

Time, Culture and Identity

The co-creation of historical research and co-development of visitor experience in China and the UK

1) Context for the project

The audience research evaluation is one element of a fifteen-month Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded research project: Time, Culture and Identity: The co-creation of historical research and co-development of visitor experience in China and the UK (TCI). The overall project is tasked with delivering both historical research and an engaging digital visitor experience in China and the United Kingdom (UK). It is focused on the clock and automata collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

The home and touring venues of the collection are 'The Hall of Clocks and Watches' in the Palace Museum of the Forbidden City (Beijing), Hong Kong Science Museum (HKSM), and the London Science Museum.

The Palace Museum is the owner of the collection and a permanent gallery devoted to their display (The Hall of Clocks and Watches). Visitors to the Forbidden City are required to purchase a supplementary ticket to their general admission ticket to enter the gallery. **The Hong Kong Science Museum (HKSM)** hosted a temporary exhibition of 120 of the clocks over the period December 2018 to April 2019. The exhibition entitled *Treasures of Time* also required the purchase of a supplementary in addition to that for general museum entry. **The Science Museum, London** is the host institution of the TCI project and will present a temporary exhibition of the clocks in 2020.

Terry Watkins of the audience research consultancy TWRResearch Ltd was commissioned by the Science Museum Group to conduct the audience evaluation phase of the project.

2) Objectives for the audience evaluation

The audience evaluation primarily focused on the *"the ways in which British and Chinese visitor engagement with historic collections differ and converge"* in the context of the collection. This will contribute to the development of a co-designed digital resource aimed at appealing to target and potential audiences in China and the UK. Throughout, a priority was to devise ways in which audience evaluation techniques and methodologies can be developed in partnership between China and the UK.

In order to address the requirements for the digital resource creative brief it was essential to gain an understanding of the awareness, interest and response to the collection according to each location – Beijing, Hong Kong and London.

The evaluation objectives were:

- Ascertain how interests in the collection converge/vary according to gallery and exhibition location.
- Establish levels of knowledge on the subject, distinguishing between enthusiasts and/or the curious.
- Identify the audience for a digital resource exploring clocks and automata from the Palace Museum.
- Define the expectations for an online digital resource that explores these subjects and themes.

3) Summary of approach and evaluation methodology

The methodology was primarily qualitative and took the form of focus groups (seven in total), informal group discussions, in-depth interviews with experts and influencers, as well as intercept interviews in host and destination locations.

The evaluation also had access to general visitor entry data for The Forbidden City and Hong Kong Science Museum. HKSM also initiated their own survey specifically of visitors to *Treasures of Time*, achieving a sample of over five-hundred participants. This was supplemented by an appendix survey of 50+ interviews using a questionnaire co-designed by the consultant and the HKSM team

The evaluation was conducted during March-June 2019, with two trips to Hong Kong and one to Beijing. In total four days were spent working with the team at the Palace Museum Beijing and eight days in Hong Kong (two trips). The London fieldwork included focus groups, depth interviews and desk-based research. In addition, there were meetings with The London Science Museum as TCI host institution.



Some of the participants in the intercept Interviews at the Hong Kong Science Museum (including a collector sharing his automaton and timepiece interests)

The qualitative sample was as follows:

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| 21st/22nd March 2019 | Intercept interviews in the <i>Treasures of Time</i> exhibition, achieving a sample of 28 short interviews with visitors. | HKSM |
| 23rd March | Two focus groups: young Hong Kong residents and an 'international' group that included four Cantonese speakers. Sessions included a brief 30-minute visit to the exhibition | HKSM |
| 26th March | Intercept interviews in The Hall of Clocks and Watches achieving a sample of 35 short interviews with visitors. Translator present to enable interviews in Mandarin. | Palace Museum, Beijing |



Some of the participants in the intercept interviews in the Clock Gallery, Beijing

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|------------|--|----------------------------|
| 26th March | Focus group with students from Beijing Jiaotong University, primarily reading engineering with interest in robotics. All required to pre-visit The Hall of Clocks and Watches. Session conducted primarily in Mandarin. | Beijing Jiatong University |
| 27th March | Group discussion with five volunteers who know and regularly work in the Hall of Clocks and Watches. Session primarily conducted in Mandarin. | Palace Museum, Beijing |
| 4th April | Focus group with horological experts, watchmakers, collectors, academics, journalists. Passionate academic and collector interest in timepieces; one a museum curator with experience of automata. | Science Museum, London |
| 11th April | Focus group with young exhibition-goers (20-30 yrs). All had previously visited a Science Museum exhibition. Arrived at session unaware of the subject for discussion. | Science Museum, London |
| 16th April | Group discussion with a jewellery creative team, Garrard Creative Director and Stephen Webster jewellers. | House of Garrard, London |
| 31st May | Focus group with Docents working at HKSM, majority had led group visits to <i>Treasures of Time</i> . Session conducted in Cantonese and English. | HKSM |
| 1st June | Focus group with visitors to <i>Treasures of Time</i> , museum volunteers and independent visitors. Session conducted in Cantonese and English. | HKSM |
| 1st June | <i>Group discussion</i> with Hong Kong Collectors Circle . Three major collectors – one a museology academic. All had attended lecture & tour of <i>Treasures of Time</i> . | Hong Kong |

Other interviews with experts and influencers have not been listed but are referenced in the report.

Terminology: Focus groups are semi-structured 90-minute sessions of seven to nine participants. Discussions are more informal 'meetings' with variable numbers.
 Note: For brevity we will refer to the **Clock Collection** throughout the document



Quantitative analysis relied primarily on existing audience data available from the host museum. In Beijing visitor data focused on total visitor numbers to the Forbidden City. Identifying visitors specifically intending to visit the Hall of Clocks and Watches was challenging. It can be assumed that many visitors include the gallery as one element of a busy and time-consuming day rather than as a specific destination.

In comparison, HKSM undertook a detailed exit survey specifically of the visitors to the *Treasures of Time* exhibition achieving an impressive sample of just over 905 interviews. It measured visitor interest, scored appreciation indices and outcomes, and response to interpretative approaches.

The TCI project team were able to spend a substantial amount of time with their hosts at the Palace Museum and HKSM discussing and sharing research practice. In Beijing, and to a lesser extent Hong Kong, audience evaluation tended to focus on the overall audience to the institution. The project identified ways that in all locations the evaluation could prioritise the Clock collection. Research process tends to be formed through need and circumstance and, as will be explored in the report, different cultures and context create different approaches.

The meetings included presentations on UK research practice by the consultant that were well received and stimulated subsequent discussions on respective and potentially mutual visitor evaluation techniques. In Hong Kong the collaborative sessions led to a pilot exit survey for the *Treasures of Time* exhibition that supplemented the enquiry fields of their existing questionnaire to identify a more detailed opinion-based and attitudinal response.

The scale of the sample and robustness of methodology was highly dependent on the assistance, hosting and contact network of the museums. For example, HKSM recruited two focus groups from their volunteer and visitor networks. The Palace Museum provided members of their team to assist and occasionally translate interviews in the Hall of Clocks and Watches. That this assistance enabled the budget 'to go further' is testimony to the success of the collaborative aspect of the project and evidence of what can be achieved by the sharing of best practice.

4) Context – Venues, visitors and factors of environment

The three museums collaborating in the TCI project have different relationships with the Clock Collection, their own unique audiences and represent different stages in the project timeline.

The Hall of Clocks and Watches, The Palace Museum, Beijing

- Visitors are likely to be primarily 'tourists' attempting to see the vast Forbidden City in one visit.
- The context of 'palace' influences perception. Clocks were the 'possessions' of a resident emperor.
- Recent refurbishment has refreshed the gallery but it's still a modest selection from the collection.
- Practicalities of managing significant volumes of visitor traffic influences presentation and access.
- The impact of CCTV's *Masters in Forbidden City* on awareness of the collection is significant.

The Hong Kong Science Museum

- HKSM is extremely popular and well-known as a family-friendly, hands-on, 'Science' museum.
- *Treasures of Time* was a strategy initiative presenting HKSM as also catering for adult tastes.
- That said, it was important for education groups due to the emphasis on the history of timekeeping.
- Breadth of content and themes meant the Clock Collection was the 'star' but not the sole focus.
- As a temporary exhibition, generating awareness and attracting destination visitors was essential.

The Science Museum, London

- Evaluation was a formative process. In most cases, it introduced the collection to new audiences.
- Discussions considered the implications to the creation of the digital resource and a London exhibition.
- Even among the 'experts' awareness of the collection and its connection with the UK was limited.
- The Science Museum as host and collaborator inescapably influences perceptions and expectations.

5) Conclusions

Conclusions – Key point summary

- * A collection of 18th century clocks once belonging to the emperor of China can initially and superficially seem to be a niche subject that will primarily appeal to enthusiasts of timepieces.
- * Interest significantly increases beyond the specialist audience with the appreciation that many are working automata with animated fantasy scenarios that are integral to their elaborate design.
- * When interest is stimulated questions focus on the context of creation and the mechanics of operation (internally and externally). The desire to *see the inner workings* and *understand how they work* are different impulses but consistent outcomes of the curiosity the clocks generate.
- * The fragility of the clocks limits the frequency and access to demonstrations of their movement. Encountering the clocks as static museum exhibits can limit visitor appreciation of their unique qualities. The charm of their movement stimulates significant interest among all audiences.
- * The host environment influences expectations. In a '*palace*' they are the valuable treasures of an emperor's home. In a '*Science Museum*' visitors expect to be told and understand how they work.
- * Cultural factors specific to Chinese and British audiences result in different points of connection. In China the luxury aesthetic is more appealing than for UK audiences. In the UK interest focuses on James Cox and the 18th century trading relationship with China. In China the focus is broader; a European-sourced and China-produced collection from the Palace Museum.

- * The clock and automata created for the UK's trading relationship with China and the significance of James Cox, the produce-entrepreneur, is largely unknown (even among many horologists).
- * All welcome a human element to the story. In the UK this was the story of James Cox. In China the CCTV series on the Palace Museum workshop made a celebrity of the conservator, Mr Wang Jin.
- * Seeing the clocks and automata 'perform' is essential to reaching the maximum audience. The creation of a digital resource offers an ideal medium to demonstrate and explain movement and mechanism. An initiative that can restore the "*magic*" lost in the static context of glass case display.
- * The challenge facing a digital resource is how to appeal beyond the specialist and academic enthusiast. If the objective is to reach the widest possible audience, then the digital resource must instantly capture the imagination and create a desire to discover and explore this remarkable collection. Traffic needs a purpose to visit a website. Seeing 'movement' is crucial to achieving this.
- * There were evident behavioural differences between museum visitors according to culture and nation. This compounded the influence of context (*museum or palace*) on the perceptions and expectations. China is a nation enthusiastically '*rediscovering*' its own history and thriving on the geographic mobility of burgeoning tourism (it was estimated that over 50% of visitors to HKSM *Treasures of Time* were from mainland China). In comparison, the potential museum audience in London and UK cities can often seem blasé regarding the abundance of free-access museums on offer. Also, in major cities pay-to-enter exhibitions are effectively and increasingly competing for visitors.
- * In museums in China attention and patience levels are greater than in the UK. There is more reverence for antiquity and academic authority. Objects in a museum command respect. Visitors in Hong Kong and Beijing often assumed the clocks were made of valuable materials (gold not gilt, and precious stones rather than paste). Though this is assumption was not unique to China it did result in greater patience with static display and a positive response to a decorative aesthetic more appealing to Chinese taste.
- * In the UK, audiences often need convincing that something is relevant. There is more evidence of 'tribes' of enthusiasm, taste and specialism where the unconverted shun that which does not instantly appeal or that is outside the spectrum of their interests. In this context, what might be described as a *clock collection* might seem irrelevant to those who assume this will be antique timepieces rather than fantastic automata. They could be marginalised as the territory of the enthusiast, and in this context evoke associations of the elitism of luxury-goods or the niche specialisms of collectable antiques.
- * It was evident in all locations that *seeing the clocks* was essential to engaging the non-specialist audience. Ideally experiencing the automata '*perform*' either in actuality or at the very least seeing a screen-based version of this. The difference between experiencing the '*static*' and '*movement*' was immeasurable. There was an evident delight and amusement when watching a demonstration. Importantly a *sense of fun* prompts a greater appreciation and enjoyment of these as sophisticated mechanical novelties rather than as the precision timepieces of an elite.
- * Once curiosity is established there are many story threads and connections that appeal to different interests. This carries implications for the creation of a digital resource that can appeal to both passionate expert and curious explorer. In China, the collection constitutes one episode in an ongoing cultural fascination with the philosophy and science of measuring time. In the UK interest focuses on the 18th century and the seventy-year '*chapter of*' James Cox, the trade with China and the surreal creations that emerged from a nascent relationship between two cultures.

* On a basic level the digital resource can satisfy the need for an internationally accessible archive of the collection. It would offer the opportunity to see all the operational clocks and automata 'perform' without the real-time demands of frequent demonstration. It can also provide ongoing access to the work and restoration achievements of the 'Clock Conservation Hospital' in the Palace Museum. Importantly, it can enable the sharing and collaboration of academic scholarship and debate.

* A digital resource can offer multiple entry-points, narratives and be relevant to different audiences. The interpretative resource in the Hall of Clocks and Watches, *Treasures of Time* and potentially the loan exhibition to the London Science Museum in 2020 'cry out' for more interactive screen and QR code accessed demonstration of both exterior performance and interior mechanism. Content created for the exhibition experience that can potentially satisfy pre, post and non-visit curiosity on a digital hub.

* To appeal to the newcomer/novice the digital resource must have instant impact and be very visual. They will not seek the resource without a compelling trigger, tease or gimmick that both captures their imagination and is shareable. The desire to share images on social media was evident throughout.

* In conclusion, the Clock Collection from the Palace Museum is an exciting, engaging and increasingly relevant story that deserves to reach a wider audience and be more than the secret preserve of the academic, enthusiast and tourist visitor to the Forbidden City. The evaluation consistently affirmed that in all locations seeing the clocks and ideally experiencing them as automata is the gateway to engagement. The digital resource offers an opportunity to be the mechanism that 'assists the discovery' of this unique collection.