



## Shanghai History Museum / Shanghai Revolution Museum Report #3

### Visitor Studies

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Researched within Work Package 3 'City Museums and Multiple Colonial Pasts'  
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*Visitor Studies*  
*at the Shanghai History Museum/Shanghai Revolution Museum<sup>1</sup>*

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## **Introduction**

This report contributes to Work Package “City Museums and Colonial Pasts” of the Horizon2020 project, ECHOES: European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities. The researchers have been conducting in-depth, qualitative, analyses of Amsterdam Museum, the Museum of Warsaw, and Shanghai History Museum, three city museums representing a distinct position within colonial history (Ariese 2019a; Ariese 2019b; Bukowiecki 2019; Bukowiecki, Wawrzyniak 2019; Pozzi 2019a; Pozzi 2019b Ariese, Bukowiecki, Pozzi 2019). The analysis conducted at Shanghai History Museum/ Shanghai Revolution Museum (SHM/SRM) is a case study from a city museum located outside the European framework in contrast to the analyses of the Amsterdam Museum and Museum of Warsaw which present case studies from Western and Eastern Europe, respectively.

The main aim of this report – the last part of a nine-part final report of the research conducted within the ECHOES project – is to understand how visitors make sense of the permanent exhibition at the Shanghai History Museum/Shanghai Revolution Museum. This report attempts to use the data obtained from a qualitative analysis of interviews with selected visitors, visitor tracking, and analysis of messages left by visitors to answer the following questions: How do visitors experience the colonial section of the exhibition and the exhibition in general? How do visitors experience the objects defined as “colonial”? Do visitors direct any criticism to the museum? After presenting the methodology employed in this research, this report will propose an analysis of the data obtained to shed light on visitors’ understanding and experiencing of the exhibition.

## **Methodology**

### **Aims of the paper**

Since the 1980s, the growing influence of tourism and the market economy on the cultural sector have encouraged museums to pay more attention to visitors’ experience. Attempts made

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by museum to discover more about their visitors have enabled the field of Visitor Studies to gain recognition among museum staff and academics (Davidson 2015: 503-505). The primary purpose of these studies is to gather data useful for improving the visitor experience, to justify the value of museums, strategize on the long-term planning of new events, and understand how effective exhibitions are (Davidson 2015: 504).

There is a growing body of literature studying visitors' receptions of and engagement with heritage sites and heritage production in China. Researchers generally assess the background and aims of tourists to improve the "touristic attractivity" of a specific site (Chen and Huang 2017). Furthermore, scholars have analysed how locals react to the heritagization of villages and local buildings: while provincial and national entities often impose a nationalistic narrative on local heritage sites, residents often preserve alternative visions of their village's past (Xia 2020; Wang 2014; Zhang and Wu 2016).

Museums in China often have a department responsible for conducting audience research. Nevertheless, such studies mostly analyse data based on visitors' personal data (age, education, provenience, etc.) and gather information about how satisfied the public were and the reasons for their visit (Cao and Li 2005: 4-10). The journal *Chinese Museums* (*Zhong Bowuguan*, 中国博物馆) publishes academic articles based on specific audience research conducted at museums both inside and outside China, but most papers aim to assess visitors' satisfaction and understanding of specific exhibitions. There are also articles written in English in museum audience studies. Lin Chen (2017) analysed comments visitors left on the Suzhou Museum's webpage. Another article reported on the results that were attained when a group of researchers employed semi-structured interviews to examine the experiences of Chinese parents who took their children to visits clusters of heritage museums in the city of Hangzhou (Zhou et al 2019). Ho and Li (2016) studied the production and reception of exhibitionary culture in the town of Anren from a historical perspective. However, most of the research on Chinese museums focuses on how these institutions are managed and the content of their narratives, emphasizing its nationalistic tone and, when possible, highlighting rare deviations from the CPP's authorized version of national history (Denton 2014; Flath 2002; Varutti 2014).

This paper aims to contribute to the field of visitor studies in China by attempting to understand how visitors of the SHM/SRM experience the exhibition's section about the colonial history of Shanghai analysing their visit not as a learning activity, but as a "cultural performance" (Smith 2015: 459).

According to Laurajane Smith (2015: 459), museum visiting can be interpreted as a form of "heritage-making", an "embodied set of practices or performances in which cultural meaning is

continually negotiated and remade, and is, moreover, a process in which people invest emotionally in certain understandings of the past and what they mean for contemporary identity and sense of place” (Smith 2015: 459-460). This means that visitors’ identities (their social background, age, gender, political views, ethnicity, etc.) can influence how they understand exhibitions, making museum visiting a “cultural performance” in which people do not engage only in learning and recreation, but also seek to have their views and sense of self reinforced (Smith 2015: 459).

Analysing museum visiting as a form of “cultural performance” is particularly valuable when studying museums and their visitors in the People’s Republic of China, where the historical narratives proposed in public institutions are streamlined to fit the agenda of the Communist Party. The CCP’s systematic use of the past to serve the present has been analysed in several studies (Denton 2005; Varutti 2005; Pozzi 2019a). Scholars have tried to identify cases in which museums have managed to partially escape the nationalistic narrative of martyrology, revolution and liberation propagated at national museums and through public education (Flath 2002; Denton 2014; Ho and Li 2016). However, representations of Chinese history as a teleological tale that reached its apex with the victory of the Communist party in 1949 remain the most widespread. Therefore, analysing museum visiting as a “cultural performance”, a process during which individuals engage in heritage making and create meaning, can be the key to discovering more about how visitors create their own narratives about the past within the PRC’s official history-making system.

The aim of the paper is twofold: it assesses visitors’ comprehension of the curators’ message about colonialism, while also analysing visitors’ behaviour as a “cultural performance”. In this light, it considers visitors’ reasons for coming to the exhibition, as well as how their identities shape their understanding of the exhibition in ways that sometimes diverge from the message the curators intended to convey.

### **Visitor Studies at the SHM/SRM**

Three main research practices have been used to source and gather information on visitors to the SHM/SRM: visitor tracking, semi-structured interviews and analysis of visitors’ messages. It is worthwhile discussing the advantages and shortcomings of each of these practices and the way they were used during the research conducted at the SHM/SRM.

Visitor tracking had become a staple of visitor studies by the end of the 1980s but was not standardized and theorized until the late 1990s (Yalowitz and Bronnenkant 2009: 47-48). Tracking visitors not only involves recording where they go, but also what they do while inside an exhibition. This information can enable museum professionals to determine how visitors are using the various components of the exhibition and whether they are engaging with the exhibits in the manner intended (Yalowitz and Bronnenkant 2009 :48-49). There are several variables used in tracking

studies (such as noting visitors' stopping behaviours, observable demographic variables, situational variables, etc.). The larger the sample, the more precise the reconstruction of how people move and experience the exhibition.

Observational methods such as tracking are very useful for understanding how visitors move through a space, how much time they spend in an exhibition and how they interact with display components. Researchers do not interfere with the activities of the visitors, thereby guaranteeing that visitors' actions are not shaped by the researcher's agenda. However, this method does not provide much data about visitors' views of the exhibition, information that can be collected more profitably through interviews.

Interviews and surveys are the most frequently used practices for gathering visitors' opinions or assessing the educational efficacy of exhibitions. Generally, researchers prepare a set of questions designed to investigate visitors' understanding of the exhibition. While interviews and surveys do provide an insight into visitors' opinions, the risk is that questions that are too detailed might shape visitors' responses. Furthermore, face-to-face interviews might unintentionally lead the interviewees to give polite opinions or look for the "right answer" (McDonald 2005:123).

A more "open-ended" method for accessing audiences' opinions and activities is the analysis of visitors' books (McDonald 2005). Almost every museum allows visitors to express their opinions in an album placed at the end of the exhibition. In the PRC, museums often provide visitors with post-it notes that they can stick on a wall or whiteboard. As pointed out by McDonald (2005, 122), visitors' books differ from most other data sources in that "they are produced independently of research being undertaken", and as such, unlike some other approaches, they "elicit unanticipated visitor responses". Visitors write many different kinds of comments in museum's books, from thank-you notes to elaborate essays giving their opinion of the exhibition. The way in which they express themselves in these books is often culturally constructed. Some visitors' books can provide significant insight in some countries (e.g. post-Soviet states, while in others (e.g. Israel), visitors' entries can be extremely polite (McDonald 2005). Incontestably, visitors' comments do not always address the issues that interest the researchers most, but they can highlight other issues that were not previously incorporated into the research.

Comparing data from different sources and methods can substantiate research results, show whether researchers' questions were valid and, finally, make it possible to assess how visitors' interests and opinions change when they are asked direct questions about a subject or given the freedom to speak about what they like/disapprove of in an exhibition (McDonald 2005, 123).

## Data Collection at the Shanghai History Museum

The research was conducted from May to June 2019 by one researcher. In this timeframe, the SHM/SRM possessed no data about its own visitors. However, at the end of May 2019, the museum installed ID scanners at the entrance to the building. After that, visitors could only access the premises by scanning a valid ID, while foreign visitors were invited to show a valid document to the guards. Since the museum introduced the compulsory scanning of digital IDs, it has been possible for it to gather information about the number of visitors it receives, but these data have not yet been made available.

Some Chinese museums have webpages connected to the microblogging platform Weibo through which visitors can ask questions and send comments to the curators (Chen 2017). However, the SHM still does not have an official website despite a link to one being provided in the museum album and in on some of the posters. Some of the items in the museum have a Wechat QR code that visitors can scan with their Wechat application to discover more about the exhibition. It is possible that the museum staff can monitor how many times the QR code is scanned, but the data are not available. Furthermore, few, if any, visitors seem interested in using this application.

Since no data was provided by the SHM, this research had to be conducted through my observations alone.

**Visitor tracking** took place by the entrance on the ground floor and in the Modern Shanghai Gallery on the third floor of the museum.<sup>2</sup> The tracked individuals (or, in some cases, couples or groups of three people) were chosen randomly. Generally, one person was chosen out of every three coming through the entrance to the museum or the entrance to the Modern Shanghai Gallery.

Given the limited time and personnel involved in the research (only one person), a relatively small sample of visitors could be tracked. A total of 35 visitors were tracked in the Entrance Hall, where they can watch an introductory video on the exhibition, view the HSBC lions and experiment with a multimedia wall presenting the story of the city. The other 35 visitors, which were all of Chinese origin and of various ages and gender, were tracked over the whole of the third floor.

A number of variables were analysed for each visitor or group of visitors:

- Total time spent in the area.
- Proportion of visitors stopping in front of a specific item.
- Time spent in front of a specific item; measurement of holding power of various display components.
- Social interaction with other visitors (if any).

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of the exhibition see Pozzi 2019a and Pozzi 2019b.

- Use of interactive media.
- Specific behaviours: taking pictures, reading captions, comments, etc.

**Semi-structured interviews** were conducted with eleven visitors at the end of their visits. Once again, the interviewees were chosen from among those who stopped to read or sign the visitors' book. Instead of asking questions on colonialism, I decided to enquire more generally about why they had decided to visit the museum and about their favourite items or section in the exhibition. Only at the end of the chat were visitors asked for their views on the city's colonial history. The decision to conduct semi-structured interviews instead of using more focused questions was dictated by two observations:

- When asked directly about colonialism or about how the museum managed colonial heritage, visitors tended to give standardized answers, as if they wanted to please the interviewer. For instance, they will express negative views towards colonialism, for them reassuring me that they do not hold grudges against foreigners (like me, the interviewer).
- Conversely, when asked about their favourite section/item, they were more eager to answer the questions, and their reaction was more personal and individual.

Some visitors spontaneously approached me with their views, sometimes even to criticize the message of the exhibition. These interactions with the public have also been taken into consideration in this research.

Finally, the **visitors' book** and the **wall of comments** proved to be an interesting source of information about the museum's audience. Hundreds of messages were left in the visitors' book or written on post-it notes that were then stuck to a large whiteboard (Fig. 1). While most of the messages were thank-you notes or messages about how beautiful Shanghai is, some notes had strong political overtones, while others were critical of the exhibition or the social situation in the city. Furthermore, while this research mostly focused on Chinese visitors, certain comments left by foreign tourists helped to shed light on how people of different cultural backgrounds had perceived and understood the exhibition. Generally, they often selected information more suitable to their own cultural background or previous knowledge of the city.

The results collected through these practices are analysed in the section below to show how visitors experienced the exhibition and re-negotiated its content according to their own interests. Visitors' understanding of Shanghai's colonial history is the central focus of this paper, but their "cultural performance" and participation (including criticism) are also discussed. Given the short time available, the pool of data that was collected is not large enough for quantitative research, but it can provide interesting results for a qualitative study (Barnham 2015).



Figure 1: The Message Wall at the end of the SHM/SRM permanent exhibition. Visitors are invited to leave their comments on the wall or in the visitors' book left on the table in the picture. One or two volunteers look after the area. Picture by the author, May 2019.

## Visitors to the Shanghai History Museum: Analysis of the empirical data.

### How visitors experience the exhibition

Museum curators wish that visitors attentively observe all the items in the museum and follow the narratives proposed by an exhibition. The reality, however, is often different. Visitors often spend a short time in an exhibition, during which they do not systematically read captions and focus only on the objects, multimedia exhibits and sections that attract their interest. The guests of the SHM/SRM proved to be no exception.

This section, based mostly on visitor tracking, examines visitor behaviours in the Modern Shanghai Gallery, providing data on the “colonial” items that attracted their attention the most.

Part of the tracking was conducted in the Entrance Hall, a large space where visitors can watch an introductory video to the history of Shanghai, admire the bronze statues of the HSBC lions and experiment with the multimedia wall that provides data and historical maps of the city (Fig. 2 and 3).<sup>3</sup> Many of the visitors who enter the museum are clients of one of the tourist bus companies (such as Hop-on Hop-off Shanghai buses) that have a special bus stop for their

<sup>3</sup> To know more about the HSBC lions, see Pozzi 2019a and Pozzi 2019b.



passengers called People's Park, which is directly in front of the SHM/SRM.<sup>4</sup> Whenever a bus pulls in to this stop, the Entrance Hall of the museum suddenly fills with tourists. The age of tourists varies from 20 to 70. Younger people tended to come alone or in couples, while older people often came in small groups or with family members.

Visitors use this entrance space in different ways, and from the very beginning, they demonstrate a different degree of interest in the exhibition. Out of the 30 visitors observed in the hall, only two watched the video about the history of the city (around five minutes) from the beginning until the end. The rest showed a much more limited level of interest, either ignoring it or only watching from a few seconds up to a minute. Conversely, all the visitors stopped in front of at least one of the two bronze lions, one of the highlights of the exhibition. The stopping time varied from a minimum of ten seconds to a maximum of two minutes. People choosing to invest in the museum audio guide (available at the entrance) spent more time (from at least one minute up to two) in front of the lions listening to the short explanation of their history.<sup>5</sup> The number of visitors choosing to rent the audio guide was minimal. There are at least two different factors that might have stopped people from renting it: firstly, the high deposit fee (100 RMB, or around 10 euro), which many might not have been able to cover from the money in their pockets; and secondly, their low interest in become acquainted in detail with the exhibition content.

The HSBC lions are the Entrance Hall's main attraction. Not only did all the visitors stop to view them, but at least ten took pictures or a selfie with one of the lions and read the captions about the history of the statues. Conversely, the multimedia wall on the left of the entrance (Fig. 3) failed to attract all the visitors, and those it did attract tended to look at it for a few seconds before proceeding to the exhibits on the first floor.

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<sup>4</sup> There are several bus companies providing sightseeing tours of Shanghai. Shanghai City Sightseeing Bus offers three different tours, the 'Red Line' stops in front of the SHM/SRM. Shanghai Bus Tour and Hop-on, Hop-off Shanghai also have a stop in front of the museum. For more info see: <https://www.travelchinaguide.com/cityguides/shanghai/transportation/sightseeing-bus.htm>

<sup>5</sup> For a description of the content of the audio guide see Pozzi 2019b.



**Figures 2 and 3: Visitors at the Entrance Hall. Visitors take selfies with the HSBC lions, watch the introductory video about the history of the city and experiment with the multimedia wall. Pictures by the author (2018-2019).**

Tracking visitors walking through the third floor of the museum also provided unexpected information about visitors' aims, behaviours and various approaches to the items they viewed. The Modern Shanghai Gallery (third floor) starts with the defeat of the Qing army during the First Opium

War (1839-1942), describes the administrative divisions during the foreign concession period, and analyses the economic and infrastructural revitalization of the modern city. The second section, that occupies a long corridor, describes the city's revolutionary history (the 1911 Revolution, the May Fourth Movement, the emergence of the Chinese Communist Party and the creation of the Nationalist Government).

The first section, which is devoted to the early colonial history of the city, has a higher attraction rate than the second section, which covers revolutionary Shanghai. Visitors spend twice as much time in the first half than they do in the second half, which they often walk straight through, only stopping to view some of the most prestigious items, such as the handwritten scroll that proclaims Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) Provisional President of the Republic of China (1911).

Visitors spent an average of 20 minutes on the third floor. Some of them spent up to forty minutes examining objects and engaging with the multimedia installations, while others spent a maximum of ten minutes taking pictures of some items, but without reading any of the labels or introductory notes providing them with further information. The few visitors who rented an audio guide (two out of the thirty visitors that were tracked) tended to spend more time in front of the objects (around two minutes per item described in the audio guide) and more time in the gallery (around forty minutes).

While each visitor demonstrated a different level of interest in the exhibition and focused on diverse items, there were some objects and multimedia that consistently attracted the visitors' attention. The behaviour of visitors in front of the items also revealed details about their level of engagement and the reasons why they felt they needed to spend more time in front of some items and less in front of others.

In the first room, which is dedicated to the Opium War, visitors consistently stopped in front of the Qing soldier's armour and in front of the cannon used to protect Wusong. The stopping time in front of these items was from between ten seconds to almost two minutes when the visitor in question decided to read the captions.



Figure 4: Armour of a Qing soldier. The caption says: “Despite the exquisite equipment of the Qing army, they failed to resist the attack of the invaders”. Visitors choose, however, to examine the features of the armour in detail. Picture by Laura Pozzi, June 2018.

The digital map showing how the city was transformed by the expansion of the foreign concessions in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Fig. 4 in Pozzi 2019a, 16) is another item that attracts visitors. The digital map presentation lasts around five minutes, and at least six visitors watched it from the beginning until the end. Many others paid less attention to the information provided by the video, preferring to spend time looking for the names of specific roads. The map in the video used the colonial-era names of the streets on display. Since then, most of the streets have been renamed. The Nationalist Government selected most of the contemporary names for the city streets between 1945 and 1949, while at the end of the Civil War, the Communist authorities kept the system established by the Nationalists, with the exception of some main roads which were renamed to celebrate the history of the Communist Party, such as Yan'an Road and Huai Hai Road (French 2010). The old names of roads, which were given in French in the French concession and in English in the International Concession, are not used anymore in the city, with the exception of the names of shops or new neighbourhoods. The removal of these signs of colonial domination took place in all of China's open ports; the only city which still keeps most of the original street names is the ex-British colony of Hong Kong.

The original maps exhibited in the SHM/SRM or those shown in the multimedia installations employ the original colonial names. One of the visitors tracked on 2 June 2019 spent quite a long time watching the digital map, trying to understand where the borders of the concession would be located in contemporary Shanghai and attempt trying to match the old colonial names to the contemporary names. Generally, visitors were interested in the digital maps of the concessions, which they were using to try to find the location of their homes.

Curators had also created a multimedia installation titled “Inquiry system for old and new street names in Shanghai” (*Shanghai xinlao luming duizhao*, 上海新老路名对照) to provide visitors with a fast method for checking the colonial names of the city streets (Figure 5). Visitors tried to find the original names of streets they knew by viewing the list of the original Chinese and English/French names of the streets to find their contemporary denomination.



Figure 5: Visitors looking for original street name on the “Inquiry system for old and new street names in Shanghai”.  
Picture by Laura Pozzi, June 2019.

Visitors also showed an interest in the items related to the introduction of the foreign oil companies Asian Petroleum Company, Texaco, and Standard Vacuum Oil to the Chinese market. In the SHM/SRM, the bronze plaque of the Asiatic Shell Oil Company (Figure 6) and a colourful Texaco commercial are employed to describe the monopolistic practices of these corporations on Chinese territory. According to the description provided by the museum, as kerosene lamps became widespread, the Chinese became increasingly dependent on these foreign oil companies for their daily oil supplies. Despite the critical way in which these companies are presented, visitors are attracted by the familiar symbols of these brands, such as the shell of the Asiatic Shell Oil Company



or the Texaco star. A family tracked on June 2 spent a few minutes showing how surprised they were to see the names of these famous foreign companies in the museum. On the same day, a couple in their twenties demonstrated the same degree of surprise on discovering that “American brands” had been introduced so early to China. At least three of the tracked visitors stopped to take pictures of the Texaco advertisements and the bronze plaque of the Asiatic Shell Oil Company.



Figure 6: The copper plate that was hung at the entrance to the offices of the Asian Petroleum Company in 1917. Photo by Laura Pozzi, June 2018.

The display devoted to the development of infrastructures and transportation in the city also attracted visitors' attention. In this case, each of the visitors seemed to be attracted to a different object: some spent time analysing old photographs of Nanjing Road, while others focused on objects used daily by tram controllers in the 1920s and others carefully examined old train tickets and a woodcut titled “Booming scene in Sima Road” (Pozzi 2019b).

Another display that proved to be very popular among the youngest visitors (in their twenties or late thirties) was the one describing the foundation of schools and universities in Shanghai. The exhibition uses documents, biographies of famous rectors, school yearbooks, and old photographs of the most famous modern institutions in the city to describe the development of Shanghai's school system. Visitors can also listen to a variety of school anthems and look at school albums in one multimedia installation. At least nine of the youngest visitors stopped to watch the display about education and to read the captions it contained. Some of them also spent several minutes listening to the school anthems, trying to identify some of them. A couple in their

thirties devoted some time to find particular items and reading aloud to each other the history of their own university.

By contrast, the final gallery, which, as mentioned, is dedicated to the revolutionary history of the city, was more popular with middle-aged visitors (from their fifties upwards). With some exceptions, most of the younger visitors walked through the corridor stopping for a few seconds here and there. Conversely, older visitors devoted time to reading the biographies of famous personalities and commenting on the oil paintings representing some of the key events in the CCP's foundation history. An older man tracked at the end of May 2019 exhibited a tendency to read aloud the names of the famous revolutionaries he could recognize in pictures and oil paintings, completely ignoring those he was unable to identify at a first glance. He never attempted to discover the names of the people he did not recognize even though full biographies were provided under each portrait.

To conclude, while the tracked visitors displayed very different behaviours when making their way through the gallery, it was possible to find some patterns and to single-out some of the items that attracted the greatest degree of attention. The most interesting observation is that the visitors often seemed to overlook the narrative and the manner in which the curators had interpreted and framed the objects. Instead, they tended to look for elements of themselves and their lives in the story of the city. This observation is confirmed by some of the answers given by interviewees and by the comments left in the visitors' book. For instance, during one brief interview, an art student from Fudan University admitted that he was looking for beautiful calligraphy and painting in the exhibition and did not care much for any other items (SHM\_V6\_30/05/2019), while another visitor left a comment in the museum book (13 April 2019) thanking the Shanghai History Museum for allowing him to better understand the life of his great-grandfather, who fought during the Xinhai Revolution (1911).

The short interviews that were conducted and visitors' comments helped to contextualize even further the choices the visitors had made and how they had understood the exhibition.

### **How visitors understand and experience colonialism in the exhibition**

*I wanted to communicate that colonialism was negative for the city, but at the same time I tried to show that the economic development of the city owes a lot to European business. So, there is a section in the exhibition on European companies and their influence on the history of the city. The exhibition also shows that roads, transportation, and infrastructures were developed in the settlements and this was a positive contribution to the city that must be acknowledged. Colonialism is related to*

*Western invasion, but objectively, it also drives the development of Shanghai city, from many perspectives. (SH\_S2\_07/12/2018, translated from Chinese by the author)*

The SHM/SRM portrays the imperialist expansion of foreign powers into China as aggressive, and colonialism – or semi-colonialism – as an oppressive system that limited the Chinese people's freedom. Nevertheless, according to the museum's main curator (quoted above), while colonialism was painful, it positively influenced the development of the city. The permanent exhibition does indeed reflect this understanding of Shanghai's colonial experience (Pozzi 2019b), but does it communicate this message effectively? Do visitors understand the message proposed by the museum?

When directly asked about colonialism in the city, the visitors interviewed at the end of their visit tend to repeat the message of the exhibition. A woman in her twenties from Beijing who always visits history museums when she travels told me that colonialism in China can be analysed and understood from several perspectives and it did not have only negative effects. Nevertheless, she also added that since China was colonized while other countries (such as Japan) were not, she thought that it was essential to introduce the subject of colonialism to the public (SHM\_V3\_30/05/2019). A businessman in his forties from the city of Quanzhou (SHM\_V5\_30/05/2019) said that colonialism was terrible because Chinese people did not have any freedom and were bullied (*qifu*, 欺负) and oppressed. By contrast, a student from Fudan University (SHM\_V6\_30/05/2019) said that he enjoyed the exhibition but did not think about colonialism much while visiting it.

When asked more generally if they enjoyed the exhibition and what section they appreciated the most, none of the people interviewed mentioned colonialism, even if some of the objects they mentioned as being their favourites were part of the colonial section of the Modern Shanghai gallery.

A couple in their fifties, university graduates living in Shanghai (SHM\_V2\_30/05/2019), told me that they had come to the museum to visit the temporary exhibition on the Seventieth Anniversary of the Revolution that had just opened that week, but that they had decided to visit the permanent exhibition as well. They said that they were extremely satisfied with the museum and were particularly fond of the history of the industrial development of Shanghai in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Colonialism was not mentioned.

A twenty-year-old man from Liaoning (SHM\_V4\_30/05/2019) who was visiting Shanghai as a tourist, told me that while the HSBC lions at the entrance were his favourite items in the collection. Nevertheless, he thought that the best section in the museum was the one devoted to Ancient



Shanghai, especially the areas dedicated to the Ming and Qing dynasty, about which he would have liked to know more.

He was not the only one to express his interest in the pre-modern history of the city. On the contrary, most of the interviewed visitors found the imperial history of Shanghai more interesting than the rest of the exhibition. The businessman from Quanzhou said he had spent most of his visit observing the Ming and Qing items (SHM\_V5\_30/05/2019) and the student from Fudan University mentioned above claimed that his favourite piece was the Qing soldier's armour at the beginning of the Modern Shanghai gallery (Figure 4) because he had never seen such armour before and had had no idea what it looked like (SHM\_V6\_30/05/2019). When I asked him if he had noticed that the armour was described in the exhibition as a reminder of the failure of the Qing army to defeat the foreign aggressors, he told me that he did not care about that. He was just excited to finally see some historical armour. Being an art student, he spent most of his time in the museum examining the calligraphy, oil paintings and cartoons, while the historical narrative was not so interesting for him.

The art student was not the only visitor to pay particular attention to the aesthetic beauty of some of the items on display. The tourist from Liaoning who loved the HSBC lions prized their beauty rather than their history and admitted to having snapped several pictures of them (SHM\_V4\_30/05/2019).

These interviews highlight that once visitors, have been asked about colonialism directly, they give answers in line with the historical narrative proposed by the exhibition. However, they do not visit the museum to discover more about colonialism. On the contrary, they seem to be much more attracted by pre-modern history or by the beauty of single objects, which they often appreciate without taking the information provided by curators into consideration.

### **What visitors say when they express themselves freely: The Visitors' Books**

The visitor tracking and interviews that were conducted were meant to provide a clear understanding of how visitors perceived the exhibition and, in particular, the colonial history of the city as presented by the SHM/SRM. It appears that visitors come to the museum for a variety of reasons and tend to experience the exhibition based on their own personal history and aesthetic preferences rather than following the narrative proposed by the curators. Furthermore, visitors seem to prefer the Ancient Shanghai Gallery to the Modern Shanghai Gallery, even though the latter covers a larger space in the museum.

What happened when visitors express their opinions freely? The few hundred comments left at the end of the exhibition reveal a complex variety of reactions to the content of the museum and its presentation of the history of Shanghai. Most visitors' notes express feelings of appreciation

for the SHM/SRM and the city in general. The sentence “I Love Shanghai” in a variety of languages is the most common comment written on the post-it notes. However, such light-hearted words are interspersed with plenty of more complex messages that shed light on visitors’ understanding of the city’s (or country’s) past, present and future. While Shanghai’s colonial history is not the main focus of the comments, many of them still express a boisterous nationalism that is often based on China’s victory over foreign invaders and pride in its growing financial and political influence in Asia and across the world. These messages indirectly shed light on visitors’ understanding of colonialism and on the dissemination of decolonial theories among the population.

It is worthwhile analysing the content of some of these messages. One of the most widespread tendencies is to link the city’s past to its present and future, as is clear from a message left by a visitor on 3 March 2019:

*After my visit to the Shanghai history museum, I feel like I know more about Shanghai’s past, present, and future. The Chinese nation is getting stronger, and we will grow better and better (Translated from Chinese by the author).*

The whiteboard of the museum is covered in different variations of this comment. Several, if not the majority, of the messages mention the city’s “past, present, and future” (*zuotian, jintian, mingtian* 昨天, 今天, 明天), the Chinese nation (*guojia minzu*, 国家民族), and the sentence “better and better” (*yue lai yue hao*, 越来越好). The popularity of this kind of comment is not surprising, since the exhibition, like most of the historical exhibitions at the PRC, follows an evolutionary model that proposes a developmental vision of history from feudalism towards an increasingly brighter future (Varutti 2014, Pozzi 2019).

The SHM/SRM’s exhibition concludes in 1949, when the CCP took the control of city, but excludes the Maoist years from its narrative. The last thing visitors see before leaving the exhibition and entering the area where they can leave comments is a video presenting Shanghai’s most recent technological, financial and cultural achievements. By eliminating the most problematic events in the city’s history under the CCP, the exhibition manages to present an organic description of a never-ending age of freedom, success and prosperity. This rhetoric is also promoted by the national propaganda machine, which constantly uses the notion of supporting the Chinese nation and the locutions “better and better” and “greater and greater”. Visitors’ comments reflect the evolutionary vision of history supported by the SHM, employing the same vocabulary used by the state propaganda promoted on TV and posters, and in education programmes and public space, etc.

While messages such as the one presented above show how proud visitors are of the city's development and how certain they are that an even better future lies ahead, some other comments contain nationalist words that are even more forceful. A visitor from Liaoning province spelled out his pride for the city's fight against foreign aggressors:

*From the past until today, [our] cultural history has undergone several changes. Shanghai's cultural history and objects are very sophisticated, yet they were influenced by foreign culture. By passionately fighting for the people, the Shanghainese demonstrated that they were not afraid of foreign aggressors. Instead, they fought against them, making us proud. (Signed, not dated. Translated from Chinese by the author).*

Some messages not only acknowledge the Chinese nation's past successes, but express a wish for the PRC's geopolitical expansion:

*I wish two hundred years to Xi Jinping. He knows how to direct the nation. I hope that very soon we will be reunited with Taiwan. Under the direction of the Communist party, the economy will exceed expectations. China has surpassed the imperialism of the United States. The return of Mongolia to China is in the hearts of all the Chinese. There are no friends forever, and no enemies. The power of China has surpassed that of several other nations. The territories stolen by Russian will be returned thanks to the work of our men. Long live Xi Jinping. (Not signed, not dated. Translated from Chinese by the author).*

This comment has little to do with the content of the exhibition and history of Shanghai, but it represents well the perpetuation of what Walter Mignolo calls the "colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo 2011). The visitor expressed his satisfaction with the end of western (and Japanese) colonialism in China, claiming that now is the time for China to take its position as a new world power, starting with the lands that the Chinese state consider their own. Out of the visitors' comments that were examined, this one was certainly the most patriotic and openly confrontational towards other nations, but it was not unique. Other comments supported a similar desire to surpass the United States and become a world power.

Some foreign visitors also support China's victory against its invaders and sympathize with the strengthening of China's position relative to the West's. On 10 March 2018, Esmail from Iran wrote:

*Magnificent and fantastic. The Shanghainese battled against the enemy and got victory for a new life!* (Signed and dated. Original in English).

It is doubly significant that a visitor from Iran showed himself to be a sympathizer with Shanghai's fight for freedom and China's war of liberation because his country of origin, like China, once possessed an empire that suffered from foreign interference. Not uncoincidentally, Iran, as Mignolo claims, is one of the countries able to support "dewesternization" (Mignolo 2011, 48-49). It can therefore be concluded that foreign visitors also tend to look for components they can identify with their lives, knowledge and history at museums located outside their own countries and culture zones. A comment presumably left by a Jewish visitor reads:

*To Shanghai Citizens: thanks for allowing Jewish people to come to the city and save some 20,000 of them* (Signed, dated 25 November 2018. Original in English).

A visitor from Europe expressed his appreciation for the beauty of the Shanghai Race Club, an iconic colonial building:

*A great historical building, conserving the legacy of Shanghai's past* (Signed, not dated. Original in English).

By commenting on the exhibition's details and historical events adjacent to their cultural and historical background, foreign visitors prove to being looking for content that reflects their own experience and knowledge in the exhibition.

While the great majority of the notes left by visitors show their appreciation for the exhibition, love for Shanghai and support for the CCP's encouragement of nationalism and even Chinese expansionism, some visitors used the visitors' book to express criticism. Some of them singled-out some mistakes in the exhibition and asked curators to correct the content of some labels, as in the case of a message left on 18 May 2019:

*In the first hall at the third floor there is a mistake, one of the captions clearly does not match the item, the curators should correct the mistake* (Signed and dated. Translated from Chinese by the author).

This comment simply points out a specific technical mistake in the exhibition, but other visitors sometimes go as far as to doubt the nationalistic and overly positive vision of contemporary Shanghai presented in the final video in the museum's exhibition, as in the case of a comment left on 21 April 2019:

*Shanghai still has a lot of poor people, the price of apartments is way too high, the city resident permit is too expensive, this is not fair! I hope this could change!* (Dated and signed. Translated from Chinese by the author).

This was not the only instance of visitors expressing their disappointment with socio-economic conditions in the city. Rising levels of inequality that are making it impossible for many to enjoy the lavishly celebrated economic prosperity of the city seemed to disturb the more disillusioned visitors.

The harshest criticism came from a Chinese man in his early sixties from Shanghai, who, when interviewed, expressed his disappointment with the museum since he felt it was not representing "the people" (*renmin*, 人民). According to him, the exhibition there barely mentions workers, peasants and all those who worked hard to contribute to the city's success (SHM\_V1\_30/11/2018). This visitor proved to be extremely autonomous in his evaluation of the content on display at the SHM/SRM and resistant to the exhibition's overly positive final message.

## Summary

The data collected in this study do not allow overarching conclusions to be made on the visitors' reception of the SHM/SRM's exhibition, but they still shed light on the ways in which visitors move through the museum and interpret the city heritage in a museum setting. In particular, it appears that even when visitors are faced with the extensive surveillance employed in such states as the PRC, they can be strikingly forthright when expressing their perspectives on exhibition content.

As far as colonialism is concerned, most visitors seem to have accepted the perspective not only propagated by the state through exhibitions such as the one at the SHM/SRM studied in this report, but at schools and by means of monuments. Western colonialism is publicly represented as a humiliating experience for China, but also one that helped the country on the path to modernity. Nevertheless, visitors seem not to care much about the museum's presentation of the city's colonial history. Instead, they are more attracted by the aesthetic features of specific items (the HSBC lions, company commercials, calligraphy, etc.) than to the curators' framing of these objects. Furthermore, visitors are more attentive when attempting to link some of the items exhibited in

the museum to their own life experiences, previous knowledge or personal connection to the city of Shanghai than they are towards the history of colonialism.

While visitors' show appreciation for some of the items produced in the colonial era, it transpires from analysis of the comment sections that nationalistic feelings are often provoked by resentment against historical foreign aggression. These comments often reflect the vocabulary and rhetoric of the CCP's patriotic propaganda, which is becoming increasingly nationalist under Xi Jinping's government. These comments show that criticism against foreign imperialism and colonialism are not preventing visitors from thinking that China itself should expand. On the contrary, some of the most engaged commenters wished for China to replace the West (and Japan) as a world's dominant power.

While decolonial ideas seem very far from entering the conscience of the majority, some visitors expressed criticism towards the excessively optimistic description of the city's economic development and the absence of the lower classes in the exhibition narrative. While the exclusion of ethnic or religious minorities from the exhibition was not acknowledged, some visitors accused the museum of excluding the weaker members of society from the narrative.

In conclusion, conducting visitor observations at the SHM/SRM proved to be a useful tool that enabled partial understanding to be reached of how visitors experience the museum. This research shows that visitors' knowledge, background and preferences shape their understanding of the exhibition, while its message sometimes is discarded. While it is difficult to speak of visitors' cultural performance as a form of resistance to the PRC's homologated presentation of history, this information highlights the level of autonomy displayed by some visitors and potential for criticizing the system producing and controlling public history in China. Visitor studies does, therefore, prove to be a useful method for analysing the efficacy of the CCP's control over history and understanding how museum audiences re-negotiate the meaning and content of an exhibition by seeking to have their views reinforced or only selecting the section that matches their own interests, while also expressing their disappointment when they do not find themselves represented or find holes in the narrative.

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## Interviews

Interview with one of the main curators of the exhibition in Shanghai, conducted on 7 December 2018: SH\_S2\_07/12/2018

Interview with visitor Chinese man in his early sixties from Shanghai, conducted on 30 November 2018: SHM\_V1\_30/11/2018

Interview with couple in their fifties, university graduates from Shanghai, conducted on 30 May 2019: SHM\_V2\_30/05/2019

Interview with Chinese woman in her 20s, tourist from Beijing, conducted on 30 May 2019: SHM\_V3\_30/05/2019

Interview with Chinese man in his 20s, tourist from Liaoning Province, conducted on 30 May 2019: SHM\_V4\_30/05/2019

Interview with Chinese man in his forties, businessman from Quanzhou, conducted on 30 May 2019: SHM\_V5\_30/05/2019

Interview with Chinese man in his twenties, student of Fudan University, conducted on 30 May 2019: SHM\_V6\_30/05/2019