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# Museum diplomacy as a global franchise: the case of the West Bund Museum x Centre Pompidou project

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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## Introduction

- 1 The presence of Mr. Emmanuel Macron at the inauguration of the West Bund Museum x Centre Pompidou project (2019-2024) (*Xi'an meishuguan yu pengpidu zhongxin wunian zhanchen hezuo xiangmu* 西岸美术馆与蓬皮杜中心五年展陈合作项目) on November 5, 2019, along with the documentation of the project in the 'Joint Declaration between the People's Republic of China and the French Republic 2018' (*Zhongfa lianhe shengming* 《中法联合声明》),<sup>1</sup> brought French museum diplomacy to the forefront of heated debates. These discussions questioned the transformative role of globalised museums in advancing political and commercial interests abroad. In contrast to the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which is a clear expression of French soft power and national branding (Guéraiche 2018), the West Bund Museum x Centre Pompidou project leans towards more flexible cultural relations through trust-building abroad (Melissen 2005, 21).
- 2 In 2005, the Centre Pompidou launched its first major exhibition in mainland China, *Nouvelles Vagues: Un Point de Vue sur l'Art Contemporain Français*, which travelled to

Shanghai, Guangdong, and Beijing. Over the next decade, the Centre Pompidou held three more travelling exhibitions in Beijing and Shanghai, further cementing its credibility among Chinese audiences. The construction of credibility, as a government approach to backyard diplomacy, 'is based on building strong connections and trustful relationships' (Grincheva 2020, 17), aimed at enhancing communication and effectively delivering messages to the public (La Porte 2012). This instrumental tool is also acknowledged as one of the factors in the West Bund Museum project. Confirmed by Paul Frèches, the chief representative of the Centre Pompidou in Shanghai, 'Our partnership with Shanghai is not just a recent development, but a long-standing collaboration that dates back to the 1990s'.<sup>2</sup>

- 3 Museum franchising has proven to be a more economically effective model of strategic development and management of institutional resources (Fabelová 2010; Vivant 2011), which 'takes advantage abroad of these still insufficiently valued assets, namely its brand, its collections and its expertise' (Centre Pompidou 2013, 4). The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the lockdowns during the Covid pandemic have significantly impacted public funding for museums in many parts of the world (Scott 2025). In contrast, funding for museums in East Asia has remained relatively stable in recent decades (International Research Alliance on Public Funding for Museums 2025, 57). For instance, in China, museum expenditures grew at a faster rate than the cultural budget (16% vs. 13%) between 1996 and 2015, with public cultural expenditure itself growing at a rate that exceeded GDP growth during the same period (Zhang and Courty 2021, 36–37).
- 4 As the global south and east accelerated their urbanising process, the geographical move of global museum growth demonstrates a clear trace in metropolitan cities in the above regions. Meanwhile, museums in the global north and west compete to establish branches and partnerships with these emerging museums to create alternative funding sources (Jimenez and Lord 2019; International Research Alliance on Public Funding for Museums 2025, 65), adapting museum diplomacy as a global franchise.
- 5 Over the past two decades, the proportion of public funding received by the Pompidou Centre from the French government has decreased, from 70% in 2005 (approximately €70 million) to 50% in 2022 (€92.3 million). In 2017, the museum recorded a €2.1 million deficit, marking the first time in its history that its revenues and expenditures were not in balance (Centre Pompidou 2005; 2017; 2022). Furthermore, the refurbishment plan for 2025–2030, with a renovation expenditure of €262 million (Greenberger 2023) makes Pompidou's international strategy urgent for pitching new partners, private philanthropic support and reaching wider audiences across borders.
- 6 In the case of the West Bund Museum x Centre Pompidou, the West Bund Group is responsible for all the funding resources. The Group covers the costs of the physical museum space while paying the Centre Pompidou a lump sum of about €2.75 million each year (excluding transport and insurance), and on top of an annual €1.4 million for the use of 'the Centre Pompidou' brand (Brown 2019). It's worth noting that, in the 2000s, the Centre Pompidou already tried to open a branch in Shanghai with a failure. In the plan, this museum branch would open to the public before 2010 (the year Shanghai held the World Expo (*Shibohui* 世博会)). The museum would be a Chinese entity but 'bearing the name of the Centre Pompidou'— which the Centre Pompidou would 'keep control of the programming' (Pedroletti and Guerrin 2007, n.p.). However, 'the project was later shelved due to the absence of a legal basis' (Jiao 2014, 115).<sup>3</sup> After

a decade, this 'legal basis' appears to have been established through a cooperative framework – namely, an 'exhibition cooperation' (*zhanchen hezuo* 展陈合作) between the West Bund Museum and the Centre Pompidou. Notably, this partnership is importantly under the institutional structure of the West Bund Museum. Hereto, it's cruel to recognise that Chinese authorities generally maintain a cautious stance towards the branding activities of global museums.

- 7 Also released in 2005, the Centre Pompidou lost an international bid to establish a modern and contemporary art museum in Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District. Under the proposed plane, the Centre Pompidou would have contributed resources such as curatorial expertise, architecture, design concepts, etc. (Yue 2019, 34). The project ultimately evolved into M+ (2021), now recognised as Hong Kong's global museum of visual culture with focus on Asian culture. Rather than relying on loans from globalised museums, M+ secured a landmark donation in 2012 from Uli Sigg – 1,463 works by 350 Chinese artists, valued at HK\$1.3 billion in 2012 (Tsui 2021) – which now form the core of its modern and contemporary Chinese art collection. This case also reflects the broader implications of the so-called 'Bilbao effect', as such starchitecture-driven projects confront both radical museological changes and increasing challenges in engaging local communities.
- 8 The logic driven behind the West Bund district, and the West Kowloon cultural district is the accelerated re-urbanisation in China's metropolitan riverbank areas, in where the cities' creativity and vibrance are supposed to be artistically showcased. Contemporary museums in these artistic districts are usually first designated to lur artists, tourists and cultural seekers, shaping public imagination about art for leisure and entertainment (Lorente 2019); then become instruments as content, producing for solace, education, and financial gain upon entering a knowledge-economy society (Powell and Kaisa 2004). In cultural districts, contemporary art plays a key role of promoting an idea that art is cool, hip and a lifestyle choice. Among these contemporary art museums there is a large number of privately-owned/entrepreneurial art museum<sup>4</sup> and the emerging state-owned enterprise art museums with real estate background (Lyu 2024). Private collectors are encouraged by the government to build their own museums/spaces due to the watchful attitude of Chinese government towards the potentially controversial nature of contemporary art, also a practical concern, the limit of public budgets (Adam 2021, 61). However, many of China's new contemporary art museums are 'white elephant' with few or without collections, poor management and unsatisfactory conservation conditions. Such conditions question the sustainable development of these museums (De Nigris 2018). This is also an important reason for the West Bund Museum, this state-owned enterprise art museums with no former experience on art museum field, to seek a partnership with a global museum for its institutional credibility and professionalism.
- 9 In such contexts, this article examines the museum franchise in accordance with the emerging state-owned enterprise art museum model in China by assessing the West Bund Museum x Centre Pompidou project in Shanghai. The study ultimately aims to explore the localisation process of the Centre Pompidou's franchising activities and the potential interventions from the West Bund Museum and local community, which new globalised museums are also facing on a museological, political, economic and social level.

## Methods

- 10 This study methodology is based on qualitative methods (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). During the research process three key questions are addressed in response to the main topic: what is the franchise model of the West Bund Museum x Centre Pompidou? What is the exact partnership between the two sides? Are there any potential interventions through these franchising activities?
- 11 To achieve the research objectives, this study employs a qualitative approach incorporating case studies, ethnographic fieldwork and documentary analysis (in English, Chinese, French, and Spanish). These methods allow for flexible data collection that is sensitive to social context, which emphasise complexity and contextual nuances to enhance understanding and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin and Strauss 2008).
- 12 During the first phase of the fieldwork in China (February 2021 – May 2021), I conducted semi-structured interviews with staff at the West Bund Museum and engaged in participant observation within the museum. These approaches involved a ‘close-up’ examination of the museum, focusing on its everyday practices, particularly its external relations with visitors, and its organisational dynamics.
- 13 The second phase of research started in March 2022-June 2022 in Paris. The range of interviewees has expanded, from the staff of the two institutions to Chinese artists collaborating with the West Bund Museum, independent curators and researchers. This was an important process to build a wider picture of the partnership between the two institutions, to understand the relationship between different levels of factors and actors and ultimately achieve the research objectives with strong evidence. However, due to the confidential issues and the characteristic of statistic data publication of state-owned enterprises in China, some quantitative data were unable to collect in this research, which may leave a question of the transparency of the West Bund Museum’s financing condition and its sustainable future.

## West Bund ‘Museum Mile’ and the real estate connection

- 14 The year 2010 marked a significant milestone for Shanghai’s cultural landscape, characterised by a series of developments and transformations (Kuai 2012; Winter 2013). In addition to the opening of the Expo, it was a period of considerable economic growth, building upon the momentum of the 1990s. The decade leading up to the Expo saw numerous large-scale government-business partnerships for urban demolition, which in turn facilitated the emergence of several cultural institutions linked to real estate projects. Simultaneously, large state-owned enterprise art museum projects began construction along Shanghai’s West Bund area (Duan 2019; Lyu 2024).
- 15 The West Bund riverside (*Xuhui Bingjiang* 徐汇滨江), situated along the Huangpu River in Shanghai’s Xuhui District, is undergoing a regeneration plan encompassing an 11.4-kilometre coastline, with a total regional planning volume of 13.4 million square meters. (West Bund n.d.). This initiative forms part of the broader Huangpu River waterfront megaproject, set for completion by 2035 (Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau 2018) (fig. 1).

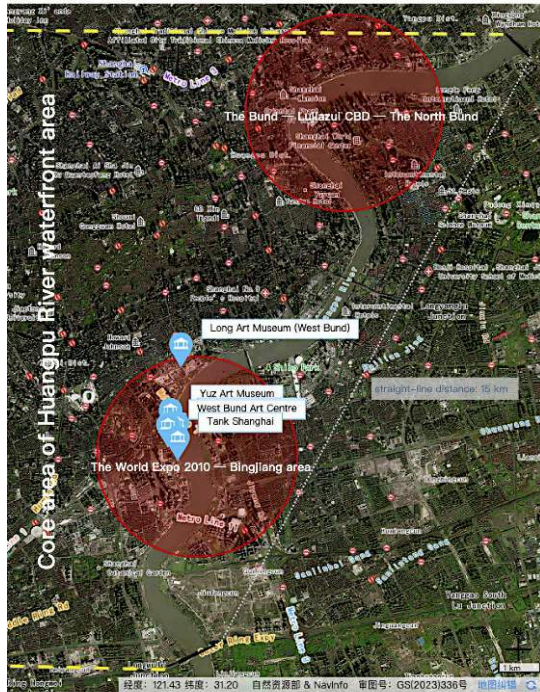


Fig. 1 – Map of the core area of Huangpu river waterfront megaproject  
Image by the author; satellite photo as underlay by Tianditu (2023)

- 16 It was not until the end of 2011 that a clear cultural regeneration plan was approved at the 9<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of Xuhui District. This plan aimed to transform the West Bund waterfront into the cultural heart of Shanghai, positioning it as a world-class, globally influential waterfront area and establishing a cluster of new cultural landmarks for the city (Shanghai Municipal Planning and Natural Resources Bureau and Shanghai Xuhui District People’s Government 2022). Meanwhile, the design of the West Bund waterfront drew on models from the Port of Hamburg in Germany and Canary Wharf in London, giving rise to the concept of ‘Corniche Shanghai’<sup>5</sup> (ibid.).

## ‘Museum Mile’ project

- 17 During the 1960s and 1970s, the West Bund riverside served as a major transportation hub and industrial centre in Shanghai (Wu 2012). The regeneration plan for the West Bund’s ‘Museum Mile’ (*Xi’an meishuguan dadao* 西岸美术馆大道) is broadly a renewal initiative, repurposing derelict industrial buildings into spaces for artistic and cultural use, covering a total land area of 9.4 square km with an approximate initial investment of \$3 billion (Brown 2019). The development of the project unfolded in five distinct phases (fig. 2). One of the key features of this project (fig. 3), alongside the erection of over 20 cultural entities, is the recovery of ‘industrial archaeology’. It’s intriguing that all major ‘industrial heritages’ are lately refurbished and reopened as private-owned public art museums with glammers of their founders’ collecting legacies. Following the inaugurations of the Long Museum (*Long meishuguan* 龙美术馆) and Yuz Museum (*Yu Deyao meishuguan* 余德耀美术馆) in 2014, the annual number of visitors skyrocketed to one million, a sharp increase from the previous range of 10,000 –20,000 per year (Jia,

Xu, and Zheng 2020). Surely, it is not a novel trend to house modern and contemporary art in austere buildings made of brick, metal, and glass. The old artistic seaside colony of St. Ives in Cornwall, the Albert Dock complex in Liverpool, the Vieille Charité in Marseilles during the 1990s, among many other examples globally, have ‘heritaged’ the modern use of museums as ‘flagships’ in the urban boosting of port cities since the post-Fordist age (Lorente 1996).

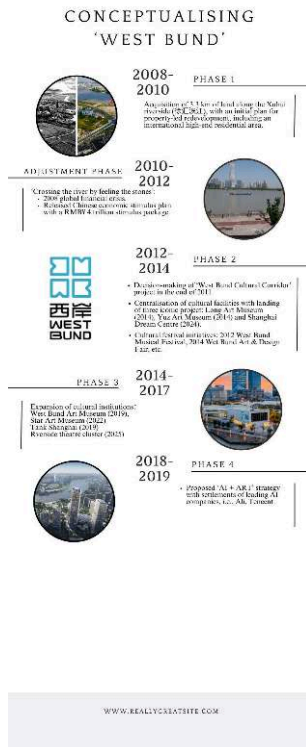


Fig. 2 – Timeline of conceptualising 'West Bund' brand

Image by the author; source: *Cultural District as a Living Space and Industry Magnet* (Jia, Xu, and Zheng 2020, 104–13)



Fig. 3 – Map of key cultural entities in the West Bund 'Museum Mile'  
Image by the author; street photo as underlay by Life Westbund (2024)

- 18 Museums and contemporary art here promote a market logic associated with the cultural industries (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) and work to make all neighbouring mixed-up complex economically and culturally profitable. It's a success but also a failure of real estate pressure in a certain level. 'The arts are victims of their own success and act as instruments of a gentrification process' (Lorente 1996, 52). It's impressive that, alongside the establishment of over 20 cultural institutions in the 'Museum Mile', the adjacent land is earmarked for the development of the financial and AI industries, with a jungle of office-buildings, commercial stores and hotels of over 3 million square meters (den Hartog 2021, 185).
- 19 The establishment of three core industries – culture and media, technology, and finance – forms the foundation of the development strategy for the West Bund, which embodies on contemporary politics of 'culture-oriented, eco-based, and technology-driven innovation' (ibid.). However, the interaction between the cultural and financial sectors could be challenging due to the lack of intellectual property protection in China. This represents a significant risk for the West Bund's art industry cluster, potentially leaving it as an empty shell without sufficient economic returns from its cultural IP. Such 'culture-led' approach is a strategy chosen by urban developers to implicitly align with the discourse of 'creativity' and 'sustainability', which are widely embraced in the context of re-urbanisation as a form of 'sortie de crise' (Bouquillion 2010, 11). "The museum brands the enterprise in the direction of an 'artistic life'", with an ultimacy of 'work towards the role of public welfare', observed by Zhao Qie, the director of Guangdong Times Museum (Wang 2017, 37).

## The West Bund Group

- 20 The West Bund Group Shanghai (*Shanghai Xi'an jituo* 上海西岸集团) (Shanghai West Bund Development (Group) Co., Ltd.), a state-owned enterprise founded in 2012 and authorised by the Xuhui District People's Government of Shanghai, is fully responsible for the comprehensive development of the Xuhui waterfront area.<sup>6</sup> With a registered capital of 3.2 billion RMB and oversight from the (SASAC *Xuhuiquguoziwei* 徐汇区国资委), the company currently employs about 400 people and manages 42 subsidiaries (West Bund n.d.). Its establishment reflects a broader trend of administrative decentralisation in China, which since the 1990s has granted local authorities' greater autonomy in market-oriented development (Leaf 1995).
- 21 Operating through a governance model known as 'two institutions with one team' (*liangtao banzi, yitao renma* 两套班子, 一套人马) (Qiu 2019, 27), the Group collaborates with the Xuhui Waterfront Area Construction Management Committee (West Bund Committee) to coordinate state oversight and engage the private sector (ibid.). Initially focused on infrastructure, planning, and land acquisition, the Group later embraced public-private partnerships in the cultural sector, particularly through the 'Museum Mile' project. This reflects a national pattern, whereby land development and cultural urban renewal increasingly involve both state and private capital (Shi 2021). The resulting wave of contemporary art museum construction – driven by the real estate boom since the 1990s – has transformed museum-building into a vehicle for urban gentrification and cultural branding (Adam 2021).
- 22 It's a key in China that the non-state-owned public (*minfei* 民非) art museums gain indirect public subsidies through land transfer or land-leasing in cultural-led urban plan helping to alleviate their financial difficulties (Qiu 2019; Ho 2020; Lyu 2024). In the case of Long Museum (West Bund), the founders, Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei, bought the land-use rights, classified as greenbelt, for \$16 million covering a floor area around 400,000 sq. ft. Additionally, they were allowed to purchase the land-use rights in instalments (\$750,000 per year for 20 years), with extra financial support of \$500,000 architectural design fee provided by the West Bund Group (Qiu 2019, 45). In contrast to the Long Museum, the West Bund Group offered a 'temporary land-leasing' arrangement for the Yuz Museum project. The Group fully financed the museum's architectural construction at the outset, and then leased the space to the museum's founder, Chinese-Indonesian entrepreneur and collector Mr. Budi Tek, for an annual rent of \$750,000. After a ten-year contract, the museum closed its door in the West Bund, largely due to financial difficulties, and relocated to Qingpu district, integrating into the emerging Panlong Tiandi (蟠龙天地) art district there.
- 23 Funding, collection and institutional oversight are critical components for the stable operations of *minfei* art museums in China. However, these museums remain unsustainable due to factors such as economic instability, individualistic collecting tastes, informal management, and a lack of awareness regarding the broader public accessibility of the collections (De Nigris 2018). This condition became a key concern that led the West Bund Group to seek international partnership for its own funded state-owned enterprise (*guoqi* 国企) art museum. As claimed by Chen Anda, the executive director of the West Bund Museum, in an interview with *The Art Newspaper China*:

[...] *minyong* (民营) art museums have their own professional fields and perspectives on contemporary art. However, we aim for a publicly-owned (*gongyou* 公有) art museum to serve as a platform. We are a public cultural institution seeking to stimulate the 'publicity' (*gonggongxing* 公共性) of public cultural facilities. (The Art Newspaper China 2019, n.p.)

- 24 Nevertheless, the developmental trajectory of the West Bund Museum suggests that the West Bund Group opted an alternative 'sustainable' way to tackle the problematic issues of collection and institutional management. This sustainability is heavily reliant on the Group's overall property-led development mission and its adaptable partnership with the Centre Pompidou, which can be extended as necessary.

## West Bund Museum and Centre Pompidou: a strategic partnership

- 25 The announcement of this partnership was made official in 2017 (David Chipperfield Architects n.d.). However, as noted in the previous section of this article, negotiations between the Centre Pompidou and Chinese authorities regarding the establishment of a satellite museum in China spanned a decade.
- 26 The architectural design for the project was entrusted to David Chipperfield, an 'old friend' with the Chinese architectural industry, who had already completed approximately 15 public institution projects in China. The design process began in 2013, with construction commencing in 2016 (ibid.).
- 27 The West Bund Museum gross floor area covers 22,000 sqm, including three major galleries of 700 sqm each<sup>7</sup>, a multipurpose hall with 232 seats (750 sqm), lobby space, atrium, education and workshop areas, and other service facilities (Iype 2019).

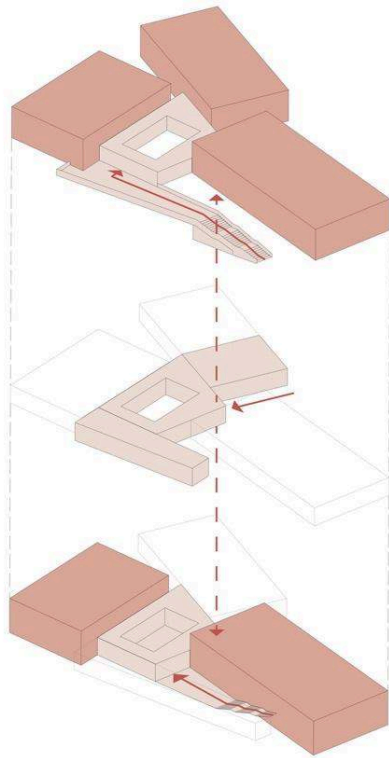
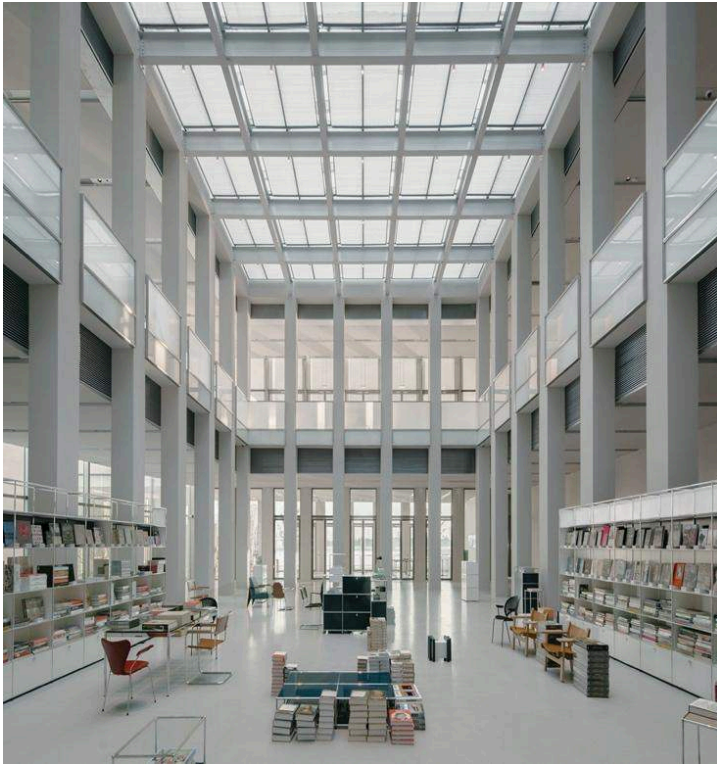


Fig. 4 – Interior layout and museum map of the West Bund Museum

© David Chipperfield Architects

- 28 It's interesting to note that in David Chipperfield Architects' online archive, the West Bund Group is classified as the 'client' while the Centre Pompidou is marked as the 'user' (David Chipperfield Architects n.d.). This nuanced partnership is further illustrated in the institutional structure of the West Bund Museum. According to

information provided by participants involved in the West Bund Museum and the Centre Pompidou partnership during interviews<sup>8</sup>, the daily operations of the museum are managed by Shanghai Guangqi Cultural Industry Investment Development Co., Ltd., a subsidiary of the West Bund Group.

- 29 The executive team of the West Bund Museum is composed of members from the Group, none of whom have a professional background in art field. To compensate for this, an Art Committee (consisted of scholars, artists, curators, professionals in art field) affiliated with the Group provides professional consultation on art and cultural matters, not only for the museum but also for the broader West Bund cultural initiative.
- 30 The West Bund Museum is composed of five departments. The chief staff members of the production and market/new media departments are directly appointed by the Group, while the operation and public mediation departments are outsourced to third parties. The exhibition department, established at the start of the museum's operational phase, holds limited decision-making authority over exhibition content. Its sole curatorial responsibility, in the strict sense, is the production of exhibitions in Gallery 0, where it's still bonded with the so-called co-curatorship with Paul Frèches, the chief representative of the Centre Pompidou in Shanghai. In other words, the Centre Pompidou holds supervisory rights over all exhibitions organised in the museum's galleries. This creates an emblematic challenge for the West Bund Museum in terms of its autonomy in deciding which artists and works to feature. As a result, the museum's ability to assert its own artistic direction and voice within the global art world is somewhat limited, which in turn blurs the tone and character of its museum programming – criticised for 'odd design, timid shows, and unclear identity' in *Quotidien de l'Art* (Azimi 2020, n.p.).
- 31 The partnership between the Centre Pompidou and the West Bund Museum is outlined on the Centre Pompidou's website, encompassing several key areas of collaboration (Centre Pompidou n.d.): lending works from the Centre Pompidou collections; designing exclusive exhibitions in resonance with the local cultural context; implementing the cultural programme and mediation activities; training museum professionals; and presenting projects and exhibitions by Chinese artists in the Centre Pompidou in Paris.
- 32 It's clear that the five approaches reflect the principles of cultural diplomacy, defined as the 'exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture between countries to improve mutual understanding' (Cummings 2003, 1).
- 33 On 24 November 2023, a contract to renew the partnership for a further five years (2024-2029) was signed in the presence of Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and Minister of Foreign Affairs, along with French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Catherine Colonna, under the backdrop of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and France (Yiu 2023).
- 34 On the other hand, the extension of the contract has practical reasons. Unlike the Kanal Centre Pompidou or Louvre Abu Dhabi, both of which established acquisition committees on the initial stage to develop their collections and curatorial mechanisms in terms of institutional independence, the West Bund Museum has no plans for acquiring a collection. 'It is challenging for Chinese state-owned enterprises to acquire

contemporary art, as the economic value of such works is constantly fluctuating in the art market and at auctions, which could potentially lead to the loss of state assets', commented by Zhang Yu in the interview<sup>9</sup>, chief of the exhibition department at the Pudong Art Museum (*Pudong meishuguan* 浦东美术馆), another state-owned enterprise art museum in Shanghai's Lujiazui CBD, which maintains an extended partnership with Tate London until 2026.

- 35 Additionally, Chinese society lacks a tradition and strong social awareness of art philanthropy. The significant injections of social capital into public cultural institutions, as seen in the case of Amis du Centre Pompidou supporting its global strategy for collection acquisitions, and Tenedora Museo de Arte Moderno y Contemporáneo de Bilbao, S.L., which enhances local participation in the Guggenheim Bilbao's own collection acquisitions, remain absent in China. Moreover, due to the specific political environment in China, criticism in public discourse is somehow restrained. The scenes of social debates witnessed in projects like the Guggenheim Museum Helsinki and the Hermitage Barcelona are unlikely to occur in China. All these factors perplexed the identity dilemma of the West Bund Museum x Centre Pompidou project, suspending itself above local discourse, despite the fact that 'exploring the local art scene' is a typical inspirational rhetoric for franchise museum initiatives.

## Towards building Shanghai's local cultural contexts

- 36 The main exhibition spaces of the West Bund Museum are concentrated in Galleries 1–3, located on the first floor. These galleries host the Centre Pompidou's three semi-permanent collection exhibitions, alongside various temporary exhibitions. The semi-permanent exhibitions aim to systematically elucidate the history of global modern and contemporary art sourced from the collections of the Musée National d'Art Moderne of France, offering audiences a comprehensive understanding of the evolution and dynamic trajectory of world art.
- 37 In contrast to the more pedagogical and methodical nature of the semi-permanent exhibitions, the temporary exhibitions provide greater flexibility in content design and object selection.



Fig. 5 – Exhibit settings from the fifth chapter, 'Passages: Writing, Marking, Noting,' in the semi-permanent exhibition *The Shape of Time, 2021*

Image by the author

After the opening exhibition programmes, our team gradually became aware that each exhibition gallery in the museum lacked a coherent vision. We believe that the cultural dialogue between China and France cannot only stop on the mere consumption of French masterpieces by Chinese audiences. In this context, the existence of Gallery 0 serves more as a strategic complement to the museum's overall vision.<sup>10</sup>

- 38 Gallery 0 is located on the ground floor of the West Bund Museum and is open to the general public free of charge (while exhibitions organized by the Centre Pompidou have an admission fee of around €20 for each). During the museum's inauguration programmes, the Gallery 0 was used for displaying multimedia and image from the Centre Pompidou, without concrete orientation.
- 39 The Covid-19 pandemic provided the exhibition team of the West Bund Museum an opportunity to explore the local art context. A temporary exhibition titled *On Sabbatical (Jingmo changjia 静默长假)* was displayed in Gallery 0 from July 25 to September 6, 2020. The exhibition, independently curated by the exhibition department, featured more than ten newly created works by nine Chinese contemporary artists, including Ding Yi and Zhang Huan, whose earlier works are part of the Centre Pompidou's collection and have been exhibited in the museum's semi-permanent exhibitions. The exhibition aimed to reflect on the changes in lifestyle during the pandemic and foster a dialogue with the public, encouraging the exchange of thoughts and insights.
- 40 Six months later, Gallery 0 hosted its second exhibition for promoting young Chinese contemporary artists: *Yu Ji - Spontaneous Decisions II (Yu Ji: Jixing Panduan II 于吉: 即兴判断II)*, with an entitled co-curated by Gu Youyou and Paul Frèches, which ran from April 27 to August 8, 2021. The exhibition marked the artist's debut in her professional

artistic career and explored the individual's psychological state through an examination of time in the ever-changing landscapes of metropolises.



Fig. 6 – On-site of the exhibition *Yu Ji – Spontaneous Decisions II* in Gallery 0, West Bund Museum, 2021

Image by the author

- 41 Following the *Yu Ji – Spontaneous Decisions II* exhibition, the Gallery 0 was officially positioned as a space for experimental local art projects, dedicated to fostering a dialogue between young Chinese artists and both local and global art contexts.
- 42 Over the subsequent years, a series of exhibitions were showcased in Gallery 0. These exhibitions increasingly adopted a theatrical approach to their design, inviting audience participation and turning the visitors into an active part of the artistic experience. The thematic focus evolved from personal reflections on urban landscapes to deeper, more intimate explorations of the self. These exhibitions featured young, emerging Chinese artists, some of whom were relatively unknown in China but had gained recognition internationally. Nevertheless, the selection of artists is, in reality, a ‘compromise’ among various stakeholders. The West Bund Art Committee plays an advisory role in introducing potential artists, while the French Consulate in Shanghai occasionally contributes resources, informed by Paul Frèches.<sup>11</sup>
- 43 The West Bund Museum’s reliance on the broader development of the West Bund waterfront is also evident in its installation of public art within the museum’s stretching outdoor spaces. As part of the 2023 Shanghai Urban Space Art Season (SUSAS), the West Bund waterfront was transformed by over 30 spatial and environmental artworks, creating a stunning visual narrative under the theme ‘METro-BIOSIS’ (West Bund Museum n.d.). The West Bund Museum contributed to this vibrant public art movement with the unveiling of a remarkable new sculpture *Hugs* presented by Mark di Suvero, situated in the north square of the museum building in early November 2023.

It's worth noting that the artist Mark di Suvero was born in Shanghai, China, in 1933. This distinguished sculptor, a pioneer in the use of steel and unparalleled in the worldwide exhibition of public sculpture, is set to realize his lifelong dream on his ninetieth birthday by exhibiting a large-scale sculpture in the country of his birth, sharing his creations with the Chinese public. With this piece, he once again

'hugs' Shanghai, using art to rekindle profound emotional connections that transcend time and space. (West Bund Museum n.d)

- 44 These are the sentences quoted on the website of the West Bund Museum, which correlate Mark di Suvero's international prestige to his 'Chinese identity'. The narrative of 'homecoming with honor' (*rongguiguli* 荣归故里), hereto, is intertwined with the interplay between the global and the local.
- 45 Another critical issue is the participation of local communities. As Wu Chen'an, a staff member from the cultural mediation department, explains, the West Bund Museum has made many efforts to engage nearby communities in its public activities, including gifting exhibition tickets to local neighbourhood committees. Yet, the local population consists largely of old people, which make it difficult to promote contemporary art among them.<sup>12</sup> Notably, the museum commissioned *So What Original* (*Nashenme* 那什么), an experimental theatrical studio, to create a contemporary film based on the history of Longhua district. The final work, *Invisible River* (*Yingxing de heliu* 《隐形的河流》), was presented in the museum's outdoor space with free entry on August 8, 2020. Despite these efforts, the program did not receive the expected feedback. Publicly engaged cultural initiatives like this did not attract much attention until the more recent 'Cultural Researcher' public-participated project, sponsored by Chanel.
- 46 In September 2024, the museum announced a call-up to invite researchers to explore Shanghai's local culture through four themes: 'dialect and accent,' 'sounds from daily life,' 'museum and opera,' and 'city's environmental sounds.' The project aims to examine the significance and roles of sounds in urban life from Shanghai's local perspective (West Bund Museum 2024). However, as of February 2025, there have been no updates on this initiative. The essential emblem still lays on the museum's collection. As the Centre Pompidou provides all major exhibition objects and content, the production of public programmes is dragged between the two to cohere the Centre Pompidou's exhibitions and to geographically connect to the living local culture, which in the end leads to nowhere.

## Conclusions

- 47 As Natalia Grincheva (2020) points out, the era when traditional museum diplomacy relied exclusively on national governments to facilitate cultural exchanges – activities once heavily relied on political matters and geopolitical concerns – has come to an end. The emerging trends in contemporary museum diplomacy reveal that museums are increasingly attuned to the demands of the global art market, adapting to new management practices and financial models within transnational economic contexts. One observed case in this article, the Centre Pompidou, has significantly enhanced its global standing as a world-class museum institution of modern and contemporary art, fostering cross-border cultural exchange through its collections, programming, and expertise. Listed in the Centre Pompidou's network of franchises, Centre Pompidou-Metz, Centre Pompidou Málaga, Kanal Centre Pompidou, West Bund Museum x Centre Pompidou project (2019-2024), also the undetermined Centre Pompidou in Seoul and Centre Pompidou x Jersey City dead in water, share similarities on the knock-on effect of well-recognised museum brand in cultural-led urban renewals, where branding has emerged as a pivotal point of convergence between the museum franchise model and urban development strategies.

48 One of the critical points, as demonstrated in this article, addresses cultural homogenisation and damages of local artistic ecologies. As exemplified by cases in China, contemporary Chinese art, that which lies outside institutional discourse, is increasingly marginalised due to the projection of ‘modernity’ and ‘internationalism’ in urban regeneration. It’s worth to re-emphasise that sustainable revitalisation of cities’ redevelopment also needs patience to incubate fragile local cultural system instead of zealously pursuing real estate interests.

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## NOTES

1. On point 20 of the joint declaration, 'China and France will strengthen their cooperation in the fields of educational, cultural and scientific exchanges in accordance with the joint declaration adopted on 24 November 2017 [...] In this regard, both sides support the organizing of exhibitions and seminars by the Pompidou Center and the Museum of Fine Arts-West Bund in Shanghai' (Xinhua 2018, n.p.).
2. Paul Frèches, interview by the author, video call via Zoom, March 12, 2022.
3. The original sentence is in Chinese: “后来由于缺乏法律依据, 该项目最终搁浅”(Jiao 2014, 115).
4. In Shaun Wang's (2017) study of contemporary Chinese art museums, he highlights three categories of art museums in China: 1. State-owned or so-called public art museums (*gongli meishuguan*, 公立美术馆 in Chinese), which are established and funded by government bodies, and served as symbols of national identity. 2. Private-owned/entrepreneurial art museums, namely *minying meishuguan* 民营美术馆 in Chinese. Noted by Ornella De Nigris (2018, 216), the concept of *Minying* is originally an economic term that gained popularity in China after 2002, referring to a public-private partnership in public entities. 3. Private collectors' art museums, which their functions are usually the storage and display of collectors' collections.
5. The concept of *corniche* (beachfront avenue) originated in Europe. It refers to the construction of open and comfortable waterfront avenues in the coastal areas of France, Italy and Spain, providing residents with new areas for leisure and entertainment, river viewing and residential consumption (Semprebou, Ma, and Fabris 2018).
6. SASAC integrated three state-owned enterprises, Shanghai Xuhui Land Development Co., Ltd., Shanghai Waterfront Co., Ltd. and Shanghai Guangqi Culture Industry Investment Development Co., Ltd., and Shanghai Huangjin World Commercial Building Co., Ltd. to form the current West Bund Group (Jia, Xu, and Zheng 2020).
7. According to the *Construction Standard for Public Art Museum (Gonggong meishuguan jianshe biaoqun* 《公共美术馆建设标准》) issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China in 2018, the floor area of the West Bund Museum meets the criteria for an I-category public art museum in China. However, this category stipulates that 32% to 40% of the total floor area be allocated to exhibition spaces, a requirement that the West Bund Museum is nowhere near meeting.
8. Regarding the organizational structure of the West Bund Museum x Centre Pompidou project, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with six staff members from the West Bund Museum and the Centre Pompidou Shanghai project team in 2022 and 2023, either in person or online.
9. Zhang yu, interview by the author, video call via Zoom, May 30, 2022.
10. Gu Youyou, the chief of the department of exhibition of the West Bund Museum, interview by the author via phone call, January 4, 2024.
11. See footnote 2.
12. Wu Chen'an, interview by the author via phone call, January 8, 2022.

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## ABSTRACTS

The emergence of museum franchising in recent decades has played a pivotal role in the evolution of museums, shaped by the forces of globalisation, cultural consumption, and cultural diplomacy. In contemporary China, this model has been adopted within the context of urban regeneration, driven by entrepreneurial local governments that invite investments from non-state sectors to develop cultural infrastructure and enhance the cities' modern image. Globalised museum brands, in a local discourse, serve as symbols of internationalism and cultural diversity. At the same time, franchising fosters exchanges of ideas, art, and cultural practices, enabling museums to engage new audiences, access additional revenue sources, and bolster their global presence. This article analyses the development, characteristics, and cultural identity surrounding the West Bund Museum and Centre Pompidou collaboration in Shanghai. The project exemplifies the challenges and opportunities faced by globalised museum brands as they navigate localized processes across museological, political, economic, and social dimensions. It reveals a hybrid institutional model of museum franchising that operates beyond the Western context, highlighting the need for an interdisciplinary and multidimensional approach to understanding derivative models that address shared concerns across various sectors.

O surgimento do *franchising* museológico nas últimas décadas desempenhou um papel fulcral na evolução dos museus, moldado pelas forças da globalização, do consumo cultural e da diplomacia cultural. Na China contemporânea, este modelo tem sido adotado no contexto da regeneração urbana impulsionada por governos locais empreendedores que promovem investimentos no desenvolvimento de infraestruturas culturais e na valorização da imagem moderna das cidades. As marcas de museu globalizadas no discurso local, funcionam como símbolos de internacionalismo e de diversidade cultural. Ao mesmo tempo, o *franchising* promove a troca de ideias, de obras de arte e de práticas culturais, permitindo aos museus atrair novos públicos, aceder a fontes adicionais de receitas e reforçar a sua visibilidade à escala mundial. Este artigo analisa o desenvolvimento, as características e a identidade cultural associadas à colaboração entre o Museu West Bund e o Centre Pompidou, em Xangai. O projeto exemplifica os desafios e as oportunidades enfrentados pelas marcas de museu globalizadas ao navegarem por processos locais, nas suas dimensões museológicas, políticas, económicas e sociais. Revela-se, assim, um modelo institucional híbrido de *franchising* museológico que opera para além do contexto ocidental, sublinhando a necessidade de uma abordagem interdisciplinar e multidimensional para compreender modelos derivados que respondem a preocupações partilhadas por diversos setores.

## INDEX

**Palavras-chave:** diplomacia cultural, museu de arte contemporânea – China, West Bund Museum, Centre Pompidou, franchising

**Keywords:** museum franchising, cultural diplomacy, museum of contemporary art – China, West Bund Museum, Centre Pompidou, soft power

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