhibition. These creative responses revealed themes connected to *Zimingzhong* (eg *hanfu*) that were not necessarily explicit in the exhibition itself, adding to its meaning.

The CTC team would like to conclude by giving thanks to the *yaji* group, the Chinese Community Centre Soho, our research volunteers and associates, and our creative collaborators. We also extend our gratitude to staff at the Science Museum, the University of Leicester and the Arts and Humanities Research Council for making this project possible.



The 'Communicating Time and Culture' team at the University of Leicester lunchtime seminar. Image © Dr Yunci Cai

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