Culturally Appropriate Social Inclusion: Insights from the Chinese Museum Context

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Abstract

Social inclusion, defined as a suite of socially related issues and concerns encompassing access, equity, and social justice, transpires in culturally distinct ways. Through a deeply grounded investigation of the dynamics of inclusion in museums in the People's Republic of China (PRC), I draw upon Christina Kreps' concept of culturally appropriate museology, probing the possibilities inherent in her approach. I demonstrate that museum practitioners in the PRC are finding culturally appropriate and politically prudent solutions to complex and interlinked concerns around inclusion, especially in relation to young people. Drawing from the Chinese Communist Party's campaigns of cultural nationalism and the alleviation of poverty, I show how practitioners employ strategies that seek to foster belonging and build cultural capital. Analysing examples of culturally appropriate inclusive practice that challenges the severe stigma of disability in China, I examine the ways that museums remove barriers to access while also providing equity of experience and pursuing social justice for disabled people. By surfacing the unique and situated ways in which inclusive work takes place in China, this study both illuminates and complicates our understanding of inclusion and its possibilities in diverse settings. It also shows how Kreps' concept of culturally appropriate museology can be extended, enriched, and reframed to evidence its relevance in elucidating a wide range of museological practices and cultural settings.

Keywords: inclusion, culturally appropriate museology, China, museum education, disability.

Introduction

Over the last quarter century, many museums around the world have worked to shed themselves of elitist systems, structures, and assumptions by introducing policies and processes of social inclusion – to varying degrees of success. Social inclusion in museums, as Moore et al. (2022: xii) assert, is defined through a suite of socially related issues and concerns encompassing access, equity, and social justice. There is no consensus on the definitions of the terms access, equity, social justice and inclusion. In this paper I define access as creating the conditions for inclusion by removing economic, physical, and educational barriers from museums and offering services so that people of all classes, abilities, and educational levels can participate. I characterize equity as an active process of ensuring all individuals have the same quality of experience in the museum by providing them with the support and resources they need. While access and equity are both integral to social justice, I use the latter term to signify the ways that inclusive strategies can shape society to become more fair and equitable. Finally, I see social inclusion in museums as a *gestalt* that encompasses any or all of the processes of creating access, equity, and social justice. How social inclusion transpires, however, is highly context dependent and varies, based on the political, economic, social, and cultural circumstances of a particular locale at a specific moment in time.

Much of the current museological understanding of social inclusion, as Laura-Edythe Coleman (2018: 9-52) establishes, is rooted in Anglo-American models (for example: Sandell

1998, 2002, 2003; Silverman 2010). These earlier models have been expanded through more recent discourse on anti-racism, decolonization, human rights, and social justice (Bunning 2021; Sandell 2017; Moore et al. 2022),[1] including a number of edited volumes with diverse international case studies (Sandell and Nightingale 2012; Janes and Sandell 2019; Bevan and Ramos 2022). Adding to this picture are EU-focused studies on various aspects of inclusion – from rethinking the potential of the ethnographic museum (Modest et al. 2019) to participatory capacity of digital engagement (Giglitto et al. 2023). A globally embedded approach is taken by the Inclusive Museum Research Network.[2]

None of the scholarship on social inclusion in museums, to date, however, has scrutinized the distinctive nature of national, regional, or local approaches. The literature, by default, assumes universality, based on Anglo-American concepts, with regards to how social inclusion is enacted across cultures. In this paper I offer up a corrective to this premise of hegemonic policy and practice by demonstrating that social inclusion transpires in culturally distinct ways. My investigation centres on the dynamics of inclusion in museums in the People's Republic of China (PRC). My analysis is the first to focus on social inclusion as an aim and a practice in Chinese museums.

I draw upon Christina Kreps' (2008) concept of culturally appropriate museology which contends that museological practice is not globally homogeneous but is instead deeply localized, and shaped by the particular cultural context in which it operates. The concept stems from Kreps' critique of indiscriminate knowledge transfer from external experts, which commonly results in failure. Analysing a case study of museum development and training with Indigenous groups in North Sumatra, Indonesia, in which she collaborated with local practitioners to embed decolonizing principles into collection care and curation, Kreps demonstrates the importance of participatory practices which tailor and adapt normative professional standards and methods in response to local cultural practices and conditions. She emphasizes the importance of culturally appropriate museology for museums with few financial resources and training opportunities, but the concept holds relevance in a wider range of contexts. Kreps (2008: 38) asserts that 'appropriate museology is a humanist approach that makes people and their *actual* cultural needs and circumstances the central reference point from which all work proceeds'.

Through a deeply grounded investigation of the dynamics of inclusion in Chinese museums, I extend, enrich, and reframe Kreps' idea of culturally appropriate museology by probing the possibilities inherent in her approach. Applying Kreps' theory as a lens through which to illuminate practice in China – a distinctly different environment than Indonesia – I extend her approach by establishing that culturally appropriate museology is relevant in diverse contexts. Evidencing the novel strategies that practitioners in China – with (respective to North Sumatra) ample economic resources and training options but little political freedom – themselves translate and transform Anglo-American social inclusion to meet the needs and values of Chinese society, I enrich her concept by presenting new internally-generated narratives that show how political sensitivity, as well as local traditions and values, are central to culturally appropriate museology. And grafting Kreps' notion from the domain of the curatorial to that of social inclusion, I reframe culturally appropriate museology as a prism through which to analyse many museological practices, and to recognize that inclusion initiatives are not globally hegemonic but enacted in distinct, culturally sensitive, and innovative ways.

Examining culturally appropriate social inclusion in the PRC is complex because of the embeddedness of political agendas in the policies and practices of museums across the nation. As Kirk Denton (2014) emphasizes, the dynamics of the Chinese museum world require that the power of the state be considered, as museum educators and even institutional leaders do not have the autonomy to make key decisions without the "approval" of relevant government authorities. For instance, major museums have an in-house Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary who wields significant power to ensure that Chinese socialist ideology guides all work (Lu 2014: 200, 209). Some types of museums, such as history museums, military museums, and national museums, are more politically sensitive than others.

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping's leadership (2013–), the power of the CCP to control the museum sector has grown significantly stronger. For example, museum educators in China have little possibility of directly addressing human rights issues. But this does not

mean that they have no agency. As Selina Ho (2019) has shown within the sphere of the curatorial, practitioners in China with alternative theories, methods, and interpretive language do create impact. In this study I demonstrate that museum practitioners in the PRC employ both culturally appropriate and politically prudent solutions to complex social concerns through a range of inclusive strategies from access and equity to social justice, especially in relation to young people. They do so despite the pressures of the state to enforce an authorized discourse of cultural nationalism and social harmony. However, when I use the term "local" to characterize culturally appropriate inclusion in China, I am generally referring to national parameters, as the strength of the CCP and of longstanding Chinese traditions typically dictates that the national trumps the local.

I argue that museum educators in China committed to social inclusion leverage *politically* appropriate government objectives to develop what Kreps identifies as *culturally* appropriate ways of working; this strategy enables staff to function effectively within the context of the contemporary Chinese museum sector while also engaging with a globalized socially engaged turn, as evidenced by ICOM's 2022 redefinition of the term "museum"[3] and current museological scholarship. The paper recognizes the maturation and distinctiveness of the relatively new field of museum public education in China, examining how practitioners are translating and transforming ideas and trends from abroad to meet local and national needs while also building upon long-held strengths and traditions. Wang Fang, Assistant Director of Education and Public Services at the Guangdong Museum reflects, 'having attended several American Alliance of Museum annual conferences, as well as many other trainings with western colleagues, I have integrated western ideas and methods into my practice but the content and style of my work is entirely Chinese'.[4] This study also refutes western media generalizations about Chinese museums as empty shells or "ghost museums", built for political prestige and city branding but without any thought for audience.[5] I chiefly employ the term "social inclusion" to emphasize the socially impactful nature of this work though sometimes use "inclusion" by itself as a syntactical shortcut. Social inclusion, however, is only an approximation of the myriad terms that Chinese practitioners have adopted to characterize their efforts.

My study is built upon relationships I developed over several years with colleagues working in Chinese museums and universities, many of them alumni from the museum studies programme on which I was teaching at the time. During several trips to China, including a 2018 sabbatical as a Senior Research Fellow at Fudan University (Shanghai), I conducted fieldwork fostered by these relationships. The research was then extended through data collection that further evidenced and framed my arguments. I was inspired, in part, by seeking to understand how museum studies alumni from China who have graduated from western institutions navigate with adeptness and tenacity upon their return to the PRC the seemingly contradictory spheres of global museology and the particular political context that delineates contemporary China.

During the sabbatical, I interviewed 18 museum educators, directors, and curators on visits to nine different cities across China at a range of 17 institutions, including history museums, archaeological museums, art museums, a natural history museum, and a children's museum, which together encompass national, provincial, and municipal level public museums, as well as private museums (see appendix). I chose these individuals and institutions because of their commitment and diverse approaches to inclusion, as well as the broadly representative sample of the sector that the group encapsulates. Data from these interviews embodies a metaphorical snapshot of a "deliberative moment" before the development of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased political polarization between China and many western nations – when the international exchange of ideas was relatively fluid.

I focus on the museums' efforts with young people. While these institutions work towards inclusion with a range of disenfranchised groups – from elderly residents in social housing to migrant workers – it is with young people of various ages and abilities from diverse locales to whom they are most committed. This reflects a complexity of circumstances, which includes: the ready conduit of schools; the belief that devoting resources to young people is a wise long-term investment; and the notion, stoked by the CCP, that young people in China today require guidance to instill in them cultural nationalism.

Because I do not have the language skills to read specialized literature or conduct

interviews in Chinese, my work is inevitably coloured by the processes of translation. I have done my best to verify my arguments by focusing on key patterns evidenced throughout the sector, rather than one-off events. Nonetheless, my viewpoint remains that of a western academic and any errors are mine alone.

After setting out the political, cultural, and legal context for social inclusion to take root in Chinese museums, I examine the development of museum education in China and the emergence of socially inclusive concepts and practices from this context. I then discuss the distinctive, culturally appropriate nature of social inclusion in China, identifying target populations, considering modes of visitor evaluation, and unpacking the diverse terms that practitioners use to describe inclusion. In so doing, I explore how practitioners draw from the CCP's campaigns of cultural nationalism and the alleviation of poverty to employ inclusion strategies that seek to build cultural capital. Finally, I analyse practitioners' implementation of culturally appropriate social inclusion through one particular strand of work – aspiring to eradicate the stigma of disability. I show how such efforts remove barriers to access for youth of diverse abilities, provide equity of experience so that agency can be realized, and challenge discriminatory thinking and behavior within the wider public.

Ultimately, by surfacing the unique and situated ways in which inclusive work takes place in China, this study calls attention to the social possibilities inherent in museum thinking and practice in the Chinese context. Applying Kreps' notion of culturally appropriate museology as a framework for analysis, the paper simultaneously unsettles and illuminates our understanding of inclusion. It also demonstrates how Kreps' concept of culturally appropriate museology can be transposed and readapted to elucidate a range of museological practices in diverse political and cultural settings.

Cultural policy and a "golden age" for museums

From a paucity of development in the twentieth century, Chinese museums have undergone unprecedented investment and growth over the last twenty years. Though just 365 museums survived the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 28), China joined the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1982, signifying a commitment to international standards of professional practice, and by 1996, showed a slow but steady advance in its number of museums to 1200 (Zhang and Courty 2021: 31). The pace has accelerated dramatically in this century so that by 2019 there were 5500 registered museums in mainland China,[6] with some 1.23 billion visitors.[7] Reflecting on the 2010s, Vice-Director of the Department of Social Education and Promotion at the National Museum of China Zhao Jing declared, 'it is a golden age for museums'.[8] Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, cultural nationalism and the campaign to alleviate poverty have become chief drivers of this maturation, and both policies have hugely impacted museum education – including the development of social inclusion initiatives.

Cultural nationalism is Xi's strategy of politicizing culture in order to legitimize his authority and claim Chinese cultural ascendancy on the world stage; as Xi views it, cultural self-confidence is central to maintaining the image of China as a great power (Lin 2023: 9, 13). In the museum context, cultural nationalism is conveyed with clarity and directness. For example, permanent collection displays typically create linear narratives expressing Chinese cultural superiority in the past and present (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 36; Zhang and Courty 2021: 32). These authorized narratives attempt to generate in the domestic visitor a sense of belonging to a proud and ancient heritage while also instilling patriotism (Varutti 2014). Duan Xiaoming, Director of the Hunan Museum, asserts that museums in China today function similarly to the family temple of ancient times, in which the clan would unite to confirm their cultural identity.[9] This sense of cultural belonging and national allegiance are integral to the social cohesion necessary for the CCP to maintain its control. And in their efforts to inspire social harmony, many policymakers and cultural leaders are particularly interested in reaching young people.

Chinese public-school education today is heavily instrumentalized towards high-stakes testing and economic goals (Zhao and Deng 2016). Thus, museums have become a space to provide alternative, value-laden learning experiences. Mao Yan, Deputy Curator of the Suzhou Museum, reflects:

> Because China's economy has developed very quickly over the last few years, many of us, particularly young people, don't really understand the culture of our nation. Chinese educational resources are limited and are exam oriented. Most of us know facts instead of really knowing our culture. To nurture individual wellbeing, our country is doing her job because we are building more and more theatres and museums to provide cultural services to the public. The museum is one of many platforms to learn about national culture.[10]

The focus on cultural nationalism for young people has become so important to policymakers that some major cities have instituted policies that make it mandatory for every student to visit at least one museum. Huang Chen (2018: 48), Director of Social Education and Promotion at the National Museum of China, one of four museums that all Beijing students must visit, states, 'we believe that, through museums, children will ground their thinking in the time-honored history of Chinese civilization and find a sense of identity and belonging'.

Xi Jinping's campaign to alleviate poverty by 2020, another pillar of his presidency, was sparked by widening economic and social disparities and fears that those inequalities might create political unrest (Duckett and Wang 2015: 26). China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism (formerly Ministry of Culture) recognized the significant role that the cultural heritage sector could play in mitigating these disparities by providing new opportunities for disadvantaged people to build cultural capital: cultural knowledge that can be leveraged to increase social mobility (Bourdieu 1985). The Ministry thus established cultural policy and funding for museums to develop socially inclusive practices; through inclusion, museums would provide access and equity to diverse economically and culturally deprived communities with the aim of helping such groups amass cultural capital. Amidst a population with little prior knowledge or experience of museums, social inclusion was an ambitious goal.

This campaign to boost cultural capital was facilitated by the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA) (formerly State Administration of Cultural Heritage), which oversees the development and management of museums, through a 2008 policy requiring those museums it administers to offer free admission to the public (Zhang and Courty 2021: 33).[11] This state policy represents inclusion through access; it aims to ensures the basic cultural rights of the population and created a dramatic shift in museum priorities from preservation to public service. As a result, audiences typically grew by 50 per cent from 2007 to 2017 (An 2019: 4). And by the 2010s, the increase in visitor *numbers* inspired by the free admissions policy helped prompt policymakers and museum leaders to consider how to strengthen the *quality* of museum education for all through equity.[12]

The dual focus on cultural nationalism and poverty alleviation has transformed the emphasis in Chinese museum development from building museums to the activation of space and communities,[13] with education becoming an increasing priority. In fact, in the National Museum Grading Evaluation of museums, education is now as important as curating in determining which institutions are awarded Grade One status (and associated funding), based on performance alignment with government aims (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 28-29).[14]

Within the field of museum education, social inclusion has become a respected area of work for its capacity both to create a sense of belonging – to which the agenda of cultural nationalism aspires – and to address inequalities – which the campaign to alleviate poverty targets. This work is supported by laws passed by the National People's Congress of the PRC, including the 2015 Regulations on Museums that positions education as a key responsibility for museums, and the 2017 law guaranteeing equal access to cultural services including museums (Wang and Duan 2018: 142). The latter, which reflects the tilt towards inclusion through equity, specifies that cultural services should 'serve special groups' including older people, people with disabilities, migrant workers, soldiers, and impoverished rural communities.[15] In effect, these laws designate museums as a social service. Museums have responded to these legal developments by embedding socially inclusive agendas and practices that are both culturally and politically appropriate

Approaches to museum education in China

Chinese museology was founded on the Soviet model shaped by Marxist-Leninist thought

and synthesized with Maoist principles (Varutti 2014: 35-36). Chinese museum "education" consisted of disseminating socialist propaganda through didactic interpretation.[16] With economic reform and opening up, led by Deng Xiaoping from 1978 to 1989, and with China's membership to ICOM, museum content generally became more factual and less propagandistic (Varutti 2014: 36-37); nonetheless, the didacticism of museum education persisted,[17] and a passive "deficit" model became the default approach to learning.

Today, political and demographic pressures compel many museum education departments to continue to rely heavily on didacticism (Huang 2018: 45-46). Museums with a politically-oriented mission, for instance the Shanghai History Museum (also known as the Shanghai Revolutionary History Museum), deliver socialist narratives through a didactic approach (Pozzi 2021: 419).[18] Museum educators more commonly employ didacticism as an efficiency mechanism. Indeed, visitor numbers to China's museums can be crushingly high. Despite the rapid development of museums in the PRC in this century, China still only has five to seven per cent of world's museums and 20 per cent of the global population (Zhang and Courty 2021: 35). For instance, the National Museum of China in 2018 had approximately 50 education staff members and 200 volunteers but seven million visitors.[19] By the mid 2010s, some Chinese museums began capping daily admissions to avoid overcrowding (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 35). 'How do we welcome more people and make good programs for them?', asks the National Museum of China's Zhao Jing.[20]

Didactic lectures, tours, and courses focused on knowledge dissemination are, in fact, an efficient means to deliver museum education for they require less staff preparation (over time when repeated), a smaller number of staff, and less visitor time in the museum than more participatory modes. But didacticism leaves little room for experimentation or divergent approaches for varied needs, interests, and contexts. Moreover, when the primary focus of a museum education department concerns efficient turnover of the greatest number of visitors, in regard to inclusion, access is privileged over addressing equity of experience and social justice concerns.

Nonetheless, opportunities for growth have opened up in this century. New architecture and building expansion across China have brought bespoke spaces for learning, increased staff numbers, bigger, more diverse audiences, and a novel interest in enhancing equity of audience experience. Yang Dandan, Assistant Director of the Capital Museum in Beijing, reflects on this transition:

> Since the opening of our new Capital Museum building in 2005, we began to think about questions such as public access to information about our museum, what preparations our visitors need before visiting our museum and what qualitative feedback we can capture to understand visitor experience…This constitutes the beginning of the transformation of our museum from a traditional one into a modern one.[21]

Academic and professional training programmes, both domestic and international, have created a vibrant community of educators who understand western theories of inclusion. Because China lacks enough graduate-level museum studies programmes to satisfy demand, and only some offer museum education training, many museum educators in China, especially of the younger generations, have studied in the UK or US (Ji et al. 2016: 22; Lu 2014: 207-208).[22] Most educators in senior positions at high profile museums have participated in domestic and/or international professional training. And many of the domestic training programmes, such as those organized by the NCHA, provide teaching by international speakers/facilitators.

But practitioners adapt western approaches to inclusion strategically to suit the Chinese context. The National Museum of China's Zhao Jing, who undertook a six-month residency at the Brooklyn Museum, is typical in her sensitive deployment of western educational theory for China's museum sector. Speaking of experiential learning, she waxes enthusiastically, 'we don't want to just tell them [visitors] what an object is, we want to lead them to thinking about it themselves'; yet she cautions, 'of course, we need to think about the pedagogy, the teaching strategy, based on our own culture. We are still working through this question'.[23]

Culturally appropriate professionalization has generated a clear and robust shift towards visitor-centered, participatory, and socially-oriented practice. As Yang Dandan of the Capital

Museum describes her transformation:

> Through self-reflection, over the last 15 years, I came to move beyond the idea of education as the passive reception of knowledge and to promote active learning. I have learned to communicate with audiences, and to learn about them, as well as to learn about the distinct needs of diverse audience groups…Because audiences are different…a single approach may not satisfy everyone's needs.[24]

In China, like elsewhere, natural history, science, and children's museums have played a leading role in the embrace of visitor-centered learning because of their experiential potential (Gong et al. 2020).[25] A wider range of museums espouse visitor-centred approaches that nurture well-being (Jiang 2023), based on Chinese tradition and values. For example, Mao Yan of the Suzhou Museum describes their aim as fostering critical thinking skills as well as Confucian concepts of personhood:

> The most important thing is not knowledge itself but how to live and how to be a person. Education in the museum is different from school education because, in school, teachers impart knowledge and students must cram all the time. Here in the museum, we really want kids to think by themselves. Sometimes students don't have to accept, they can turn over a concept and build a new one.[26]

Such critical thinking skills foster the creativity that exam-focused school education in China typically lacks and that is needed in contemporary professional careers; moreover, they promote inclusion through recognizing independence of thought.

Defining museum social inclusion with 'Chinese characteristics'

Clearly, political and professional contexts have created circumstances for social inclusion to flourish in Chinese museums. Indeed, inclusion has evolved so much that it has become a pillar of museum practice in China. As Liu Yuzhu, Director of the NCHA, stated on International Museum Day 2019, 'equality has become a distinctive characteristic of the development of Chinese museums'.[27] But inclusion in China has developed within a particular cultural milieu and value system. This process should be recognized as a phenomenon extending, expanding, and reframing Kreps' definition of culturally appropriate museology. How can museum social inclusion with "Chinese characteristics" best be defined? Liu Qingxian, Head of the Education Department at the Changsha Museum, explains that museum educators in China typically adopt theories and strategies from western museum practice but draw from local knowledge in adapting these theories and strategies, negotiating contingencies on the ground.[28] For Chinese practitioners, drawing from local knowledge includes working to the boundaries of what CCP policy deems acceptable.

For Liu Qingxian and her peers, central to this process is reconciling: who is included and who is excluded in the project of social inclusion; how museums are understanding these publics through audience research; and what culturally appropriate nomenclature is employed to define social inclusion. Of course, social inclusion in China has limits. Inclusion typically is viewed as the purview of an education/visitor services department with support from leadership, rather than a systemic effort. Few Chinese museums are presently considering how diversifying its workforce or collecting and interpreting collections can foster inclusion. Further, social inclusion is constrained by CCP policy that makes outreach to particular groups taboo.

Who is included in social inclusion and who is excluded?

Both cultural and political considerations inform decisions about which communities are prioritized for social inclusion and which are excluded. In fact, the focus on particular audiences is part of what defines culturally appropriate inclusion in China. Paradoxically, on one level, all Chinese people comprise the target audience for inclusion – with a specific focus on children; this broadly inclusive campaign came about because, as Zhang Li explains, during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, most people did not have access to museums:

> Chinese citizens know very little about museums. For many western people, visiting museums is a habit passed down from generation to generation but in China the museum is very new. No matter what your education in school or at home, we lack this kind of knowledge…Few, outside the upper and middle-class enclaves of first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, have cultural capital.[29]

Museums across China, such as Jinsha Site Museum (Jinsha Site Museum (n.d.): 22-23, 60-61), Changsha Museum,[30] and Zhejiang Museum of Natural History,[31] have responded to this lack of familiarity and self-confidence by developing hands-on museological literacy programs in which children play the roles of archaeologists, curators, conservators and tour guides. This inclusive programming aims to provide for a broad swath of Chinese children and their families an understanding of key responsibilities and missions of museums. Through such experiential learning, educators have introduced culturally appropriate and politically astute museum literacy programmes that address the CCP's agenda to help alleviate poverty by building cultural capital.

Museum educators work to reach the wider Chinese public primarily through the dual mechanisms of school and family groups (Jiang 2023: 87). But some staff caution that it is important not to allow meeting the needs of this wider public to overshadow socially inclusive practice with disadvantaged groups. Yang Yingshi, Deputy Director of the Department of Public Education at the National Art Museum of China, notes, 'we need to serve our mainstream audiences and that's important; but marginalized people need to be served at the same time'.[32]

Among these marginalized publics that museums want to reach are impoverished rural populations to whom much of Xi Jinping's campaign to eliminate poverty has been directed. As of 2019, approximately 43 per cent of China's population were living in rural areas, most of whom rely on agriculture. However, 40 per cent of agricultural land has been degraded, due to poor management practices and climate change. Income inequalities between urban and rural are large, with the average household along the eastern coast (where most of China's wealthy cities are located) earning some 2.5 times more than the typical family living inland.[33] The lack of economic opportunity in the countryside has led many parents to move to urban areas to seek work, leaving their children behind to be cared for by grandparents. Evidence shows that the experience of being "left behind" negatively impacts children's rights to subsistence, health care, protection, development, and participation in the wider social sphere (Xu et al. 2023). Poor internet connectivity for approximately 36 per cent of rural households in 2018 (CEIC 2023),[34] and lack of access to computers and smartphones in remote areas (Huang et al. 2022) means that posting content online does not guarantee more equal distribution of resources (Jiang 2023: 89-90).

All sorts of museums commonly form partnerships with rural schools, dispatching teaching materials to complement academic curricula and sometimes sending volunteers to present these materials. But it is provincial-level museums that more often lead on socially inclusive initiatives with these communities. This is because, in China, provincial level museums are responsible for strengthening the cultural provision for an entire province (Wei 2019: 103), including the network of other museums across the province that are not well funded or without staff training, along with schools, villages, and sometimes army bases. Provincial museums prioritize the needs of rural children in their socially inclusive practice – and will travel far to reach them, in some cases through mobile museums.[35]

Disabled people – who face severe economic deprivation and social stigma in China – comprise another major constituency for socially inclusive museum practice in China. As Sarah Dauncey (2020) explains, the concept of the ideal Chinese body, first articulated in Confucian philosophy in the early Imperial period and reclaimed in the mid-twentieth century with the socialist state, continues to exert a huge influence in Chinese society; amidst the pressures of a largely conformist society, disabled people are marginalized and often hidden from society. Even the language used to describe disabled people, "special" (特殊) (tè shū), as in special needs, is riddled with stigma. Yang Yingshi of the National Art Museum of China notes that, in Chinese, "special" signifies something weak, as well as minority groups.[36]

While the CCP has reduced poverty among disabled people through its top-down approach, huge gaps still exist. In addition, a scarcity of welfare resources has generated a

competitive environment and fueled resentment by non-disabled people towards disabled people. Moreover, by focusing on labelling through medical diagnosis, state-led welfare assistance programmes have further stigmatized disabled people, which has negatively impacted their social and cultural capital. (Wang et al. 2022).

The government rejects human rights activism, but China does have a nascent disability rights movement; this movement impacts government policy and social norms primarily through nuanced self-help and advocacy groups, rather than through direct political or social "rights" activism (Zhang 2017). China's disability rights movement, nonetheless, is combatting longstanding cultural biases on many fronts. Sarah Dauncy (2020) asserts that what it means to be disabled in China today is fluid and contested. While she acknowledges that many structural barriers remain, she emphasizes the diversity of disabled experiences and the agency of disabled individuals in China to affect change.

Prompted in part by the 2008 law guaranteeing disabled people equal rights to cultural participation,[37] museums have cautiously begun to engage with disabled visitors. Many museums focus on access by, for example, offering a special "green pass" ticket to disabled and elderly visitors, allowing them to enter the galleries without having to wait in line. But this is a passive approach. Some educators have expressed to me that they are not confident working with disabled people, particularly those with learning difficulties, without having specialized training – which is not typically available. Unfortunately, in China, most people with moderate to severe autism, cerebral palsy, and intellectual disabilities are either institutionalized or kept at home (Shang and Fisher 2016: 137) and are extremely hard to reach. Some museums, however, do send traveling exhibitions to institutions including orphanages (Chen 2019: 113) – where almost all children now are disabled.

Some museums have had strong success in programming for hearing and visually-impaired young people, particularly through collaborating with schools designed for these students (Shang and Fisher 2016: 133-44), where teachers provide bespoke support. The Suzhou Museum, for instance, only began working with disabled people in 2016 but, as Mao reports, within two years, the institution had created an effective model advancing access, equity, and social justice with hearing impaired students.[38]

In China, of course, some groups, especially those advocating for human rights – such as LGBTQIA+, women's and ethnic minority rights – are clearly excluded from inclusion agendas as they represent a political challenge to the CCP. The focus on children in Chinese museums' inclusion strategy may, on one level, help practitioners to bypass rights groups and the issues that they champion in their efforts to embed culturally (and politically) appropriate inclusion.

The state of audience research for inclusive practice

How well do museums in China know their audiences? Audience research, particularly qualitative research, is a linchpin to long-term success in equity-driven socially inclusive practice (Silverman 2002: 80-81; Coleman 2018: 93-112). Until recently, however, museums in China relied almost exclusively on quantitative data to demonstrate their success and significance, much of it gathered by the state. Some quantitative museum visitor data is straightforward to gather, as China is a surveilled state; all Chinese visitors must scan their national identity cards to enter a public museum and international visitors must bring their passports. Thus, the state and the museum automatically know something about visitors with every admission.[39]

When conducting their own quantitative studies, museums have traditionally concentrated on evaluating exhibitions rather than educational programming. Moreover, museums often did little to analyze and interpret the quantitative data gathered. The statistical approach reflects a wider cultural acceptance of the quantitative due to the CCP's dependence on statistics since its founding – with some of these numbers fabricated to evidence political propaganda.[40] However, presently museums are putting less stress on the quantitative, because, as Hong Lei of the Zhejiang Museum of Natural History states, staff have come to realize that numbers alone are not very meaningful (and statistics can be easily manipulated).[41]

In regard to qualitative research, museums in China are undergoing transition. Many practitioners, including educators, recognize its importance in assessing the caliber of visitor experience but do not have the resources, expertise, or administrative systems to design

effective mechanisms for capturing and analysing qualitative data and leveraging the results. Liu Duanling, Director of Education at the Guangdong Museum of Art, reports that her team employs qualitative analysis for some small projects but does not have the means to do so for bigger projects; she would need to hire an external consultant which is beyond the bounds of her budget.[42] Veronica Wong, Chief Curator of Public Programmes at the Guangdong Times Museum, and Yang Yingshi of the National Art Museum of China, agree that qualitative research is difficult because methodologies circulating in China are not yet sufficiently robust.[43] Some museums are taking an informal, anecdotal approach for the moment. For instance, the Shanghai Himalayas Museum sends surveys through the popular social media platform WeChat after individuals register for an event or exhibition; staff read the responses and consider how the museum could make constructive changes.[44] Yang Dandan of the Capital Museum is more circumspect; she is uncertain whether the results of qualitative research are employed fruitfully to impact future practice.[45]

How comfortable and competent visitors are in participating in qualitative research is a contentious subject. Zhang Li of the Shanghai History Museum argues that audiences don't know how to respond to qualitative surveys because they have little experience with them.[46] Mao Yan of the Suzhou Museum, however, asserts that the Chinese public is becoming increasingly familiar with the concept of qualitative studies through third-party public evaluation platforms such as Dianping.com (similar to Tripadvisor) and sometimes, in fact, review the museum on Dianping.[47]

Indeed, some museums in China are absolutely committed to qualitative research. Many are compelled because all museums that want to be considered for Grade One status in the NCHA rankings must submit qualitative as well as quantitative data.[48] But practitioners have discovered that qualitative data is extremely valuable as it yields important insights into the needs, interests, and opinions of diverse publics, thus facilitating social inclusion through equity and social justice. Yang Dandan reflects on this trend towards the qualitative:

> In earlier times, education ranked last in the museology priority list…But now, education ranks first. Why? Because there has been a huge change in public recognition of the responsibility and mission of museums, as well as the social reception towards them and people's understanding of museum education… This has implications for our research; we need to analyze the current needs of audiences before we design our educational programmes. Also, we need to think about how we present our research results and how these results can transform our approaches to learning.[49]

Qian Ling, Vice-Director and Curator of Tianjin Museum, states that educators at her institution used to focus on numbers of visitors but now also stress participation and relationship-building. Describing their approach to qualitative research, Qian states, 'utilizing new media and new methods, they [museum leadership] want the museum to become integral to the life of the public'.[50]

Sometimes, especially with generous funding, qualitative evaluation can be very ambitious. For an important 2017 exhibition *Pharaohs and Kings: Treasures of Ancient Egypt and China's Han Dynasty*, the Nanjing Museum conducted front-end evaluation over a full ten months, including focus groups with students and teachers, on both exhibition content and educational programming (Wang and Chen 2018: 137).

But who is permitted to provide qualitative feedback is a critical question – and exclusions hold some museums back from the full potential of social inclusion. This is because, frequently, as is the case with the Chengdu Museum, teachers/parents/guardians, rather than students/children, are asked to provide feedback on children's experience; in soliciting qualitative feedback from disabled young people, it is even more common for teachers or carers to speak for them.[51] This situation reflects inadequate support and training; capturing the experiences of young people – of diverse abilities – commonly requires different mechanisms for measurement and analysis than do those for typical adults. Some museums, however, do employ inclusive tactics for qualitative research. For instance, in the Suzhou Museum's collaboration with a school for the deaf, educators pose questions to students at the start and end of every class to assess impact;[52] and the Jinsha Site Museum provides braille visitor

surveys for visually impaired audiences.[53]

Chinese nomenclature for social inclusion

What terms do Chinese practitioners employ to capture their socially inclusive work? Yang Yingshi at the National Art Museum of China explains the difficulties: 'there is not one perfect word to describe social inclusion in Chinese. Access and inclusion, translated directly, are not understandable in the Chinese language'.[54] Creating their own terms for inclusion is central to the process of culturally appropriate museology.

When asked for their preferred terms, the responses of informants convey little agreement on nomenclature but provide evidence for robust explorations on the meanings of inclusion in the Chinese museum context. Most also convey that equity is at the heart of how they conceive inclusion. For instance, Duan Xiaoming of the Hunan Museum states that he uses the terms "facilitation" (促进cù jìn) and "service" (服务 fú wù), emphasizing the museum's responsibility to help people connect with culture.[55] At the Jinsha Site Museum, He Li Li favours the terms "participate" (参与cān yù) and "experience" (体验 tǐ yàn), indicating a commitment to creating opportunities for depth of engagement.[56] Hong Lei of the Zhejiang Museum of Natural History has adopted the phrase "public benefit" (公共利益, gōng gòng lì yì), highlighting the social impact of inclusion.[57] And Liu Duanling from the Guangdong Museum of Art prefers the word "understanding" (理解lǐ jiě), suggesting a relational or communal approach to inclusion.[58]

Others endorse the word "inclusion" (包容 bāo róng) itself. For example, in a nod to the western discourse, Li Zhe, Director of Publicity and Education at the Suzhou Museum, underscores the social justice aspects of the term:

> We don't actually have a specific word for it [social inclusion] but I think the concept fundamentally concerns equality and justice. It's very important to give all people opportunity to experience museums even though China has such a large population and limited resources. Inclusion is a good word…I am using it more and more often.[59]

Ma Xioalin of the Henan Museum, too, employs the term "inclusion" with a thrust on justice – through a poetic and inspirational turn of phrase. 'To be inclusive in nature (包容性; bāo róng xìng)', Ma reflects, 'is a perspective that helps me think about the global village. We should learn from each other; we should live in peace'.[60]

Others hold opposing views. At the Shanghai History Museum, Zhang Li, argues that the term "access" in the Chinese language, which she translates as jìn rù (进入), meaning to join in, is in fact a more powerful and active term than "inclusion" which she translates as cān yù (参与) – a more superficial type of engagement, like being a tourist, looking in from the outside.[61]

The diversity of opinion on nomenclature suggests an emerging, dynamic field of inquiry with practitioners bringing distinct culturally sensitive points of view to the domain of social inclusion. This is a pivotal moment for museum educators in China as they define and embed a culturally appropriate inclusion agenda that achieves benefits for marginalized groups.

Advancing culturally appropriate social inclusion in practice: aspiring to eradicate the stigma of disability

Examining how museums enact inclusion within one particular disenfranchised community provides a deeper understanding of the ways that culturally appropriate social inclusion in China transpires. A focus on inclusion initiatives with disabled people illuminates the challenges and opportunities of creating culturally appropriate practices for a group that the CCP prioritizes for social inclusion through law and cultural policy, and that is among the most stigmatized populations in China. Museums in China draw from the political agendas of cultural nationalism and the eradication of poverty to help disabled communities feel a sense of belonging and build cultural capital, thus improving their economic and social mobility.

Social inclusion of disabled people in China is a hugely complex initiative due to

the depth of cultural bias, segregation of disabled populations, and the all-too-common patronizing stance of non-disabled people. For example, while the museum building boom promised accessibility for disabled people, as Chinese law guarantees universal design in new public buildings,[62] in reality, barriers to access persist. This is, in part, because museum personnel commonly find it difficult to relinquish the cultural paradigm of dependency. Li Lu'e, former Manager of Research and Education at the Shanghai Himalayas Museum, describes accessibility at the site:

> We have accessible toilets and whenever disabled people visit our museum, the security guard down there would definitely give them help…At the main entrance to our museum there is an elevator [lift] designated for people who have special needs. The only thing they need to do is go to the front desk and register; there will be staff to come and help them get on the elevator.[63]

In fact, at many of the museums I visited, the accessible toilet was a *de facto* cleaning supply closet, suggesting that not many people using wheelchairs felt welcome, appropriately accommodated, or had opportunities to come.

However, inclusion of disabled people is an area of practice in which many museum educators recognize their responsibility to the 2017 law guaranteeing access and equity to marginalized groups by specifying that cultural services should "serve special groups", including people with disabilities. As Yang Yingshi states:

> For the National Art Museum of China, this is an issue of commitment to educational equity so that everyone the museum serves, including disabled people, can enjoy access to our educational resources. To do this, we have special services catering to special needs.[64]

Patterns in practice indicate that the translation and transformation of western approaches to suit the Chinese context manifest, for some museums, relatively conservatively – to provide access – for other museums, more progressively – to provide access and create equity of opportunity – and, for a bold few – to integrate the suite of socially inclusive initiatives: access, equity and social justice. Looking across the wider landscape of inclusion in Chinese museums evidences a growing trend in which disabled people are provided the same quality of experience as their non-disabled peers, non-disabled audiences and staff are inspired to champion the concept of equity for disabled people, and programs spark public advocacy and prompt systemic change within the institution. Yang Yingshi remarks:

> For me, it's a process of learning. I understand more about the possibilities of my work [with disabled people] to contribute to society and to my profession. And my museum is becoming more welcoming to the wider public and playing a more active social role to create impact.[65]

In-school programming

One common route that educators take to facilitate inclusion through access is to bring programming and/or traveling exhibitions to schools for disabled young people. The National Art Museum of China, for instance, sends educators and volunteers to special education schools for children with autism. Many Chinese museums see this as an efficient method of outreach. As Yang Yingshi explains:

> Usually, it's very difficult for disabled students to come to the museum in person. If they come to the museum, we need to put much energy into providing educational services for them. In terms of management, it requires more people and more work for us. An alternative is to send educational services to their communities or schools. The problem is that we do not have enough staff…Every museum has its limits.[66]

Of course, as Chinese museums gain experience in integrating disabled visitors into the museum space and recognize that these audiences require both equity and independence,

the preparation becomes less resource intensive and more streamlined. Moreover, while the school visit model is helpful on one level, the strategy continues to isolate disabled people rather than facilitate their social integration through the museum into the wider community. Some museums are responding by pairing in-school programming with museum visits, as does Jinsha Site Museum through its long-term collaboration with a school for hearing and visually impaired young people.[67] But inclusion as access too often positions disabled people as both insiders and outsiders to the museum.

Exhibiting art in the museum by disabled people

Another common approach is to organize group exhibitions of art by disabled youth as a means of empowering them to assert their voices in the museum. This strategy introduces an element of equity to these children's experiences. However, except perhaps during the openings of such shows, disabled people are often absent from the museum galleries. Thus, the young artists and their disabled peers are given limited access to the museum. Moreover, while exhibitions of work by disabled children typically target audiences who are not disabled, many do not attempt to pursue social justice by challenging prejudice. In fact, some of these projects attempt to evoke sympathy, thereby maintaining long-held positions of othering.

For instance, in 2010 the Nanyue King Mausoleum Museum in Guangzhou partnered on an exhibition with the Guangzhou branch of Huiling, a Chinese social services agency that supports children with intellectual disabilities integrate into their communities. Featuring works by young people living on the Huiling campus, the exhibition, *Sun in Winter,* received keen attention from the wider public, as it strategically coincided with the 2010 Asian Para Games (Lu 2011: 157-159).

Nanyue King Mausoleum Museum educator Lu Simi (2011: 161) notes the positive impact of the project on the young artists, observing that 'the exhibition inspired these special children, who had played the main roles. They gained confidence from the public's attention'. But, despite good intentions, the ways that such programmes are presented and discussed sit uncomfortably with disability rights-based understandings and approaches that challenge charitable and deficit models of engaging with disabled people. For example, Lu (2011: 159) emphasizes that disabled young people are 'special' and describes these types of projects as benevolent, 'manifesting museums' sympathy to these special groups'. Further, Lu's (2011: 161) assessment of a visitor survey suggests that the framing of the exhibition led audiences to engage with it on similar terms:

> Many visitors had a new perspective by seeing such an exhibition…Many students were surprised by the talent of these special children…instead of laughing at their different outward appearance. Most of the visitors reflected that this exhibition let philanthropy become reachable.

Other museum educators who have curated exhibitions of art by disabled young people are more nuanced in their understanding and, rather than sympathy, assume an ethics of care – though this position, too, is at variance with those of disability rights advocates who focus on more empowering approaches. However, as Yang Yingshi argues, regarding exhibitions by disabled young people at the National Art Museum of China, a framework of care can provide a form of support that helps disabled young people (and their families) achieve equity – or the same quality of experience as their non-disabled peers. It can also advance social justice by countering the wider public's biases towards disabled people. Yang states:

> It's not just about teaching them something; it's more an expression of love, support and care. It's also to help their families to gain confidence and to feel supported by society…However, our exhibitions with art created by young disabled people are not just about their own and their families' growth but also about getting the wider community to engage with them, to understand them, to support them and to care for them.[68]

At the Changsha Museum, Education Department Head Liu Qingxian found that art exhibitions have the potential to spark profound social impact both for the young artists, the wider

community, and the museum itself. Reflecting on an ambitious 2010 exhibition *Color of the Wind*, with over 200 works by young people with disabilities from a social welfare institute (or orphanage) and special education school in Changsha, Liu Qingxian reports that the project boosted the social integration and cultural capital of the young artists, as well as community support for families of disabled young people and the institutions on which they depend.[69] Liu (2014: 174) notes the 'sense of belonging that disabled people find in museums can promote their sense of belonging in the city where they live'. Further, local social welfare institutes, schools, and agencies supporting disabled people brought hundreds of disabled visitors to see the show (Liu 2014), amplifying impact. As a result, institutes, schools, and agencies serving Changsha's disabled community received increases in donations and, further, began to recognize how museums are relevant to disabled people (Liu 2014).

For the museum, *Color of the Wind* fuelled a commitment to improved access through universal design that shaped its new building (opened in 2015). The project equally enhanced equity. Staff improved their disability services to become more responsive to the needs and wishes of disabled visitors than most other museums in China – which Liu Qingxian (2014) characterizes as concerned more with accessibility through signage and facilities than on equity through support services.

Color of the Wind resulted in a sustained commitment to partnering with institutions, schools, and agencies for young people with disabilities (Liu 2014) and to creating innovative programming for these constituents, including collaborative activities with non-disabled children. The latter, Liu Qingxian explains, is critical to counter stigma in an environment so rife with prejudice that non-disabled children who have not had close encounters with disabled peers sometimes ask if the latter are contagious when they first meet.[70] For Liu, how museums treat disabled people is a clear reflection of their level of sophistication: 'disability services are one marker of how developed a museum is', she states.[71]

Integrating disabled people's experiences and needs into the museum

As the example from the Changsha Museum shows, exhibiting art by disabled young people can sometimes be a powerful mechanism for inclusion and such one-off projects can lead to lasting change. Other museums have taken a more direct approach to social inclusion of disabled people by prioritizing the embedding of sustained practices that foster equity and social justice.

For instance, the private Lao Niu Children's Discovery Museum in Beijing, which charges admission to most of its visitors, has provided free admission since 2016 for low-income families with disabled children through its programme Children and Families 365, so that these young people can experience free play as learning alongside their non-disabled peers. Partnering with rehabilitation centres, schools, and other facilities that support disabled young children, the museum identifies outreach opportunities to build disabled audiences. Museum Director Zhou Yaqin recounts:

> We have a social as well as educational role. We collaborate with community partners in this programme. And it's very important to us that we do not schedule a special time for the programme but integrate these children with non-disabled kids so that they have opportunities to engage in play together.[72]

As a result, Zhou reports, many of the parents and caregivers involved recognize the impact of the museum visits for their children: 'they are not motivated by free tickets alone but want their children to have equal opportunities; they want a kind of justice with other children'.[73] Beijing's Lao Niu Children's Discovery Museum programming works to deliver this kind of social justice by offering the same quality of experiences to disabled children as those of their non-disabled peers, and by teaching the latter the importance of equity with the former.

A project at the Suzhou Museum started out relatively modestly – as in-school programming – but with a critical commitment to the young people involved; it quickly generated a transformative impact on the children, the museum, and the wider community, prompting the museum to expand the project sustainably and holistically. The museum began by establishing a collaboration with a local school for the deaf in 2016. As Suzhou Museum Director of

Education Li Zhe recounts, staff chose the school as a partner because the teaching level is high and teachers show a strong ethos of professionalism; the museum understood that this partnership could create an influential model for success. It took time to build trust with the school as teachers were accustomed to organisations parachuting in only for a select date, such as International Children's Day.[74] But a sustained commitment was fundamental to the Suzhou Museum's approach, which can be best be described as a form of relational ethics. Director of Publicity and Education Li Zhe explains:

> We understood from the start that the programme must be long-term because only by coming in a sustained way could the kids feel that staff were doing things for them instead of for the museum's own benefit; we wanted the kids to develop trust.[75]

Initially, the project was confined to the school. Museum educators worked with teachers to build a curriculum that complemented their academic studies and visited weekly, bringing handling objects from the teaching collection.[76] And before long, museum staff felt prepared to engage directly with hearing-impaired young people in the museum space by providing appropriate services, such as Chinese sign language-based teaching. To make this possible, Mao Yan explains, the Suzhou Museum offered a Chinese sign language training course in collaboration with the municipal government, the school for the deaf, and a local radio station that advertised the course to the public. Those who took the course included not only Suzhou Museum staff and volunteers but also diverse community members – from doctors to bus drivers.[77]

The Suzhou Museum's project to foster the social integration of hearing-impaired youth exemplifies the full suite of inclusion initiatives: access, equity, and social justice. The project created a sense of belonging among the young people involved while empowering them to build cultural capital through the equity of experience provided. Further, it sparked communication, connection, and understanding among Suzhou Museum practitioners and the wider public towards the hearing-impaired community.

In fact, it is becoming increasingly common for major museums in China to provide staff and volunteer training to promote social inclusion. For instance, the Jinsha Site Museum offers training in Chinese sign language through a local NGO. Also, significantly, Jinsha has begun to diversify their staff: they employ a hearing-impaired staff member to teach ceramics classes.[78]

At the Suzhou Museum, Mao reports that work with hearing-impaired audiences has sparked the museum to create a "Touching Culture" space,[79] enabling visually-impaired visitors to experience specifically-chosen relics through a tactile approach (Chen 2019). Mao sees the museum as a platform that helps build momentum to challenge the profound stigma attached to disability in China. 'The impact is beyond our expectations', Mao comments.[80]

Examining the inclusive practice of the Suzhou Museum – and the other museums cited here – through the framework of culturally appropriate museology enables us to recognize what challenging work this is, given the context of severe discrimination against disabled people in China. The framework of culturally appropriate museology also illuminates the deftness required of practitioners to successfully negotiate political, social, and cultural pressures in transposing Anglo-American concepts of inclusion for local conditions.

Conclusion

This study shows that Chinese museum practitioners are finding culturally appropriate and politically prudent solutions for complex social concerns through social inclusion, especially in relation to young people. Leveraging opportunities generated by the political campaigns of cultural nationalism and the alleviation of poverty, practitioners have adapted western notions of inclusion, based on conditions in China. They have embedded access for a diverse range of abilities among young people. In addition, many are working to provide equity of opportunity to participate in ways that are meaningful to these audiences so that agency can be realized. Some are pursuing inclusion to also help create a more just society. Museums in China commonly foster inclusion projects around issues of political and social

concern such as eradicating the stigma of disability. Though inclusive practice in Chinese museums may rarely be systemic in the ways that scholars (for example, Moore et al. 2022: 47-72) measure transformative change in museums in North America, the UK, or Europe, such practice represents a significant body of work that generates impact, which should be acknowledged and understood. In fact, the CCP continues to encourage inclusion through new laws and cultural policies. For instance, in 2023 the 14th Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed a law promoting barrier-free environments to ensure 'equal, full and convenient participation and integration of persons with disabilities and the elderly into social life'.[81] Further, the NCHA now includes the employment of barrier-free infrastructure and communication, such as braille, among its evaluation standards and rankings, thus prompting museums to pursue more holistic approaches to inclusion across the institution.

My granular study of inclusive practice in China extends the relevance of Kreps' notion of culturally appropriate museology beyond the sphere of participatory training and development with Indigenous communities to diverse settings and cultures globally. Its elucidation of the clever and agile strategies and tactics through which Chinese practitioners independently (without external experts) recast Anglo-American concepts of inclusion to accommodate the values, traditions, and social and political realities of China enriches our understanding of how culturally appropriate museology is enacted in locally distinctive ways. The paper's focus on inclusion, rather than collection care and curation, reframes Kreps' idea of culturally appropriate museology as a lens to illuminate a wide range of museological practices.

Recognizing the distinctive and culturally appropriate nature of inclusion in China fosters a more nuanced and culturally sensitive understanding of practice not only in China and the developing world but also in a western context. For this writer, an American completing final revisions of the paper in February 2025, a few weeks after Donald Trump's second inauguration, the research has taken on particular resonance. As my president creates political conditions that suspend museums' efforts to embed diversity, equity, and inclusion, the narratives of Chinese practitioners using their agency to advance inclusion through culturally appropriate museology, despite a difficult and complex political and social environment, is more relevant to the US context than I ever could have imagined when I began my project.

My study, of course, is limited by the moment in time it highlights: 2018. At the time of writing, late 2023 to early 2025, museums in China are under increased pressure, as they continue to recover from the COVID-19 lockdowns and experience greater government interference,[82] creating conditions, for example, for a number of private art museums to close.[83] As they re-build their audiences, many public museums have directed resources towards digital initiatives – from new participatory ways of learning to e-commerce that help replace lost income from sales of temporary exhibition tickets and other on-site income generators. In fact, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between an institution's educational outreach and its marketing campaigns. And while these initiatives may help generate new audiences and break down barriers between publics and museums, potentially furthering social inclusion, the dangers of digital surveillance are real and becoming ever more ubiquitous (Jin and Min 2021; Sola 2019: 76-77).[84] Still, I am optimistic given that museum educators in China and those leading them are amazingly adept at satisfying government agendas while reaching their own professional goals in the advancement of culturally appropriate social inclusion.

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Appendix: Museum Staff Interviewed

(All positions correct at time of interview in Spring 2018)

Duan Xiaoming, Director, Hunan Museum, Changsha

He Li Li, Director, Department of Reform and Opening Up, Jinsha Site Museum, Chengdu

Hong Lei, Educator, Zhejiang Museum of Natural History, Hangzhou

Li Lu'e, Research and Education Department Manager, Shanghai Himalayas Museum, Shanghai

Li Qianzi, Director of Education, Hunan Museum, Changsha

Li Zhe, Director, Department of Publicity and Education, Suzhou Museum, Suzhou

Liu Duanling, Director of Education, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou

Liu Qingxian, Head of the Education Department, Changsha Museum, Changsha

Ma Xiaolin, Director, Henan Museum, Zhengzhou

Mao Yan, Deputy Curator, Suzhou Museum, Suzhou

Qian Ling, Vice-Director and Curator, Tianjin Museum, Tianjin

Wang Fang, Assistant Director of Education and Public Services, Guangdong Museum, Guangzhou

Wong, Veronica, Chief Curator of Public Programmes, Guangdong Times Museum, Guangzhou

Yang Dandan, Assistant Director, Capital Museum, Beijing

Yang Yingshi, Deputy Director, Department of Public Education, National Art Museum of China, Beijing

Zhang Li, Director of Education, Shanghai History Museum, Shanghai

Zhao Jing, Vice-Director, Department of Social Education and Promotion, National Museum of China, Beijing

Zhao Yaqin, Director, Lao Niu Children's Discovery Museum, Beijing

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