



# University of Sheffield

## **Exploring the Role of Place Identity and Cultural Values in Domestic Museum Visitor Experience in China—A Qualitative Study of the Chengdu Museum**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Management School  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
The University of Sheffield

June 2024



## **Declaration**

I confirm that this thesis is my own work and it is the result of my own achievements unless the contents referenced in the text. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). The material contained in the thesis has not been submitted elsewhere for any other degree or qualification in this or any other institution.

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Jun 2024

## Abstract

Museums are increasingly challenged to distinguish themselves within the competitive leisure market while fulfilling their public service roles by engaging diverse audiences and fostering meaningful visitor experiences (Komarac, Ozretic-Dosen, and Skare, 2017; Aroles and Morrell, 2024). Alongside core exhibitions, modern museums now offer augmented services including digital content, commercial facilities, and community programmes (Kefi *et al.*, 2024; Komarac, 2014; Vaux Halliday and Astafyeva, 2014), with visitor experiences emerging as a critical factor in shaping engagement and satisfaction (Schuch *et al.*, 2018). However, the factors influencing how China's distinct sociocultural context shapes domestic visitors' museum experiences remain poorly understood, as existing scholarship remains predominantly rooted in Western-centric frameworks.

This study addresses this gap by examining how place identity and cultural values shape Chinese domestic visitors' experiences of the museum *servicescape*, with a specific focus on the Chengdu Museum. Drawing on Falk's (2008, 2011) identity framework, *servicescape* theory (Bitner, 1992), and perspectives on cultural values (Roccas and Sagiv, 2010; Filieri and Mariani, 2021), the research develops a conceptual model to explore how place identity, cultural values, and museum visitor experience intersect. The study employs qualitative methods—semi-structured interviews and focus groups—with thematic analysis to interpret visitor narratives.

The findings identify four forms of place identity among Chinese visitors: Chengduese (local residents of Chengdu), Sichuanese (residents of Sichuan Province), New Chengduese (migrants from other provinces to Chengdu), and non-local visitors (tourists from outside Sichuan). These identities exhibit a bidirectional relationship with the museum's core exhibition services: alignment between exhibitions and place identity enhances emotional

connection, which in turn reinforces visitors' sense of belonging and identity. In contrast, cultural values such as respect for authority and striving for harmony shape visitors' interactions with the *servicescape* in a unidirectional manner, positioning them as passive recipients of curated narratives rather than active co-creators—a dynamic that contrasts with Western models of participatory engagement (Shoukat and Ramkissoon, 2022; Dion and Borraz, 2017).

This study offers two key theoretical contributions. First, it expands the conceptualisation of place identity by uncovering context-specific forms in China, challenging Western-centric interpretations (Palmer, 2005; Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007; Hahn, 2023). Second, it reconceptualises *servicescape* theory by foregrounding intangible cultural values—such as harmony and authority—as key mediators of the visitor experience, extending beyond traditional emphasis on physical design and layout (Bitner, 1992). By integrating identity theory, services marketing, and consumer experience literature, this research develops a culturally grounded understanding of museum visitor experience in China.

Keywords: *Servicescape*, place identity, cultural values, museum experience

*To my mother Zhang Qing, and my father Yu Xiao Guang.*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who has contributed to the realisation of this research in any way.

First and foremost, I must thank my supervisors. I hope to continue receiving your guidance in my future studies and life.

Thank you, Dr Anthony Grimes, for your support and assistance.

Dr Dahlia El-Manstrly, I am sincerely grateful for your care and input; I know you didn't have to do all this for me.

Thank you, Professor Eva Kipnis. I know I was very fortunate to have had a supervisor as rigorous and dedicated as you during my PhD journey. More importantly, you have shown me how kindness goes around the world. Thank you for never giving up on me.

Thank you, Dr Carole Couper, for your guidance and constant encouragement. You have been more like an elder sister than a supervisor. Our lovely chats, starting from the COVID-19 and beyond, have been a beacon of light in my life in the UK, which often felt like a long, dark night.

I also want to say thank you to my colleague and friend, Dr Chuting Feng. During every moment of self-doubt, it was you who pulled me out of the mire.

Peng Yu Xing (James), thank you for your advice on English grammar, as well as your encouragement and companionship.

My thanks extend to everyone who participated in my interviews and focus groups. I am especially grateful to my friends Cao Xiao Chun (Annie), Feng Yun Fang (Ambre), Hu Ai Li (Ailly), Liu Rui (Wanzi), Xu Huan (Yolanda), Zhao Ruo Yan (Er Pang), and Zhong Qian (Cao Xi). Thank you for your kind help during the data collection period; without your time and effort, I would not have been able to complete the field work.

My favourite song has a lyric that goes: "There must always be a song of mine sung loudly, to see the vastness of the world." This PhD journey is my song, and you are the notes in the song.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The Evolving Role of Museums

Museums are traditionally considered authoritative cultural institutions for collecting and exhibiting historical cultural heritage to provide information, and educate and entertain the public (Hume, 2011; Su and Teng, 2018; Yucelt, 2001). However, the modern general public seeks more value from its museums, such as contributions to improving diversity and social inclusivity (Sandell, 1998). The International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2022) has recently made changes to its new definition of museums:

*“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”*

The ICOM definition reflects not only the current theoretical knowledge of museums, but also the expectations from society (and indeed funders) of the potential role and value of museums as public institutions, thus setting higher goals for museums to pursue. Apart from their fundamental obligation to present history, museums, as public cultural spaces, are expected to take responsibility for reflecting current social trends, providing equal access to different groups of members, and ultimately support democracy and inclusivity in society (Huhn and Anderson, 2021; Kinsley, 2016; Schuch, et al., 2018). At the same time, many museums have transitioned to a marketised model of operations, driven by the need to cover

financial shortfalls resulting from cuts to public services funding and to attract and retain public engagement (Aroles and Morrell, 2024; Easson and Leask, 2020).

## **1.2 Marketization and Visitor Engagement**

In their role as cultural spaces, museums are in competition with the growth of alternative culture, education, and leisure platforms which are emerging both as physical realms (e.g., cinemas, concert halls, theme parks, part-time university courses - Komarac, Ozretic-Dosen, and Skare, 2017) and online (e.g., social networking as an alternative to attending leisure activities - Arora, 2011); Hence, to develop and engage visitors, modern museums are adopting marketing strategies, that include interactive activities and utilisation of social media. Museum are also, making efforts to shift their mission from that of cultural heritage conservators to education and enjoyment experience providers and social value constructors and mediators (Gilmore and Rentschler 2002; Sianoa *et al.*, 2010). The core purpose of museums therefore has evolved from preserving and displaying permanent collections, while hosting temporary exhibitions, to organising events and educational programmes, engaging with local communities, and providing their visitors meaningful experiences (Grefe, Krebs, and Pflieger, 2017; Kotler, 2001).

## **1.3 Visitor Experience of Museum Services**

Museum services encompass a diverse range of activities, offerings, and interactions that museums provide to enhance visitor engagement, education, and enjoyment (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002; Kotler, 2001). These services include physical and digital exhibitions, educational programmes such as guided tours, workshops, and lectures, cultural and community events, visitor support services that improve accessibility and inclusivity, and interpretive materials designed to facilitate deeper understanding and interaction with

museum content (Komarac, Ozretic-Dosen, and Skare, 2020). By offering these services, museums aim to not only preserve and present cultural heritage but also to create meaningful experiences that cater to diverse audiences and learning preferences (Antón, Camarero, and Garrido, 2018; Cesário and Campos, 2024).

Visitor experience, on the other hand, refers to the individual's subjective and multi-dimensional responses that emerge from their interaction with museum services and spaces (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2012). It encompasses cognitive engagement, which involves learning and knowledge acquisition; emotional reactions, such as awe, nostalgia, or excitement; sensory perception, shaped by the visual, auditory, and tactile elements of exhibitions; physical interaction, including movement through museum spaces and engagement with interactive displays; and social dynamics, influenced by interactions with other visitors, museum staff, and participatory activities (Brida, Meleddu, and Pulina, 2016; Ceccarelli et al., 2024; Luo, Doucé, and Nys, 2024). These dimensions collectively shape the overall museum experience, affecting visitor satisfaction, retention, and long-term engagement with cultural institutions.

The *servicescape* concept, originally introduced by Bitner (1992), explains how tangible facilities and ambient environmental elements influence consumer experiences. Over time, it has evolved to include social interactions within service environments, as the behavior of other consumers can shape individual experiences and contribute to co-creation of value (Arnould, Price, and Tierney, 1998; Gupta and Verma, 2021). Beyond physical spaces, the rise of digital commerce has led to the recognition of the e-servicescape, which encompasses online aesthetics, interactivity, customization, and security as key factors in shaping consumer engagement (Harris and Goode, 2010; Torkzadeh, Zadeh, and Zolfagharian, 2022). Whether in physical or virtual settings, *servicescape* provides a holistic framework for

understanding how environmental, social, and technological elements collectively shape service experiences, guiding businesses in creating immersive and meaningful consumer interactions.

As museum's role has evolved, engagement with visitors to encourage active participation of society members has become critical if museums are to effectively fulfil their responsibilities (including reflecting current social trends, providing equal access to diverse groups, and ultimately promoting democracy and inclusivity in society - Sandell, 1998; Schuch *et al.*, 2018). Engagement is the result of the interaction between museum services and visitor experience of these services. Given the pivotal role that the visitors are meant to play in the process of co-creating value through the interplay between service and consumer experiences within the museum environment, this study first draws upon the perspectives of both museum and service marketing research to examine the museum visitor experience. Museums are conceptualised through the lens of the *servicescape* (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017; Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002). The *servicescape* model emphasises that a service is co-produced by the service provider and service consumers and assigns significant value to consumer experiences in this process. *Servicescape* as a lens also considers the services of an organisation integrally as an organic whole which functions together and influences consumers' experiences (Bitner, 1992). As a result this perspective is helpful to study the interaction between museum services and visitor experience and explore visitor engagement.

#### **1.4 Focus on Non-Western Museum Experiences**

This study will also explore the visitor experiences of museums in a non-Western context. Thus far, much published research on museums has been situated in the Western context. For example, Sandell's influential research (1998) on museums and social inclusion was involved with the museums in Europe, the widely cited research of Kotler (2001) was concerned in

Europe and the USA, Kinghorn and Willis (2008) adopted examples from UK and Australia to support their arguments, the study of Komarac and Ozretić Došen (2023) exploring the experiences of Generation Z visitors in Web-based virtual museums was conducted in Croatia. However, theoretical and empirical research on how museum visitors experience and engage with museum services in non-Western contexts remains notably limited.

The lack of research in non-Western contexts may be problematic from the perspective of context-sensitivity and generalizability because differences in culture and institutions might generate differences of consumers' choices and experiences. For example, Chinese consumers do not fully utilise science museums although the government has invested heavily in building science museums in large cities (Ji *et al.*, 2014). This lack of engagement may be explained by the reliance on, and trust in, the traditional and formal education system by the Chinese public, as well as a lack of cooperation between museums and schools (Ji *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, the value of science museums has not been adequately recognized by the public in China.

Research based on museums in non-Western countries has the potential to generate valuable data and develop the current theory of museum marketing (Ani, 2021; Chandrasekara, Wijetunga, and Jayakody, 2023; Jafari, 2022). In the research field of marketing, Burgess and Steenkamp (2006) proposed that theories in marketing science should be substantially investigated and enhanced by research conducted in non-Western markets in four stages: (a) theory development, (b) acquisition of meaningful data, (c) analysis of the data to test one's theories, and (d) learning.

As public policy and economics in non-Western, usually less developed, countries differ from those of developed countries, many common and fundamental concepts of museum marketing in developed countries – such as market segmentation and brand equity – might be

in conflict with the realities of emerging markets (Heinberg *et al.*, 2020; Sheth, 2011). For example, a new middle class is growing in emerging markets (Belbağ *et al.*, 2019; Kravets and Sandikci, 2014). These consumers are diverse in values and lifestyles, exhibit aspirational and sophisticated spending, adapt to new societal values, prefer branded products, and show varied consumption behaviours across different regions, making it essential to understand their unique needs for effective marketing strategies (Cavusgil *et al.*, 2018).

In a non-Western context, the museum visitor experience may be approached in a manner distinct from that seen in the Western world. As suggested by Burgess and Steenkamp (2006), it is reasonable to expect that an understanding of the non-Western museums and their visitors might offer new insights into the current knowledge of both the museum industry and cultural consumption. In addition, as the ICOM definition (ICOM, 2022) frames what museums are and should be mainly through the Western lens of museums, whether museums in the East, especially in the emerging countries, are consistent with the definition needs to be examined. This study aims to explore this problem by grounding itself in the context of domestic museum visitors in China. Exploring the relevance of the ICOM definition in non-Western contexts is important as it helps to identify and understand the diversity of museum practices and visitor experiences across different cultures and regions. The ICOM definition establishes global standards and expectations for museums. Therefore, examining the applicability of this definition in non-Western countries can reveal the unique characteristics and differences in how museums in these regions provide services and engage with their audiences.

Given these factors, research set in China—as a prominent example of a non-Western emerging market—holds significant theoretical and practical implications for museum studies globally. By offering insights into how Chinese visitors engage with museums and how

cultural contexts shape their experiences, this research can enhance existing theories and inform global museum practices, extending beyond Western frameworks.

## **1.5 The Chinese Context**

As the world's second-largest economy, China is the world's largest emerging market and has the potential to take a leading role in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world economy (Haini, 2021; Schindler, DiCarlo, and Paudel, 2022). The growth of the economy in recent years, particularly in the digital sector, has resulted in significant changes to Chinese society and stimulated consumption (Zhao, Zhang, and Liang, 2022). Following rapid processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, the disposable household income of Chinese families has increased substantially, leading to improved consumption capacity and changing consumption behaviours (Li and Zhu, 2021). The average annual per capita disposable income of households in China climbed from 3,721 yuan (approximately 407.20 British pounds) in 2000 to 39,218 yuan (approximately 4,291.76 British pounds) in 2023 (Statista, 2024). In the decade of 2002 to 2012, China's middle-class increased by 27% to 31% of the total population and now comprises more than 420 million citizens (China Power Team, 2019).

The museum literature shows that the normal visitors of museums are the groups who are young, well-educated, with relatively high income and willing to join leisure activities (Daskalaki *et al.*, 2020). China's middle class had increased to over 450 million by 2018 (Gustafsson, Yang, and Sicular, 2020). Consequently, the growing Chinese middle class represents a significant potential audience for museums, making China an important context for museum marketing research. This suggests that research of the Chinese museum audience has the potential to offer valuable opportunities for the study of museum services experiences.

China's socialist system is also noteworthy when it comes to cultural institutions such as museums. In China, museums are under the management of the government and have to be align with the governments' cultural policies (Xu, Tao, and Smith, 2022). The Administration of Cultural Services, which is affiliated to the government, is in charge of the museums and guides the development of the museums (Xu, 2019). With its more than 5,000-year-old culture, China has a large number of museums of different varieties, and more than 70% of the museums in China are state owned, funded by the central or local governments (Sun, 2014; Yan and Gan, 2017). Chinese museums, especially when state owned, are often expected to act as ideological propaganda institutions (Perry, 2017). As a result, how Chinese domestic museum visitors experience museum *servicescape* may differ in that context.

In addition, China has long held a notorious reputation as a 'copy culture', with plagiarism, piracy and counterfeit products a frequent occurrence and cultural industries generally lacking originality and creativity (Pang, 2008). The Chinese government is supporting and developing cultural institutions as spaces tasked with transforming the country's image (Li and Worm, 2011). The ultimate aim is to enhance China's soft power through a national identity that creatively promotes history and culture (Arshad, 2017). As a result, the Chinese government places a high value on the development of culture and the museum sector with a series of new policies for the development of museums launched in recent decades. For instance, in 2008, the public was given free access to all state-owned museums and monuments across the country (Liao, 2008). Under these advantageous circumstances, museums have been rapidly developing in China, and the number of museum visitors has been continuously rising. In 2022, 382 new museums appeared, bringing the total to 6,565 (Mu, 2023). Collectively, they held a total of 34,000 exhibitions and received 578 million visitors during the year (Mu, 2023).

To sum up, the social and cultural environment in China differs from Western countries. Hence, research on contemporary Chinese museums and visitor experience could challenge conventional understanding of museums generated in developed countries and extend knowledge of how museums in non-Western countries engage with visitors. Extant research on museums offers a view of the interaction between museums as *servicescape* and visitor experience, which is based on Western developed markets (Burkov and Gorgadze, 2023; Loureiro and Blanco, 2023; Sánchez-Amboage *et al.*, 2023). An exploration of the interaction between museum services and visitor experience in a major emerging country such as China, where the social and cultural context significantly differs will offer new insights into how visitors may experience museum services. These new insights aim to contribute to cultural consumer research.

## **1.6 Overview of Methodology**

This study focuses on Chengdu Museum, located in the capital of Sichuan Province, a metropolis with a population of 20 million (Chengdu Population and Social Sciences Division, 2024). Chengdu, characterised by its rich Ba-Shu cultural heritage, serves as a prominent tourist attraction, particularly for domestic visitors, who numbered 2.8 billion in 2024, as reported by Zhu and Wang (2024). The Chengdu Museum serves as a platform for showcasing the city's local culture through exhibitions, lectures, and interactive experiences. Its modern approach includes features like a coffee shop, souvenir stores, and active presence on social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat. This study conducted at the Chengdu Museum aims to provide valuable insights into the experiences of domestic museum visitors in China.

This study adopts a qualitative research design to critically examine how domestic consumers experience the museum *servicescape* of the Chengdu Museum. Given the exploratory nature

of the inquiry, qualitative methods were chosen to capture the complexity and depth of visitor experiences (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). The research follows a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, recognizing that reality is socially constructed, subjective, and constantly evolving (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015, p.54). From an interpretivist perspective, the study focuses on how individuals make sense of their museum experiences through social interactions and personal meanings (Bryman, 2016, p.26).

To collect rich and nuanced data, 27 one-on-one interviews and 7 focus groups were conducted with museum visitors. The photo-elicitation method was integrated into the interviews, allowing participants to engage with visual stimuli to recall experiences, trigger emotions, and articulate deeper insights about their interaction with the museum environment (Padgett *et al.*, 2013).

## **1.7 Overview of Key Findings and Theoretical Contributions**

This study explores the museum experiences of domestic Chinese visitors, focusing on how place identity and cultural values manifest within the museum *servicescape*. Drawing on Bitner's (1992) *servicescape* model as a theoretical foundation, the study adopts a qualitative approach, incorporating both one-on-one interviews and focus groups. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the bidirectional influence between place identity, cultural values, and visitor experiences in a regional museum context.

The study identifies four types of place identity among domestic Chinese visitors to the Chengdu Museum: Chengduese, Sichuanese, New Chengduese, and visitors from outside Sichuan Province. The findings reveal that place identity significantly shapes visitors' cognitive, emotional, and social experiences within the museum *servicescape*. A strong place identity or attachment to Chengdu enhances engagement with exhibitions, while positive

museum experiences reinforce visitors' sense of place identity. Specifically, New Chengduese develop an emplaced identity (Porter and Tanghe, 2016), attributing meaning to Chengdu after relocation, whereas visitors from outside Sichuan form place attachment based on emotional and cognitive factors (Sthapit, Björk, and Coudounaris, 2022).

Additionally, the study identifies and explores the role of two key Chinese cultural values—respect for authority and striving for harmony—in shaping museum experiences. Respect for authority leads visitors to rely heavily on museum guidance, creating a unidirectional interaction with the *servicescape*. Meanwhile, striving for harmony discourages open expression of dissatisfaction and limits interactions with strangers, resulting in reduced social engagement within the museum setting. These cultural values may act as intangible barriers that shape visitor behaviour and engagement patterns in the museum *servicescape*.

The theoretical contributions of this study are twofold. First, it expands the theoretical understanding of place identity by demonstrating its role in shaping museum visitor experiences within the Chinese context. The findings reveal multiple layers of place identity, extending the concept beyond a single-dimensional framework (Baxter and Kerr, 2010; Moreno *et al.*, 2021; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). Furthermore, by establishing a bidirectional relationship between place identity and museum experiences, this study highlights the role of regional museums in fostering place identity beyond national identity (Hahn, 2023; Zhang and Courty, 2021).

Second, the study integrates cultural values into the *servicescape* framework, demonstrating how respect for authority and striving for harmony influence visitor interactions with the museum environment. It extends the applicability of the *servicescape* concept to the Chinese cultural context, revealing how hierarchical and collectivist values shape visitor engagement. The findings show that respect for authority leads to a reliance on museum-provided

narratives, reinforcing a unidimensional transmission of information (Dion and Borraz, 2017; Gao et al., 2021; Huang and Wen, 2021; Tian et al., 2021). Meanwhile, striving for harmony reduces spontaneous social interactions, shaping group dynamics within the *servicescape* (Cai, Cohen, and Tribe, 2019; Kwek and Lee, 2010).

By addressing these dynamics within a regional museum in China, this study contributes to the broader understanding of place identity, cultural values, and the *servicescape* model in cultural consumption settings. It offers new insights into how visitor experiences in Chinese museums are shaped by both individual-place relationships and cultural norms, filling a gap in the literature on museum experiences in non-Western contexts.

## **1.8 Overview of Thesis Structure**

This thesis is structured into six chapters, each building upon the previous to develop a comprehensive understanding of how place identity and cultural values manifest in the museum experiences of domestic Chinese visitors.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the research. It situates the study within the broader context of the evolving role of museums, particularly in the context of marketization and visitor engagement. It highlights the significance of visitor experience in museum services, with a specific focus on non-Western museum experiences, particularly in China. The research setting is introduced, and the research aim is articulated, providing a foundation for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 presents a multidisciplinary literature review, framing the study within relevant theoretical perspectives. It begins by examining the marketization of museums and the application of the *servicescape* concept to museum marketing. The chapter explores the services provided by museums, including core services, temporary exhibitions, online

services, commercial spaces, and community-based experiences. It then delves into customer experience literature, outlining its five key dimensions—cognitive, affective, social, physical, and sensory—and discusses the role of place identity and cultural values as key factors influencing visitor experiences. The chapter concludes by situating these theoretical insights within the museum context, focusing on visitor identity, motivations, engagement, and satisfaction.

Chapter 3 outlines the study's methodology, detailing the research design, philosophical stance, and qualitative approach adopted. The chapter discusses the rationale for selecting the Chengdu Museum as the research setting and explains the data collection methods, which include one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and photo elicitation. Sampling strategies and data collection processes, both in-person and via WeChat, are described. The chapter also details the data analysis strategy, transcription methods, and key methodological considerations, such as validity, reliability, positionality, and reflexivity. Ethical considerations are also addressed.

Chapter 4 presents the findings on how place identity manifests in the museum experiences of domestic Chinese visitors. It identifies four distinct visitor groups based on place identity: Chengduese, Sichuanese, New Chengduese, and visitors from outside Sichuan Province. The chapter explores the impact of place identity on different dimensions of visitor experience—cognitive, affective, social, and sensory. It further examines how different forms of place identity, including local identity, emplaced identity, and place attachment, shape visitor engagement with museum *servicescape* elements.

Chapter 5 investigates the role of cultural values in shaping visitor experiences in the museum *servicescape*. It focuses on two key Chinese cultural values—respect for authority and striving for harmony—examining their influence on cognitive, affective, social, and

physical dimensions of visitor experience. The chapter explores how respect for authority leads to visitors' reliance on museum narratives and limited online engagement, while striving for harmony affects group dynamics, decision-making, and social interactions. The chapter synthesizes these findings, highlighting how cultural values shape visitor engagement with the museum *servicescape*.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the research and its key findings. It discusses the study's theoretical contributions, particularly its extension of place identity and cultural values within the *servicescape* framework. The chapter also outlines the practical contributions and implications of the research for museum practitioners and policymakers. Finally, it acknowledges the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research before concluding the thesis.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction: the Trend of Museums' Marketisation**

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and identify the key areas of this study by reviewing the existing literature. As cultural institutions, museums are expected by governments and the public to deliver positive social outcomes and eventually promote the change of society (Kotler and Kotler, 2000; Whelan, 2015). Many museums are publicly funded from the government and private sponsors (Fillis and Rentschler, 2005). Therefore, to consolidate their legitimacy as public institutions, there is a need to evidence they are fulfilling their expected public role and the conditions of funding by taking social responsibilities (Cole, 2008; Ober-Heilig, Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, and Sikkenga, 2014).

Social responsibilities, which is known as corporate social responsibilities in the management literature, indicate that the performances of an organisation need to be in line with the interests of the stakeholders in the specific social contexts, and meanwhile meet the 'the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance' (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). Fulfilling social responsibilities leads to the generation and delivery of social value, defined as a value that represents changes in the lives of individuals or groups when both tangible and intangible resources are utilised at the grassroots level by social actors, ultimately fostering social change within society (Jain *et al.*, 2020).

In terms of museums, as the ICOM definition quoted above, they are expected to take responsibility for reflecting current social trends, providing equal access for different groups of members, and ultimately support democracy and inclusivity in society (ICOM, 2022). However, museums cannot unilaterally drive social change without the participation from

visitors. The social value of museums is closely intertwined with the visitor experience (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2012; Scott, 2006). The multiple functions and missions of museums to enhance the visitor experience range from education and entertainment to cultural heritage and public engagement, each of which aims to provide a rich and meaningful experience for visitors (McPherson, 2006). Increasing the number of visitors and maintaining interaction with them are essential for modern museums to fulfil social responsibilities and eventually create and deliver social value (Jafari, Taheri, and vom Lehn, 2013).

Marketing can play a positive role in the social value delivery process by equipping museums to attract and stimulate the public and compete in the intense leisure market (Komarac, 2014). As noted earlier, consumer's disposable personal income and leisure time are both limited, with a great deal of alternative choices of recreational and educational activities (Komarac, Ozretic-Dosen, and Skare, 2017; Yucelt, 2001). Museums have to compete with different kinds of competitors in the leisure market as well as with other museums within a locality (Van Aalst and Boogaarts, 2002). As Rentschler notes, 'Marketing is no longer an option: it's a survival tool rather than a dirty word' (Rentschler and Hede, 2007, p.12). Under such complex circumstances, museums globally are taking up more business functions, including marketing (Cole, 2008), although museums have to find a balance between marketisation and the curatorial and research functions (Hume, 2011).

Museum marketing involves different levels of performances and services of museums, including understanding the complex ever-changing society, recognizing and satisfying visitors' expectations, adopting the latest technologies, meanwhile taking the traditional role of collecting, preserving and exhibiting human history (Halliday, and Astafyeva, 2014). This research employs the *servicescape* model (Bitner, 1992) as a fundamental theoretical lens to synthesise a comprehensive comprehension of museum services, with the aim of examining

the experiences of museum visitors. This forms the basis for the subsequent sections of the study.

## **2.2 Viewing Museum Marketing Through the Lens of Servicescape Concept**

Marketing is more than just a communication tool to reach and engage consumers. Since consumer experience lies in the central position in museum marketing (Kotler & Kotler, 2000), museums' function as *servicescape* to offer beneficial experiences for visitors and provide platforms for them to co-create value. Applying the concept of *servicescape* can help modern museums to fulfil their social responsibilities and deliver social value. This section explains the concept of *servicescape* and how it aligns with museum marketing in detail. Scapes, the origin and theoretical base of *servicescape* will be explained first, and the development of *servicescape* in consumer literature will be presented, followed by theorising of museum marketing through the lens of *servicescape* concept.

### **2.2.1 The Adoption of *Servicescape* Literature in Conceptualizing Museum Services**

Museums serve as important cultural institutions that offer visitors not only educational insights but also immersive and affective experiences (Robaina-Calderín, Martín-Santana, and Muñoz-Leiva, 2023; Zhang, Zhu, and Chang, 2024). Given their reliance on both tangible and symbolic elements, museums can be effectively conceptualized through the lens of *servicescape* literature, which examines how physical and social environments influence consumer perceptions and behaviours (Bitner, 1992). The adoption of *servicescape* theory in framing museum services emphasizes museums' role in shaping visitor experiences, fostering emotional engagement, and influencing visitor satisfaction and behavioural intentions.

#### **Servicescape as a Framework for Museum Experiences**

The *servicescape* concept, introduced by Bitner (1992), highlights the influence of physical surroundings on consumer behaviours, classifying environmental factors into three

dimensions: ambient conditions, spatial layout/functionality, and signs, symbols, and artifacts. These dimensions are particularly relevant to museums, where the design of exhibits, lighting, soundscapes, and interactive elements play a crucial role in shaping visitor engagement (Erdogan, and Enginkaya, 2023). The museum environment, by design, must balance aesthetic appeal and functional accessibility to optimize visitor immersion (Annechini *et al.*, 2020).

Recent research has extended the *servicescape* model to include place identity, where individuals assess their personal connection to a space based on its environmental and symbolic cues (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007). In the museum context, exhibit design, thematic coherence, and cultural representation influence visitors' sense of belonging and cognitive engagement (Pizam and Tasci, 2019). Such findings validate the use of *servicescape* theory in explaining how museum environments shape visitor perceptions and memory retention.

### **The Social *Servicescape*: Expanding Beyond the Physical Environment**

In response to limitations in Bitner's (1992) original model, scholars have introduced the concept of social *servicescape*, which accounts for interpersonal interactions within the service environment (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). This extension is highly applicable to museums, where interactions between visitors, staff, and tour guides significantly impact the overall experience (Lin, Gursoy & Zhang, 2020).

For instance, studies have demonstrated that customer-to-customer interactions within museums can enhance emotional engagement, particularly in group visits or guided experiences (Brocato *et al.*, 2012; Li, 2024; Loureiro and Ferreira, 2020; Recupero *et al.*, 2019). The presence of knowledgeable staff further reinforces visitor satisfaction by facilitating deeper cognitive and affective engagement (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). Thus, integrating the social *servicescape* perspective allows for a more comprehensive

understanding of how museums foster meaningful visitor interactions beyond their physical attributes.

### **Emotional and Sensory Immersion in Museum *Servicescape***

Museums aim to evoke emotional responses through their exhibits and narratives, making affective engagement a critical component of the visitor experience (Trunfio, Jung, and Campana, 2022). According to Komarac & Došen (2022), interactivity, digital engagement, and multisensory stimuli significantly contribute to visitor immersion. Their study found that interactive technology enhances both aesthetic and escapist experiences, reinforcing Pine & Gilmore's (1999) notion of the experience economy.

Moreover, museum visitors form emotional connections with exhibits through symbolism, storytelling, and sensory design (Mahr, Stead & Odekerken-Schröder, 2019). Research suggests that museum environments designed with multisensory elements, such as tactile displays, immersive audio-visual content, and augmented reality experiences, generate stronger emotional and cognitive responses (Jüttner *et al.*, 2013). This aligns with the broader customer experience literature, which highlights the role of physical, cognitive, affective, and sensory dimensions in shaping consumer perceptions (De Keyser et al., 2020; Gahler, Klein, and Paul, 2023; Hermes and Riedl, 2021; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

### ***Servicescape* and Brand Image in Museums**

A well-designed museum *servicescape* plays a crucial role in shaping brand perception and visitor loyalty. Yin, Chen & Ni (2023) emphasize that museum *servicescapes* influence brand image and word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, where positive visitor experiences contribute to increased visitor retention and advocacy. The incorporation of thematic consistency, architectural aesthetics, and innovative engagement strategies enhances the museum's reputation and competitive positioning (Homburg, Jozic & Kuehn, 2017).

Furthermore, the Touchpoints-Context-Qualities (TCQ) framework introduced by De Keyser et al. (2020) underscores the importance of experience design in customer satisfaction. By conceptualizing museum services through the *servicescape* lens, museums can systematically evaluate and enhance visitor experiences, thereby driving engagement and long-term loyalty (Maklan, Antonetti and Whitty, 2017).

The adoption of *servicescape* literature provides a robust theoretical foundation for conceptualizing museum services, offering insights into how physical, social, and symbolic elements influence visitor experiences. The integration of social interactions, emotional immersion, and brand perception further enhances the applicability of this framework to the museum context. As museums continue to evolve in response to technological advancements and shifting consumer expectations, *servicescape* theory remains a valuable tool for designing engaging, inclusive, and memorable museum experiences.

### **2.2.2 The Framework of Servicescape**

The concept of '*scape*' was first adopted by Appadurai (1990) to define the global culture flow — the multi-directional flow of people and the redistribution of resources. Appadurai argues that the world cannot be seen simply in binary terms such as the East and the West, with separate segments of consumers and producers. Instead, proactively or passively, cultures in different regions are involved in the process of globalisation: in a dynamic, overlapping, and interactional flow, having dominant or implicit effects on one another (Appadurai, 1990).

In terms of individuals, the environment people are living in is not only the traditional geographical and physical environment but more complicated, which is constituted by many cultural factors such as people, the media, technologies, finance and ideas. In modern society, people can hardly avoid being affected by globalisation, but are passively surrounded or

actively participate in the culture flows. These factors in a great movement in globalisation were construed by Appadurai as '*scape*' (1990). Five dimensions of the global culture flow were categorised as ethnoscape, mediascape, technoscape, financescape and ideoscape, which respectively represented people, media, technology, capital, and ideas (Appadurai, 1990).

As Appadurai also conceptualised that the *scapes* are interactive and overlapping, the way globalisation affects people should be considered in an interactive way. For example, an immigrant who moved to Hong Kong from India might expertly speak Cantonese at work and expose him/herself to the local culture, and his/her experience in Hong Kong might associate his/her families and friends in India with the Chinese culture. However, on the other side, this person might keep the habit of watching Indian films and more importantly, read Indian news online. He/she physically moved to Hong Kong but a significant part of his/her spiritual life and information resources still remained in intensive relationship with India, and to a great extent the Indian culture had constant impacts on him/her and presumably his/her acquaintances in Hong Kong. Therefore, interactions of cultures become the key point of Appadurai's framework of *scape* in globalisation.

Appadurai (1990) believed that in globalisation cultures flow in a multi-directional way and globalisation would generate heterogenization, which is different from the point of view that globalisation would necessarily result in convergence and homogenization of cultures. In the viewpoint of homogenization, in globalisation cultures are in uni-directional flows because the American culture will become the dominant culture and other cultures may become similar and lose the distinguishing characteristics (Bhawuk, 2008).

Basing their research on Appadurai's framework, Ger and Belk (1996) developed *consumptionscape* to explain the influences of global cultures on consumption. The concept of '*consumptionscape*' highlights people's engagement with material environment and shared

culture (Dholakia, Reyes, and Bonoff, 2014). In the context of *consumptionscape*, consumers utilise services (for example, the interior design and the ambience of the consumption spaces) as resources to fulfil their own values and the experience transcends the product per se. For instance, in the study of Venkatraman and Nelson (2008), the researchers surprisingly found that the customers of Starbucks in China did not patronise it for coffee. Instead, they were attracted by the ambience and treated the spaces as a third place between home and work to escape from the chaos in life. In such a case *consumptionscape* helped the consumers in self-identity shaping because they were closer to the ideal selves in Starbucks stores than in ordinary life.

Consumers are influenced by global cultures and make their own meanings through consumption experiences. *Consumptionscape* was echoed in Firat's research (1997), which argued that under globalisation, consumers value experiences more than the product per se, and consumption can be conceptualised as 'marketized existence'.

Upon further examination of consumer research in the context of service consumption, Bitner (1992) formulated the *servicescape* conceptual framework. This framework describes the environmental factors created by humans that significantly impact the behaviour of both consumers and organisations, as well as the responses of these groups to the environment. Additionally, it considers the interaction between consumers and service providers, which plays a crucial role in shaping customer experiences and perceptions of value (Nilsson and Ballantyne, 2014). *Servicescape* demonstrates the emotional feelings and the cognitive responses of consumers to the human factor related services, for example the interactions between consumers and the employees (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011).

Three aspects of the man made physical environment were identified and categorised by Bitner (1992), which are 'ambient conditions,' 'spatial layout and functionality,' and 'signs,

symbols and artefacts.’ ‘Ambient conditions’ refers to background attributes of the physical environment, for example the lighting, music, and scent of the space. ‘Spatial layout’ stands for the interior design and arrangement of machinery, equipment, and furniture, the capacity of the objects, and the spatial relationships among them. ‘Functionality’ suggests the ability and facility of the objects to promote performance and accomplish goals.

From the viewpoint of *servicescape*, the environmental factors are a holistic structure rather than independent components (Ali, Ahmad-ur-Rehman, and Chauhan, 2024; Hooper, Coughlan, and Mullen, 2013). Some researchers view *servicescape* as the stages where consumers form their perceptions of services, which precede service quality and have significant impacts on consumers’ cognitive and emotional status and eventually affect their experiences and repurchase intentions (Ali, Salim, and Ahmad-Ur-Rehman, 2021; Dedeoglu *et al.*, 2018; Yunita *et al.*, 2022).

Based on Bitner’s model, researchers developed models to show the influences of environmental factors on service quality. For example, in their study of the psychological influences of *servicescape* in theme restaurants, Kim and Moon (2009) classified five dimensions of *servicescape*, which are facility aesthetics, layout, electric equipment, seating comfort, and ambient conditions. Compared to utilisation services such as health services, the effects of *servicescape* turned out particularly conspicuous in the industry of hedonic services (Tuominen, 2023; Reimer and Kuehn, 2005).

In Bitner’s model (1992), *servicescape* concept was initially applied to explain the influences of tangible facilities and ambient environmental elements on consumer experiences. However, the notion of *servicescape* evolves and not only emphasises on the tangible environment but includes the spaces and elements where interactions between organisations and consumers happen, which can be viewed as the social aspects of *servicescape* (Cockrill *et al.*, 2008; Line

and Hanks, 2019). For example, in their study, Arnould, Price, and Tierney (1998), the role of other present consumers in the space was examined in relation to *servicescape*. This was accomplished due to the understanding that the behaviour of strangers can impact a consumer's psychological state, behaviours, and experiences to some extent. The present other consumers are not arranged by or under control of the service provider, however they play an active role in participation, interaction and the co-creation of value, therefore are integrated into the social factors of the service environment and need to be taken into considerations of *servicescape* (Gupta and Verma, 2021; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2010).

Besides, with the development of technology, the Internet was identified as a market space where services could take place and have impacts on consumers' experiences (Williams and Dargel, 2004; Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017). Harris and Goode (2010) adopted a term “*e-servicescape*” to describe the online *servicescape* and define it as ‘the online environment factors that exist during service delivery.’ In addition to the elements typically included in existing *servicescape* models, such as aesthetic appeal and interactivity, the authors identified customization and financial security as critical components of the *e-servicescape*.

Considering the increasing prevalence of service providers who operate both physical and virtual spaces, it is essential to recognize the *e-servicescape* as a vital component of the overall *servicescape* (Torkzadeh, Zadeh, and Zolfagharian, 2022; Tran and Strutton, 2020).

To sum up, *servicescape* offers a vision to consider the services of an organisation as an organic whole rather than separate segments. The tangible settings and intangible elements work together and have influences on consumer experiences and further determine the service quality. It emphasises experiences and requires marketers to pay attention to the interactions between consumers and service providers.

### 2.2.3 Considering Museum Context through theoretical lens of Servicescape Concept

This study posits that modern museums can be seen through the lens of *servicescape* concept for the following reasons (Bitner, 1992). Firstly, both the concept of *servicescape* and museum marketing emphasise consumer experiences. Some of the targets mentioned in ICOM definition (2019), such as ‘contribute to human dignity and social justice’, cannot be accomplished without consumer participation. Since museum consumption is experiential, marketing is not one-way (from museums to the public), but consumer experience lies in the centre in museum marketing (Kotler and Kotler, 2000; Thyne and Hede, 2016). Simply engagement with visitors is also far from enough for modern museums, and they are making efforts to co-create with consumers in many dimensions (Lynch, 2011). Museums function as *servicespace* to provide experiences for consumers as well as offer platforms to them to derive value.

Secondly, apart from the core services of preservation and exhibition, there are many other service elements which have influences on consumer experiences, such as the shops and cafes inside museums (Rentschler and Gilmore, 2002). This is in consistency with the *servicescape* model which indicates the human related environmental factors significantly affect the behaviour of both consumers and organisations (Bitner, 1992). The coherence can be found in micro levels as well. For example, *servicescape* research showed that the present strangers can affect consumers’ psychological status, behaviours and experiences (Arnould *et al.*, 1998), which was exemplified in the museum literature: research showed that considerable visitors engaged with the encountered strangers in museums and the involvements contribute to improve overall visiting experiences (Silverman, 2010, p. 14; Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015).

Furthermore, the creation and delivery of social value by the museums through services, and the consumers' receipt of this value, are interconnected with each part affecting the other. Therefore, the services of museums should not be viewed as separated segments but as an organic whole. Adopting the lens of *servicescape* in museum context enables us to consider museum services integrally. Marketing is not the only communication tool with which to approach and attract consumers, as *servicescape* can fulfil museums' social responsibilities and deliver social value. The following section will discuss the *servicescape* of museums in more detail.

## **2.3 Services Provided by Museums**

### **2.3.1 The Core Services of Museums**

The *servicescape* concept places significant importance on the man-made environmental factors that affect consumer experiences (Newman, 2007). Nevertheless, this does not imply that the primary function of the service provider is unimportant. Museums are considered one of the most influential cultural authorities in society (Wu and Wall, 2017). The primary function of a museum is to collect, preserve, study, present, and showcase the physical and intangible legacy of humanity and its surroundings for educational, scholarly, and recreational purposes (Ezenagu, 2023; Ferrer-Yulfo, 2022; Kotler, 2001; Simone, Cerquetti, and La Sala, 2021).

However, the role played by museums is changing in today's society. There is an increasing focus on museums, signalling a wider social mandate beyond conventional education (Altintas, and Yenigül, 2020; Chynoweth *et al.*, 2020). Museums are now perceived as arenas for social transformation, cultural inclusivity, and interactive involvement with communities (Dawson, 2014; Han-Yin and Liem, 2022; McCall and Gray, 2014; Solima, Tani, and Sasso,

2021). As establishments capable of promoting the social, cultural, and political goals of communities, museums extend beyond education to encompass the facilitation of dialogue, diversity, and societal change (Pedretti and Iannini, 2020). This role underscores museums' dual role as a custodian of cultural and historical objects and as a hub for learning and community involvement (Agostino and Arnaboldi, 2021; Yu and Hirzel, 2024). There is a transition towards participatory museology, where museums serve as spaces for the exploration and negotiation of diverse cultural meanings by visitors (Robinson, 2020).

### **2.3.2 Temporary Exhibitions as a Focus for Change-making**

Temporary exhibitions often become a key way to raise and reflect on current concerns within society (Ekstrom, 2012). Permanent collections of museums sometimes are criticised as linked to the social elite's point of view which is differentiated from the mass cultural forms (Brenton and Bouckaert, 2021; McCall and Gray, 2014). Given that temporary exhibitions afford museums the opportunity to present unique themes, objects, and narratives that may not align with the constraints of permanent collection display, they possess the potential to explore areas and groupings of objects that may not be conveniently exhibited in the permanent collection (Mao and Fu, 2022). In addition, the market influence of temporary exhibitions has shown that not only do the range and size of collections influence a museum's target consumers, but also the quality and frequency of temporary exhibitions can affect consumer intention to revisit (Brida, Meleddu, and Pulina, 2012; Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002; Yin, Chen, and Ni, 2023).

### **2.3.3 Online Services**

In addition to the core services of exhibitions, there are many other augmented services which have a significant influence on consumer experience. Online services offer museum

patrons and potential visitors a means to establish a sustained connection with the institution (Kamariotou, Kamariotou, and Kitsios, 2021). In terms of experience delivery, the Internet is a communication tool that can help museums to reach a wider public beyond traditional museum goers and diversify the access to the general public (Whelan, 2015).

Online services are now a vital component in museum *servicescape*, especially in the context of the post COVID-19 pandemic, effectively forming part of the *e-servicescape* (Bonel, Capestro, and Di Maria, 2023; Choi and Kim, 2021). Most modern museums typically have official websites and offer mobile phone oriented applications which give practical information such as opening hours, entrance fees and onsite services, and market commercial products (Fernández-Hernández, Vacas-Guerrero, and García-Muiña, 2021). Museums additionally are able to disseminate background information and give access to online collections and archives to the general public who may not have specialised knowledge of history and art (Golub, Ziolkowski, and Zlodi, 2022). Moreover, museums are increasingly adopting technology to record and post the preparation work for their exhibitions and to offer digital versions of their collections (Bai, 2023; Bertacchini, and Morando, 2013; Komarac, 2014).

Online services can build bridges for visitors to connect with their activities prior to and after their visits, as well as stimulate the interest of new visitors to attend the museums in person (Pisoni, 2020; Suroto, Dewantara, and Wiradarmo, 2020). Although such websites do not provide actual products, they do make the museums more accessible, thereby engaging in a complementary rather than competitive relationship with the physical museum space (Marty, 2007). Beel and Wallace (2020) argue that online activities are not simply technical processes to attract consumers to fun and intelligent experiences of cultural organisations: they have the potential to make long-term change to the socio-spatial relationship.

Today, a growing number of consumers have moved from word-of-mouth feedback and engagement with organisations and are increasingly accustomed to sharing their opinions via online media with museum staff and other visitors (Çolak and Karakan, 2023; Gao and Yu, 2024). There emerges the expression ‘e-word of mouth’ (eWOM), which refers to the trend of consumers using social networks such as TripAdvisor to communicate, share visit experiences, and give other consumers advice (Zanibellato and Casarin, 2018). In this way museum visitors are not satisfied with just passively receiving information but have a strong desire to give direct feedback and express themselves, which can be done easily with social media (Kefi *et al.*, 2024; Li, 2024).

Social media offers a platform for open dialogue and interpretation, allowing museum visitors to express their innermost thoughts, define their identities, actively participate in the meaning-making process, and engage informally with museum authorities and other visitors (Capriotti and Kuklinski, 2012). Social media connects visitors with similar interests and facilitates the development of social relationships (Tomiuc, 2014). Participation in social media can provide individuals with a sense of security and co-presence, contributing to the formation of communities (Hu and Kidd, 2024; Wong, 2015). Through such communication, visitor participation is thereby diversified.

#### **2.3.4 The Commercial Spaces of Museums**

Reports have consistently shown that the commercial spaces, namely the shops and food venues are crucial for satisfying museum visitors (Kirezli, 2011; Komarac, Ozretic-Dosen, and Skare, 2019; Zitzlsperger, 2021). Such leisure and commercial services offer consumers a visit-dependent experience which can extend their visiting time and even encourage them to revisit in the future (Batat, 2020; McIntyre, 2008). High-quality dining establishments contribute to enhancing the ambiance of museums and can attract visitors who are seeking

enjoyable and leisurely experiences, as the atmosphere serves as a significant factor that draws consumers (Kottasz, 2006). The products sold in museum shops, especially books and other educational products, can encourage consumers to reflect on what they have experienced in the museum, creating an informal learning experience and stimulating inspiration (Kent, 2010). These findings mirror those of Yucelt (2001), who reported that visitors generally spend 2.5 hours in a museum, with less than half of this time devoted to the exhibitions. In addition, Jafari, Taheri, and vom Lehn (2013), in their study of an art gallery in Glasgow, state that participants said they typically went to the gallery cafe after their visits and had conversations about the exhibitions including frequently exchanging thoughts with strangers in the cafe.

The consumption facilities are not purely for resting and refreshing oneself, they are spaces in which people can accumulate wisdom and social capital (Corrêa *et al.*, 2022; McIntyre, 2008). Museums as cultural institutions are regarded as safe spaces for groups of consumers from diverse backgrounds to meet and communicate, while participating in social activities (Malt, 2006). The consumption facilities can act as casual meeting spots where people can come together, socialise, and participate in diverse activities, thereby enhancing the sense of community and social connections within a museum environment (Gurian, 2001). In this sense, shops and cafes play a vital role in providing casual, educational, and social experiences by functioning as friendly spaces in which to share one's thoughts and gain knowledge.

### **2.3.5 Community-based Experiences/Engagements**

Community-based services, such as outreach activities, are also an important part of the museum's augmented services, and they have caught the attention of researchers. As public institutions funded by the government, museums have a responsibility to benefit the local

community (Vivant, 2011). According to Kotler and Kotler (2000), connection and interaction with the local community contributes to local-identity and enables museums to approach and support under-served ethnic groups. This is echoed in the conclusions of Borch (2018), who reported that cultural spaces can foster communication among diverse social groups, satisfy the needs of different groups, and generate long-term positive social outcomes, such as inclusion and cultural democracy. By cooperating with local communities, museums can reach more consumers, including those who are not regular visitors (Bradburne, 2001). Moreover, museums can grasp opportunities in community-based services to advocate for social values to the grassroots (Amauchi *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, there is a global phenomenon of emerging brand cooperation between museums and world leaders in the fashion industry, the media, and other industries (Greffé, Krebs, and Pflieger, 2017), promoting museums' brand images and aesthetic values to the public (Stallabrass, 2014).

To summarise the discussion above, Table 1 shows the current research on the experience delivery from museum perspective. It brings the literature on museum services together and classifies them into two categories: physical space and virtual space.

Table 1. Theorising museums as *servicescape*: museums' perspectives on experience delivery.

Theorising museums as <i>servicescape</i> : museums' perspectives on experience delivery	
Physical space	Virtual space
1. Collections, displays and temporary exhibitions (Ober-Heilig et al., 2014).	1. Websites and apps that are information giving (Beel and Wallace, 2020).
2. Events, activities and engagement strategies (Ekstrom, 2012).	(1) Practical information (Fernández-Hernández, Vacas-Guerrero, and García-Muiña, 2021).
3. Cafes, shops and general ambiances (Kent, 2010).	(2) Online archives and exhibitions and

4. Architecture and the interior design of the building (Kotler, 2001).	collection materials (Golub, Ziolkowski, and Zlodi, 2022).  2. Social media platforms for feedback and engagement with visitors (Kefi <i>et al.</i> , 2024).
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This section explores the various services provided by museums from a marketing perspective. In today's ever-changing cultural environment, museums offer a wide range of services that extend beyond their traditional roles of preservation and education (Altintas, and Yenigül, 2020; Chynoweth *et al.*, 2020). These services are designed to enhance visitor engagement, foster community connections, and create enriching experiences for visitors (Ekstrom, 2012). The core services of museums focus on exhibiting local history, with temporary exhibitions serving as catalysts for innovation and change (Kotler and Kotler, 2000; Mao and Fu, 2022). Online services have expanded the reach of museums, making their collections and educational resources accessible to a global visitors (Beel and Wallace, 2020). Additionally, commercial spaces within museums, such as cafes and gift shops, add value to the visitor experience by offering amenities that complement educational and cultural offerings (Kent, 2010). Community-based experiences and engagements highlight the indispensable role of museums in local cultural and social life, fostering deeper connections with diverse visitors (Amauchi *et al.*, 2022). Hence, considering how museum visitors' experience can be understood as customers' experience of *servicescape* is valuable. The following section presents a discussion of this perspective.

## 2.4 Customer experience

### 2.4.1 Customer Experience in Consumer Literature

As previously discussed, museums cannot unilaterally convey value; visitor experience is crucial (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2012; Scott, 2006). Therefore, the focus will now shift from discussing the various services provided by museums to exploring consumer experiences of museums. Literature on consumer experiences provides a framework for examining the multifaceted nature of customer engagements with services. The five dimensions of customer experience—cognitive, affective, social, physical, and sensory—offer a comprehensive perspective through which the ways visitors experience museum services can be analysed (Schmitt, 1999; De Keyser *et al.* 2015; De Keyser *et al.*, 2020; Verleye 2015). Studying these dimensions enables a deep understanding of how visitors engage with different aspects of the museum *servicescape*, and how museum services influence visitors' perceptions and behaviours.

Customer experience pertains to the internal and personal responses that customers have towards any form of direct or indirect engagement they have with a company (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; De Keyser *et al.*, 2015; Kranzbühler *et al.*, 2018; Meyer and Schwager, 2007). Direct interactions generally take place when a customer purchases, receives, or utilises services from a product or service, and these interactions are typically initiated by the customer (Mascarenhas, Kesavan, and Bernacchi, 2006; Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016). Indirect interactions, on the other hand, occur spontaneously and involve a customer's interactions with a company's products, services, or brands, such as word-of-mouth referrals or other forms of online interactions (Mascarenhas, Kesavan, and Bernacchi, 2006; Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016). Customer experience encompasses more than just the transactional elements of buying a product; it also

includes the emotional, sensory, and cognitive reactions that the customer undergoes before, during, and after the purchase (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Pine and Gilmore (1998) characterise customer experience as a significant transformation in the manner in which businesses interact with their customers. They highlight that experiences are inherently individualised and exist solely within the consciousness of the person who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level. In contrast to commodities, products, and services, experiences are distinct to each customer and are influenced by the interplay between the orchestrated event and the customer's mental disposition.

#### **2.4.2 Five Dimensions of Customer Experiences**

Schmitt (1999) proposed the concept of experiential marketing, in which the customer experience consists of five major dimensions: cognitive experiences, affective experiences, social-identity experiences stemming from interactions with a reference group or culture, physical experiences, behaviours, and lifestyles, and sensory experiences.

##### **2.4.2.1 Cognitive Dimension**

According to Schmitt (1999), the cognitive aspects of customer experience revolve around intellectual, cognitive, and problem-solving experiences, engaging customers' creativity. Cognitive factors, such as past experiences and memories, significantly impact the customer journey by evoking social norms and goals, thus influencing customer perceptions and behaviours at various touchpoints and stages. For instance, negative past experiences may hinder customers from continuing to use a service. Future or imagined experiences can also affect the progression of the journey across different touchpoints and stages (Verhoef *et al.*,

2009). Additionally, customers' willingness to engage at different stages can either facilitate or obstruct the progression of the experience (De Keyser *et al.*, 2020). This highlights the importance of understanding and considering cognitive factors in the customer journey. Schmitt (1999) suggests that service providers should incorporate elements of surprise, intrigue, and provocation to stimulate customers' convergent and divergent thinking.

The cognitive dimension of customer experience pertains to the mental processes engaged in customers' perception, interpretation, and assessment of their engagements with a product, service, or setting (Jain, Aagja, and Bagdare, 2017; Pekovic and Rolland, 2020). This encompasses customers' evaluations of the actions taken by the firm, as well as their feedback on areas for enhancement (McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2019). At its core, the cognitive dimension pertains to how customers analyse information, form opinions, and develop perceptions of the service experience, encompassing elements such as perception, cognition, memory, and decision-making (Godovykh and Tasci, 2020).

Prior experiences and memories can trigger norms or goals, significantly influencing the customer journey (De Keyser *et al.*, 2020). Negative interactions with a company's products can substantially affect consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards the company, potentially deterring them from further interaction with the product and leading to declines in brand attitude and purchase intention (Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, and Paladino, 2014; Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016; Thorbjørnsen *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, anticipated or future experiences can have an impact on the journey across various touchpoints and stages (Homburg, Jozić, and Kuehnl, 2017; Zomerdijsk and Voss, 2010). Customers' willingness and readiness to engage at different stages can either accelerate or hinder the progression of the customer journey (Baines *et al.*, 2020; Siebert *et al.*, 2020).

The cognitive dimension of museum visit experience pertains to the intellectual and knowledge-oriented facets of the museum visit (Passebois Ducros and Euzéby, 2021; Romanelli, 2018). Museum visits provide a comprehensive intellectual and knowledge-focused experience, encouraging critical thinking, facilitating the acquisition of knowledge, and offering innovative educational activities that support the spread of knowledge (Kliuchko, 2020). It encompasses activities such as acquiring new information, comprehending concepts, and actively interacting with the exhibits and information presented in museums (Kim Lian Chan, 2009).

#### 2.4.2.2 Affective Dimension

The affective dimension of customer experience encompasses the customer's subjective emotions and sentiments that are aroused and stimulated during the service interaction (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello, 2009). These emotions can range from mildly positive feelings associated with the service experience to intense emotions of joy and pride (Schmitt, 1999). Researchers have observed that an individual's emotional state, such as situational feelings of joy, happiness, and sadness, can exert a profound influence on customer behaviour (De Keyser *et al.*, 2020; Szymkowiak *et al.*, 2021; Williams, 2014). For example, individuals who experience positive emotions tend to be more receptive to trying new services, while those in a negative emotional state often prefer to stick with familiar services and are more likely to be influenced by negative cues in their environment (Puccinelli *et al.*, 2009).

Building emotional connections, including trust, affection, and favourable reactions, with customers can improve their overall experience, resulting in higher satisfaction and loyalty (Juettner *et al.*, 2013; Nadhifa, Sunaryo, and Surachman, 2023). It is important to recognise that the stimuli and the willingness to provoke emotional resonance in a particular situation can differ significantly from one culture to another (Schmitt, 1999).

The affective dimension of a museum visit involves the emotional and personal reactions elicited during the experience. Visitors may feel emotions like happiness, curiosity, nostalgia, inspiration, or personal connections as they engage with the exhibits and activities in a museum (Watson, 2020). The study by Rodriguez *et al.* (2021) on an art museum indicates that individuals visiting art museums encounter a broad spectrum of emotional experiences, which vary depending on factors such as visitor category, gender, familiarity with the museum's theme, and past visitation experiences. Integrating personal narratives and providing opportunities for empathetic reactions can enhance visitors' emotional involvement (Bedigan, 2016).

#### 2.4.2.3 Social Dimension

The social dimension of the customer experience encompasses the broader societal context in which individuals engage with services. This dimension extends beyond personal feelings to connect individuals with external entities, such as social groups, subcultures, or countries (Schmitt, 1999). Customers do not operate in isolation but navigate their experiences within various social roles and expectations shaped by their interactions with family, friends, and broader collectives (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). Consumers are constantly interacting with a variety of individuals, including family members, friends, and members of cultural groups or communities. Each of these individuals has their own set of unique goals, preferences, and needs that may overlap or conflict with those of others (De Keyser *et al.*, 2020).

These collectives, characterised by overlapping and sometimes conflicting goals, preferences, and institutions, profoundly shape customers' perceptions, behaviours, and the overall social landscape in which they operate (Arnould and Price, 1993). The social dimension of customer experience appeals to customers' aspirations for self-improvement and their desire for positive social perception from peers, partners, or colleagues (Schmitt, 1999). This social

context highlights the impact of social rules, norms, and relationships on customers' interactions with services (Akaka and Vargo, 2015; Åkesson, Edvardsson, and Tronvoll, 2014). It also establishes connections between individuals and societal norms, institutions, and collective behaviours that significantly influence customer attitudes and behaviours (De Keyser *et al.*, 2020).

The social dimension is critical, as customers do not exist in isolation but rather in a social context that significantly influences their perceptions and behaviours (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011; Menon and Bansal, 2007). This dimension encompasses the presence of various individuals such as family, friends, and cultural groups, as well as the internalised norms, values, and cognitive frameworks that shape customers' interactions and decision-making processes (Akaka, Vargo, and Schau, 2015). Within this framework, customers are driven not only by personal desires but also by the aspiration to align themselves with an envisioned "ideal self" that reflects their desired identity (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard, 2003; Malär *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, the customer experience extends beyond individual emotions to encompass the need for social validation and acceptance from members in the same social groups, thereby linking the individual to broader social networks and systems (Kuppelwieser *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). Service providers that successfully leverage social-identity experiences can establish strong emotional connections with customers and cultivate lasting relationships founded on shared beliefs and identities (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

The museum experience is characterised by the social dimension, encompassing social interactions that occur between visitors and artefacts, exhibitions, and museum staff (Blunden, 2020; Smirnova and Vinck, 2019; Vom Lehn, 2006). Museum goers do not visit in a vacuum; rather, they participate in a social practice that incorporates a range of interactive and cognitive processes within specific socio-cultural contexts and interpersonal relationships (Coffee, 2007). The social information that visitors bring with them as part of their personal

identities is crucial for them to comprehend the significance of artefacts and exhibitions, create shared experiences, and make informed decisions (Yi *et al.*, 2022). The social dimension of museum experiences is influenced by various factors, such as the composition of the visiting group, the alignment of individual and group agendas, and the social attributes of individuals (e.g., gender, age) (Bitgood, 1993).

#### 2.4.2.4 Physical Dimension

The physical dimension of customer experience comprises elements associated with the tangible aspects of a customer's engagement with a service provider (Roy, Gruner, and Guo, 2022). The presence of customers in a physical setting creates chances for them to engage with tangible aspects of the service environment, interact with staff members and other customers, thereby influencing their overall experience (Berry, Wall, and Carbone, 2006). This dimension includes elements including architecture, ambient conditions, interior design, and product characteristics that contribute to the holistic customer experience (Mohd-Ramly and Omar, 2017; Ryu and Han, 2011). Physical elements play a significant role in shaping customers' perceptions of a service provider's offerings, contributing directly to the customer experience, particularly in cultural settings like museums (Ponsignon, Durrieu, and Bouzdine-Chameeva, 2017). Illustrative examples of physical elements encompass the visual appeal of employees, the design of the environment, and the room temperature (Namkung and Jang, 2008).

The physical dimension of customer experience is centred around enhancing customers' lives by targeting their physical experiences. This entails presenting alternative methods of doing things, exhibiting different lifestyles and social interactions, and taking into account individual physical factors like fatigue or sickness (De Keyser *et al.*, 2020; Schmitt, 1999). In

essence, it involves how brands interact with customers in a tangible manner, shaping their physical experiences and behaviours.

The physical experience within museums involves the exhibition setting, incorporating elements like the architectural design, pathway layout, exhibition spaces, temperature, and the ambience created by elements such as light and sound arrangements (Saraoui *et al.*, 2022). These tangible factors significantly influence how visitors perceive, feel, and act during their museum exploration (Forrest, 2014). Thoughtful design of the physical environment in museums facilitates the creation of atmospheres that augment visitors' appreciation of the exhibited objects, promote engagement, and enhance the overall visiting experience (Forrest, 2013).

#### 2.4.2.5 Sensory Dimension

The sensory dimension of customer experience encompasses human sensory perceptions such as touch, vision, olfaction, taste, and audition, playing a pivotal role in shaping the service encounter (Schmitt, 1999). Sensory dimension pertains to environmental stimuli, including sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures. These stimuli can be encountered by customers during their interactions with the various components of a service context created by the service provider (Schmitt, 1999). Each individual perceives these stimuli uniquely, whether experienced alone or in combination (Mahr, Stead, and Odekerken-Schröder, 2019). In a service context, sensory cues are often multisensory stimuli, such as a combination of taste and smell, where multiple senses influence cognitive and emotional perceptions (Mahr, Stead, and Odekerken-Schröder, 2019). Customer responses and behaviours are evoked through various aesthetics or stimuli present in the service environment (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Stead *et al.*, 2022). Customers can utilise sensory experiences to differentiate between

businesses and their offerings, motivate consumer behaviour, and enhance the value of services by emphasising aesthetics or excitement (Schmitt, 1999).

The museum experience's sensory dimension encompasses proprioception, sensation, and aesthetics, which pertains to the enjoyment or discomfort that visitors may experience.

Museums provide visitors with immersive and interactive environments that include sensory stimuli such as sight, sound, smell, taste, and proprioception (Wang, 2020). These stimuli have the potential to increase visitor engagement and emotional connection, stimulate intellectual and introspective participation, encourage visitors to interpret the artist's intentions, and reflect on their own experiences (Roederer and Filser, 2018). Furthermore, an immersive and engaging interaction with the objects and the cultural context they represent can help visitors understand and appreciate the artefacts on display and the cultural narrative as a whole (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2012).

### **2.4.3 Factors Influencing Consumer Experience**

Research has rigorously examined the diverse factors influencing customer experience across various contexts and industries. Customer experience is influenced by a variety of factors that interact in complex ways (Kranzbühler *et al.*, 2018). Key elements include service quality and encounters at various touchpoints, which directly impact customer satisfaction and overall experience (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Cohen, Prayag, and Moital, 2014; Ieva and Ziliani, 2018; Santos *et al.*, 2022). Pre- and post-purchase activities, such as obtaining up-to-date information and reflection and judgement of the actual obtained value, as well as past experiences, contribute to future customer experiences (De Jesus, and Alves, 2019; Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Homburg, Jozić, and Kuehn, 2017). Emotional responses such as pleasure and contentment significantly influence customer satisfaction, and interactions with other customers also shape the overall experience (Juettner *et al.*, 2013). Personal values and

psychological factors such as perception and motivation play a significant role in shaping how customers perceive and respond to experiences (Stein and Ramaseshan, 2020).

In the realm of cultural consumption, especially in the tourism industry, research has demonstrated that place identity is a significant factor influencing cultural consumption (Davis, 2016; Mayes, 2010; Wang and Chen, 2015). Consumers frequently form emotional and symbolic attachments to particular locations, which contribute to the construction and evolution of their identities and influence their consumption experience (Skandalis, Banister, and Byrom, 2018). Consequently, place identity significantly impacts customer experience in the tourism industry by shaping how individuals perceive, connect with, and engage with a location, thus affecting their overall experiences (Jiang, 2020; Palmer, 2005; Shoukat and Ramkissoon, 2022).

Another critical factor considered a critical determinant of customer experience especially in tourism consumption is cultural values (Hwang and Seo, 2016; McIntosh, Hinch and Ingram, 2002; Squire, 1994; Zare, 2019). These values not only shape customers' expectations but also influence their perceptions of service quality (Karami, Maleki, and Dubinsky, 2016; Thøgersen and Olander, 2002). Cultural values play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, thereby impacting how they perceive and evaluate interactions with service providers (Arnould and Price, 1993; Hsu, and Huang, 2016; Shavitt and Cho, 2016).

#### 2.4.3.1 Place Identity

##### 2.4.3.1.1 Social Identity

Before discussing the concept and influences of place identity, it is essential to clarify the notion of social identity and its impact on customer experience.

Identity works as "the processes through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that identity," (Rounds, 2006, p.133). Influence on identity is a result of both internal representations, which include religion, language, ethnicity, nationalism, and cultural lenses, as well as external social influences, such as the education system, national curriculum, religious institutions, political discourses, media and communication, peer groups, and historical narratives (Qazi, Javid, and Ullah, 2023). Consumption plays a role in shaping one's identity, and this process is also influenced by both internal and external social structural forces (Kleine and Kleine, 2000): internal factors including identity schemas, self-perceptions, motivations, and emotions play a crucial role in shaping these outcomes; external factors such as social structural forces, role stereotypes, cultural norms, and social connections also have a significant impact on individuals' consumption behaviour and identity expression.

Beyond personal identity, Reed II (2002) defines social identity as the psychological bond and self-definition that individuals derive from their membership in specific social groups. Social identity theory suggests that an individual's self-concept is shaped by their association with social groups, which encompasses the value and emotional importance they place on being a member of those groups (Małecka, Mitreğa, and Pfajfar, 2022). This affiliation influences how individuals perceive themselves and their position in the social realm (Spears, 2021). According to Reed II (2002), social identity shapes individuals' self-concept and behaviours within the context of group membership. The significance and self-importance of a particular social identity can affect how individuals perceive themselves and their self-concept (Carter and Marony, 2021). When a social identity is prominent and personally meaningful, it can have a substantial impact on an individual's self-concept (Onorato and Turner, 2004).

Social identity theory asserts that individuals define themselves based on personal and social attributes, and an important part of an individual's self-concept is derived from their membership in a social group (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). According to social identity theory, an individual's identity comprises two dimensions: personal identity and social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). Personal identity is characterised by unique characteristics and traits, while social identity involves individuals defining themselves in relation to social categories or groups, encompassing identification with specific social groups based on factors such as race, age, gender, religion, politics, or organisational affiliations (Underwood, Bond, and Baer, 2001; Małecka, Mitreğa, and Pfajfar, 2022).

This theoretical framework aims to explain the interconnectivity between an individual's self-concept and his/her group affiliation, as well as the influence of social group membership on individual behaviours (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000). In situations where social identity is salient, individuals are inclined to act in accordance with the norms and values of their pertinent social groups to uphold a favourable social identity (Schmader and Sedikides, 2018). They may strive to harmonise their behaviours with the perceived norms of their social groups to preserve a feeling of belonging and a positive self-concept (Terry, Hogg, and White, 1999). In addition, individuals seek to present their in-group identity (the groups they are affiliated with) in a positive light when compared to out-groups (groups they are not affiliated with) (Ouwerkerk *et al.*, 2018).

In essence, social identity theory aims to explain the circumstances under which individuals identify with a group and act in accordance with that group's norms (Zeugner-Roth *et al.*, 2015). Social identity comprises various social categories and plays a crucial role in an individual's self-concept (Reed II, 2002).

The social identity discloses that individuals tend to categorise themselves into social groups based on shared lifestyles and attitudes (Underwood, Bond, and Baer, 2001), thereby affecting how they perceive themselves and others, consequently influencing their consumptions (Małecka, Mitreğa, and Pfajfar, 2022). Customers' interactions with a company are intricately linked to their sense of identity and affiliation within the social context (Bolton *et al.*, 2018; Hwang and Seo, 2016). Such interactions have considerable influence on customers' perceptions of their experiences with the product/service providers, their alignment with the brand's ethos and image, and the role their engagements with the brand play in shaping their social identity (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The social identity theory affects consumers in two main dimensions, in-group and out-group.

In terms of in-group dimension, as the social identity theory suggests that individuals strive to maintain positive social identities and do so by favourably comparing in-group to out-group members, this in-group favouritism drives consumers to choose products that resonate with their social group identity (Chattaraman and Lennon, 2008; He, Li, and Harris, 2012).

Consumers might partake in self-stereotyping by selecting a brand perceived to have strong reflection of their identity and self-esteem (Han, Nam, and Swanepoel, 2023). This behaviour can be viewed as a deliberate affirmation of their belonging to a particular group, strengthening their sense of identity and self-worth. Consumers often utilise their consumption decisions to strengthen their ties to a particular social group or identity, particularly in response to threats or obstacles to that identity (White and Argo, 2009).

Through their affiliation with the brand, consumers symbolically communicate their in-group identity (Han, Nam, and Swanepoel, 2023).

The social identity theory emphasises the distinction between in-group and out-group, suggesting that individuals distance themselves from out-group members in their

consumption choices to avoid signalling undesirable characteristics (Ukrainets and Homburg, 2021). Consequently, consumers may perceive foreign products as representative of the out-group and are more inclined to choose domestically-produced goods that align with their social identity, thus supporting their in-group identity (Zeugner-Roth, Žabkar, and Diamantopoulos, 2015). Under certain conditions, strong national identification may lead consumers to prefer domestic products over foreign ones (Zeugner-Roth, Žabkar, and Diamantopoulos, 2015). For example, He and Wang's study (2015) found that in the Chinese market, consumers who strongly identify with their cultural heritage and take pride in their national identity often show a preference for domestic brands like BaWang shampoo, Xtep athletic shoes, Lenovo mobile phones, and Master Kong bottled water, as opposed to foreign brands such as Pantene, Nike, Samsung, and Nestle. However, whether this tendency manifests similarly in cultural consumption remains underexplored in the current literature.

#### 2.4.3.1.2 Place Identity and its Impact on Customer Experience

Place identity forms an underlying component of oneself's social identity, comparable to other identity classifications like gender and social class (Hauge, 2007). The concept of place identity originates from the discipline of environmental psychology and highlights the significance of the connection between individuals and the physical environments they inhabit or visit (Jiang, 2020). It explores how individuals perceive themselves in relation to a specific place, incorporating elements of continuity, uniqueness, and self-categorisation rooted in their connection to that place (Lewicka, 2008).

Specifically, place identity refers to the emotional and psychological bond that an individual forms with a specific place, which influences their perception, connection, and interaction with the place, ultimately shaping their overall experience and behaviour (Baxter, and Kerr, 2010; Moreno *et al.*, 2021; Twigger-Ross and Uzzell, 1996). Place identity involves the

subjective perceptions, feelings, beliefs, values, and meanings that an individual assigns to a physical location to set themselves apart from others (Peng, Strijker, and Wu, 2020). It encompasses the distinct methods through which individuals form a bond with a particular place, mirroring their self-perception and personal identity within that specific environment (Shoukat and Ramkissoon, 2022). Moreover, place identity includes aspects of personal uniqueness, continuity with past selves and values, self-esteem derived from the place, and self-efficacy to participate in activities at that place (Hallak, Assaker, and Lee, 2015).

Compared to other types of attitudinal constructs such as satisfaction and destination loyalty, place identity is viewed as a more elevated form of affiliation or connection to a place due to its ability to generate a strong sense of loyalty and emotional attachment between consumers and their surroundings (Chen, White, and Ting, 2022; Lee, Levy, and Yap, 2015). Consumers utilise the products they purchase to define and communicate their personal and social identities (Jang and Kim, 2024). Belonging to a particular social group is crucial to the consumer's overall experience, and the selected products serve as an indicator of group membership, allowing the consumer to determine whether they are an insider or an outsider with regards to the origin of the product (Panzone *et al.*, 2016). A consistent place identity promotes positive engagement, whereas an incongruent identity leads to avoidance behaviour (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007). Moreover, customers who perceive alignment between their self-identity and a consumption environment are inclined to demonstrate loyalty to the place (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007).

Skandalis, Banister, and Byrom (2018) conducted a study highlighting the relationship between place identity and music consumption. Their research emphasises the importance of consumers' investments in place identity formation, which significantly shape their self-perceptions, social interactions, and cultural affiliations within the marketplace. Through the

accumulation of various forms of capital within specific places, consumers can attain status within their preferred music genres. These investments not only contribute to the construction of consumer identity but also influence how individuals express themselves through their consumption choices (Skandalis, Banister, and Byrom, 2018).

In the realm of tourism, consumers exhibit a propensity to visit destinations that align with their values and preferences (Janiszewska, 2013). Tourism-related place identity emerges as a resilient and resistant construct, capable of mitigating situational influences on consumer satisfaction (Chen, White, and Ting, 2022). Chen, White, and Ting's (2022) research corroborates this resilience, indicating that travel-related place identities endure environmental fluctuations and remain relatively stable over time.

#### 2.4.3.2 Cultural values

##### 2.4.3.2.1 Cultural Values and Their Impact on Individual and Collective Behaviour

Cultural values are defined as the fundamental principles and stable, long-lasting beliefs that form the basis of an entire culture (Carter, 1991; Fu *et al.*, 2004; Pollay, 1983; Smolicz, 1981). These values are essential convictions that direct actions, shape perspectives, and impact the standards and customs within a community (Carter, 1991; Pollay, 1983). They act as the cornerstone for how individuals in a culture interpret their surroundings, engage with others, and make choices (Roccas and Sagiv, 2010). Schwartz (1999) identifies seven categories of values: Mastery, Harmony, Hierarchy, Egalitarianism, Autonomy, Intellectual, and Affective Autonomy. These categories represent cultural emphases and perspectives on individual and collective behaviour, reflecting a dynamic interplay of contradiction and compatibility within an integrated cultural value system.

Shavitt and Cho (2016) categorise the diverse cultural values of a society into two orientations: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal cultural orientations prioritise values such as equality, uniqueness, self-expression, and interdependence, as exemplified by countries like Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Australia. In contrast, vertical cultural orientations prioritise values such as hierarchy, status, achievement, and obedience to authority, as exemplified by countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, France, South Korea, Japan, and India. People from vertical-collectivist societies may place a higher priority on group goals over individual goals and stress the importance of adhering to authority.

#### 2.4.3.2.2 The Influence of Cultural Values on Consumer Experience

Cultural values serve as a filter through which consumers analyse and assess products and services, ultimately shaping their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards various aspects such as expectations, preferences, consumer behaviour, and interactions (Åkesson, Edvardsson, and Tronvoll, 2014; Carpenter et al., 2013; Henry, 1976; Soyeze, 2012; Xing and Jin, 2023; Yoon, 2009). Cultural values greatly impact the expectations consumers have for the service experience, their evaluations of service quality, and their behavioural intentions towards services (Filieri and Mariani, 2021; Stathopoulou and Balabanis, 2019). Consumers from diverse cultural backgrounds may have varying expectations and evaluations of the service experience, which can be influenced by their cultural norms, traditions, and values (Akaka, and Vargo, 2015; Karami, Maleki, and Dubinsky, 2016; Smith and Reynolds, 2009). Research has shown that consumers show a strong tendency to select products and services that resonate with their cultural values (Nayeem, 2012; Sun, Horn, and Merritt, 2004; Torelli *et al.*, 2012). The alignment of a brand's concept with the cultural values of the local community in which the consumer is located can cultivate a higher level of empathy towards

the service provider and enhance the consumer's favourable view of the product and service (Batra *et al.*, 2017).

With respect to the influence of cultural values of collectivism on consumers, three primary areas can be identified, the first of which pertains to group identity and social connections. Individuals in collectivist societies typically place a higher priority on group identity and social connections than on their own personal preferences (Triandis. *et al.*, 1988). As a result, they may make consumption decisions that reflect their desire to belong to a particular social group (Shavitt and Barnes, 2020). In collectivistic cultures, consumers may be driven by others-oriented motivations and therefore engage in consumption experience to maintain social connections, fulfil obligations, or contribute to the well-being of their social groups (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2014). These influences are evident in China, due to its deep-rooted cultural tradition of collectivism (Barbalet, 2021; Huang, Hassan, and Goh, 2024; Qu *et al.*, 2018).

Studies conducted by researchers (for instance, Kacen and Lee, 2002; Monkhouse, Barnes, and Stephan, 2012; Zakaria, Wan-Ismail, and Abdul-Talib, 2021) have evidenced the impact of the cultural environment in East Asia on consumer demands towards social relationships and collective behaviours. In East Asian societies like China, social-affiliation values are given more significance due to the communal nature of the culture (Kim, and Lee, 2021). This results in an increased value placed on group cohesion and the viewpoints of others, impacting consumer needs towards social connections and interactions (Yuan, Song, and Kim, 2011). Consumers may favour products and services that represent social standing, community principles, or cultural identity in line with their social values (Kim, et al., 2002; Mai, Ketron, and Yang, 2020).

The influence of collectivist cultural values on consumer behaviour is also reflected in their pursuit of validation and social recognition. Since individuals in collectivism cultures assess themselves according to the values and viewpoints of significant others in their social circle, collectivist consumers place considerable importance on seeking approval from others within their social groups and fostering social harmony (Chan *et al.*, 2024; Necula, 2023). Chinese consumers often seek guidance from members of their social circle, pay close attention to consensus cues, and make purchasing decisions that align with the expectations and norms of their group (Li, Ghaffari, and Su, 2020). The desire for public recognition and reassurance plays a more significant role in their purchasing decisions than personal satisfaction or financial savings (Czarnecka, Schivinski, and Keles, 2020). In collectivist cultures, consumers consider the opinions and recommendations of their social circle of important referents like family and friends when evaluating and selecting products and services (Chan and Lau, 2002). Particularly in the purchase of highly involving items such as automobiles, they involve family and friends in the information search process, assessing product suitability based on shared cultural values and preferences (Nayeem, 2012).

Furthermore, collectivism also influences environmental factors in consumer experiences. According to Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011), a consumption environment consists of signs, symbols, and artefacts that are significant components of an ethnic group's symbolic world and hold special, often emotional meaning for members of the group. Collectivist consumers primarily engage in holistic thinking, defining consumption experiences based on environmental factors rather than abstract product or brand features. Consumers with collectivist traits exhibit holistic processing in their thinking style, showing a focus on the overall context and relationships between objects (Hollebeek, 2018). They prefer to interpret experience based on these interconnected relationships (Hollebeek, 2018). In collectivist

cultures, factors such as store layout, product placement, and retailer reputation play significant roles in shaping consumer experiences (Shavitt and Barnes, 2020).

#### 2.4.3.2.3 Chinese Cultural Values and the Influence on Customer Experience

Chinese society is influenced by Confucianism, which emphasises collectivist cultural values and presents the characteristics of a collectivist society (Lin, 2010; Yau, 1988; Wu *et al.*, 2018). Guided by Confucianism, Chinese society emphasises the priority of the interests of the family, the community and society as a whole over the interests of the individual (Feng, Jin, and Johansson, 2021; Sheh, 2001). This collectivist cultural value orientation is reflected in the behaviour of individuals and societal organisation, emphasising interpersonal harmony, respect for authority, and collective well-being (Lin, 2020; Wang, Juffermans, and Du, 2016; Yeh *et al.*, 2013). In traditional Chinese culture values, Chinese tend to link their identities and values closely to their families, communities and the nation, as opposed to emphasising self-fulfilment and independence (Zhang and Harwood, 2004).

Overall, research has found that four traditional Chinese cultural values influence consumer experience, including tourism experiences (Huang, Hassan, and Goh, 2024; Hsu and Huang, 2016; Jin Hoare and Butcher, 2008; Sheh, 2001). These cultural values are face (Mianzi), relationships and networking (*guanxi*), hierarchy and respect for authority, and harmony.

Face is associated with the respect, dignity, and prestige that individuals or organisations hold within social contexts (Siu, Kwan, and Zeng, 2016). Maintaining face is crucial for establishing trust and reputation (Sheh, 2001). It involves a mutual relationship of respect and courtesy, emphasising the importance of acquiring or safeguarding one's face in social interactions (Kwek, Wang, and Weaver, 2019). The concept of face influences customer satisfaction by enhancing social status through respectful and attentive service interactions (Huang, Hassan, and Goh, 2024; Jin Hoare and Butcher, 2008; Zhang, Pearce, and Chen,

2019). In the tourism industry, preserving dignity and reputation leads to a preference for prestigious and highly-rated travel destinations (Hsu and Huang, 2016).

Guanxi refers to social connections or relationships grounded in mutual benefits and interests (Nolan and Rowley, 2020). It is a prevalent cultural value that shapes the behaviour of Chinese individuals (Barbalet, 2021). It can stem from various factors such as locality, dialect, fictive kinship, family, workplace, social clubs, and friendship (Wu and Chiu, 2016). The personalised and reciprocal nature of *guanxi* can significantly impact the consumer experience by fostering trust, improving the quality of relationships between consumers and product and service providers, and increasing consumers' willingness to trust and support their peers' recommendations and decisions (Fock and Woo, 1998; Lin *et al.*, 2018; Yang, 2019).

In terms of hierarchy and respect for authority, in Confucian tradition, there is a strong focus on hierarchy and respect for authority figures (Taylor, 1989). This cultural value system greatly impacts social behaviour and interpersonal relationships, underscoring the significance of preserving structured social orders and showing deference to those in higher positions (Evasdottir, 2004). These values are deeply embedded in Chinese societal norms and significantly influence individual behaviour (Tian, 2021).

This emphasis on hierarchy and respect for authority shapes interactions and expectations within tourism services (Hsu and Huang, 2016). Moreover, a study by Dion and Borraz (2017) is noteworthy because it explores how respect for authority and hierarchy greatly affect the Chinese consumer experience within the *servicescape* by shaping social interactions and behaviours in the context of luxury consumption. The physical and social elements of the *servicescape* establish a hierarchical environment, compelling consumers to conform to elite class expectations to achieve social acceptance. This setting inherently segregates consumers,

reinforcing social intimidation and class distinctions. Consequently, the hierarchical structure within the *servicescape* assigns specific roles to consumers, influencing their overall experience and behaviour in these retail spaces.

The cultural value of harmony is characterised by an individual's inner balance and the balance between individuals and their social and natural environments (Ren, Wang, and Lv, 2022). Chinese individuals strive to maintain harmony, often conforming to societal norms within groups (Qu *et al.*, 2018). This concept reflects the collectivist nature of Chinese culture, where group conformity and the maintenance of harmonious relationships are essential (Lau *et al.*, 2023). This value leads to the avoidance of conflict and the pursuit of smooth, harmonious experiences, affecting the selection of destinations and activities that are seen as peaceful and pleasant (Hsu and Huang, 2016). It significantly influences customer experiences, especially in hospitality service industries such as tourism and dining, affecting satisfaction, compliance, tourist motivations, and experiences (Huang, Hassan, and Goh, 2024; Jin, Hoare, and Butcher, 2008; Wei, 2018).

## **2.5 Customer Experience in Museum Context**

It is essential to clarify the terminology used to describe museum customers. In much of the literature on museum marketing, terms such as "visitor" and "audience" are used interchangeably (Hutchinson and Eardley, 2021; Kotler, 2001; Kotler and Kotler, 2000; Robinson, 2020). Some studies predominantly refer to customers as "audience" (Coffee, 2007; Easson and Leask, 2020; Falk, 2016; Hutchinson and Eardley, 2021; Robinson, 2020), while others mainly use the term "visitor" (Komarac, Ozretic-Dosen, and Skare, 2020; Kottasz, 2006; Li, 2024; Marty, 2007; Roederer and Filser, 2018; Thyne and Hede, 2016; Yucelt, 2001).

In this research, the term "visitor" is primarily used to describe museum customers. This choice is based on the theoretical framework of *servicescape* and customer experience, which examines not only the customers' experience of viewing exhibitions but also their experience of other services and interactions within the museum, as well as the underlying influencing factors.

### **2.5.1 Visitors' Expectations for Visiting Museums**

Three primary expectations for visiting museums are determined according to the current literature. The first of these is to actively engage with the exhibitions and activities and obtain new knowledge (Allan and Altal, 2016; Kamolpattana *et al.*, 2015; Ober-Heilig, Bekmeier-Feuerhahn, and Sikkenga, 2014). This suggests that the visitors' primary intention to visit museums is to engage with the historical, aesthetic and other kinds of knowledge to broaden their horizons and enhance their spiritual cultivation (Cotter, Fekete, and Silvia, 2022). Research shows that Chinese museum visitors aspire to find enlightenment, inspiration, and spiritual enrichment by engaging with heritage objects and cultural relics (Lo *et al.*, 2019). Museums are regarded as informal educational establishments that offer opportunities for Chinese visitors to acquire knowledge and develop an appreciation for heritage resources (Shen *et al.*, 2020).

The second expectation is to be entertained (Vaux Halliday and Astafyeva, 2014). In spite of the frequency of visiting museums, the majority of museum visitors expect to have a relaxing and enjoyable experience (Sheng and Chen, 2012). Thirdly, a significant number of visitors anticipate the acquisition of social capital by visiting museums, viewing them as opportunities to enhance their social capital through fostering community spirit, creativity, and interpersonal connections (Burton and Griffin, 2008; Ji *et al.*, 2014).

Social capital is highly valued by museum visitors and can be profoundly important to the experience (Smith and Zimmermann, 2017). Social capital can be described as a collective resource comprising shared norms, trust, networks, social relations, and institutions that enable cooperation and joint actions for mutual advantage (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009; Robison, Sandefur and Laumann, 1998; Schmid and Siles, 2002). It encompasses the resources found within social relationships and networks that individuals and communities can leverage to accomplish shared objectives, promote collaboration, and improve overall well-being (Lochner, Kawachi, and Kennedy, 1999; Paldam, 2000).

Specifically, museum visitors seek to get acquainted with unknown people who have the same interest and also strengthen companionship with friends and families (Kinghorn and Willis, 2008). Various studies (for instance, Debenedetti, 2003; Jafari, Taheri, and vom Lehn, 2013; Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015; vom Lehn and Heath, 2016) have found that the museum visitor experience is strongly affected by the present of strangers, with the cafes and restaurants functioning as social centres that enable visitors to communicate with strangers who have the same interests. Enhancing relationships with families and friends is one focus of museum visits but many visitors also have the desire to meet new people and make connections with others during their visit (Smith and Zimmermann, 2017). Interaction with other visitors not only spark inspirations and meaning making, but also creates connections and even support communities, and in the process, encourage diversity in participation (Nielsen, 2017) .

Research has shown that it is a trend in Western museums to adopt a variety of participatory activities such as late night openings, tours of collections, sleepovers for children, and other kinds of themed events, and these events are widely welcomed by visitors because of their sociable attributes (Kinghorn and Willis, 2008; Kotler, 2001; Romualdo, 2013; Walker, 2016). There remains a clear gap in the literature between the expectations of Western and

non-Western visitors and this study will help to determine whether visitors in China also share these key expectations to obtain an experience which is unfamiliar to their daily life and accumulate social capital from museums.

### **2.5.2 Visitors' Identity and Museum Experience**

Falk and his fellow researchers' series of studies have investigated the relationship between museum visitors' identity and their museum experience. To gain a comprehensive understanding, it is essential to examine Falk's perspective on the concept of identity. According to Falk, identity is a multifaceted, evolving construct that is shaped by both social and physical environments (Falk, 2006; Falk, 2008; Falk and Storksdieck, 2010). It is suggested that individuals develop multiple identities as a result of their interactions with their environment (Falk, 2010). The researchers introduce two key concepts to explain identity: the big 'I' identity and the little 'i' identity (Falk, 2008; Falk, Heimlich, and Bronnenkant, 2008; Falk, 2011).

The big 'I' identities are comparatively stable fundamental identities that encompass an individual's inherent characteristics in important social and cultural categories, such as gender, nationality, race and ethnicity, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation (Falk, 2008; Falk, 2011). These core identities form the essential elements of an individual's self-concept and generally persist throughout their lifetime (Falk, 2008). In contrast, the little 'i' identities are transient, adaptable components of identity that are influenced by specific situations and circumstances (Falk, 2008; Falk, 2011). These situational identities are flexible, capable of responding to current circumstances, social interactions, and personal needs, and can evolve as required in different situations and particular moments (Falk, 2011). In other words, the big 'I' identities refer to enduring core identities, while the little 'i' identities are context-specific identities that are more adaptable and responsive to the demands and circumstances

of a particular moment, for example, one's feeling of belonging to a family, being a supportive friend, or holding a respected position as an employee (Bond and Falk, 2013). By distinguishing between these different levels of identity, Falk's model illustrates the intricate interplay between an enduring core identity and a dynamic situational identity.

Falk's identity model acknowledges the interplay of social influences, cultural factors, and individual elements in shaping identity formation. Identity is viewed as malleable, evolving, and embedded in the physical and socio-cultural world of reality. Furthermore, Falk notes that individuals possess a variety of identities, most of which are influenced by their interactions with the world around them. Thus, identities are not fixed, but are formed and evolve over time.

The research conducted by Falk, Moussouri, and Coulson (1998) revealed that a visitor's pre-visit agenda has a direct impact on their behaviour and learning within a museum. These agendas encompass a visitor's motivations and strategies prior to visiting the museum, which may be driven by social, educational, recreational, or cultural factors, as well as specific travel plans and objectives. The pre-visit agenda sets the tone for how visitors engage with the exhibits and shapes the nature of their museum experience.

#### 2.5.2.1 Visitors' Identity and Motivations

Visitors' identities significantly shape their motivations and learning experiences in museums (Falk, 2006; Falk, 2016). The factors that shape visitors' motivations for attending museums are closely tied to their identities, including their interests, backgrounds, and personal experiences (Falk, 2016). In this context, it is important to consider both the big "I" identities previously discussed and the situational and context-driven multiple identities that visitors may enact, referred to as the little 'i' identities (Falk, 2008; Falk, 2011). For instance, individuals with a strong cultural identity, which can be interpreted as one of the big 'I'

identities, may be motivated to explore exhibits that relate to their heritage or identity (Falk, 2016). Conversely, visitors' motivations may be influenced by their little 'i' identities, which are based on situational and context-driven factors, leading to varying behaviors and learning outcomes. Visitors may identify themselves as explorers, facilitators, professionals or hobbyists, experience seekers, or spiritual pilgrims during their museum visit (Falk, 2006; Falk, Heimlich, and Bronnenkant, 2008). Each of these identities represents varying motivations and goals that visitors bring to their museum experience. Visitors may demonstrate varying motivations related to their identities across multiple visits, interacting with the museum in diverse ways depending on their changing needs and preferences (Falk, 2011).

Falk and Storksdieck (2010) further explored the relationship of identities and visitor motivation in a different context. It was discovered that in the science learning in a leisure setting, visitors are driven by motivations linked to their identities, which shape their learning experiences (Falk and Storksdieck, 2010). These motivations reflect aspects of the self that visitors leverage to facilitate their visit and interact with the environment in ways that communicate their identity to others (Falk and Storksdieck, 2010).

Falk summarised in his study in 2011 that cultural institutions' visitors are motivated by identity-related factors, such as their professional interests, curiosity, social facilitation, pursuit of experiences, and spiritual fulfilment. These motivations demonstrate a visitor's sense of self impacts their decision to visit cultural institutions.

#### 2.5.2.2 Visitors' Identity and Engagement

Visitors' identities can impact how they interpret and engage with museum exhibits, programs, and content (Falk, 2006; Falk, 2011; Falk, 2016). Research extended to the role identity plays in visitor engagement in specific contexts, such as science learning within leisure settings

(Falk and Storksdieck, 2010) and other cultural institutions like museums and zoos (Falk, 2011). Visitors to science centres and cultural institutions engage in self-reflection and self-interpretation of their experiences, aiming for consistency and significance (Falk and Storksdieck, 2010). The process of visiting museums and zoos involves understanding their connection to the environment, both physical and social, which contributes to shaping their identity (Falk and Storksdieck, 2010).

#### 2.5.2.3 Visitors' Identity and Satisfaction

In terms of visitor satisfaction, Falk's study conducted in 2008 shows that visitors bring narratives with them that shape their self-concepts and guide their learning and behaviour in the museum. The level of satisfaction with their experiences is often influenced by the alignment of these entry narratives. In a similar, yet in a distinct context of science learning within leisure settings, it has been observed that visitors are driven to explore institutions dedicated to informal science education in order to satisfy particular identity-related needs (Falk, 2008). The perceived worth and usefulness of these visits are closely tied to the fulfilment of those needs (Falk, 2008).

Research on visitor experiences emphasizes identity as a key factor influencing how individuals perceive and interpret their experiences (Liu, 2020; Shoukat and Ramkissoon, 2022). Identity plays an important role in shaping meaning-making processes, guiding interactions, and affecting emotional and cognitive responses to a setting (Pilarska, 2017). Falk's contributions to identity research in museum contexts have significantly advanced the understanding of this relationship, offering a framework for analysing both stable and fluid aspects of identity. He distinguishes between "big I" identity, which represents an enduring core shaped by characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and cultural heritage (Falk, 2008;

Falk, 2011), and "little i" identity, which reflects situational roles that shift based on context and immediate interactions (Falk, 2011; Bond and Falk, 2013).

Between these two levels of identity, various types of identities exist that mediate between the stable and the situational. These intermediate identities bridge enduring big I identities, such as core traits and long-term self-concepts, and little i identities, which shift according to situational demands. For instance, Stryker and Burke (2000) highlight the existence of a hierarchy of identities that guide behaviours, with some identities becoming more salient in specific contexts, thus mediating between stable personal traits and situational roles.

Similarly, Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley (2008) discuss professional and organisational identities as intermediate forms that help individuals navigate between their enduring personal identities and their role-based situational identities within organizational settings.

Place identity is one example of such an intermediate identity. It links an individual's sense of self to specific locations and environments, reflecting how personal and cultural associations with a place shape their experiences and meanings (Hauge, 2007; Lewicka, 2011; Proshansky, 1978). As Kawai (2020) demonstrates, identity can evolve through interaction with specific contexts, such as service experiences, showcasing how it is neither wholly fixed nor entirely fluid but shaped by both internal characteristics and external circumstances.

Research shows that place identity is intricately linked to tourism experiences, shaping how visitors perceive, interpret, and engage with destinations (Peng, Strijker, and Wu, 2020).

Place identity can operate as a conceptual bridge within Falk's framework, challenging the rigid dichotomy between the stability of big I identity and the fluid adaptability of little i identity. Rather than merely occupying an intermediary position, it actively negotiates and reshapes the interplay between enduring self-conceptions and context-driven identity shifts.

In the context of museum visit experiences, place identity becomes particularly significant, as visitors' engagement with exhibitions is shaped by their personal and cultural associations with the museum space (Taheri, Jafari, and O'Gorman, 2014). This suggests that museum experiences are not only mediated by individual motivations and situational factors but are also deeply intertwined with visitors' place-based identities, influencing how they perceive, interpret, and derive meaning from their visit. It reflects an individual's connection to specific physical and cultural environments, such as museums, heritage sites, or science centres (Chen, White, and Ting, 2022). Unlike the deeply ingrained nature of the big I identity, which remains relatively unchanged across time and contexts, place identity is shaped by both enduring associations and contextual influences tied to the environment (Hallak, Assaker, and Lee, 2015; Shoukat and Ramkissoon, 2022). At the same time, it is more stable and persistent than the little i identity, which is entirely situational and responsive to immediate demands (Falk, 2008; Falk, 2011).

For example, a visitor with a strong cultural identity (big I identity) may connect deeply with a museum exhibit that reflects their heritage, reinforcing their sense of self. Simultaneously, their place identity could be influenced by the museum's design, atmosphere, and symbolic significance, providing a semi-stable framework for engagement (Davis, 2016; Korpela, 1989). This contrasts with the situational roles (little i identities) they may adopt during the visit, such as being an explorer, facilitator, or learner (Falk, 2006; Falk, Heimlich, and Bronnenkant, 2008). In this way, place identity mediates the interplay between an individual's core and situational identities, shaping how they interpret and engage with the environment.

This intermediate layer fills a gap within Falk's original framework by emphasizing the role of physical and cultural spaces in identity formation and expression. It acknowledges that museum visitors' experiences are not solely shaped by who they are (big I identity) or the

roles they assume in the moment (little i identity), but also by their semi-enduring relationship with the environment. By incorporating place identity into Falk's model, a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between individuals and museum spaces emerges, highlighting the significance of spatial and environmental factors in shaping identity-related motivations, engagement, and satisfaction. This nuanced perspective bridges the gap between core and situational identities, enriching the overall understanding of visitor experiences in cultural institutions.

### **2.5.3 Cultural Values in Museum Context**

Cultural values play a critical role in shaping the experiences of museum visitors by influencing their expectations, perceptions of service quality, and engagement with exhibits. These values are important in forming individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, impacting their interactions and overall satisfaction with museum visits (Goulding, 2000).

Camarero Izquierdo and Garrido Samaniego (2011) argue that cultural values significantly influence museum visitors' experiences through the cultural activities provided. These activities, designed to be enjoyable and educational, foster emotional connections and enhance visitor satisfaction. Elements such as group composition, interaction, and the incorporation of new technologies are crucial in shaping participants' emotions and satisfaction.

Chen (2015) found that visitors' motivations for visiting museums vary significantly based on their cultural backgrounds. For instance, motivations of individuals from Western countries, Malaysia, and Thailand differ due to their distinct cultural contexts. Chen's research (2015) shows that whereas Western visitors may pursue a variety of experiences in museums, such

as intellectual, professional, and personal enrichment, Malaysian and Thai visitors primarily regard museums as educational resources.

Both Suhartanto *et al.* (2022) and Zeng, Liu, and Xu (2022) examine the influence of collectivism on visitor experience. Suhartanto *et al.* (2022) emphasise cultural values by contrasting the impacts of collectivism and indulgence on visitor experience. They asserted that collectivism fosters a sense of belonging and connection, enhancing the overall experience of visitors. Conversely, visitors from indulgence-oriented cultures tend to have more positive attitudes, enjoy their experiences more, and retain more positive memories, all of which positively affect their experience quality. On the other hand, Zeng, Liu, and Xu (2022) found in their study on virtual tourism experiences that cultural values significantly impact experiences within cultural institutions. Visitors with collectivist values may experience a stronger sense of collective pride, which in turn enhances their willingness to share and disseminate the culture they experience through virtual reality.

The body of literature on the impact of cultural values on museum visitor experiences is relatively limited and lacks sufficient depth. Although the aforementioned studies demonstrate that cultural values, such as collectivism, have some influence on visitor experiences, existing research generally lacks a systematic and in-depth exploration of cultural values within the specific context of museums.

## **2.6 A Comprehensive Examination of Museum Visitor Experiences: Integrating Key Perspectives**

Museum visitor experiences are shaped by an intricate interplay of personal identity, marketing strategies, and cultural values (Falk, 2016; Goulding, 2000; Jafari, Taheri, and vom Lehn, 2013). Drawing on Falk's insights into museum marketing, foundational principles from services marketing, and tourism literature addressing cultural values, this synthesis provides a holistic framework to provide a comprehensive basis for examining museum visitor experiences.

### **2.6.1 Falk's Museum Marketing Insights**

The concepts of big 'I' identity and little 'i' identity, as outlined by Falk, play a crucial role in shaping museum visitor experiences by influencing their motivations, engagement, and satisfaction. Big 'I' identities, which encompass stable and enduring characteristics such as gender, nationality, cultural heritage, and other fundamental social and cultural attributes, serve as the foundation for visitors' self-concept. These core identities guide visitors' interests and motivations, leading them to engage with exhibits that align with their heritage, cultural background, or personal identity, thereby creating meaningful connections with museum content (Falk, 2008; Falk, 2011). For instance, visitors with a strong cultural identity may feel drawn to exhibitions that reflect their traditions, fostering a deeper emotional connection to the museum experience (Falk, 2016).

In contrast, little 'i' identities are situational and fluid, shaped by immediate contexts and specific interactions. These identities influence visitors' roles during their museum visits, such as acting as explorers, facilitators, learners, or spiritual pilgrims, each of which reflects a unique motivation and expectation for the visit (Falk, Heimlich, and Bronnenkant, 2008).

These situational identities enable visitors to adapt their behaviour and engagement based on the specific environment and social interactions they encounter, creating dynamic and personalized experiences (Falk, 2011). For example, a visitor assuming the identity of an "explorer" might focus on discovering new knowledge, whereas a "facilitator" might prioritize guiding family members through the exhibits.

The interplay between these two levels of identity shapes how visitors interpret and engage with exhibits and programs, creating a balance between the stable aspects of their self-concept and the situational demands of the visit (Falk and Storksdieck, 2010). This dual influence also extends to visitor satisfaction, as the alignment of museum experiences with both their core and situational identities can lead to a more fulfilling and memorable visit. For instance, when visitors' personal narratives and expectations align with the museum's offerings, their overall satisfaction and perceived value of the experience are significantly enhanced (Falk, 2008).

The interaction between big 'I' identities and little 'i' identities provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the diverse and dynamic ways in which visitors engage with museums. By addressing both the enduring and situational aspects of identity, museums can create experiences that resonate deeply with their audiences, fostering engagement, learning, and emotional connection (Dorph, Cannady, and Schunn, 2022; Rounds, 2006). In this context, the concept of place identity emerges as a critical intermediary, offering additional depth to the analysis by addressing how environmental and spatial factors influence and mediate these identity interactions.

Through an extensive review of the literature, a gap in existing frameworks was identified, and it is anticipated that the concept of place identity, acting as a bridge between core and situational identities, could provide a valuable lens for understanding and interpreting

museum visitor experiences. Place identity is shaped by visitors' connection to physical and cultural environments, which mediate the interaction between stable self-concepts and situational roles (Chen, White, and Ting, 2022; Hallak, Assaker, and Lee, 2015). This nuanced perspective underlines how museums can leverage both identity dimensions and spatial connections to enhance visitor satisfaction and engagement (Davis, 2016; Korpela, 1989).

### **2.6.2 Foundational Principles from Services Marketing**

Services marketing principles provide critical insights into how museums, as experiential spaces, can attract, engage, and retain visitors (Packer and Ballantyne, 2002; Taheri, Jafari, and O'Gorman, 2014). Modern museums function not only as repositories of cultural and historical artefacts but also as dynamic environments where consumer participation and co-creation of value are central to fulfilling their social responsibilities (Kotler and Kotler, 2000; Thyne and Hede, 2016). Drawing on the *servicescape* framework (Bitner, 1992), museums can be conceptualised as holistic environments where physical settings, ambient conditions, and human interactions shape visitor perceptions, emotions, and behaviours.

Key components of the *servicescape*, such as spatial layout, ambient conditions, and symbolic artefacts, significantly influence visitor experiences. For example, the design of exhibition spaces, the availability of social and leisure areas such as cafes and shops, and the behaviour of other visitors contribute to creating a welcoming and engaging environment (Arnould, Price, and Tierney, 1998; Silverman, 2010). Moreover, the concept of *e-servicescape* (Harris and Goode, 2010) emphasises the importance of digital environments in enhancing museum accessibility and engagement, particularly through online collections, social media platforms, and interactive virtual exhibitions (Beel and Wallace, 2020).

Integrating these tangible and intangible elements allows museums to deliver an enriching visitor experience.

### **2.6.3 Cultural Values and Tourism Literature**

Cultural values play a pivotal role in shaping visitor expectations, behaviours, and perceptions of museum experiences (Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2012; Li, 2024). Cultural values influence how individuals interpret exhibits, interact with museum spaces, and evaluate service quality (Roccas and Sagiv, 2010; Filieri and Mariani, 2021). For instance, visitors from collectivist cultures may prioritise group-oriented experiences and social connections, as evidenced in the East Asian context, where social harmony, respect for authority, and group identity significantly impact consumer behaviour (Barbalet, 2021; Huang, Hassan, and Goh, 2024).

The concept of face (*mianzi*) and its emphasis on social status and respect is particularly relevant in Chinese cultural contexts, where maintaining dignity and fostering relationships (*guanxi*) significantly influence visitor satisfaction and engagement (Hsu and Huang, 2016; Siu, Kwan, and Zeng, 2016). Similarly, the emphasis on harmony and collective well-being informs preferences for peaceful and cooperative experiences within museum spaces (Ren, Wang, and Lv, 2022). These cultural dimensions underscore the importance of aligning museum offerings with the values and expectations of diverse visitor groups to enhance inclusivity and relevance.

### **2.6.4 A Holistic Framework for Visitor Experiences**

The integration of Falk's identity framework, *servicescape* principles, and cultural values provides a comprehensive and multidimensional model for understanding and enhancing museum visitor experiences. Each perspective contributes a distinct yet interconnected

dimension—identity shapes motivations and behaviours (Falk, 2008; Falk, 2011), *servicescape* influences visitor interactions (Bitner, 1992; Harris and Goode, 2010), and cultural values frame these experiences within diverse social and cognitive contexts (Roccas and Sagiv, 2010; Filieri and Mariani, 2021).

By integrating these perspectives, a comprehensive foundation is established for examining museum visitor experiences, considering the interplay between place identity, cultural values, and visitor experiences. This framework not only enhances the understanding of how diverse place identities and cultural contexts shape visitor engagement, but also provides insights into the broader role of museums as platforms for cultural exchange, community engagement, and social transformation (Kotler and Kotler, 2000; Thyne and Hede, 2016). By recognizing and adapting to the complex and multifaceted nature of visitor experiences, this approach provides a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of museum visitor engagement and interactions.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework guiding this literature review. The framework positions the museum *servicescape* experience at its core, highlighting its interconnections with two key theoretical dimensions: place identity and cultural values.

Museum *servicescape* experience represents the holistic experiential outcomes that visitors derive from interacting with a museum's *servicescape*. As depicted in Figure 1, this construct is shaped by two fundamental dimensions: Place identity significantly shapes museum visitor experiences by mediating the interaction between visitors' stable (big 'I') and situational (little 'i') identities, influencing their emotional connections, satisfaction, and overall engagement. Cultural values reflect societal and communal beliefs influencing visitors' perceptions, interpretations, and expectations of the museum services.

This conceptualisation emphasizes the importance of integrating place identity and cultural values to deeply understand how museum *servicescapes* can be designed and managed to enhance meaningful visitor experiences.

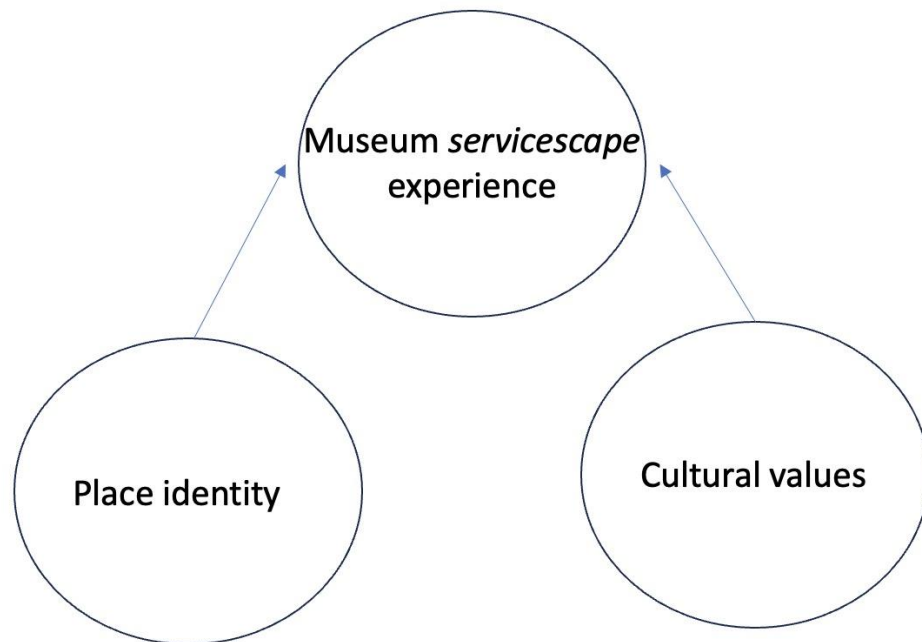


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Museum Servicescape Experience, Place Identity, and Cultural Values

## 2.7 Conclusion

The literature review begins by examining the trend towards the marketisation of museums, highlighting the adoption of marketing strategies to enhance visibility, attract diverse visitors, and generate revenue. This shift is driven by the necessity for museums to remain attractive and competitive in a fierce cultural consumption market and to ensure financial sustainability. The review investigates museum marketing through the lens of the *servicescape* concept, which considers how physical and social environments influence customer experiences. This framework is applied to the museum context, discussing the range of services provided by museums.

The review then addresses the various services offered by museums, including core services such as exhibitions, which constitute the fundamental function of museums. Temporary exhibitions are emphasised as dynamic elements that introduce innovation and attract repeat visitors. The provision of online services, such as virtual tours and digital collections, is analysed as a means to reach wider public and enhance accessibility. Commercial spaces within museums, such as cafes and gift shops, are discussed in terms of their role in enhancing the visitor experience. Community-based experiences and engagements are highlighted for fostering deeper connections with local communities and promoting cultural participation.

The literature review then analyses the concept of customer experience, examining it through consumer literature and exploring the five dimensions of customer experiences: cognitive, affective, social, physical, and sensory. Factors influencing consumer experience are discussed, with a focus on place identity and cultural values. The concept of place identity and its influence on consumer experiences within the service industry, with a particular focus on cultural consumption and the tourism sector, is subsequently examined. The influence of cultural values on customer experience is explored, with a particular focus on four Chinese cultural values that significantly impact customer experience. The review concludes by discussing customer experience in the museum context and emphasising the need for further research on the impact of cultural values on museum visitor experiences.

Through the literature review, it is evident that there exists a gap in the current research. The impact of *servicescape* on customer experience has been extensively documented, with studies thoroughly examining how the physical environment, social environment, and service interactions affect overall customer experience. Additionally, existing studies have demonstrated that place identity and cultural values play a significant role in cultural and

tourism consumption, particularly influencing the customer experience in cultural institutions such as museums.

However, there is a lack of a comprehensive perspective that integrates *servicescape*, customer experience, and influencing factors (place identity and cultural values) into a unified framework to explore how these factors influence customer experience of *servicescape*. The context of Chinese museums provides an ideal setting for studying how place identity and cultural values affect customer experience of *servicescape*. In this context, the place identity and cultural values of Chinese domestic consumers may influence their visitor experience.

Therefore, conducting research in the context of Chinese museums can reveal the specific impact of place identity and cultural values on the customer experience of *servicescape*. This can provide valuable theoretical contributions and practical guidance for service providers to design and optimise the *servicescape*. This approach not only helps to fill the existing research gap but also offers new insights and methods for improving service quality and customer satisfaction. By deeply exploring this area, consumer needs can be better understood, thereby optimising service design and enhancing overall consumer experience in cultural and tourism consumption.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design Rationale**

#### **3.1.1 Philosophical Stance**

This section will discuss the philosophical stance, the choices of ontology and epistemology of the research.

The philosophical standpoint is related to the basic belief system in research; it guides the researcher in the fundamental ways of ontology and epistemology, lays the foundation of research inquiry, guides as well as justifies the adopted methods (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). In essence, the philosophical standpoint begins with ontology and determines epistemology. Ontology is the assumption of the nature of reality and epistemology is the way of inquiring into that nature (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015, p.47). Epistemology underpins the types of research questions and accordingly research methods to collect data that can answer the research questions (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015, p.47). The combination of epistemology and ontology is the research paradigm, and the paradigm determines the methodology (Kuhn, 1970). Certain epistemologies and ontologies lead to certain methods, which corresponds to the understanding of reality and knowledge. Research paradigm and methodology are closely related. Therefore, one type of ontology can hardly lead to different epistemologies. Vice-versa, it will be illogical to adopt an epistemology on the basis of other ontologies (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). A researcher must critically evaluate their beliefs and assess their alignment with their worldview in order to make an informed decision about their philosophical position.

### 3.1.1.1 Social Constructivism

This research study is grounded in a social constructivism paradigm. Museum visiting experiences are based on the real-life experience of the visitors and how they construct meanings. As demonstrated in previous chapters, the visitor experience is a dynamic process that can be influenced by a range of factors, including a visitor's background, personal life experiences, and knowledge (Thyne and Hede, 2016; Szarucki and Menet, 2018). The exhibits and information provided by museums are merely one aspect of the overall visiting experience. The comprehension and interpretation of these exhibits are contingent upon the individual visitor's capacity for understanding and cultural factors such as educational background, and cultural heritage. Additionally, socio-cultural factors play a significant role in shaping the visitor's experience (Baradaran Rahimi, 2014; Yang *et al.*, 2023). It is important to recognize that this type of information is subjective and difficult to quantify, as it relies heavily on human interaction and interpretation. Hence, this research is in consistency with social constructionism (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015, p.54).

Social constructionism states that, unlike natural science – which is completely objective and static – social reality is constantly changing and there exists no absolute objectivity (Bryman, 2016, p.30). From the viewpoint of social constructionism, our knowledge of the world and its meaning depend entirely on human practice, which is ‘constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context’ (Crotty, 2003, p.42). In other words, rather than the absolute ‘truth’, social constructionism emphasises people’s interaction and the consequent meaning in a social collective. It acknowledges that meaning is shaped by people's interactions and interpretations, and can occur in a variety of contexts (Schwandt, 1994).

### 3.1.1.2 Interpretivism

The corresponding epistemology, interpretivism, claims that social reality can only be obtained from inquiry into social phenomena, interaction between people, and the resulting meaning (Goldkuhl, 2012; Bryman, 2016; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Social constructionism can hardly lead to different epistemologies which work inefficiently to investigate the interaction and meaning in society. Vice-versa, on the basis of social constructionism, it would be not practicable to follow other epistemologies, for example, positivism, which helps researchers to adopt deductive approaches (building hypotheses and collecting data that are mainly numbers and facts to test the hypotheses) to reach the goal of uncovering the absolute 'truth' (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015, p.50).

Utilising convergent research questions that typically emanates from an inductive stance (frequently taking the form of open-ended inquiries such as 'how' and 'why' questions), interpretivism empowers researchers to collect enriched and detailed data, thereby capturing the constantly evolving social reality. The firsthand personal interaction between researchers and participants enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants' interpretations of reality (Carson *et al.*, 2002). By exploring the experiences of different individuals, researchers can gain profound insights into participants' subjective interpretations and constructions of reality. This approach ultimately yields fresh perspectives on existing theories (Edmondson and McManus, 2007).

The interpretivist approach is well-suited for research that focuses on consumer experiences or seeks to elucidate consumer perceptions. This study incorporates the Chengdu Museum and its visitors within its scope. In accordance with Guba's (1990) assertion that individuals are responsible for constructing their own reality, this study incorporates participants' personal experiences and perspectives within the museum to reflect their individual

construction of reality. Because the interpretivist researcher's methodological approach involves understanding how individuals perceive and interpret their subjective reality (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988), this paradigm is relevant to the context of this study. The interpretivist approach is critical for this research that endeavours to comprehend the subjective experiences of participants and their individual perceptions within the unique context of the museum.

### **3.1.2 Qualitative Approach**

This study aims to explore the domestic Chinese museum visitors' experiences – to determine how customers in China experience museum *servicescape*. The research question is:

How do place identity and cultural values manifest in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*?

The objectives of this research will be:

1. To investigate how place identity manifests in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*;
2. To investigate how cultural values manifest in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*.

Museum visit experiences are based on the real life experience of the visitors and how they construct meanings. Such information is subjective and intangible. The nature of this study is exploratory. Hence a constructivist ontology and an interpretative epistemology will be applied in this study.

The selection of an appropriate research methodology is a crucial step in any study, and the researcher must determine whether qualitative or quantitative methods are best suited to the

specific situation. Given that the experiences for domestic Chinese visitors visiting Chinese museums is an underdeveloped area, as previously discussed, a more exploratory research methodology is required. Quantitative methodologies effectively address reliability and validity concerns through the application of numerical data analysis techniques, while qualitative research methods allow for the collection of elaborated linguistic descriptive data from the target population (Hohenthal, 2006; Petty, Thomson, and Stew, 2012). Qualitative analysis is particularly important in the absence of relevant research in determining the appropriateness of key elements and relationships (Laurent, 2000). Therefore, a qualitative approach is most applicable for research on museum visitor experiences, as it allows the researcher to explore identified gaps and honour the voices of participants, representing their perspectives (Morgan and Smircich, 1980).

Qualitative methods enable the researcher to collect data which contain a high level of details and cannot be generated from quantitative methods, for example, emotions, perceptions, meanings and other subjective aspects related to the real life experience of individuals and groups (Berg and Lune, 2012, p. 15). These details can provide information of high value for gathering deep insights in the investigation. Qualitative research methods provide several advantages, including the ability to conduct a more in-depth exploration, offer detailed and vivid descriptions, and allow for greater autonomy for participants in shaping the process of knowledge discovery, rather than the researcher directing or controlling it (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

According to Cheney (2002), the primary metrics typically employed in prior research to assess museum visitors are overall attendance and additional demographic characteristics derived from quantitative studies. Quantitative research techniques remain a vital approach employed by scholars in the field of studying museum visitors at present. For instance, Cotter, Fekete, and Silvia (2022) examined visitors' motivations and outcomes in art museum visits,

finding that visit outcomes have a stronger influence on satisfaction and length than visit motivations, highlighting the importance of considering the entire visit experience. The quantitative research of Meyer *et al.* (2023) investigated how aspects of openness to experience influence the frequency of museum visits among a large sample of visitors.

However, it is not necessarily the number and frequency of people who visit the museum that is most significant, but rather the meaning and significance of the museum experience itself.

Therefore, it is more crucial to analyse and understand the meaning of the museum experience. Researchers are employing qualitative methods to investigate this subject. Archer *et al.* (2016) utilised interview and observational data gathered from ten families to gain insight into the experiences of socially disadvantaged families in science museums. Komarac, Ozretić-Dosen, and Skare (2020) utilised in-depth interviews with a range of museum professionals, such as museum directors, marketing professionals, and curators, to explore how museums handle edutainment and the perceived authenticity of the museum visitor experience. Komarac and Ozretić Došen (2023) studied the virtual museum experiences of Generation Z, emphasising the significance of technology, visitor navigation, interactive features, and social media engagement in enhancing visitor satisfaction and involvement.

The utilisation of qualitative research methods in the field of museum visitor experience demonstrates their applicability and effectiveness for the methodological approach adopted in this study. Furthermore, it aligns with the aforementioned objectives of this study, as qualitative methods offer researchers the opportunity to employ a more flexible research design when compared to quantitative methods (Singh *et al.*, 2021). The flexibility of qualitative research enables the researcher to adapt the approach in response to emerging findings, unforeseen insights, and evolving research contexts, which is essential for obtaining detailed descriptions of the experiences of museum visitors during their visits.

While qualitative methods are considered appropriate for this study due to their advantages in deeply exploring social and cultural contexts and providing opportunities for participant voices to be heard, aiding researchers in understanding the nuances and complexities of human behaviour and interactions (Malterud, 2001), it is also necessary to acknowledge their associated limitations. These include the specific lack of universality inherent in qualitative research, namely the potential absence of "analytic generalisability" or "transferability" (Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri, 2008). The relevance and applicability of research findings to similar backgrounds or situations may be constrained, thereby limiting the potential transferability of research results to other settings.

This study's transferability is rooted in the domestic Chinese museum visitors, and its findings may be extended to other service industries in China as well as to consumer studies focusing on the influence of identity and conventional cultural values on consumers.

Nonetheless, there are challenges associated with the study's generalizability, given China's vast and complex nature with a diverse demographic composition. However, it should be acknowledged that as a qualitative study, the sample size is limited compared to quantitative research (Vasileiou *et al.*, 2018), which may affect the generalizability of the study's results. To overcome the challenges posed by these limitations, the researcher will employ various qualitative methods to enhance the dependability of the data collected.

## **3.2 Data Collection Strategy**

### **3.2.1 The choice of the Chengdu Museum**

Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province, as opposed to Beijing, Shanghai, and other megacities in China, has been chosen for this project. The rationale for this decision is as follows. Chengdu stands out as one of the most appealing domestic tourist destinations in

China. Renowned as the most laid-back city in the country, Chengdu is recognized as the leading city in western China with the highest overall tourism economic impact (Liu, Feng, and Yang, 2011). Located in the southwest inland of China, Chengdu is geographically distant from the developed areas of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong. It is a mega city that nurtures dynamic cultures. The city has abundant tourism resources: it is the birthplace of Shu culture and Sichuan cuisine; Qingcheng mountain is one of the four famous mountains of Taoism in China; and it is the home of giant pandas. Hence, domestic tourists in particular show great enthusiasm for Chengdu. On National Day Golden Week holiday in October 2019, Chengdu received 20 million domestic visitors, ranking third among Chinese cities, and generated a revenue of 28.6 billion yuan, taking the top national ranking (Li, 2019). Therefore, compared to the cities such as Beijing and Xi'an which are also rich in tourism resources but serve more foreign visitors, Chengdu will be more appropriate for this study which aims to explore the experiences of domestic Chinese visitors.

Specifically, the Chengdu Museum has been selected for this study because the characteristics of the museum fit the research aims and the researcher assumes that the research based on this particular museum will generate sufficient and nuanced data. Due to its history of more than 3,200 years, Chengdu is home to a variety of museums, such as Sichuan Museum; historical museums, such as Jinsha Site Museum; specialised museums, such as the Zhi Art Museum and the Chengdu Shu Brocade and Embroidery Museum. Established in 1953 and having opened its new building in the city centre since 2016, the Chengdu Museum, a comprehensive museum, holds both regular exhibitions of local history and temporary exhibitions on diverse themes, has been chosen as the key fieldwork site for this study for the reasons as follows.

Firstly, the museum actively joins in the local identity construction. The collections of the museum show the local history of Chengdu city and explain the characteristics of the local

people (Chengdu Museum, 2024b). For example, the collection of pottery figurines with smiles on faces in the museum suggests the historical origin of the local people's optimistic personality and the 'enjoy the present' attitude towards life (Chengdu Museum, 2024a). Temporary exhibitions were also organised to demonstrate the local culture. For example, from June 17 to December 12, 2021, the museum hosted the temporary exhibition "Discovering the Beauty of Traditional Chinese Medicine: An Exhibition of Chinese Traditional Medical Artifacts" (Chengdu Museum, 2022b). More importantly, there are clear signs that the Chengdu Museum is seeking to engage in marketisation and enhance its impact and visibility. The museum frequently cooperates with world leading museums and brands. For example, from November 26, 2022, to February 26, 2023, the museum, in collaboration with the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art in Italy, hosted the exhibition "Centennial Infinity: Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art in Italy" (Chengdu Museum, 2022a). In the online aspect, during the Covid-19 lockdown period, the museum opened access to some of its collections on its website, including the temporary exhibitions held, as online digital exhibitions for the public (Chengdu Museum, 2024c). The museum also operates official social network accounts on the most popular Chinese social media platforms such as Sina Weibo and Wechat to have informal and relaxed communication with its visitors.

### **3.2.2 Qualitative Data Collection Methods**

In qualitative research, researchers have a range of options to consider based on their research questions and goals. Some typical methods include conducting interviews, organising focus groups, making observations, analysing documents, undertaking case studies, engaging in ethnography, developing grounded theory, and exploring narrative analysis (Devers and Frankel, 2000). These choices offer researchers a variety of approaches to investigate

intricate phenomena, encompass diverse viewpoints, and produce detailed, context-specific insights in qualitative research.

Considering the time constraints and the length of time required to conduct ethnography, grounded theory, and other methods, despite numerous approaches that could have been implemented in this study, as previously discussed, the researcher opted for a mixed qualitative methodology comprising interviews, focus groups, and visual research.

Subsequently, both interviews and visual research, as well as the techniques utilised, will be discussed in the next sections.

In this study, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were strategically used to gather rich, multi-dimensional data on participants' museum visit experiences (Barbour and Morgan, 2017; Cassell, Cunliffe, and Grandy, 2018; Guest *et al.*, 2017). In the research design, the decision to use both in-depth interviews and focus groups was carefully planned to capture distinct individual and group perspectives on museum experiences. During data collection, the researcher conducted six one-on-one interviews before starting the focus groups, with separate participants for each method—each individual participated only once, either in an interview or a focus group. This approach allowed the collection of authentic, personal reflections through individual interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018), while the focus groups facilitated interaction among different participants, encouraging them to build on each other's experiences and explore shared or contrasting views (Acocella, 2012). This design ensured a comprehensive dataset, enriched by both individual insights and group dynamics, without overlap among participants.

The primary rationale for conducting in-depth interviews was to obtain an in-depth, individualised understanding of each participant's thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes toward their interactions with the museum services. During these one-on-one interviews, participants could freely express their personal views and provide detailed narratives, allowing for a deep

dive into the unique aspects of their experiences (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014). This method was instrumental in uncovering subtle, individual-specific insights and capturing nuanced reflections that participants might not readily share in a group setting.

Focus groups, in contrast, were conducted to foster dynamic discussions among participants, drawing on their shared museum visit experiences (O.Nyumba *et al.*, 2018). The group format enabled participants to respond to each other's comments, often sparking new thoughts or expanding on perspectives in ways that might not emerge in solitary interviews (Guest *et al.*, 2017). This collective interaction helped reveal shared understandings, conflicting viewpoints, and social influences that shape participants' perceptions of the museum visits. By bringing participants together, the focus groups allowed the study to capture a broader, communal perspective that complements the individualised insights from the interviews.

#### 3.2.2.1 One-on-one Interviews

Interviews stand out as one of the most frequently employed and firmly established methods for qualitative data collection (Craig and Douglas, 2005). They enable researchers to acquire comprehensive information, perspectives, and insights directly from participants. Through interviews, participants can articulate their thoughts, experiences, and emotions in their own language, empowering researchers to explore intricate phenomena and grasp the subtleties of human behaviour (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins, 2010). According to Craig and Douglas (2005), interviews are considered an effective method of data collection because researchers have the opportunity to adjust questions on-site during the interview to accommodate specific participants and delve deeper into their responses. The necessity of adaptable interview inquiry techniques cannot be overstated when it comes to investigating lived experiences and subjective viewpoints, as it enables a more comprehensive and detailed comprehension,

which is frequently unobtainable via rigid and prescribed approaches, such as surveys or questionnaires (Roulston, 2010). In the context of this study aimed at exploring museum visitors' experiences and perspectives, interviews are highly applicable, enabling the researcher to gather rich data when encountering different participants.

Prior to initiating data collection, the researcher developed an indicative interview protocol based on the conceptual framework of *servicescape* outlined in the previous chapter. This interview protocol consisted of a series of questions designed to explore the participants' experiences of visiting the Chengdu Museum, encompassing various aspects of the museum visit, such as the experience of visiting permanent and temporary exhibitions, the experience of utilising facilities within the museum, and the engagement with the museum's online services. The complete interview protocol is available in Appendix 1. Although a protocol was developed, as is typical in qualitative research, the researcher employed follow-up questions and further exploration in each interview based on the participants' unique responses to gain additional insights into their experiences (Berg and Lune, 2012).

#### 3.2.2.2 Focus Groups

Morgan (1996, p. 130) defines the focus group as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher.” Focus groups are a valuable tool for collecting qualitative data through open and interactive discussions (Acocella, 2012; Krueger and Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1998). This method allows participants to express their opinions, experiences, and perspectives, resulting in rich and in-depth data. The dynamic nature of focus group discussions enables the exploration of complex topics, the clarification of different perspectives, and the generation of new ideas and insights through interaction and group dynamics.

When studying the visitor experience in Chinese museums, focus groups served as an advantageous method for data collection (Liamputtong, 2016). Firstly, it is essential to consider the fact that Chinese visitors frequently visit museums in groups of families and friends (Wu and Wall, 2017). Therefore, focus groups are a necessary means of data collection in order to study the impact of their collective experience on the visitors. Focus groups offer a suitable platform for in-depth investigation of topics and enable participants to engage in discussions, thereby assisting the researcher in gaining deeper insights into participants' perspectives and the underlying reasons, and in collecting comprehensive and detailed data. Secondly, the interactive nature of focus group discussions can stimulate participants to engage in dialogue based on each other's responses, deepening their understanding of the topic and uncovering different viewpoints. In terms of visitor units, the participants varied in the company they kept during their visit. Some brought their families, while others accompanied friends. Moreover, there were notable disparities in the level of knowledge and interest among their peers, which subsequently influenced their experiences and viewpoints of the visit. In focus groups, interactions among participants have the potential to trigger deeper reflection and foster more in-depth exchanges with other participants, with some insights possibly not being elicited during their independent reflections or one-on-one interviews. Additionally, similar to interviews, as a qualitative research method, focus groups offer flexibility, allowing researchers to adjust the format and questions of the discussion flexibly based on participants' responses, thus exploring unforeseen insights and topics. Lastly, focus groups facilitate efficient data collection from multiple participants within a relatively short period, demonstrating cost-effective data collection capabilities. Therefore, utilising focus groups as a data collection method aided the researcher in gaining profound insights into the visitor experience in Chinese museums, providing nuanced perspectives.

The researcher prepared an interview protocol for the focus groups that was similar to the one-to-one interviews. This protocol comprised a series of questions addressing various aspects of the museum visit experience. The complete interview protocol is provided in Appendix 2.

### 3.2.2.3 Photo Elicitation

In addition to conducting interviews and focus groups, the researcher opted to use photo elicitation as a visual method in this study. Research has traditionally concentrated on both spoken and written narratives. However, other forms of communication, such as visual images, can also be utilized in research (Riessman, 2020). Visual research techniques are gaining popularity among qualitative researchers in various fields (Banks, 2007; Pauwels and Mannay, 2020). Researchers are finding that visual methods have great potential to supplement other data collection methods (Packard, 2008). Through the use of images alongside text, researchers can bridge the gap between the messages conveyed by the text and the images (Pain, 2012). Although interviews and focus groups provided in-depth insights into participants' experiences at the Chengdu Museum, incorporating visual research methods allowed the participants to express themselves visually, offering additional context and depth to their narratives beyond what they may have conveyed verbally (Allan, 2012). Visual methods also have the potential to evoke precise recollections and emotions from the participants' museum visits, thereby encouraging them to disclose more in-depth and nuanced narratives and perceptions that are connected to their visiting experience (Cunliffe and Grandy, 2018).

In this study, the researcher exclusively utilised the photo elicitation research method during one-on-one interviews. By requesting participants to bring photos to the interviews, the aim was to enable the participants to choose and discuss personally significant images and enrich

the interview process by exploring their unique perspectives and experiences, thereby enhancing depth and richness in the discussions (Harper, 2002). Moreover, photos could establish an emotional connection with participants during the interviews, enhancing the depth and richness of the dialogue to enable the researcher to gather more comprehensive information and enrich the study's content. As focus groups facilitate discussions in a group format, emphasising interaction and sharing among participants rather than individual presentations of personal materials (Morgan, 1996), if participants were to bring photos to the focus groups, it might disrupt the dynamics and discussions of the group. Consequently, participants in the focus groups were not instructed to bring photographic images with them to participate. Additionally, during fieldwork, the researcher also visited the Chengdu Museum multiple times to capture first hand images. These photographs were intended to illustrate specific exhibitions or artefacts mentioned by participants, aiding in visually representing the viewpoints discussed by interview participants.

Photo elicitation was incorporated into the interviews as a methodological tool to facilitate deeper reflections on participants' museum experiences. This approach allowed participants to visually express and discuss aspects of their visit that might not have surfaced through verbal descriptions alone (Padgett *et al.*, 2013). By integrating visual stimuli, photo elicitation helped elicit more detailed and nuanced responses, enriching the interview data with cognitive and emotional depth (Bignante, 2010).

Participants were provided with clear instructions prior to their interviews, guiding them to select and bring up to five photographs that represented meaningful or impactful elements of their museum visit. These could include images of exhibits, architectural features, social interactions, or any other aspects they found significant. The purpose of this approach was to bridge visual and verbal narratives, enabling participants to engage more personally with the

discussion and articulate their experiences in greater depth (Zhang and Hennebry-Leung, 2023).

By encouraging participants to describe the reasoning behind their photo selections, the method facilitated a more interactive and reflective interview process (Hopkins and Wort, 2020). This not only enhanced participant engagement but also allowed for a more holistic exploration of how museum experiences are perceived and interpreted. The use of photo elicitation ultimately contributed to a richer understanding of visitor experiences, offering insights that might have been less accessible through traditional verbal interviews alone (Scarles, 2010).

### **The Choices of Locations**

The data collection process for this study was carefully designed to accommodate the diverse backgrounds, preferences, and logistical needs of participants (Denzin *et al.*, 2023). Interview and focus group locations were chosen strategically to maximise comfort and encourage engagement (Bjørvik *et al.*, 2023; O.Nyumba *et al.*, 2018). A large portion of individual interviews took place outside the museum in nearby cafes, providing a relaxed and neutral space conducive to openness and reflection. This setting was particularly beneficial given the varied visitation experiences of participants, who ranged from first-time visitors to frequent attendees.

To preserve the authenticity of participants' museum experiences, interviews were deliberately conducted in external cafes rather than in the museum's on-site café. Pilot study findings indicated that many participants had not visited or intended to visit the museum café, making external cafes a more appropriate choice that aligned with their usual habits. The consistency of this external location contributed to a welcoming atmosphere where

participants felt at ease, enabling deeper engagement with interview questions (McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl, 2018).

Online interviews were conducted for participants facing geographical or time constraints, such as those residing in cities other than Chengdu. The use of online platforms ensured accessibility, allowing individuals from as far as Hubei Province to contribute their perspectives without the need for travel, thereby preserving the integrity of the participant pool across geographic boundaries (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014).

Focus groups were held in a mix of locations based on participant connections and logistical convenience, including cafes located outside the museum, which were chosen for their casual, accessible atmosphere (Leung and Savithiri, 2009). These cafes provided a familiar and approachable setting that supported open group conversations, particularly beneficial for focus groups consisting of friends or acquaintances who had visited the museum together or shared similar backgrounds. The arrangement of certain focus groups in the same cafe setting as individual interviews maintained a consistent spatial theme, allowing focus group participants to converse in a familiar, communal location (Gundumogula, 2020). Additionally, some focus groups with participants who shared professional ties took place in shared public spaces within office buildings, creating a familiar setting that facilitated group cohesion and comfort (Krueger, 2002).

The thoughtful selection of diverse locations, including cafes outside the museum, online platforms, and shared office spaces, effectively supported the study's aim to elicit rich, personal narratives. This flexible approach not only addressed logistical constraints but also provided a suitable backdrop for each participant group, helping to draw out contextually grounded insights into museum visits across social, geographical, and professional divides.

#### **Challenges Encountered During Data Collection:**

As a researcher at a UK university, even though the researcher is Chinese, she was often regarded as a kind of “outsider.” For instance, the researcher initially intended to interview staff at the Chengdu Museum to gain insight into the museum’s perspective as a service provider. However, due to concerns that the researcher’s affiliation with the University of Sheffield might enable foreign influence to criticise China, the museum declined the request. Similar concerns arose among some participants. For example, participants such as Participant 17, Participant 26, and those in Focus Group 1 expressed significant sensitivity regarding the portrayal of Chinese museums in Western contexts. They were concerned that their words might be used by the researcher to depict Chinese museums unfavourably, potentially harming their image—likely influenced by traditional Chinese cultural values surrounding “face.”

Some participants were particularly sensitive to the term “qualitative” used in this study. Misinterpreting this as an attempt to “define” or judge the Chinese museum, they worried the researcher might characterise the Chengdu Museum negatively. Thus, before starting interviews and focus groups, the researcher had to invest substantial time and effort to clarify the study’s intentions, ensuring participants understood the research context and fostering an environment where they could share their perspectives openly.

Another challenge was the casual conversations that arose during both interviews and focus groups. For instance, during the interview with Participant 23, while some discussion on COVID-19 was relevant to museum visitation, the participant extended the conversation to unrelated aspects of the pandemic. Casual discussions were more pronounced in focus groups. In Focus Group 1, for example, participants who were close friends and had visited the Chengdu Museum together on multiple occasions sometimes veered off-topic, engaging in extended casual conversation. The researcher’s position as an outsider in this tight-knit group, combined with the fact that these participants were much older, presented a challenge; in

collectivist Chinese society, it is impolite for a younger person to interrupt older individuals (Zhang and Hummert, 2001). Thus, the researcher waited for a natural pause before redirecting the discussion back to research-related topics. This scenario repeated frequently across focus groups.

Because the researcher employed verbatim transcription for interviews and focus group recordings, substantial time and effort were required to capture the full content, including these casual conversations. During the data analysis phase, it was necessary to decide which content to include and which to exclude (Moser and Korstjens, 2018). Managing this additional content was a significant challenge throughout the data analysis process.

### **The development of the interview protocol and focus group agenda**

To address the identified gaps in the literature, the interview protocol and focus group agenda were developed to explore how place identity, cultural values, and servicescape elements shape customer experiences in Chengdu Museum (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The literature review revealed that while the impact of *servicescape* on customer experience has been extensively studied, particularly in terms of physical environment, social interactions, and service quality, a significant gap remains in examining how these elements interact within a unified framework that includes place identity and cultural values. Consequently, the interview protocol and focus group agenda were crafted to probe visitors' expectations, perceptions of exhibitions, interactions with companions, and experiences with augmented services such as cafes and social media platforms (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). These areas are directly aligned with key research questions aimed at uncovering how place identity and cultural values manifest in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*.

By focusing on a Chinese museum, this research also addresses the gap in understanding non-Western perspectives in the *servicescape* literature and seeks to reveal whether Chinese

visitors, like their Western counterparts, view museums as spaces for accumulating social capital and experiencing the unfamiliar (Burton and Griffin, 2008; Kinghorn and Willis, 2008). This approach not only aligns with the gaps identified in the literature but also supports a deeper understanding of cultural and contextual influences on customer experience, thus offering practical insights for enhancing museum services and optimising visitor engagement.

To analyse the nuanced perceptions and social dynamics within museum settings, the researcher utilised targeted questions to elicit detailed responses from participants (Lim, 2024). For example, when asked about their impressions of regular exhibitions, participants often provided insights that extended beyond surface-level observations. Participant 16 described the exhibitions as “fairly standard” and reflective of Chengdu’s cultural and technological development, but their response also underscored a perceived disconnect in presentation. This participant felt that Chengdu’s exhibits resembled “scattered beads without a thread,” lacking a cohesive narrative that would capture the cultural richness and continuity found in cities like Beijing or Shanghai. Such responses illustrate participants’ expectations for a deeper, more unified portrayal of Chengdu’s heritage.

Another example is the exploration of social engagement, where the researcher asked if participants would converse with strangers at exhibits. Several participants expressed a preference for “eavesdropping” and later discussing insights with their companions rather than directly interacting with unfamiliar visitors, suggesting a layer of cultural nuance in social behaviour. As Participant 32 and Participant 35 in Focus Group 2 noted, such interactions might feel more typical in Western contexts, such as the U.S. These examples indicate that cultural factors influence interpersonal dynamics within Chinese museums, where indirect engagement might feel more comfortable. Through these interactions,

participants shed light on both individual behaviours and broader cultural norms that shape the museum experience.

#### 3.2.2.4 Sampling strategy

Qualitative research typically involves small sample sizes due to its labour-intensive and time-consuming nature (Mason, 2010). Although there has been debate over the optimal sample size and number of participants for qualitative studies, this study follows Creswell's suggestion (1998, p.128) that a range of 20 to 30 participants is sufficient for qualitative research. Therefore, the study aimed to collect at least 20 one-to-one interviews and five focus groups, a number considered sufficient for achieving data saturation.

Upon determining the approximate number of participants required for the study, the researcher subsequently considered the optimal approach for recruiting them. Ultimately, the researcher opted to employ a snowball sampling technique. This strategy involves identifying more informative participants by obtaining referrals from initial key informants (Browne, 2005).

Snowball sampling proves valuable for examining the social networks and dynamics within particular populations (Noy, 2008). Studies have demonstrated the successful application of snowball sampling across diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including within Asian communities (Perez *et al.*, 2013). When investigating the experiences of domestic Chinese museum visitors who likely belong to interconnected social groups or networks, snowball sampling emerges as a pertinent approach for accessing and researching this demographic. This method enables the recruitment of participants through established connections and referrals within the target population, offering significant utility when studying groups with shared experiences or characteristics (Noy, 2008).

Prior to commencing these sampling procedures, the researcher formulated sampling criteria to confirm the eligibility of participants. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be of Chinese nationality and had to have previously visited the Chengdu Museum. This criterion ensured that the participants were suitable for the design of this study, which focused on domestic museum visitors in China. Moreover, it was their experiences of visiting the Chengdu Museum that enabled them to engage in informed reflections on their visiting experiences during the one-on-one interviews and focus groups.

In order to identify suitable participants, the researcher relied on personal contacts who had visited the Chengdu Museum multiple times and who then recommended others who met the study's specific criteria. This method facilitated the recruitment of individuals with particular characteristics. Furthermore, the researcher ensured a certain level of accessibility by informing participants that interested potential participants could contact the researcher directly or provide contact information through the informant for further discussion if preferred.

Prior to conducting the actual interviews and focus groups, the researcher had preliminary communication with all participants, informing them of the study's purpose, emphasising the protection of their privacy. Additionally, the researcher informed the one-on-one participants that they could bring photographs to the interviews with them if they desired. Furthermore, the researcher responded to some of the queries raised by participants regarding their participation in the interviews, such as the duration of the interviews and whether the study was an official museum act. Once participants were successfully recruited and interviews were scheduled, data collection commenced.

In qualitative research, achieving saturation is essential in determining the appropriate sample size (Mason, 2010). Saturation signifies the stage at which gathering additional data no

longer yields novel insights or information relevant to the research inquiry. Researchers strive for saturation to guarantee a comprehensive exploration of the breadth and depth of the phenomenon being investigated. With the progress of the data collection process, the number of participants steadily rose, ultimately reaching a total of 47 individuals. A total of 27 one-on-one interviews and 7 focus groups were conducted by the researcher in Chengdu. Information on the participants' background can be found in the Appendix 3.

#### 3.2.2.5 Interview and Focus Group Administration: face-to-face and via WeChat

Face-to-face interviews offer several advantages that contribute to effective data collection (Vogl, 2013). Firstly, this research is centred on the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants, and it is crucial to emphasise the trust that the participants have in the researcher. Face-to-face interviews enable the establishment of trust and intimacy with the participant, fostering an environment conducive to disclosing sensitive information. Secondly, face-to-face interactions often result in longer and more detailed responses, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of topics. Additionally, the ability to observe non-verbal cues and contextual information enhances the researcher's understanding and interpretation of the participant's perspectives.

Most of the one-on-one interviews were conducted in person. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic during the data collection period and the possibility of lockdowns in certain regions of China, as well as time, economic, and geographical constraints such as the cost for participants to attend face-to-face interviews, transportation challenges, and long distances between participants' residences and Chengdu, four interviewees were unable to participate in face-to-face interviews. As a result, it was necessary to conduct interviews via online video platforms.

The widespread availability of new communication technologies via the Internet, such as WeChat video calls, now enable the inclusion of individuals who were previously unable to participate in research. WeChat is one of the most widely used communication platforms in China, thus researchers opted for WeChat video calls for online interviews. Consequently, WeChat video calls presented a novel opportunity for data collection in this research context.

Utilising online communication tools such as Wechat to conduct interviews not only provides opportunities for those who would not otherwise be able to participate, but can be seen as a positive approach. The online environment empowered the participants to select their interview surroundings, manage their camera presence, and determine the timing of their participation, fostering a feeling of authority and autonomy in the interaction (Prior and Lachover, 2023). Online interviews are therefore seen as a valuable data collection tool that can broaden the range of participants and experiences.

However, despite the drawbacks associated with online interviews, including technical issues such as connectivity problems or participants' unfamiliarity with technology, which may disrupt the interview process and lead to interruptions or difficulties in communication, these limitations have been carefully considered to evaluate the value of WeChat as an adjunct methodology for this research (Saarijärvi and Bratt, 2021).

All of the focus groups were conducted in person in this study. Face-to-face focus groups offer several advantages in this study (Murgado-Armenteros, Torres-Ruiz, and Vega-Zamora, 2012; Packer-Muti, 2010). Initially, they support comprehensive data collection through facilitating detailed discussions, resulting in nuanced qualitative data. Secondly, non-verbal cues like body language, facial expressions, and vocal tone offer supplementary context to participants' responses, facilitating a deeper comprehension of their perspectives. The researcher may observe modifications in the moods of the participants in response to a

specific topic during the conduct of a focus group, which could reflect their attitudes and perceptions of their own experiences, which are relevant to the subject matter of this study, specifically the participants' experiences at a museum. Thirdly, the physical co-presence can enhance group dynamics, stimulating participants to collaboratively build on ideas and generate fresh insights about their visiting experiences at the museum. Moreover, the researcher can assess participants' reactions in real-time, adapt the discussion as necessary, and explore deeper into intriguing points, ensuring immediate feedback and thorough exploration. Lastly, interpersonal interactions in face-to-face settings aid in fostering rapport between participants and the facilitator, fostering a conducive environment for sharing experiences and viewpoints. Collectively, these aspects underscore the distinctive advantages of utilising face-to-face focus groups in this qualitative research.

### **3.3 Data Analysis Strategy**

#### **3.3.1 Transcription Methods**

The primary source of data for this study originated from semi-structured interviews and focus groups. According to Rutakumwa *et al.* (2020), it is crucial to gather comprehensive data during the interview process, whether through audio recordings or interviewer notes. The researcher's main objective was to ensure that the transcripts or scripts accurately represented the underlying themes, nuances, and participants' perspectives covered in the interviews and focus groups. To ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data for the study's purpose, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews verbatim. Furthermore, some participants used the dialect Sichuanese, during the interviews or focus groups. Transcribing verbatim was essential to preserve the details in their linguistic expressions and provide an in-depth viewpoint for this study.

Like all data analysis methods, verbatim transcription also encounters certain challenges. These include background noise that may affect the quality of the recordings and the different speaking styles of participants, which may necessitate careful consideration when using punctuation marks (McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig, 2003). To minimise the impact of these challenges on the text and to preserve the details of the data, the researcher adopted a cautious approach.

For the interviews and focus groups, the researcher used an iFLYTEK SR101 recorder and an iPhone 7 with no SIM card inserted and no internet connection for recording. After the interviews were completed, the recordings were promptly transferred from both devices to a secure Google Drive folder held by the university account and deleted from the devices. The researcher manually transcribed the audio verbatim into a Google doc file on the university account within two days of the interview or focus group taking place. Although this method was cumbersome and time-consuming, this method was essential as it enabled the researcher to thoroughly explore the data and gain a deeper understanding of the information provided by the participants.

### **Transcription and Translation Processes**

In this study, transcription and translation were essential for accurately capturing participants' perspectives and ensuring the integrity of the data (Wellard and McKenna, 2001). The primary data source was semi-structured interviews and focus groups, conducted largely in Mandarin, with some participants using the Sichuanese dialect. According to Rutakumwa et al. (2020), comprehensive data collection through audio recordings or interviewer notes is critical to preserving the richness of participant responses. The researcher aimed to accurately represent the underlying themes, nuances, and viewpoints by transcribing the audio recordings verbatim, including dialectal expressions, to maintain linguistic authenticity and detail. Since translating all transcripts into English would be time-intensive, the researcher

adopted a process of initial coding in Chinese, allowing for a more nuanced analysis in the original language. Key quotes relevant to the study's findings were then translated into English, ensuring these excerpts preserved participants' intended meanings. This approach allowed the research to maintain the depth of cultural and linguistic context while facilitating analysis for an English-speaking audience.

### **3.3.2 Data Analysis Strategy**

After transcribing the data, recognizing the considerable number of transcripts involved, 34 in total, the researcher determined that coding all of them into English would prove to be an excessively time-consuming endeavour, thereby impeding the study's progress. Consequently, the researcher opted to code the original Chinese text initially and subsequently translate the codes and salient quotes into the English language.

The researcher weighed the pros and cons of using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), particularly NVivo, which is widely used and relatively user-friendly. NVivo offers robust data management capabilities, allowing researchers to efficiently organise and store large datasets, and it can generate solutions for complex quantitative inquiries related to the data, thereby enhancing the analytical process (Maher *et al.*, 2018). However, the researcher also recognized that computer analysis programs may sometimes hinder rather than facilitate the qualitative analysis process.

Therefore, despite the additional effort required to organise and manage the vast amount of data, the decision was made to perform the analysis manually, given the researcher's desire to thoroughly analyse the data. The use of flexible manual methods of analysis enables researchers to maximise their immersion in the data and engage with it more slowly and meaningfully (Maher *et al.*, 2018).

In this study, the primary data collection methods were semi-structured interviews and focus groups, resulting in the researcher analysing a total of 34 transcripts. To effectively interpret the data, it was crucial to determine the most suitable method of data analysis. Two primary methods of analysing qualitative data were considered: content analysis, such as thematic analysis (Ahuvia, 2001; Kolbe and Burnett, 199; Krippendorff, 2019; Spurgin and Wildemuth, 2009; Neuendorf, 2017), and interpretive analysis, including discourse analysis (Titscher and Jenner, 2000; Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates, 2001). For this study, thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate approach, as it is a versatile and adaptable method that is not bound to any specific theoretical framework for all types of research (Braun and Clarke, 2014), including consumer research (e.g., Fletcher and Gbadamosi, 2022). Furthermore, employing thematic analysis has proven useful for examining the viewpoints of various research participants (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). In this study, the thematic analysis methodology can reveal commonalities and dissimilarities among participants' perspectives on the museum experience, potentially yielding unforeseen insights.

Since the research adopted an interpretive stance, the researcher endeavoured to interpret the participants' narratives in order to gain a deeper comprehension of their significance. Upon the completion of transcribing the interviews, the researcher codified them, simultaneously becoming more acquainted with the data.

This study employs reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), to examine how place identity and cultural values shape the museum experiences of Chinese domestic visitors. Thematic analysis provides a flexible yet rigorous framework for analyzing qualitative data, allowing for the systematic identification, interpretation, and organization of themes emerging from visitor narratives (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). This approach is particularly well-suited to investigating identity-related constructs, as

it acknowledges the subjectivity and iterative nature of theme development, ensuring that findings remain deeply rooted in participant experiences (Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

The thematic analysis process began with familiarization, where transcripts were read multiple times to immerse the researcher in the data. This stage involved detailed note-taking to capture initial impressions and repeated ideas, providing a foundation for subsequent coding. Following this, initial codes were generated systematically, identifying meaningful data features that aligned with the research objectives. Codes were both data-driven and informed by the theoretical framework of the five dimensions of customer experience—cognitive, physical, sensory, affective, and social—as conceptualized by Schmitt (1999) and further developed by De Keyser et al. (2015, 2020) and Verleye (2015). For instance, phrases relating to “ease of access” were coded under the physical dimension, while references to “emotional responses” informed the affective dimension.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022):

1. Familiarization with the Data – The researcher engaged in repeated reading of the interview and focus group transcripts, taking initial notes to capture emergent meanings and patterns. This stage facilitated immersion in the data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of participant perspectives.
2. Generating Initial Codes – The data were systematically coded using an inductive approach, allowing key concepts to be identified based on the participants' narratives rather than being predetermined. Codes were assigned to segments of text that

reflected aspects of place identity, cultural values, and visitor engagement with the museum *servicescape*.

3. Searching for Themes – The initial codes were clustered into broader thematic categories, with particular attention to how respondent characteristics—such as place of birth, current residence, age, and group composition during visits—may have influences on their engagement with the museum.
4. Reviewing Themes – The identified themes were refined to ensure internal coherence and conceptual clarity. This process involved cross-checking the themes against the dataset to confirm that they accurately captured the variations in visitor experiences.
5. Defining and Naming Themes – Each theme was clearly defined, with an emphasis on articulating its theoretical and practical implications in understanding museum experiences.
6. Producing the Report – The final themes were structured to demonstrate the interaction between visitor identity, cultural values, and the museum servicescape, providing a nuanced interpretation of how these factors shape museum engagement.

This iterative and reflexive process ensured that the thematic development was both data-driven and theoretically informed, allowing for the generation of meaningful and contextually relevant insights (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020).

### **Progression from Data to Findings**

The thematic analysis revealed two primary themes that shape visitor engagement: place identity and cultural values. These findings were derived from an in-depth examination of participant characteristics, particularly place of birth, current residence, age, and group composition.

## **Place Identity and Respondent Characteristics**

Findings indicate that place identity is predominantly shaped by respondents' place of birth and current residence, influencing their cognitive, affective and social engagement with the museum.

- **Chengduese and Sichuanese Visitors:** Respondents who were born in and currently reside in Chengdu or Sichuan Province exhibited a strong emotional connection to the museum, often describing their experiences through the lens of regional pride and cultural heritage.
- **New Chengduese (Recent Migrants to Chengdu):** Visitors who had relocated to Chengdu demonstrated an emplaced identity, whereby their place attachment was formed through post-migration experiences (Porter and Tanghe, 2016).
- **Visitors from Outside Sichuan Province:** Respondents from other provinces exhibited a weaker sense of place identity, positioning their museum visits as cultural explorations rather than acts of heritage reaffirmation. However, individuals with prior exposure to Chengdu's culture displayed place attachment, shaped by emotional, cognitive, and behavioural factors (Sthapit, Björk, and Coudounaris, 2022).

The findings further suggest a bidirectional relationship between place identity and visitor experiences:

- Visitors with stronger place identity engaged more deeply with exhibits, resulting in enhanced cognitive, affective, and social experiences.
- Positive museum experiences, in turn, reinforced and strengthened place identity, fostering a sense of cultural belonging.

## **Cultural Values and Respondent Characteristics**

The analysis also revealed that cultural values, particularly respect for authority and striving for harmony, were shaped by age and group composition during museum visits.

- Age Influence on Cultural Values:
  - Older respondents (40+) emphasized heritage preservation and traditional knowledge transmission, engaging with museum content in a structured and authoritative manner.
  - Younger respondents (20s–30s) exhibited a more interactive and social approach, valuing engagement with digital installations, participatory exhibits, and peer discussions.
- Group Influence on Cultural Values:
  - Visitors in groups (families and friends) were more likely to engage passively, deferring to museum guidance and minimizing disruptions due to cultural norms of harmony and deference.
  - Solo visitors demonstrated greater autonomy in meaning-making, engaging in self-directed exploration and critical reflection.

These findings suggest that cultural norms shape visitor engagement, often leading to unidirectional interactions with the museum *servicescape*, wherein visitors adopt a passive consumption model rather than actively negotiating meanings.

### **3.4 Key Methodological Considerations**

#### **3.4.1 Validity and Reliability**

In the realm of qualitative research, the researcher serves as the sole instrument and means of data collection (Patton, 2002). Consequently, it is imperative for the researcher to prioritise reliability and validity throughout the data collection and analysis process to maintain rigorousness, as these qualities cannot be presumed to be inherently derived from the data collection itself (Aguinaldo, 2004; Morse *et al.*, 2002).

Validity and reliability emphasise the significance of upholding quality, precision, and coherence in qualitative research (Long and Johnson, 2000; Rose and Johnson, 2020).

Ensuring validity in qualitative research is vital for establishing the credibility and rigour of study findings (Maxwell, 1992). Lincoln and Guba (2007) posited that qualitative research rigour comprises critical elements designed to guarantee the dependability and authenticity of study outcomes. These components encompass credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and by addressing these components, researchers can improve the dependability, authenticity, and reliability of their qualitative research findings.

##### **3.4.1.1 Positionality**

Given the cultural context of domestic museum visitors in China, the positionality of the study is of particular importance (Hill and Dao, 2021). The concept of positionality in qualitative research pertains to the subjective vantage point of the researcher, which encompasses their background, experiences, beliefs, and social identities (Ganga and Scott, 2006). These elements possess the potential to significantly influence both the research process and its outcomes (Muhammad *et al.*, 2015). It is essential to acknowledge and comprehend how the researcher's personal traits and viewpoints can shape various aspects of

the research, including its design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings (Bourke, 2014; Mendez, 2023).

Recognizing and comprehending one's positionality is of paramount importance in qualitative research, as it empowers researchers to strive for transparency, reflexivity, and ethical conduct throughout the entire research process (Mendez, 2023). The researcher engaged in self-reflection regarding her positionality to identify and address potential biases, assumptions, and external influences that could impact the research process.

The researcher who carried out this study possesses both insider and outsider attributes (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Hill and Dao, 2021; Kipnis, Bebek, and Bröckerhoff, 2021). Her qualities as an insider are evident. As a Chinese national, she shares the same Confucian cultural foundation as all the participants. Born and raised in Sichuan, where Chengdu is located, she shares common cultural traditions and life experiences with many of the participants, particularly those from Sichuan. Furthermore, having resided in Chengdu for seven years, she has developed a deep affection and understanding of the local community. Her personal fascination with museums has also invested her deeply in this study. Additionally, her background in marketing has equipped her with the ability to understand this study in depth, thereby providing a more comprehensive and enriched perspective on the research.

However, the researcher is an outsider to some of the participants, such as the new Chengduese who have relocated to Chengdu from other provinces and cities to settle in Chengdu, as well as tourists who have come to visit the city. The researcher is also an outsider to the participants as a parent who brings his or her children to the museum as she lacks the necessary experience. In addition, as a researcher from a UK university, the researcher is also to some extent an outsider to all the participants.

The researcher's position in this study presented both advantages and challenges due to its complexity (Kipnis, Bebek, and Bröckerhoff, 2021). As an insider, the researcher enjoyed certain benefits, such as a natural, in-depth understanding of the cultural context of the study, which allowed her to gain a nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives. Furthermore, being empathetically aware of her own position during the data collection process enabled her to establish empathetic interactions with the participants, leading to more meaningful and productive data collection. The researcher's insider position was particularly evident in the interviews. The same cultural background and similar life experiences enabled her to swiftly establish rapport with the participants, gain their trust, and empathise with them in the conversation, thereby yielding nuanced and comprehensive data.

The researcher also faced challenges, particularly evident in the context of being an outsider in this study. While China shares a common cultural background rooted in Confucianism, significant cultural differences exist among regions (Sun *et al.*, 2023). A challenge for researchers is to navigate through the overarching framework of broad cultural landscapes with participants from diverse areas of multicultural environments, which requires avoiding power imbalances and hierarchical dynamics. For instance, maintaining power equality during interviews and focus groups to ensure rich data collection can be challenging when the researcher's expertise is perceived to surpass that of participants regarding the local history and culture of Chengdu.

#### 3.4.1.2 Reflexivity

Researcher bias presents a notable challenge to research validity and reliability, as it may result in the systematic inaccuracies or departures from the actual findings in research projects, which are shaped by the researcher's personal beliefs, values, attitudes, or experiences (Chenail, 2011). These biases have the potential to affect different phases of the

research journey, such as study planning, data gathering, analysis, and result interpretation (Johnson, Adkins, and Chauvin, 2020). To counteract this bias, the researchers need to develop an understanding of her own biases and recognize her potential impact on research outcomes and interpretations (Jones and Donmoyer, 2021).

Through engaging in self-awareness and introspection, commonly referred to as reflexivity, the researcher can verify that her prior viewpoints did not influence the research process (Bott, 2010). Macbeth (2001) defined reflexivity in qualitative research as positional reflexivity and textual reflexivity respectively. Positional reflexivity *underscores* the significance of comprehending the impacts of diverse factors on the research process, whereas textual reflexivity involves a thorough analysis of the process of representing information in qualitative research.

Reflexivity played a vital role in enabling the researcher to actively shape interpretations of the collected data and scrutinise the origins of these interpretations (Bott, 2010). By acknowledging how her personal interests and perspectives influence the research process, the researcher transitioned from viewing herself solely as an individual scholar to recognizing herself as conduits through which a narrative structure unfolds (Richardson, 1994, cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 523). Maintaining a self-reflective stance throughout the research process, the researcher scrutinised her biases and preconceptions that could potentially skew the study's outcomes (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011).

#### 3.4.1.3 Ensuring Validity and Reliability: Measures Taken

Through techniques such as peer review and data triangulation, the researcher can improve the reliability of her interpretations and conclusions, thereby enhancing the credibility of this qualitative research in academic contexts (Hayashi, Abib, and Hoppen, 2019). To guarantee the reliability and validity of this study, the researcher utilised the method of triangulation in

the research design. Triangulation involves utilising various data sources or analytical methods to strengthen the trustworthiness and reliability of a study or analysis, as well as to create fresh insights through the integration of diverse approaches or perspectives from various participant groups (Blaikie, 1991; Hayashi, Abib, and Hoppen, 2019; Moran-Ellis *et al.*, 2006; ). In this study, the researcher gathered information through two distinct methods, one-on-one interviews and focus groups, and further bolstered the data collected through interviews by incorporating photo elicitation.

Furthermore, as per the methodologies and perspectives put forth by Morgan and Drury (2003), Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), and Thomas and Magilvy (2011), the researcher in this study employed the following procedures to ensure the credibility and dependability of the data collection and analysis processes, as well as the interpretation of the findings.

Firstly, the researcher refrained from making presumptions prior to data collection. Secondly, the data was recorded mechanically to rule out the possibility of the researcher recording it based on her own recollection or imagination, thereby ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the data collected. For this study, all data was audio-recorded using an iFLYTEK SR101 recorder and an iPhone 7 with no SIM card inserted and no internet connection, and then uploaded to a secure, password-protected University Google Drive account belonging to the researcher. Thirdly, to guarantee that the information provided is based on participant language, verbatim accounts from participants were employed, incorporating direct quotes and statements. Furthermore, the researcher documented any exceptions observed during interviews and focus groups and reevaluated them throughout the data analysis phase.

Stening and Zhang (2007) raised some issues to be taken into account when conducting research in China. For instance, for political and religious reasons, some Chinese respondents may seek to give ‘right’ answers, to reflect the conditions they deem ideal, rather than true

answers, and this may lead to biased data (Stening and Zhang, 2007). The researcher took measures to prevent such occurrences during the data collection phase and made every effort to ensure their absence. Prior to each interview or focus group, the researcher informed the participants about the confidentiality and anonymity of the study and emphasised this point again at the beginning of the interviews and focus groups to assure participants that their responses would not be disclosed or utilised for other purposes. Furthermore, the researcher was attentive throughout the interviews and focus groups and, when she subjectively sensed a problem, she repeated the question and asked the participant to describe the situation to confirm it.

In addition, although the study was conducted autonomously by the researcher, the researcher held regular meetings with her supervisors throughout the study to provide updates on the study's progress and actively sought their input and feedback. This close collaboration with the supervisors ensured the study's credibility and validity, as the supervisors provided invaluable guidance and scrutiny, helping the researcher to assess the soundness of the study design, data analyses, and conclusion derivation. This team-based approach not only enhanced the study's quality control, but also ensured its transparency and reliability, thereby making the findings more convincing and credible.

### **3.5 Ethical Issues**

Prior to initiating data collection, the researcher applied for ethical approval for the study from the The University Research Ethics Committee and adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by the University of Sheffield (The University of Sheffield, 2024). The full ethics application can be found in the Appendix 4. Obtaining ethical approval was a time-consuming process, as data collection occurred during the worldwide pandemic of Covid-19.

After obtaining approval, the researcher ensured the protection of participants who chose to participate in the study (Leach, 2012, p.268; O’Sullivan *et al.*, 2021; Straiton *et al.*, 2020).

Ethical considerations must play a pivotal role in research design (Holbrook, 1994). To ensure a balance between research objectives and participants' rights and safety, the researcher followed by the ethical principles in qualitative research outlined by Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden, (2001):

Autonomy: Respecting individuals' rights to decide on their involvement in research.

Beneficence: Safeguarding participants' welfare, including upholding confidentiality and identity protection.

Justice: Upholding fairness, preventing exploitation of vulnerable groups, and recognizing all participants' contributions.

It is crucial to uphold ethical practices in research to safeguard the rights, welfare, and dignity of research participants (Poopuu, 2020). The researcher took several measures to ensure that the interviews and focus groups were conducted ethically.

Firstly, the researcher notified the participants beforehand that their participation would require time and energy, which included the hidden time cost of travelling to the interview/focus group locations. The researcher also informed the participants that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point during the interviews and focus groups without any consequences or liability. The researcher provided a two-week cooling-off period during which participants could inform the researcher of their desire to withdraw from the study, and the relevant recordings and transcripts would be deleted. However, no participants withdrew from the study. Secondly, to guarantee that participants comprehended the study's purpose and content, the researcher

explained the consent form to them and addressed their inquiries. Each participant read and signed the consent form before taking part in the interview or focus group. Thirdly, the anonymity of the participants was preserved by informing them that their names or any identifying characteristics would not be used in the PhD thesis or subsequent research. The audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were also securely kept on a Google Drive provided by the university. Finally, all focus groups and face-to-face interviews were conducted in a public, safe location, maintaining a safe social distance between the researcher and participants during the interviews and focus groups. Participants and the researcher wore masks to prevent virus transmission, except for those who did not wear masks for medical reasons in accordance with medical advice. The online interviews were conducted on the researcher's private wifi and personal computer, ensuring privacy and security for both participants and the researcher. These ethical considerations were present throughout the process, from data collection to the writing up of the study results.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter details the development of a research design that incorporates social constructivism and interpretivism as its guiding philosophical principles. To achieve this, a qualitative methodological approach was implemented, which comprised the use of semi-structured one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and photo elicitation within the one-on-one interviews. The purpose of this was to explore the visit experiences of museum visitors in China. The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis, and the results are presented in the subsequent two chapters.

## **Chapter 4 Manifestations of Place Identity in Chinese Domestic Visitors' Experience of the Museum Servicescape**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The data indicates that the experiences of domestic Chinese visitors within the museum *servicescape* primarily manifest around five dimensions: cognitive, affective, social, physical and sensory. The two main factors influencing visitor experiences are place-based identity and two Chinese cultural values: respect for authority and striving for harmony. This chapter examines how place identity is manifested in the experiences of Chinese domestic museum visitors.

The data reveal that place identity primarily influences the cognitive, affective, social and sensory dimensions of visitors' experiences within the museum *servicescape*. The impact of place identity on visitors' experiences within the museum *servicescape* primarily affects their experiences of the museum's core services, specifically the exhibitions. Specifically, this chapter intends to provide a comprehensive examination of the following objective:

To investigate how place identity manifests in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*.

The following sections will detail how place identity and the Chinese cultural values affect each of these dimensions. First, the four different types of place identities that emerged from the data will be introduced. Next, the impact of these identities on participants' experiences within the Chengdu Museum's *servicescape* will be investigated respectively.

## 4.2 Four Types of Consumers by Place Identity/Relationship

It is essential to clarify the various types of place identities identified by the data. The data reveal four distinct types of place identities that significantly influence visitor experiences of the *servicescape* of the Chengdu Museum: Chengduese (individuals native to Chengdu), Sichuanese (individuals native to Sichuan Province), New Chengduese (individuals born outside Sichuan Province but currently residing in Chengdu), and visitors from outside Sichuan Province (individuals residing in other provinces and visiting Chengdu for tourism purposes). The subsequent sections will provide a detailed analysis of the four distinct types of place identity identified from the data.

### 4.2.1 Chengduese

Chengduese participants, such as Participant 6, 21, and 38, who were native to and resided in Chengdu, exhibited a deep understanding and affinity for the museum exhibits, which reflected their cultural heritage. This familiarity stemmed from their exposure to the city's historical and cultural traditions since childhood. Visiting the museum provides a blend of historical and contemporary perspectives, enabling Chengduese participants to experience and reinforce their identity. Their statements indicate a strong sense of attachment to Chengdu and a robust identification with their Chengduese social identity.

As stated by Participant 21:

*“When visiting with Chengduese friends, we often chat about things like the ground projection on the fifth floor that shows old Chengdu streets. We locals will stand there and say things like, “Oh, I used to take extra classes here when I was a kid,” or “This street used to be called this.” It really gives you that immersive feeling of being right there in the moment.”*

The data indicate that the cultural heritage symbols displayed in the museum allow Chengduese visitors to interpret them and form their contemporary place identity. Their understanding of local history and culture, along with their accumulated life experiences in the city, serves as a valuable resource in the context of their museum visits. This interpretive ability is a unique privilege of locals, clearly superior to that of non-Chengduese visitors. When encountering exhibits related to local history and culture, which are connected to their daily lives, Chengduese visitors are able to mobilise their resources to interpret these exhibits, thereby understanding and reinforcing their place identity. The exhibits in the museum act as historical symbols, establishing a connection between the collective past and present for Chengduese visitors, allowing them to experience their social identity within the museum. Participants' expressions reveal that this often brings them a sense of enjoyment.

#### **4.2.2 Sichuanese**

Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan Province. Sichuanese participants were born and raised in Sichuan and had been deeply influenced by Sichuan culture since childhood. Although they may not be as familiar with certain exhibits that have strong local attributes specific to Chengdu as the Chengduese participants, they were generally quite knowledgeable of the local history and culture. The data show that they also felt a strong sense of affinity towards the exhibits in the Chengdu Museum.

Sichuanese participants positioned themselves slightly differently from native Chengduese. Unlike Chengduese participants, Sichuanese participants extended the cultural and historical narratives presented in the museum to encompass the entire Sichuan region, thereby adapting to their own place identity. Some, like Participants 9, 28, and 46, used the term "Sichuan" rather than "Chengdu" in their statements, indicating an off-centre perception of social identity, whereas Chengdu is at the heart of Sichuan culture. Despite this, their experiences in

the Chengdu Museum still fostered a sense of attachment and identification, extending their identity from Chengdu to the entire Sichuan province. The Chengdu Museum thus plays a significant role in place identity construction and reinforcement, signifying not only Chengduese identity but also that of the broader Sichuan region.

For example, Participant 9 did not have an in-depth understanding of Chengdu's history. The museum updated her knowledge, and in her description, she extended the scope to include the whole of Sichuan.

*“To be honest, **I never really thought Chengdu's history was that long and rich.** But when I saw the Ashoka statue and the overall historical development of Chengdu, it kept mentioning periods from thousands of years ago. **I was surprised to learn** that artefacts similar to those found in places like Vietnam have been unearthed here, suggesting there was some cultural exchange despite the limited communication back then. It made me realise that even in ancient times, foreign cultures influenced Chengdu and **Sichuan**, which I found quite astonishing.”*

There was a segment of Sichuanese, such as Participants 5, 20, 33, and 41, who were born in Sichuan Province but moved to Chengdu and lived there for a long time. Although not originally from Chengdu, they exhibited a self-identification closely resembling that of the Chengduese participants, with no apparent sense of alienation in their museum experiences.

For example, Participant 5 indicated that he was not interested in the regular exhibitions at the museum because the exhibits were too closely related to his daily life:

*“Personally, the shadow puppetry exhibit upstairs left the biggest impression on me and is my favourite. I'm not really interested in the other folk customs stuff. To me, it just looks like they've moved items from craft shops into the museum and called them Chengdu*

*specialties. Locals wouldn't think much of it because it's already part of my daily life. So, I only go to the museum for special exhibitions, like the jewellery exhibit, the Qianlong exhibit, or the oil painting exhibit."*

#### **4.2.3 New Chengduese**

As the economic, cultural and technological centre of Southwest China, Chengdu attracts a large number of young people to develop and explore new opportunities (Rongchengzhengshi, 2022). New Chengduese, such as Participant 12, 13, 27 and 42, refer to the new residents who have relocated and settled in Chengdu from an alien province or city to pursue their career, studies or other goals. In this context, it specifically refers to Chinese who were not born in Sichuan Province. Their social identity as New Chengduese were emplaced. The data show that they may not yet be familiar with Chengdu's local history and culture, but they experience the Chengdu lifestyle to varying degrees in their daily lives. One avenue for gaining insight into the region's cultural heritage is by visiting museums, which can serve as a means of accessing and appreciating the historical and cultural aspects of the city.

For instance, when discussing an exhibition that showcases several decades of Chengdu's rapid development, Participant 27, a New Chengduese, stated that she could not deeply resonate with it:

*"But honestly, I think the main reason it didn't resonate with me is because I didn't grow up in Chengdu. I'm not a local who's witnessed that development first-hand, so the narrative didn't strike a strong chord with me. But I imagine it would feel quite meaningful for local Chengdu residents."*

There exist no disparity in ethnic background between the Chengduese, Sichuanese and the New Chengduese participants. However, the manner in which the New Chengduese

participants recognized their connections to Chengdu and their acceptance of their identity as the New Chengduese differed from that of Chengduese and Sichuanese participants who were born and raised in the local area. There was a process of transformation in the construction of the identity of the New Chengduese to regard an alien place as their "hometown."

The significance of visiting the museum lies in its capacity to shape the emplaced social identity of New Chengduese. The museum imparts historical and cultural implications to their individual life experiences. It empowers them to construct their New Chengduese identity by contemplating how their personal identities are interwoven with the broader historical and cultural frameworks of the local Chengdu community.

Participants who demonstrated a high acceptance of their New Chengduese identity, for example, Participant 42, exhibited a notable ability to interpret museum exhibits.

*"I found it fascinating. The first time I went, I couldn't understand much—it covered the development of Chengdu through various dynasties. The second time, I had just watched "The Qin Empire" series, which mentioned a lot about the interactions between the Qin Dynasty and Shu (ancient Sichuan), including Li Bing's flood control efforts. I realised I was missing knowledge about that part of history, so I wanted to learn more. As an immigrant to Sichuan, which is **my second home**, I didn't know much about its history and wanted to understand it better, **to better understand my new hometown**. The second visit was much more interesting because I could connect what I saw in the museum with what I'd seen on TV."*

During their visits, they developed a deeper attachment to Chengdu and reinforced their New Chengduese identity. These participants not only comprehended the cultural and historical context of the exhibits but also connected this information with their own life experiences and emplaced identity. Consequently, their museum experience encompassed a profound

understanding of the exhibits from both cognitive and social experiences while also enhancing their sense of belonging to Chengdu on an emotional level. This multifaceted experience further solidified their New Chengduese identity, providing them with a rich and layered engagement during their museum visits.

For some of the New Chengduese participants, for example Participant 13, the impact of the museum visiting experience on their perception of Chengdu's history and culture was undeniable to some extent, however, it didn't contribute much to their sense of belonging to Chengdu. As Participant 13 stated:

*“The museum did give me a bit more of an understanding (of Chengdu's history and culture), but nothing too profound. My husband's family are locals, so most of my impressions of Chengdu come from what they've told me, as they were born and raised here.”*

The life experience residing in Chengdu and knowledge about the city's history and culture enabled them to initially construct, renew, or challenge their emplaced social identity. Although the museum visits provided valuable insights into Chengdu's history and culture, there was no sign of them fostering a strong emotional connection to the city, which ultimately had a limited contribution to the individuals' development of a New Chengduese social identity.

#### **4.2.4 Visitors from Outside Sichuan Province**

Unlike the aforementioned Chengduese, Sichuanese, and New Chengduese, visitors from other provinces have a relatively distant connection to Chengdu in terms of birthplace, residence, and place identity. Chengduese, Sichuanese, and New Chengduese are physically connected to Chengdu, and their social identities are, to varying degrees, linked to the city. In

contrast, visitors from other provinces lack this connection. They neither have nor need to develop a social identity related to Chengdu. However, the data indicate that they can develop a sense of place attachment to Chengdu through their museum visits. For example, at the end of the interview, Participant 15 told the researcher: *“If I have the time, I'd like to visit Chengdu again and have another look around, including another visit to the museum.”*

After analysing the four different types of place identities related to the museum visit experiences, the following section will discuss how place identity influences customer experiences. This discussion will be structured around three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and social.

#### **4.3 The Impact of Place Identity on the Cognitive Experience**

For visitors to the Chengdu Museum, a regional museum, those with a stronger sense of place identity related to Chengdu generally have a more positive cognitive experience. The following section will explore in detail how each type of place identity manifests in the cognitive experiences of the participants.

First, the experiences of Chengduese will be examined. As locals, their long-term residency in Chengdu has allowed them to accumulate a considerable amount of knowledge and life experience, which they can draw upon during their visits, resulting in a highly positive cognitive experience.

Participant 6, a Chengduese, detailed her experience in the Chengdu Museum, particularly how exhibits such as the smiling ceramic figurines became integral to her identity. Below are her specific descriptions:

*“I love to see the smiling terracotta figurines, which would not be seen in other areas. (...) I feel safe to be labelled or defined, just like you're drawn into a comfort zone. It starts*

*as being a Chengduese, and then you learn how to be a Chengduese, how it becomes an identity or a label for you. In fact, I am quite concerned about this, maybe because I don't have much confidence in the identity representation given by myself only from the emotional perspective. **I think culture is a better place for me to stand on.** (...) On the surface, it may not necessarily be accurate. For instance, I'm really happy today and you see me as a happy person, that might not fully capture who I am. I'm an optimistic person."*

Participant 6 recognized that her personal experiences were interconnected with the broader collective memory of the local community. She viewed her place identity as a significant component of her subjective personal identity. Her perception of local history in the museum played a crucial role in the construction and reinforcement of her social identity. As a native of Chengdu, her understanding of local customs and traditions, combined with her accumulated life experiences, enabled her to relate her cognitive processes to the broader cultural context depicted in the exhibits. Her museum experience encompassed not only the understanding and appreciation of the exhibits but also how these exhibits connected with her personal identification, forming a comprehensive and profound sense of social identity. This place identity was central to her cognitive experience in the museum, allowing her to deeply understand and perceive the culture and history behind the exhibits.



*The smiling terracotta figures. The photograph was captured by the researcher in May 2021.*

At the time of the interview with Participant 2 (a visitor from Beijing), it was her first visit to Chengdu.

*“By seeing the exhibitions, uh... I had a general understanding of Chengdu and the people who live here. **But I don't think I have got a knowledge of the special point of Chengdu, the difference from other cultures. It just feels like any other museum I've visited. I mean in terms of the content. For example, I don't think I found the point that the Ba-Shu culture is different from other cultures, and I don't think that the difference is particularly obviously exhibited.**”*

Participant 2 perceived that the Chengdu Museum's efforts to accurately present Chengdu's history and culture were unsuccessful. The museum failed to distinguish Chengdu's local culture from the history and culture of other regions in China, and it did not foster her appreciation for the local culture during her visit. Her cognitive experience was closely related to her place identity. As a first-time visitor from outside Sichuan, her place identity was entirely unrelated to Chengdu, and her understanding of the city was quite limited. Her identity as a Chinese allowed her to analyse and understand the information in the Chengdu Museum from a national perspective. However, due to her limited knowledge and experience of Chengdu, she was unable to recognize the regional cultural information presented in the museum. This prevented her from critically understanding and reflecting on the differences between Chengdu and other regional cultures in China. Consequently, her place identity influenced her cognitive experience in the museum, making it challenging for her to appreciate the unique cultural and historical charm of Chengdu.

Participant 6's and Participant 2's experiences illustrate the impact of varying place identities on cognitive experiences. The following is a comparative analysis of how different place identities influence cognitive experiences to the same exhibits. Participant 9, a Sichuanese,

and Participant 12, a New Chengduese, both mentioned Shu Embroidery in their interviews, but exhibited markedly different levels of cognitive engagement.

Participant 9 stated that the museum showed the history of Shu embroidery and the exhibits showed the real handmade embroidery, so she had a visual understanding of Shu embroidery and felt the progress of human civilization through the layout of different dynasties:

*“It told the history of the Shu Embroidery. There were some exhibits. In fact, now we rarely are exposed to real hand-made embroidery in life. A lot of the embroideries we see in daily life are machine made. **In the museum I saw the very early embroideries.** Although it had so many years of history, and some of them were tattered, they still looked very exquisite. **Before I did not have a very intuitive cognition of the Shu Embroidery, but I have had through this exhibition.** At least you can directly see the real hand-made Shu Embroidery. (...) Shu Embroidery was very famous. But I haven't really seen it. (...) It was arranged according to the dynasties. **I think it gave you a clearer understanding of each dynasty. And you feel the progress of human civilization little by little.**”*

Participant 9's cognitive experience was deeply influenced by her Sichuanese identity, which facilitated a profound connection between the exhibits and her existing knowledge. As a Sichuanese, she had accumulated knowledge and experience regarding Shu Embroidery in her daily life, allowing her to gain a more profound cognitive experience in the museum. The Shu Embroidery exhibits enhanced her understanding through historical displays, providing her with a direct comprehension of this traditional craft. This deep understanding was closely related to her knowledge base.

The Shu Embroidery exhibits, through their historical and cultural context, intertwined with her memories, further enhancing her identification with Sichuan culture. She could draw upon her knowledge to integrate the historical background of Shu Embroidery into a broader

understanding of Sichuan cultural development, enriching her cognitive experience. The museum exhibits were not merely static displays of artefacts but cultural bridges connecting the past with the present. Through these exhibits, Participant 9 gained a better understanding of the significance of Shu embroidery within Sichuan culture. This cognitive experience not only enhanced her appreciation of the exhibits but also reinforced her identity as a Sichuanese. This process demonstrated the core role of place identity in the museum's cognitive experience, enabling her to deeply understand and perceive the culture and history behind the exhibits.

In contrast, Participant 12, as a New Chengduese, approached the exhibits from a more detached perspective, having limited prior knowledge of Shu Embroidery. He stated:

***“I knew very little about Shu Embroidery before. Before I visited the museum, I felt... Fujian or other southern areas were more famous for brocades. But I understood that the history and culture of Shu Embroidery is also very long. This was known from the museum, I basically had not been exposed to it before.”***

Participant 12's cognitive experience was primarily educational, reflecting his unfamiliarity with the history and culture of Chengdu. Unlike Participant 9, he lacked prior knowledge of Shu Embroidery, resulting in a more passive absorption of new information, updating his existing knowledge base. This lack of background knowledge placed him in the role of an information receiver rather than someone who could actively understand and internalise the cultural significance of the exhibits. Although the museum provided Participant 12 with valuable knowledge about Shu Embroidery, the absence of prior knowledge made his cognitive experience less profound than Participant 9's, and he did not resonate with the exhibits on a cognitive level.

This difference highlights the impact of place identity on the cognitive experience in the museum. Participants with a local social identity often possess a deeper knowledge of local culture that can enhance their place identity through the museum exhibits, while those lacking this background tend to engage in passive learning from an outsider's perspective, making it challenging to deeply understand the exhibits and the culture and history they represent.

#### **4.4 The Impact of Place Identity on the Affective Experience**

The data indicates that place identity significantly influences participants' affective experiences, enabling them to establish an emotional connection with the exhibits during their visits to the Chengdu Museum. During their visits, they not only relate their personal life experiences to the cultural and historical significance represented by the museum exhibits but also project their emotions onto these exhibits. This emotional projection allows them to resonate with the local history and culture depicted in the exhibits. This connection not only enhances their understanding and appreciation of the exhibits but also provides them with a deeper emotional experience during their museum visits. By integrating their personal experiences and emotions with the cultural and historical context of the exhibits, these participants reveal the unique perspectives and rich emotional experiences endowed by their place identity.

Participant 28 (Sichuanese) in Focus Group 1, expressed her admiration for the smiling terracotta figures: *"I love the terracotta figures in the Chengdu Museum. The optimism of the Sichuan people, wow, it really was reflected in the statues from thousands of years ago."*

Her remarks not only demonstrate an appreciation for the museum exhibits but also deeply reflect how her place identity influenced her affective experience. During the visit, she perceived the historical continuity of the optimistic spirit of Sichuanese through the exhibits, which further reinforced her own social identity. This affective experience was not limited to

mere observation but was closely tied to her place identity, resulting in a strong emotional resonance with the exhibits. This resonance deepened her understanding and appreciation of the exhibits and strengthened her social identity as a Sichuanese. Her identity construction and reinforcement extended beyond the boundaries of Chengdu, encompassing a broader sense of pride in being part of Sichuan. In this way, her affective experience in the museum was enriched, illustrating the significant role of place identity in shaping affective experiences.

Participant 33 (Sichuanese) in Focus Group 2 expressed her pride in learning at the museum that the world's earliest paper currency "jiaozi" was invented in Chengdu: *"The world's first paper currency, Jiaozi, came from here. Wow, we were amazing! (...) Yeah, the sense of pride. It's like, wow, we were great before, and we're great now."*

Participant 33 learned about the world's earliest paper currency, "Jiaozi," during the exhibition, which elicited positive emotions and reinforced her social identity as a Sichuanese, as evidenced by her use of the term "we." This sense of pride enhanced her emotional attachment to Chengdu and strengthened her place identity as a member of the Sichuanese community. Through the exhibition, she deeply connected with the local history and culture, further enhancing her sense of belonging to the regional culture.

The example of Participant 42 highlighted the impact of museum visiting experiences on the emplaced identity of the New Chengduese.

***"I feel that I love Sichuan more. Really! I think Sichuan is so great! (...) And I think I could feel the spirit of Sichuan people from the exhibits, especially from the Yuan Dynasty or the Song Dynasty, when the terracotta figures were all smiling. (...) The people here have been so relaxed, so fond of life and so optimistic since ancient times. There really is such spirit! (...) By going to the museum, we can get closer to the ancient people. It feels like***

*having a kind of dialogue with ancient people within the space. (...) When I went there, **I felt that I should review and feel the things of my ancestors frequently.***”

Her use of "*more*" suggests that she had built strong attachment to Chengdu and Sichuan in life before the visit, and the experience of visiting the Chengdu Museum reinforced her attachment. Her language choices, including the utilisation of the first person pronouns "*my ancestors*" when discussing the deceased who resided in Chengdu, reflected her perception of her place identity as a New Chengduese, indicating a strong sense of belonging and identification with the city.

Participant 12 stated that he gained knowledge of Shu embroidery at the museum:

*“I knew very little about Shu Embroidery before. Before I visited the museum, I felt... Fujian or other southern areas were more famous for brocades. But I understood that the history and culture of Shu Embroidery is also very long. This was known from the museum, I basically had not been exposed to it before.”*

Participant 12 did not demonstrate any indications of forming a profound emotional connection with Chengdu, nor did his increased familiarity with Shu embroidery contribute to the construction of his social identity as a New Chengduese. Undoubtedly, the museum visit influenced his understanding of Chengdu's historical and cultural image to some extent. However, the historical insights gained did not evoke a deep attachment to the city. Consequently, his statement showed that the visit experience minimally impacted the formation of his identity as a New Chengduese.

Another category of New Chengduese participants, such as Participant 42, integrated the museum visit experience into their identity construction. For individuals like Participant 42, they effectively employ their personal resources, particularly the knowledge and life

experiences they have gained in Chengdu, and utilise all three channels, similar to Chengduese and Sichuanese. The emotional connections they acquire and establish during their museum visit enhance their sense of belonging to Chengdu, thereby facilitating the construction of their identity as New Chengduese.

#### **4.5 The Impact of Place Identity on the Social Experience**

This section will explore the impact of place identity and cultural values on the social experiences of visitors, beginning with place identity. Several participants, including Participant 21 (Chengduese), Participant 20, Participant 28, and Participant 33 (Sichuanese), as well as Participant 42 (New Chengduese), constructed or reinforced their place identity to some extent through comparisons with other regions. By situating their local identity within a broader context and reflecting on the differences between Chengdu and other areas in China, they were able to clarify and strengthen their place identity.

These participants' social experiences in the museum were conveyed in two different manners: one involved interacting with friends, where the participants accompanied their friends from outside Sichuan on visits to the Chengdu Museum. In these instances, the participants' friends compared Chengdu with the places they themselves originated from, enabling the participants to discern the unique historical and cultural aspects of Chengdu. This process comprised two parts: the separation from Chengdu's culture, which was not carried out by the participants themselves, but rather by their tourist friends, who supplied them with information. As a friend of Participant 21 (Chengduese) remarked, *“My friend liked the Pili Puppet Show very much. He was very surprised when he saw it in the museum. He said that normally museums don't put that kind of thing in.”* Similarly, Participant 20 (Sichuanese)'s friend stated, *“They can only see this kind of life in Chengdu, rarely in other places. By visiting the museum and having a look, Chengdu has such heritage culture.”* The participants then utilised these

reflections and made comparisons to develop a distinct Chengduese/Sichuanese social identity for themselves.

The second form of social experience involves the participants' personal life experiences, undertaken independently without any external involvement. These participants compared the history and culture of Chengdu, as seen in the Chengdu Museum, with their perceived history and culture of other regions in China. Through this comparison, they not only gained a profound understanding of the exhibits and the culture and history they represented but also reinforced their identification with their Chengdu place identity. Participants 41 (Sichuanese) and 42 (New Chengduese) exemplified this type of social dimension in their museum experience.

While on a visit to the museum, Participant 41 gained valuable insight into the significance of Chengdu's commercial culture in Chinese history, as she expressed her thoughts:

*“I thought it gave me these images and made me feel that Chengdu might not be the political centre, but its position in business has been very important. It has been at least the first class, if not the first or second commercial city in China.”*

Participant 41 not only passively received information but also actively connected the exhibits with her place identity, reflecting and comparing them within the broader cultural context of China. Through comparing Chengdu with northern Chinese cities, she recognized that although Chengdu is not a political or geographical centre, it holds a unique commercial status in Chinese history. This realisation deepened her understanding of Chengdu's history and simultaneously strengthened her identification with her place identity. As a Sichuanese, she felt a profound sense of pride in Chengdu's commercial significance during her museum experience. Her statements demonstrate how she internalised her place identity through her museum visit and expressed and reinforced this identity within a broader social context.

Additionally, her place identity encouraged her to engage with the exhibits more actively and openly, fostering reflection and a deeper engagement with the displays.

During her visit to the Chengdu Museum, Participant 42 employed Xi'an as a comparative point to reflect on the historical origins of Chengdu's relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, thereby uncovering the cultural foundations that constructed and reinforced her identity as a New Chengduese:

*“Because I have been to the Xi 'an Museum, **I felt very different.** The people here have been so relaxed, so fond of life and so optimistic since ancient times. **There really is such spirit!** The experience of seeing things in the Xi 'an Museum was **not quite the same as seeing things here.**”*

Her place identity as a New Chengduese significantly influenced her social dimension experience in the museum. The knowledge and experiences she accumulated during her visit to Xi'an provided her with a contrasting perspective, enabling her to understand and appreciate Chengdu's unique culture more profoundly.

During visiting the Chengdu museum, Participant 42 used Xi'an as a point of comparison to contemplate the historical roots of Chengdu's relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, thereby discovering the cultural foundations that shaped and reinforced her identity as a New Chengduese. While visiting the Chengdu Museum, she actively compared Chengdu with Xi'an rather than merely passively receiving information, which allowed her to reflect on the distinctiveness of Chengdu's history and culture. By contemplating the differences between Chengdu and Xi'an, she deepened her understanding of Chengdu and further solidified her identity as a New Chengduese. Although her hometown is outside Sichuan Province, her experiences of living in Chengdu and her identification with the city have shaped her into a New Chengduese.

In sum, Participant 42's museum experience not only enhanced her understanding of Chengdu's history and culture but also allowed her to situate her emplaced social identity within a broader social context. This experience enabled her to articulate and reinforce her identity as a New Chengduese in a more comprehensive manner.

The exploration of how place identity manifests in the social experiences of visitors at the Chengdu Museum reveals the significant role that place identity plays in shaping these interactions. Participants, through both interactions with friends and their own personal reflections, were able to construct and reinforce their place identity by comparing Chengdu's unique cultural and historical aspects with those of other regions. This process not only deepened their understanding of Chengdu but also strengthened their sense of belonging and pride in their place identity.

Participant 21 (Chengduese) and others exemplified how interactions with friends from outside Sichuan facilitated a comparative understanding, while participants like 41 (Sichuanese) and 42 (New Chengduese) highlighted the impact of personal reflections on their place identity. These experiences illustrate the dynamic interplay between personal narratives and collective memory in the museum context, demonstrating how place identity is both constructed and reinforced through social engagement.

The next section will focus on the impact of cultural values, particularly respect for authority and the pursuit of harmony, on the social experiences of visitors in the museum setting. This will further elucidate how deeply ingrained cultural values influence visitor interactions and overall social experiences within the museum.



*Panda Shu Embroidery, downloaded on January 28, 2024, from the Chengdu Museum*

*official website: 展览落幕 传承不停-“千针万线一缕丝——蜀绣传统针法绣片展”完美收官 - 成都博物馆 <https://www.cdmuseum.com/xinwen/202011/1891.html>*

However, the impact of local place identity on participants was not always positive and, in certain cases, negatively affected their cognitive experiences in the museum. In Focus Group 6, Participants 44 and 45, both native Sichuanese and long-term residents of Chengdu, expressed a lack of interest and motivation to attend the regular exhibitions at the Chengdu Museum, explaining their reasons.

Participant 45 indicated that she had only attended temporary exhibitions at the Chengdu Museum and lacked interest in the permanent exhibits, never considering them as a means to learn about Chengdu's history and culture: *"I'm not particularly interested, and I haven't taken the time to explore those things, so I haven't been to see it."* Her words reveal that she was not interested in the exhibition content.

Participant 44 stated that his reason for not attending the permanent exhibitions was his desire for more in-depth content to deepen his understanding of Chengdu's history and culture:

*"I heard it's mostly about folklore and stuff. (...) Basically, it's urban legends, folk tales, that's what I've heard. It doesn't clearly show the origins, the background, **there's not much in-depth research or written explanations.** (...) I haven't visited the permanent exhibitions at the Chengdu Museum. After hearing it's about folklore, **I developed a prejudice.**"*

Without personally visiting the permanent exhibition, he formed a subjective and prejudiced view, considering it shallow and uninteresting, based on hearsay.

The reluctance and avoidance attitudes of these participants toward the Chengdu Museum's permanent exhibitions are evidently linked to their local place identity as long-term Sichuanese residents in Chengdu. Due to their long-term immersion in Sichuan culture, they believed that they had accumulated a wealth of cultural knowledge and experience in their daily lives. Consequently, they found the exhibition content overly familiar, lacking novelty and motivation for exploration. Their identity as long-term Sichuan residents thus became a primary barrier to their engagement with the museum's permanent exhibitions.

This situation illustrates that local place identity can not only enhance a sense of belonging but also bring about negative impacts on cognitive experiences in the museum. When participants were overly familiar with the exhibition content, they might develop dismissive attitudes or lack interest due to preconceived notions and extensive knowledge of local culture. This influence of place identity on cognitive experiences necessitates finding a balance between familiarity and novelty for local museum visitors. Only then can they find points of interest in the exhibitions, feel a sense of connection to local culture, and also experience novelty and excitement, satisfying different levels of cognitive needs.

Participant 32, who was also a visitor from an alien province, expressed great delight in her narration. She was struck by a quote in the introduction to the exhibits at the Chengdu Museum that highlighted the Chengdues' enjoyment of life.

*“Before I only knew that Chengdu was a leisure city, and everyone was relaxed here. Something like that, just the stereotypical images. However, **today I organised my thoughts with the historical contexts**, including that sentence we remember, that was to say the people were listening to music and playing, at the same time they didn't forget to develop the economy. (...) **This sentence was very shocking**. I think we could only say it in reverse in the north.”*

Participant 32 had visited Chengdu multiple times. Her identity as a tourist significantly influenced her cognitive experience. As a native of northern China, she had previously perceived the leisurely lifestyle of Chengdu's locals through her travel experiences. The exhibits at the Chengdu Museum confirmed this perception, allowing her to compare the familiar attitudes and atmosphere of northern life with those presented in Chengdu, deeply sensing the differences.

The exhibits at the Chengdu Museum facilitated the integration of her perceptual awareness of Chengdu with her personal experiences, enhancing her cognitive perceptions of the city through historical materials. As a visitor from outside Sichuan Province, this comparison and integration deepened her understanding and knowledge of Chengdu culture. This cognitive experience not only enhanced her rational comprehension of Chengdu but also fostered her attachment to the city, making her museum visit more enriching and satisfying.

The exploration of place identity's impact on visitors' cognitive experiences at the Chengdu Museum reveals a profound connection between an individual's sense of belonging and their engagement with the museum's core service—exhibitions. Participants with a strong place identity, such as Chengduese and Sichuanese individuals, often have enriched cognitive experiences due to their accumulated knowledge and personal connections to the exhibits. For example, Participant 6 (Chengduese) and Participant 9 (Sichuanese) demonstrated how their deep understanding and emotional ties to Chengdu's history and culture significantly enhanced their museum visits. Conversely, visitors without a strong place identity/attachment, such as Participant 12 (New Chengduese) and Participant 2 (visitor from outside Sichuan Province), exhibited more passive and less profound cognitive experiences, often struggling to engage deeply with the exhibits.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that while a strong place identity can enhance the cognitive experience, it can also lead to disengagement when the content is perceived as overly familiar or lacking novelty. This duality illustrates the need for museums to balance familiarity with innovative presentations to serve both local and non-local visitors.

The next section will explore the impact of cultural value of respect for authority on the cognitive experiences of visitors in the museum *servicescape*. This analysis will further investigate how deeply ingrained cultural values shape visitor perceptions and interactions with museum exhibits.

#### **4.6 The Impact of Place Identity on the Sensory Experience**

The data shows that local visitors from Chengdu and Sichuan exhibit higher sensitivity to exhibition details than non-local visitors due to their familiarity with the region's history and culture. For example, Participant 38 (Chengduese) complained to the researcher about the poor visual effects of the exhibition hall:

*"As far as I remember, everything looks quite old-fashioned. You can't just make the entire colour scheme so dark, with dim lighting, just because the history you are presenting involves things like rustic houses, pits, and roof tiles."*

Participant 38 (Chengduese) described the exhibits using dialectal expressions such as "*tu bao bao*" (rustic houses and pits) and "*wa zhuan*" (roof tiles), they are, in essence, deconstructing the exhibition narrative through local knowledge. The mismatch between dim lighting and local historical symbols triggers their critique of staleness, reflecting the stringent scrutiny that local visitors apply to cultural representation.

This critique shows the significant influence of local place identity on visitors' sensory experiences within the museum setting. Participant 38's dissatisfaction with the dim lighting

suggests that local visitors do not passively receive sensory stimuli but instead evaluate them through the lens of familiar regional aesthetics and cultural memory. The visual dimness and muted colour palette are perceived not as neutral design choices but as a misalignment with local historical symbols, leading to a sensory experience that feels detached from the lived essence of Chengdu's cultural identity. This highlights how place identity shapes not only cognitive interpretations but also sensory expectations, as visitors anticipate an exhibition environment that resonates with their embodied experiences of place, materiality, and atmosphere.

Similarly, Participant 6 (Chengduese) offered a highly sophisticated evaluation of the background colours of Buddhist statues:

*"The lighting sometimes feels lifeless. Look, look at this statue—it is illuminated from above with a top-down light. For a human figure, top lighting is disastrous; it entirely relies on the statue's inherent aesthetic appeal to hold up. (...) If the eyelids were lit from the side, they would appear soft and gentle, but with this lighting, the eyes seem droopy. (...) **The exhibition layout has a significant impact on the sensory perception of artefacts. The Buddha statues are already grey, and when the brightness is turned up to the maximum, along with contrast and saturation adjustments, it sometimes feels overly processed and unnatural. Now, let me show you an example of well-executed design. There was once a Buddha statue exhibition where they extracted colours directly from the statues to create the background. The texture was excellent. **The lighting and colours were exactly to my liking.**"***

Her account reflects a deep familiarity with regional aesthetic traditions, demonstrating how sensory perception is shaped by cultural expectations. The critique of the grey background and top-down lighting reveals an expectation that exhibitions should align with a visual language that prioritises warmth, depth, and authenticity. This suggests that sensory

experiences in museum settings are not solely dictated by display techniques but are mediated through visitors' place-based aesthetic frameworks. Consequently, place identity extends beyond cognitive and affective engagement to shape how sensory stimuli—such as light, colour, and contrast—are perceived, interpreted, and evaluated within the exhibition space.

Local visitors' sensory experiences frequently intersect with their memories of city life. Participant 4 (Sichuanese), upon recognising the continuity of historical street functions in the interactive map installation, remarks:

*"It's fascinating to see that the city's spatial divisions haven't fundamentally changed. The city wall was essentially our current ring roads, and the surrounding rivers are now the present-day ring roads. The areas that were commercial hubs remain so today, while places that once housed dye workshops have transformed into trendy boutiques. Some areas that used to sell tea and pulled noodles still have many snack stalls today. You can walk onto the exhibit and see for yourself—street names haven't changed much, so you can get a sense of how things have evolved from ancient times to the present."*

This reflects the participant's daily observations of Chengdu's urban space. Such an embodied sense of place allows sensory experiences to transcend the exhibition itself, serving as tools for validating personal lived experiences. This connection between sensory experience and place identity highlights how local visitors engage with exhibitions not as isolated displays but as extensions of their lived environments. The recognition of historical continuity through sensory interaction—such as walking onto the exhibit and visually tracing familiar street names—demonstrates how sensory stimuli activate spatial memory and reinforce a sense of belonging. Rather than passively absorbing historical narratives, visitors use their embodied familiarity with urban space to interpret and validate the exhibition's representation of Chengdu's transformation. This emphasizes the role of place identity in

shaping sensory perception, as visitors do not merely see, hear, or navigate the exhibition but experience it through the lens of their personal and collective spatial knowledge. Place identity functions as a mediator of sensory engagement, influencing how visitors perceive historical authenticity and connect with museum narratives on an experiential level.

Visitors with strong local identities also tend to be critical of museum merchandise design. For example, Participant 5 (Sichuanese) expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and practicality of cultural and creative products, stating:

*"I don't like these cultural and creative products because they are poorly made. Take the bookmarks, for example—you know, the ones that are curved, made of metal, with a Sunbird pattern on them. I think they are less convenient than simply using a random sticker, and they look quite tacky—gold-coloured and heavy. As for items like vases, I feel that the people designing these products haven't put much thought into them."*

Visitors with a strong sense of place identity often assess museum merchandise through the lens of their cultural expectations, with sensory experience playing a key role in this evaluation. When local cultural symbols are misrepresented or poorly designed, the sensory qualities of these products—such as texture, weight, colour, and material—become integral to visitors' perception of cultural authenticity. Participant 5 (Sichuanese) critiques the metallic Sunbird bookmarks as "tacky," highlighting how the physical attributes of these objects evoke a sensory dissonance that disrupts their connection to place identity. The gold-coloured, heavy design does not align with their expectations of an elegant, meaningful representation of Chengdu's heritage.

This response shows how sensory engagement extends beyond exhibitions to the products sold in museum shops, shaping visitors' perceptions of cultural legitimacy. Museum

merchandise serves as a tangible extension of the exhibition experience, reinforcing or diminishing visitors' emotional and cultural connection to the site. When sensory qualities fail to align with place-based aesthetic expectations, products are perceived as inauthentic, undermining their role as meaningful cultural representations. For visitors with a strong local identity, museum shop items are not merely commercial objects but embodiments of cultural heritage, where sensory dissonance—such as an overly stylised or impractical design—can create a disconnect between personal place identity and the commodification of cultural symbols. This suggests that place identity not only influences how visitors experience exhibitions but also how they engage with, critique, and validate the sensory qualities of cultural products in museum retail spaces.

Notably, the data indicate that sensory experience plays a significant role in Chengduese and Sichuanese visitors' experiences and is frequently intertwined with cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of experience. Participants' accounts highlight not only the influence of sensory stimuli—such as visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile elements—but also the ways in which these sensory inputs interact with their thoughts, emotions, and social interactions.

The intersection of sensory and cognitive experiences becomes evident as visitors engage with sensory stimuli to actively decode historical narratives, demonstrating how perception and cognition work in tandem to shape their understanding of the past within the museum space. Visitors' sensory experiences are not merely passive receptions of information; rather, they activate cognitive processes through bodily engagement and perceptual reconstruction (Krishna, Elder, and Caldara, 2017).

In the interactive map exhibit, Participant 4, through the tactile-spatial experience of *"walking onto the exhibit and choosing directions,"* transforms physical movements into historical logical reasoning:

*"You can step on it and have a look because the street names haven't changed much. When you walk onto it, you can roughly perceive how it has evolved from ancient times to the present."*

This progression of perception, from foot pressure to spatial orientation and historical continuity, demonstrates how sensory stimulation can transcend the abstraction of conventional text-image exhibitions, allowing visitors to construct a "past-present overlay" through bodily movement. By engaging her senses, the participant reconstructed the urban planning and morphological evolution of Chengdu, overcoming the limitations of two-dimensional text-image representations.

Participant 6's evaluation of the background colour of a Buddhist statue exhibit reveals an alternative cognitive mode: *"The background colour was extracted from the Buddha's statue, and the texture is excellent. The lighting and colours also appeal to me."* When the exhibit wall colour and the artefact's colour form a visual spectrum, she interpreted it as evidence of historical authenticity (*"It complements the artefact well"*); conversely, a grey background that causes the artefact to blend into its surroundings is criticised for *"diminishing the viewing experience."* Here, colour contrast becomes a cognitive criterion for visitors to assess the authority of the exhibition.

Tactile interaction subverts the passivity of traditional exhibition viewing. Participant 27's detailed description of the traditional Chinese medicine cabinet (*"standing in front of the drawers, physically reaching out and pulling them open, then smelling what's inside"*)

exemplifies how tactile-olfactory-kinaesthetic coordination stimulates active exploration: *"it wasn't one of those virtual, digital screen-type displays – it felt very real."* When visitors acquire information through bodily actions (pulling, extracting, smelling), their sensory perception facilitates cognition, fostering an active learning experience. This aligns with findings in sensory marketing research, such as Sadeghian, Akbari, and Foroudi, (2022), which demonstrate that multisensory engagement—particularly through touch and smell—enhances cognitive engagement and active learning, reinforcing the idea that sensory interactions are not merely passive experiences but integral to knowledge construction.

The interplay between sensory and affective experiences is particularly evident in visitors' emotional responses to exhibition design, where elements such as lighting and colour not only shape aesthetic perception but also evoke deeper cultural associations and emotional connections.

Lighting design and colour coordination are not merely technical considerations but fundamental elements of sensory experience, shaping emotional perception and engagement in the museum. Participant 6's critical description of Buddhist statue lighting demonstrates how lighting is imbued with anthropomorphic emotional value:

*"Some museums have excellent lighting, employing side lighting, which is particularly suitable for Buddhist statues. The Rembrandt-style lighting is very beautiful. I don't know how to express it properly... Look, if the light shines from the side, the eyelids appear gentle and expressive, but with top lighting, the eyes seem downcast and lifeless."*

This progression—from physical lighting to facial shadows and ultimately to emotional interpretation—illustrates how visitors reconstruct the "personality" of artefacts through their own sensory experiences. This perspective aligns with research by Agapito, Mendes, and Valle (2013) and Bender *et al.*, (2024), which similarly demonstrate that sensory engagement

enables visitors to form personal interpretations of artefacts. While the finding of this study emphasises the transition from physical lighting to facial shadows and ultimately emotional interpretation, highlighting how sensory stimuli contribute to the reconstruction of an artefact's "personality," Bender *et al.*, (2024) similarly argue that sensory experiences at heritage sites influence visitors' perceptions and emotional connections. Likewise, Agapito, Mendes, and Valle (2013) discuss how sensory stimuli shape tourist experiences, allowing them to establish personal connections with their surroundings. Both studies reinforce the idea that sensory perception is not merely passive but actively constructs meaning, supporting the finding that visitors' sensory experiences play a crucial role in shaping their interpretation of artefacts.

Olfactory experiences trigger deeper cultural identification. Participant 27 strongly resonated with the traditional medicine cabinet, saying, *"I smelled every single one of them. There were maybe fifteen or twenty drawers, and I went through all of them, one by one. Haha."* This response stems from how extracting and smelling activate both olfactory perception and emotional experience:

*"I thought that kind of interaction was... what's the word... very grounded. Very down-to-earth. It wasn't one of those virtual, digital screen-type displays – it felt very real. You could actually use your sense of smell to engage with it. I thought that was great."*

The scent of herbal medicine becomes an olfactory symbol connecting visitors to traditional ways of life, elevating their emotional experience from "novelty" to "cultural belonging." This shift from sensory novelty to cultural affiliation transforms sensory experience into storable and transmissible emotional capital, completing the transition from bodily practice to cultural identification.

The findings contribute to existing knowledge by extending the principles of sensory marketing and emotional capital to the domain of museum visiting experiences. While Hulten (2011) and Krishna (2012) examine how sensory engagement enhances brand experiences and fosters emotional connections in consumer contexts, this study demonstrates that olfactory experiences in museum settings similarly facilitate deeper cultural identification. The shift from sensory novelty to cultural affiliation aligns with the conceptualisation of sensory experiences as mechanisms for embedding emotional and cultural value. By framing sensory perception as a means of encoding and transmitting cultural memory, this research broadens the discourse beyond commercial applications to heritage and museum contexts, illustrating how bodily engagement with sensory stimuli transforms individual encounters into collectively meaningful experiences. This perspective reinforces the argument that sensory experiences do not merely influence immediate perception but actively contribute to the construction of long-term emotional and cultural capital.

The intersection of sensory and social experiences is evident in the way visitors engage with exhibitions through social media, where visually striking sensory elements enhance shareability, transforming personal encounters into performative and socially mediated experiences.

The data reveals that participants' experiences at the Chengdu Museum are deeply embedded in social media logic. Participant 5's admiration for the Bulgari projection hall *"Everyone in my WeChat Moments is posting pictures of that hall"* illustrates that the perceived value of an exhibition experience depends on its compatibility with social dissemination. When visitors exclaim, *"This is so well-designed!"* They are, in effect, evaluating the social media adaptability of the scene—assessing whether the lighting intensity, colour contrast, and compositional possibilities align with mobile photography requirements. Such designs, by

providing visual feedback to bodily actions, transform private experiences into public performances, rendering physical spaces into generative sites of social media capital.

As the social dimension of customer experience extends beyond individual emotions, encompassing interactions with broader social groups, cultural collectives, and societal structures (Schmitt, 1999; Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). The data indicates that visitors' engagement with the Bulgari projection hall at the Chengdu Museum is mediated through social media platforms, such as WeChat Moments, where the perceived value of the exhibition is contingent upon its adaptability to digital dissemination. This aligns with the notion that customer experiences are shaped by external social influences rather than being purely individual in nature.

Furthermore, the data illustrates how social validation and collective influence play a crucial role in the museum experience. Previous research highlights that customer experiences are driven not only by personal motivations but also by aspirations for self-improvement and positive social perception (Schmitt, 1999; Akaka and Vargo, 2015). The emphasis on whether the exhibition is "*well-designed*" is directly linked to its compatibility with social media aesthetics, suggesting that visitors assess the value of the experience based on its ability to meet broader social expectations. This reflects the argument that museum experiences are embedded within a framework of social norms, where visitors seek validation through peer recognition and engagement with digital networks (Kuppelwieser *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, the transformation of physical spaces into sites of social media capital aligns with the conceptualisation of customer experience as a socially constructed phenomenon (De Keyser *et al.*, 2020; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Prior literature indicates that individuals' interactions with artefacts and exhibitions are not isolated but are shaped by shared cultural practices and collective experiences (Blunden, 2020; Smirnova and Vinck, 2019). In this

context, the act of capturing and sharing images on social media reconfigures the exhibition space into a performative environment, reinforcing the argument that sensory and aesthetic encounters are mediated by external social and cultural dynamics. The social dimension of customer experience is fundamental in shaping perceptions, behaviours, and the broader meaning of engagement with museum spaces.

This research extends existing knowledge by demonstrating how the intersection of sensory and social experiences within museum spaces is increasingly mediated through digital platforms, thereby reinforcing the performative nature of customer engagement. While Lemon and Verhoef (2016) highlight that sensory elements shape consumer emotions and drive social engagement, particularly in experiential marketing, this study builds upon their findings by illustrating how social media logic structures the way visitors perceive and evaluate exhibitions. The findings reveal that visitors assess exhibitions not only based on immediate sensory impact but also through their potential for social dissemination and validation, aligning with broader societal expectations. This contributes to the understanding of museum experiences as socially constructed phenomena, where the perceived value of an exhibition is contingent upon its adaptability to digital circulation rather than being purely an individual sensory encounter. Furthermore, this research highlights the role of social media in transforming physical museum spaces into sites of social capital, where aesthetic and sensory elements are curated for performative engagement rather than passive appreciation. As such, it advances the evolving relationship between place identity and sensory interaction in customer experience theory.

## 4.7 The Interplay Between Place Identity and Visiting Experience of Museum

### Servicescape

This study uncovers that the interplay between place identity and visiting experience of museum *servicescape* for domestic Chinese visitors is intricate and nuanced. Three following key insights emerged to represent these nuances.

First, the findings reveal four distinct types of place identity in the context of visits to the Chengdu Museum—a regional museum: Chengduese, Sichuanese, New Chengduese, and visitors from outside Sichuan Province. Next, findings illuminate a close bidirectional relationship between place identity and visitors' experiences within the museum *servicescape*. That is, place identity significantly influences visitors' experiences within the museum *servicescape*, while museum visits play a crucial role in constructing, reinforcing, and renewing visitors' place identities. Finally, the findings show that a stronger alignment of visitors' place identity with and higher place attachment to Chengdu, the more positive their experience tends to be. Specifically, when visitors closely identify with Chengdu, their cognitive, emotional, and social experiences, particularly in relation to the core service of exhibitions, are significantly enhanced by a strong place identity and high place attachment. Conversely, the museum experience also plays a significant role in constructing and reinforcing visitors' place identity related to Chengdu. The following sections will discuss the implications of these findings for the extant knowledge regarding consumer experience of museum *servicescape*.

The findings of this research identifying a relationship between visitors' place identities and their museum experiences corroborate, in a new contextual setting, the existing consumer research which shows that identity, particularly place identity, plays a crucial role in shaping consumption behaviours (Panzone *et al.*, 2016; Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007; Cleveland

and Bartikowski, 2023). These findings also correspond with museum research indicating that visitors' identities significantly shape their experiences in museums (Falk, 2006; Falk, 2016). By investigating the impact of different place identities within China on visitors' experiences in a regional museum, this study extends and deepens the understanding of how place identity influences museum visitor experiences.

Notably, most of the existing knowledge has been drawn from research in Western contexts with Western visitors (Burkov and Gorgadze, 2023; Loureiro and Blanco, 2023; Sánchez-Amboage *et al.*, 2023), or Chinese visitors in Western museums (Song, 2022). Previous research on museum visitors in China (e.g. Li and Li, 2022; Shen et al., 2020; Zhu and Wang, 2022) has not yet integrated place identity within the framework of *servicescape* for a comprehensive consideration. As such, this study provides a valuable perspective by focusing on the manifestation of place identity in the visiting experience of the museum *servicescape* for the domestic Chinese visitors.

This study's findings contrast extant knowledge concerning which experience of *servicescape* elements is impacted by place identity. That is, existing research indicates that place identity influences consumers' perceptions and experiences of consumption spaces, rather than the core services (e.g., Hall, 2008; Mars, 2023; Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007; Setiyorini, Chen, and Pryce, 2023). However, this study shows that for domestic visitors' experiences at the Chengdu Museum, the influence of place identity on visitor experiences is not related to the consumption environment of *servicescape*. Instead, it significantly impacts their experience of the exhibitions, which are the core service of the museum. This indicates that, in the Chinese context, place identity plays a distinct role in shaping museum visitor experiences, emphasising its significance in enhancing the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of engagement with museum exhibitions. This has significant implications for museum curators and managers. They must understand how place identity influences the visitor experience and

design exhibitions and services accordingly to enhance visitors' cognitive, affective, and social experiences.

Further, by demonstrating that museum experiences play a crucial role in constructing, reinforcing, and renewing visitors' place identity, this study's findings extend knowledge on the role and impact of museum experiences on identity dynamics. As such, existing literature largely focuses on how museums contribute to the formation of national identity (Anderson, 2018; Packer, Ballantyne, and Uzzell, 2019; Gieling and Ong, 2016; Potinkara, 2023). These studies establish that museums play an important role in identity formation by curating and presenting objects that reflect specific narratives of national identity, history, and culture (Hahn, 2023). Through the shaping and maintenance of these official identity narratives, museums wield significant influence over how individuals and communities perceive themselves and their place within the broader social framework (Levick, 2023). In China, museums are particularly recognized for their vital role in fostering a collective Chinese national identity (Wei, Yu, and Yuan, 2022). They achieve this by emphasising the enduring legacy and continuous progression of Chinese civilization, while also highlighting the unity and diversity inherent within the Chinese nation (Zhang and Courty, 2021).

In a similar vein, this study identifies that visitors' interpretation of exhibits during their visit experience play a crucial role in the construction and reinforcement of their place identity. Specifically, findings establish that visitors adopt three different approaches of drawing upon museum experience in place identity development, as follows:

**Learning from Exhibits:** Visitors enhance and reshape their understanding of Chengdu by absorbing the historical, cultural, and local information conveyed by the exhibits. This approach is primarily associated with cognitive experience, as the cognitive experience

encompasses the intellectual and knowledge-oriented aspects of the museum visit (Passebois Ducros and Euzéby, 2021; Romanelli, 2018).

**Actively Assigning Meaning to Exhibits:** Visitors actively interpret and attribute unique meanings to exhibits based on their personal backgrounds and experiences, thereby forming personalised understandings related to Chengdu and resonating with them. While this approach is related to cognitive experience, it is more significantly linked to affective experience, as the affective experience involves the emotions, feelings and personal reactions that arise during the museum visit (Watson, 2020).

**Comparing with Other Regional Cultures:** Visitors compare their place identity with the cultures of other regions in China through the exhibits, further clarifying their own place identity. This approach is grounded in cognitive experience but also involves the social experience, as visitors interpret artefacts and exhibitions through social messages to reflect their desired social identities (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard, 2003; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Yi *et al.*, 2022).

These approaches are not isolated or mutually exclusive; visitors may construct, reinforce, or renew their place identity through one or multiple approaches simultaneously during their visit. Through the museum visiting experience, visitors not only develop personalised interpretations of the exhibits but also continuously reflect upon and adjust their place identity in this interactive process.

This finding reveals a bidirectional relationship between place identity and the museum *servicescape*. In other words, while place identity influences Chinese visitors' cognitive, affective, and social experiences of exhibitions (as the core service of the museum's *servicescape*), exhibitions as the core services of museums in turn significantly impact visitors' place identity. Understanding the interplay between place identity and exhibitions is crucial

for museum curators. By considering this relationship when curating exhibitions, museums can create more engaging exhibitions and enhance visitors' cognitive, affective and social experience, making museum experiences more inclusive and impactful (Bodnár, 2019).

Another important nuance emerged from this study's findings is the insight into differences in museum experience informed by different types of place identity of the study's participants, discussed next.

#### **4.7.1 The Manifestation of Local Place Identity in Visit Experiences**

The findings reveal four different types of place identity related to Chengdu. While each identity type significantly impacts visitors' experiences in the Chengdu Museum, findings highlight that the closer visitors' place identity aligns with Chengdu, the more likely their cognitive, emotional, and social experiences in the museum *servicescape*, particularly the core service of exhibitions, will be positively influenced.

Specifically, Chengduese and Sichuanese visitors, owing to their accumulated knowledge and understanding of the city's history and culture in their daily lives, are able to utilise the aforementioned three approaches of drawing upon museum experience in place identity development: *learning from exhibits*, *actively assigning meaning to exhibits*, and *comparing with other regional cultures*. They draw on their knowledge and life experiences to interpret the meanings behind the exhibits encountered in the museum, resulting in a strong cognitive experience. Moreover, they project their place identity onto the exhibits, creating intense affective experiences. Additionally, they contextualise their place identity within the broader social framework of China, thereby highlighting the uniqueness of their place identity and gaining positive social experiences.

These findings lend support to the argument proposed by Skandalis, Banister, and Byrom (2018), which suggests that in music consumption, the accumulations in the process of forming place identity significantly influence consumers' self-perception, social interactions, and cultural affiliations within the marketplace, as well as how they express themselves through their consumption choices. Although Skandalis, Banister, and Byrom's research (2018) focuses on music consumption, similar patterns are evident in the museum context, demonstrating the significant role of place identity in cultural experiences consumption.

Notably, Chengduese visitors have a superior experience compared to Sichuanese visitors, making their experience the most favourable among the four place identity types. Existing research indicates that individuals with a strong sense of place identity tend to make consumption decisions that resonate with their self-identity (Lee, Levy, and Yap, 2015). Consumers often identify with their hometown and express pride and maintain a sense of collective identity by consuming products with hometown geographical characteristics, reflecting social belonging and group affiliation with the hometown community (Zhang *et al.*, 2023).

Although museums are not consumer goods and differ from the subjects of the studies, the exhibits in museums, which uniquely represent Chengdu's history and culture, are directly related to the place identity of Chengduese individuals. This can reinforce their deep connection with and profound pride in Chengdu, their hometown. Given the strong place identity, Chengduese visitors exhibit the most favourable experiences, highlighting the strength of place identity alignment as a significant factor in museum experience. This finding is crucial for museum curators and managers. By acknowledging and providing unique services to visitors with strong place identities like Chengduese, museums can create more meaningful and engaging experiences, thereby fostering a deeper connection with the local community (Kadoyama, 2018).

Indeed, findings reveal some Sichuanese visitors to exhibit a relatively distant place identity with Chengdu and to occasionally find it challenging to actively engage with the exhibitions due to a lack of relevant knowledge and emotional background. For these visitors, experiences related to identity construction are primarily derived from the first approach: *learning from exhibits*. When confronted with the exhibitions, they may feel unfamiliar and detached, making it difficult for them to achieve the same level of cognitive understanding, emotional resonance, and social comparison as Chengduese visitors. Consequently, their engagement with the museum experience tends to be more limited and passive compared to Chengduese visitors.

Oakes (2000) found that provincial cities in China frequently possess a pronounced sense of provincial identity that sets them apart from other cities. The findings of this study partially confirm the existence of differences in place identity between Sichuanese and Chengduese. Notably, Sichuanese tend to include Chengdu in their broader sense of Sichuanese place identity, although their understanding of local history and culture may not be as profound as that of Chengduese. Currently, no research indicates that the place identity of people from provincial capital cities differs from that of individuals from other areas of the same province in terms of their *servicescape* experience. The findings of this study expand existing understanding of place identity, refining it to highlight the differences between the central city and other cities within the same province or region.

Museum curators and managers, particularly those in regional museums aiming to represent the history and culture of a broader area such as a province, should consider these differences in place identity when planning exhibitions and creating museum experiences. Visitors from non-capital cities within the province, such as those from Sichuan, possess a significant degree of regional identity. However, their identity differs slightly from that of visitors from provincial cities, and they may require additional knowledge and emotional connections to

fully engage with the exhibits. Museum curators and managers can develop strategies to bridge these gaps by understanding these nuances in place identity.

The importance of regional museums extends beyond constructing national identities (Ushakova *et al.*, 2021); they also play a vital role in disseminating central values to local levels, shaping a collective memory culture, and highlighting the unique identities of different regions (Kłodkiewicz, 2021). Understanding regional identity is crucial for improving the museum experience, as it creates a deeper connection with local culture, fosters a sense of community pride, promotes diversity and inclusivity, and enhances the overall visitor experience (Bramantya, Darajat, and Hidayat, 2021).

In addition, the negative impacts of local place identity on visitor experience should not be overlooked. This study shows that Chengduese and Sichuanese visitors might dismiss the museum exhibits due to their perceived familiarity with the local culture and history, thereby hindering their cognitive experience.

Existing studies show that the lack of museum engagement can be attributed to various factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural capital, perceptions of accessibility, and educational background. Financial constraints, lower cultural capital, and discomfort with the museum environment all contribute to reduced visitation (Booth *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, community perceptions, lack of interest, social exclusion, psychological barriers like "threshold fear," and integration challenges for immigrant populations further exacerbate the lack of engagement (Cerquetti, 2016).

However, this study reveals that the lack of engagement with certain exhibits in the Chengdu Museum among Chengduese and Sichuanese participants is not attributable to these factors. Instead, their lack of engagement arises from their perceived familiarity with local culture, a consequence of their strong place identity. This perceived familiarity leads to a dismissal of

the exhibits, resulting in a lack of engagement and interest during the visit. Consequently, visitors miss opportunities to gain new knowledge and insights from the exhibits.

Overconfidence and reliance on existing knowledge might cause visitors to overlook new information or different perspectives presented in the exhibitions, further diminishing the overall museum experience.

Moreover, due to the lack of deep understanding and exploration of the exhibition content, these visitors are unable to gain further affective and social experiences. Affective experiences relate to visitors' resonance with the exhibits, which often arises from perceiving and identifying with the stories and cultural backgrounds behind the exhibits. If visitors dismiss the exhibits and lack this perception and identification, their affective experiences will be significantly limited. Similarly, social experience involves situating one's place identity within a broader social context. This process necessitates a deep engagement with cognitive and affective experiences; without such experiences, visitors cannot fully achieve this integration.

This finding contrasts with existing research, which indicates that visitors with a high level of cultural familiarity are likely to seek a deeper understanding of cultural heritage and place identity during their museum visit (Prentice and Andersen, 2007). This study adds nuance to the concept of place identity, demonstrating that while, in general, alignment between local place identity and the museum can enhance visitor experience, this is not universally true for all visitors. There are exceptions where a strong local place identity can negatively impact the *servicescape* experience.

These findings emphasise the necessity for museums to continuously evolve and adapt their offerings to maintain relevance and appeal to all segments of their visitors (Batat, 2020; Choi, Berridge, and Kim, 2020). By doing so, museums not only enrich the visiting experiences but

also foster a deeper connection between the institution and its community, thereby increasing their educational and cultural impact (Kotler and Kotler, 2000).

Having examined the local place identities of Chengduese and Sichuanese, the next section will discuss how emplaced identity manifests in visitors' experiences, further elucidating the intricate relationship between place identity and museum visiting experiences.

#### **4.7.2 The Manifestation of Emplaced Identity on Visit Experiences**

Place identity is not an enduring core identity; rather, it is a dynamic and evolving construct. The interaction between individuals and their environments co-produces place identity, as people both shape and are shaped by their surroundings (Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff, 2014). This continuous interaction creates distinctive environmental connections, suggesting that place identity can change over time with new experiences and movements (Chow and Healey, 2008). Additionally, place identity is influenced by social formations, cultural practices, and political actions, indicating its fluidity and context-dependent nature (Brown-Saracino, 2015). This perspective frames place identity as a flexible and adaptive aspect of personal and communal identity.

Specifically, the place identity of the New Chengduese visitors emerged in this study's findings is unique due to their resettlement. They bring their original place identity to Chengdu, where they develop new self-awareness and a sense of belonging within the distinctive social, cultural, and natural environment of the city. This process of attributing meaning and value to Chengdu to construct one's place identity is referred to as emplaced identity in existing studies (Aguirre, 2024). Emplacement describes how individuals attribute meanings and value to specific locations (Lin, 2010). This process is characterised by the negotiation of social, cultural, and economic elements, along with the tangible features of

Chengdu (Englund, 2002). It is a dynamic and evolving process that includes navigating these influences (McHugh, 2000).

Emplaced identity highlights the significant role that the environment plays in shaping an individual's identity, including the impact of social, cultural, and natural factors (Porter and Tanghe, 2016). An individual's New Chengduese emplaced identity is not solely determined by internal factors but is also influenced by the surrounding environment, including aspects such as historical traditions and socio-economic conditions (Porter and Tanghe, 2016). In this process, New Chengduese and the local Chengdu communities participate in discussions concerning their perception of identity and inclusion, taking into account the distinct social, cultural, and environmental settings in which they exist (Chu, 2006). These settings offer New Chengduese a foundation of strength, self-understanding, flexibility, and the capacity to thrive in unfamiliar surroundings and social relationships (George, 2020).

However, not all who migrate to Chengdu establish a New Chengduese emplaced identity. This study found that some New Chengduese do not have a strong New Chengduese emplaced identity. This parallels insights by Lin *et al.* (2022) who show that rural migrants in urban China predominantly retain their original identities, reflecting a low level of identification with their host cities (Lin *et al.*, 2022). Most migrants do not develop multiple identities; they typically do not possess both a hometown identity and a host city identity (Lin *et al.*, 2022). This phenomenon, described as separation, highlights the significant challenges migrants face in achieving identity assimilation within urban environments (Lin *et al.*, 2022).

It must be acknowledged that this study did not explore whether participants had migrated from rural areas to Chengdu, but the phenomenon of not possessing a New Chengduese emplaced identity is indeed evident from some of the participants' discourse. Within the New Chengduese type in this study, there are two subtypes: those who have established a New

Chengduese emplaced identity and those who have not. Although both subtypes have accumulated some local experiences, there is a clear difference in their emplaced identity with Chengdu.

Overall, this study demonstrates that visitors with an established emplaced identity of New Chengduese have more enriched museum visiting experiences compared to those without such a place identity. Both subtypes employ the first approach of identity construction: *learning from exhibits*, indicating no significant differences in cognitive experiences. However, marked differences are observed in their affective and social experiences.

Visitors lacking a New Chengduese emplaced identity fail to employ the second approach: *actively assigning meaning to exhibits*, resulting in insufficient engagement necessary for affective experiences. Additionally, these visitors are unable to adopt the third approach: *comparing with other regional cultures*, thereby missing out on social experiences.

In contrast, visitors with a New Chengduese emplaced identity, driven by pride and a sense of belonging, effectively employ all three approaches. Their affective and social experiences, despite their distinct emplaced identity, align closely with those of Chengduese and Sichuanese visitors who possess strong place identities.

Currently, research on the relationship between emplaced identity and service experience remains insufficiently explored. This study highlights the unique emplaced identity of new Chengduese and their varying degrees of emplaced identity manifested within the museum *servicescape*. By doing so, it highlights the distinctiveness of domestic migrant populations in the construction of place identity within the Chinese context, thereby enriching and broadening the concept of place identity.

The implications of these findings are particularly significant for museum curators. Understanding the distinct experiences of visitors with varying levels of emplaced identity can inform the development of more inclusive and engaging museum exhibitions. By recognising and offering these varied experiences, museums can be instrumental in facilitating the involvement of diverse visitor types (Etherington, 2020).

Building on the understanding of how local place identity influences museum experiences, the next section will explore the role of place attachment in shaping the visit experiences of visitors from outside Sichuan Province.

#### **4.7.3 The Role of Place Attachment in Shaping Visit Experiences of Visitors from outside Sichuan Province**

In this study, an unexpected finding emerged: although visitors from outside Sichuan Province are a consumer group whose place identity is not connected to Chengdu, the extent of their connection(s) to Chengdu plays a role in their museum experience. This phenomenon can be explained through the concept of place attachment.

While both place identity and place attachment involve the relationships individuals have with places, they differ in their primary focus. Place identity is centred on self-definition and the sense of belonging derived from one's association with a place (Peng, Strijker, and Wu, 2020). It is about how individuals categorise and perceive themselves concerning their connection to a location (Belanche, Casaló, and Rubio, 2021). On the other hand, place attachment focuses on the emotional and psychological bonds individuals form with places (Lewicka, 2008). It is about the feelings of affection and attachment that develop through personal experiences and the meaningful connections people establish with their surroundings (Raymond, Brown, and Weber, 2010; Scannell and Gifford, 2010).

Place attachment is a multidimensional concept that encompasses various aspects of individuals' connections with a specific place, primarily used to discuss the relationship between travellers and tourist destinations (Chen and Dwyer, 2018; Patwardhan et al., 2020; Kyle, Graefe, and Manning, 2005). It involves cognition, emotions, and behaviours, as defined by Altman and Low (1992). Place attachment is generated through the interplay of emotional factors such as affection, cognitive factors such as knowledge and beliefs, and behavioural factors such as actions and practices (Scannell and Gifford, 2010; Sthapit, Björk, and Coudounaris, 2022). This combination of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural factors contributes to the formation of a strong bond between individuals and places (Kyle, Graefe, and Manning, 2005). Consequently, this attachment can significantly influence an individual's evaluation of and loyalty to a place, as it plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes and behaviours towards that location (Florek, 2011).

Finally, involvement with a destination plays a crucial role in shaping place attachment (Hwang, Lee, and Chen, 2005; Lee, and Shen, 2013). The formation of place attachment is dependent on individuals' involvement and engagement in events and activities that provide them with knowledge and understanding of the environment (Tsai, 2016). Higher levels of involvement lead to greater emotional investment in the destination and, consequently, stronger attachment (Gross and Brown, 2008).

The findings of this study reflect the theoretical perspective on place attachment in the existing literature. Specifically, the findings show that the visitors from outside Sichuan Province who have developed attachment to Chengdu have accumulated substantial knowledge and emotional connections to the city through repeated visits. The repeated engagements with Chengdu allow these visitors to build a deep understanding of the city's history, culture, and unique characteristics. As a result, their visits to the museum are

enriched with meaningful experiences and personal relevance, fostering a strong attachment to the city.

In sum, this study demonstrates that place attachment is a crucial factor influencing the museum visit experiences of visitors from outside Sichuan Province. In this regard, it aligns with prior research on place attachment in tourism, which demonstrates that the stronger the emotional connection a tourist has with a destination, the more likely they are to be satisfied with their tourism experience (Kastenholz, Marques, and Carneiro, 2020; Prayag and Ryan, 2012; Yuksel, Yuksel, and Bilim, 2010). Positive travel experiences evoke emotions such as pleasure and satisfaction, fostering attachment to the destination (Loureiro, 2014; Tsai, 2012). The attachment that individuals develop with a place during their travels has a profound impact on their perceptions, evaluations, and loyalty towards the destination (Gautam, 2022). This bond ultimately shapes their overall experience (Ge *et al.*, 2022). Repeated visits further strengthen this attachment, as familiarity with the place deepens over time (Dong and Qu, 2022; Isa, Ariyanto, and Kiumarsi, 2020; Qu *et al.*, 2023).

Further, those visitors who have developed a strong attachment to Chengdu, despite their place identity being unrelated to the city, achieve this through two primary approaches: *learning from exhibits* and *comparing with other regional cultures*. These visitors are able to utilise their understanding of and emotional connection to Chengdu to acquire knowledge from the exhibits and resonate with them. Furthermore, they appreciate and comprehend the uniqueness of Chengdu's culture by contrasting it with their own cultural background.

In contrast, findings show that visitors with weak or nonexistent place attachment can only passively absorb information, struggling to engage deeply with the exhibits. This can occasionally lead to negative evaluations due to their inability to discern the distinctiveness of Chengdu's history and culture compared to other regions in China. Consequently, visitors

lacking place attachment to Chengdu represent the type with the least positive experiences among all types.

This study finds that the more frequently individuals visit Chengdu, the richer their accumulated life experiences and knowledge of the city become, thereby fostering a stronger place attachment. This place attachment, similar to place identity, exhibits a bidirectional relationship with the *servicescape* experience of the museum. Specifically, a deeper place attachment enhances the *servicescape* experience, while the museum's exhibitions further strengthen this place attachment. This finding enriches the concept of place attachment. This indicates that, in the Chinese context, place attachment plays a distinct role in shaping *servicescape* experiences for domestic visitors from outside the region at a regional museum. It highlights the significance of place attachment in enhancing the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of engagement with the museum's core services, particularly its exhibitions.

The implications of these findings are particularly significant for museum curators and marketers. By understanding the varied experiences of visitors from outside the region, especially in relation to their place attachment, curators and marketers can enhance the overall visiting experience for visitors from outside the region. This understanding can ensure that museums remain engaging, and inclusive for a diverse range of visitors.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

The findings reported in this chapter demonstrated that different place identities significantly impact the museum visiting experience. For Chengduese visitors, a strong sense of local identity plays a crucial role. Owing to their extensive knowledge and life experiences accumulated in Chengdu, these visitors possess a high capability for interpreting museum exhibits. They are able to closely relate the local history and culture showcased in the exhibits to their daily lives. As locals, they naturally possess a sense of attachment and social identity

as Chengduese, which is further reinforced and validated during their museum visits. The museum, as an authoritative cultural institution, provides a critical platform for constructing and reflecting their place identity, thereby enhancing their overall visit experiences. The place identity not only enhances their understanding and appreciation of the exhibits but also brings them satisfaction and a sense of security during their visit. The process of constructing and reinforcing their place identity in the museum creates a positive cycle with their enriching and enjoyable visit experience.

The place identity of Sichuanese visitors provides them with a high degree of satisfaction and inspiration during their museum visits. Since Chengdu is part of the broader Sichuan cultural system, the exhibits in the Chengdu Museum evoke a broad attachment with Sichuan, resulting in an enjoyable experience for these visitors. However, due to their knowledge and life experiences stemming from various parts of Sichuan, Sichuanese visitors may find it difficult to form strong specific connections with exhibits that focus on the local history of Chengdu. Consequently, their place identity is more aligned with being Sichuanese, distinguishing them from Chengduese. Compared to Chengdu visitors, their experience tends to be relatively more passive.

It is notable that the place identity of Sichuanese visitors who are long-term residents of Chengdu can sometimes negatively impact their museum experiences. Their beliefs in possessing a high level of knowledge about the local culture may lead to biases against some museum content, particularly the permanent exhibitions, which they may perceive as lacking novelty or even as boring. Consequently, some visitors might reject or avoid these exhibitions in favour of more innovative and varied content.

For New Chengduese visitors, those with a strong identification as New Chengduese tend to have more positive museum experiences. They effectively utilise a range of resources,

including personal experiences, knowledge, and emotions, which enhances their attachment to Chengdu and solidifies their New Chengduese identity. The data indicate that, in addition to cumulative life experience and knowledge, the strength of place identity is closely connected to an individual's willingness to establish an attachment to Chengdu. Visitors with a stronger inclination to form this attachment are more likely to develop the New Chengduese identity during their visit and have more positive evaluations of their experience. Visitors who have not fully embraced this place identity still identify primarily with their place of birth and have not transitioned their place identity to that of New Chengduese. As a result, their place identity does not align with New Chengduese. During their museum visits, their engagement is rather passive. Consequently, their museum experience rarely fosters a sense of attachment to Chengdu, resulting in a relatively unremarkable overall museum experience.

For visitors from other provinces, their social identity as outsiders to Chengdu means that the primary factor influencing their museum experience is their prior experiences and attachment to the city. Visitors who are more familiar with Chengdu are more likely to form a strong attachment within the museum and have a more positive experience. Overall, the richer their experiences in Chengdu and the deeper their understanding of the city, the more likely their museum visit will form and enhance their attachment, resulting in a more satisfying museum experience.

## **Chapter 5 Manifestations of Cultural Values in Chinese Domestic Visitors' Experience of the Museum Servicescape**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter intends to provide a comprehensive examination of the following objective:

To investigate how cultural values manifest in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*.

The data reveal that Chinese cultural values, respect for authority and striving for harmony, affect four dimensions of visitor experience: cognitive, affective, social, and physical.

However, no findings related to sensory experience emerged from the data. This chapter will detail how Chinese cultural values impact each of these dimensions. Cultural values influence the overall experience of the *servicescape*, including online services, commercial facilities, and human interactions.

The data indicate that in China, a collectivist society deeply influenced by Confucian cultural traditions, participants' museum experiences were significantly impacted by Chinese cultural values. Within the museum context, the values of respect for authority and conformity, along with the striving for harmony, have a notable influence on participants' experiences of the museum *servicescape*.

Whether or not they were consciously aware of it, the mindset of respecting authority and conforming affected participants' experiences when visiting the museum. They typically regarded the museum as an authoritative institution and held in high esteem those exhibits considered the museum's treasures. Participants expected the museum to take on the responsibility of narrating history through its exhibits and preferred to follow a specific order

and process during their visit. Additionally, due to their respect for authority, they often avoided direct interactions with museum officials.

Furthermore, the emphasis on harmony in Chinese culture profoundly influenced participants' experiences within the museum *servicescape*. Participants exhibited a high level of concern for maintaining harmony and fostering positive relationships during their museum visits.

When visiting in groups, participants tended to prioritise their relationships with companions, often sacrificing part of their own experience to accommodate their peers and ensure harmonious relations. This pursuit of harmony was evident not only in their attitudes towards their companions but also in their politeness and respect towards other visitors, creating a harmonious atmosphere throughout the museum experience. They typically refrained from initiating interactions with other strangers present. When other visitors engaged in uncivil or impolite behaviour, they also tried to avoid conflicts to maintain the overall harmonious environment of the visit.

After introducing the two cultural values, this chapter will proceed to discuss the impact of these two cultural values on participants' museum experiences across four dimensions: cognitive, affective, social, and physical.

## **5.2 The Impact of Cultural Values on the Cognitive Experience**

The influence of cultural values on tourists' cognitive experience mainly comes from the cultural value of respecting authority. Specifically, this manifests in their heightened regard for the museum's most treasured exhibits and their reluctance to interact with the museum online. The subsequent sections will explore these two aspects in detail.

### 5.2.1 ‘The Treasure of the Museum’

Many participants emphasised ‘*zhen guan zhi bao* (镇馆之宝)’ in the interviews/focus groups.

The impact of it on the cognitive dimension of their experience was substantial, and it ultimately influenced their perception of the entire museum visit. The word ‘*zhen guan zhi bao*’ adopted by many participants (16, 32, 33, 39) in Chinese refers to a treasure or a prized possession that is unique and unparalleled, and is often used to describe an object that is exceptional and remarkable. In museum context, these items are typically evaluated by museum officials or the public and are highly esteemed in society. These exhibits give the museum value or special significance, which is related to the legitimacy of the museum. Normally, the exhibits best represent the local history and culture and are widely known, but there exist exceptions. In some cases, it may be an exhibit from elsewhere, but with extremely important historical significance. For example, the Parthenon marbles, which are collected and exhibited in the British Museum, might be considered one of the treasures of the museum by Chinese visitors. The term conveys the idea that the object is the main attraction or the highlight of the museum, and is something that is highly valued and admired. A possible English translation for ‘*zhen guan zhi bao*’ could be ‘*the treasure(s) of the museum*’. By following the recognized treasures of a museum, visitors can efficiently navigate the highlights of the institution, thus enabling them to obtain a concise understanding of the regional culture and historical context within a brief duration.

In Focus group 4, participants had a discussion around their perceptions of ‘the treasure of the museum’. They expressed disappointment that they did not get to see the treasure of the museum and, as a result, did not have a memorable experience.

Participant 40: “*But if you let me recall that I was in the Chengdu Museum a few years ago, I really didn’t have such a deep impression. It was purely putting a lot of things*

*in front of you, and you yourself had to identify which one was the treasure of the museum. (...) in so many... thousands of exhibits in the collections, only relying on one's own wisdom, or eyes to identify the treasure of the museum was very difficult."*

Participant 41: *"Yeah, yeah, I don't think it really stood out."*

Participant 39: *"**I got aesthetic fatigue after a long time and could not continue visiting it.**"*

Participant 41: *"**You didn't say it was the treasure of the museum and I didn't know.**"*

Participant 40: *"It should be like this: it doesn't exist anywhere else."*

Participant 41: *"As soon as I arrived at the Shaanxi Historical Museum, I was told that the horn cup was the treasure of the museum. **I will always remember it.**"*

Participants showed an extremely strong interest in the treasures of the Chengdu Museum. They typically aimed to visit the most significant and representative exhibits in the museum, making this their primary purpose for visiting. They frequently searched for these exhibits during their museum visit.

The reverence for "*the treasures of the museum*," driven by respect for authority and a conformity mindset, can positively impact visitors' cognitive experiences. These treasures, often holding significant historical value and representing the local history and cultural accumulation, attract visitors to the museum. They provide firsthand knowledge of the culture and history embodied in the artefacts, satisfying visitors' desire for knowledge. Viewing these exhibits up close can expand visitors' understanding of historical processes and human development, inspire creativity and imagination, and offer aesthetic enjoyment and artistic appreciation.

Participant 41's experience of viewing the "*treasures of the museum*" at the Shaanxi History Museum illustrates how such exhibits leave a lasting impression on visitors. Influenced by respect for authority and a tendency to conform, participants believed that viewing the museum's treasures significantly impacted their overall museum visit and their perception of local history and culture. Their emphasis on these exhibits reflects their desire to acquire knowledge about local history and culture. Due to the high recognition and representative nature of these exhibits, these exhibits can deepen their understanding of the local history and culture displayed, fulfilling their expectations for acquiring knowledge.

However, the pursuit for "*the treasures of the museum*" also reveals a negative impact on participants' cognitive experiences. Participants appeared to largely delegate the ability and power to determine which exhibits are valuable and worth exploring and appreciating to the museum and the public. Their assessment of which exhibits are considered the museum's treasures, and thus worth their time and effort, primarily relied on the opinions of museum officials and the general public. Entrusting significant autonomy to the tastes of the museum and the public may limit visitors' independent judgement and lead to a lack of independent thinking during their museum experience.

In the interviews and focus groups, apart from expressing their frustrations with the lack of prominence given to the certain exhibits in the Chengdu Museum, none of the participants questioned the status of the treasures of the museum, or whether there were other exhibits besides the Stone Rhinoceros and the '*jing xue qi ren* 经穴漆人' (a painted lacquer model of a human figure depicting the meridians and channels) that could be considered by themselves as the treasures of the museum. This finding suggests that the participants have become accustomed to adhering to prevailing tastes and reputations, and submitting to the authority of the museum without challenging it. It was highly possible for them to lose the value of

exploring exhibits on their own, and not develop unique insights. Their museum visiting experience can be viewed as passive in terms of receiving information rather than actively engaging in value creation.

When *"the treasures of the museum"* were not explicitly exhibited by the museum as an authority or perceived by the audiences, participants were inclined to depreciate their overall visiting experiences. During Focus Group 2's discussion on whether the museum had met their expectations, Participant 32 expressed that the Chengdu Museum lacked any particularly memorable points, a sentiment that was echoed by Participant 33 who stated that the museum's treasures were not particularly noteworthy: *"There was not a particular area, with a dozen lights: This! Is our treasure of the museum!"*



*The Stone Rhinoceros is the largest round sculpture stone carving from the Qin and Han Dynasties in China. In the introduction on the Chengdu Museum's official website, both the*

title and the main text use the term "镇馆之宝" (*Treasure of the Museum*). Accessed on 30

May 2024: <https://www.cdmuseum.com/xinwen/202011/1932.html>

Excessive emphasises on the treasures of the museum have other potential negative influences. It was not infrequent for participants to prioritise the observation of the treasures, which may lead to a diminished interest in exploring alternative exhibits and inadvertently dismissing the extensive variety that characterises a comprehensive historical background. As Participant 39 (in Focus Group 4)'s experience, when she did not see the treasures of the museum for a period of time after entering, she got bored and lost interest in other exhibits to a certain degree (the participant described the feeling as "*aesthetic fatigue*"). Leaving the museum with a limited and superficial experience, the participants' cognitive experiences may be diminished due to the excessive value of the treasures of the museum. For such audiences, it is highly possible that the museums turn into a single time consumption venue rather than a repeatedly visiting place for education and recreation activities.



*'jing xue qi ren 经穴漆人' (a painted lacquer model of a human figure depicting the meridians and channels), downloaded on January 28, 2024, from the Chengdu Museum official website: 经穴漆人 - 成都博物馆*

<https://www.cdmuseum.com/lianghan/201901/45.html>

### **5.2.2 Reluctance to Engage Online Due to Respect for Authority**

In the context of museum experiences, Chinese visitors' respect for authority does not always manifest as compliance; it can also manifest as avoidance, such as reluctance to interact with museum officials. When asked whether they would leave comments on the museum's official social media accounts, most participants indicated they had never done so and were unwilling to do so. Participant 16 elaborated on the reasons for this attitude. Despite following the museum's official accounts on social media, she chose not to interact with them.

*“It's like you don't have any say in the matter. (...) It has to do with China's political structure, our way of life, and the Chinese personality. We tend to be more obedient. (...) I don't think I have the power to make decisions about it.”*

Her description indicates that her respect for authority is complex. She shows a great reverence for hierarchical structures, which diminishes her individuality and ability to exert influence. Chinese public museums are state-owned and operated by government authorization (Bollo and Zhang, 2017). The public sector holds a prominent role in the ownership and management of museums in China, characterised by highly structured and hierarchical unilateral governance (Zhang and Courty, 2022). Consequently, as an individual, the participant felt her voice was insignificant and unlikely to be heard by the government or its affiliates. This perception led her to avoid direct communication with the museum and refrain from interacting with the museum's official social media accounts.

The participant's respect for authority significantly impacted her cognitive experience, leading her to avoid interacting with official museum social media accounts. This respect for authority means that the participant tended to passively accept information disseminated by the museum rather than actively engaging with it online. Consequently, her cognitive experience was shaped by a one-sided flow of information, which limited the opportunities to critically engage with and fully explore the museum's online content. This lack of interaction and active engagement means she was less likely to question or seek deeper understanding, resulting in a more superficial cognitive experience. Additionally, by not utilising the interactive features of social media, participants missed out on the potential for richer, more dynamic learning opportunities that could enhance their overall museum experience. This dynamic demonstrates how the cultural value of respect for authority can influence the way visitors process and interact with museum information, ultimately affecting their cognitive engagement and learning outcomes.

The influence of cultural values, particularly the respect for authority, plays a significant role in shaping visitors' cognitive experiences at the Chengdu Museum. This respect for authority manifests in two main ways: a heightened regard for the museum's treasured exhibits and a reluctance to engage with the museum online.

Participants placed substantial importance on identifying and viewing the "treasures of the museum," often making these exhibits the focal point of their visits. This focus on esteemed exhibits enhanced their cognitive engagement by providing them with a sense of fulfilment and deeper understanding of Chengdu's history and culture. However, this emphasis also led to some negative outcomes, such as a passive reception of information and a diminished interest in other exhibits. Participants often relied heavily on the museum's authority to identify valuable exhibits, which limited their independent exploration and critical engagement.

Additionally, respect for authority resulted in a reluctance to interact with museum officials online. Participants felt that their opinions were insignificant and unlikely to influence the museum's operations, leading them to avoid leaving comments or engaging with the museum's social media platforms. This avoidance behaviour resulted in a one-sided cognitive experience, limiting opportunities for interactive and dynamic learning.

Overall, the respect for authority significantly shaped visitors' cognitive experiences, influencing both their in-person engagement with exhibits and their online interactions with the museum.

The following section will discuss the impact of cultural values on the affective experiences of visitors, further examining how these factors shape their emotional engagement with museum exhibits and narratives.

### 5.3 The Impact of Cultural Values on the Affective Experience

The data indicate that the cultural value of respecting authority significantly influences participants' affective experiences in the museum. Participants desire to acquire historical and cultural knowledge through the museum's narratives. They expect the museum to take responsibility for conveying history, not only by providing detailed and professional information but also by weaving the exhibits into coherent stories that present history and culture. During fieldwork, many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the Chengdu Museum's failure to effectively narrate stories, which negatively impacted their affective experience.

In Focus Group 4, Participant 41 expressed her dissatisfaction that the Chengdu Museum lacked storytelling.:

*“I think it's important to tell more stories about the exhibits. **I think it's important for museums (visitors) to resonate.** You can only know the things (the exhibits) were hard-earned and (get an understanding of) the culture, **only if you have resonations.** In fact, what is cultural inheritance? It is telling stories. It is all told through stories, right? (...) **In my opinion, the Chengdu Museum needs to be enhanced in terms of story, resonance and interactivity.**”*

Her remarks indicate that stories significantly impacted her affective experience. She believed that only through storytelling can museum exhibits convey cultural significance, fostering resonance and understanding among visitors. The participant's use of the term "story" can be understood from a narrative perspective, encompassing not only historical accounts but also the methods of conveying these narratives. In exhibitions, this involves connecting the uniqueness of the exhibits with broader historical themes to evoke visitors' emotions and establish connections with significant historical figures and events.

The data indicate that visitors often perceive themselves as lacking professional knowledge and therefore rely on the museum to present its content in a meaningful and easily understandable manner. The inadequacy or absence of storytelling could hinder their emotional engagement and information acquisition, thereby diminishing the overall experience. Many participants (e.g., 16, 34, 36, 40) believed that the Chengdu Museum has limitations in providing effective narratives, potentially causing them to miss opportunities for emotional connection and knowledge acquisition.

For instance, Participant 16 mentioned, *"The Chengdu Museum lacks a coherent thread to outline the culture of Chengdu as a city. However, there are certainly many stories to tell about Chengdu."* She viewed Chengdu as a city rich in cultural heritage with numerous stories to share but noted that the exhibits lacked a unifying theme that could effectively convey the unique cultural identity of Chengdu. Participants heavily relied on the museum's narratives, passively accepting the museum's interpretations of the exhibits and their historical contexts rather than engaging in critical thinking or questioning these narratives.

Although the participants perceived the Chengdu Museum to have limitations in providing information, which hinders them in gaining a deeper understanding of Chengdu's culture and history, it can be expected that museum visitors—especially those with relevant knowledge and life experiences—should have the ability to construct personal narratives about the museum. Participants believe that these narratives play a crucial role in expressing the emotions associated with their museum visit, as it is only through narratives that they can resonate and thus achieve an affective experience, significantly enhancing their overall engagement with the exhibits. However, the data illuminates that the participants often remain passive observers, heavily relying on the museum's narratives and awaiting the one-sided transmission of information. Due to their respect for the museum's authority, participants largely depend on the museum to interpret the exhibits and take the museum's

narratives as definitive. As an authority, the museum largely determines the participants' affective experience of the exhibits, shaping their understanding and perception. When participants enter the exhibition halls to appreciate history and art, they tend to passively accept the museum's storytelling. This reliance leads them to forgo the power and opportunity to construct personal narratives, thereby affecting their affective experience.

This section has examined the impact of cultural values on the affective experiences of visitors. The following section will continue to discuss their influence on social experiences.

## **5.4 The Impact of Cultural Values on the Social Experience**

### **5.4.1 The Complexity of Group Visits**

In terms of cultural values, visitors' pursuit of harmony is the primary factor influencing their experience of the museum *servicescape*. Participants expressed different social experiences of visiting the museum as a group, yet they all shared a common goal: to maintain group harmony.

In the case of Participant 22, she had extended an invitation to her friend, contingent upon the assurance that their interests aligned and would not result in a significant conflict.

*“Because my friends are all long-time friends, and when you invite them to go out, you know they'll be interested. You're both into the same things, so when you mention something, they'll be like, “I want to go too!” and then you both go. I think this helps to maintain a good relationship. It's a way to continue the friendship.”*

The instance of Participant 22 demonstrates that, for museum visits, a highly intellectual form of tourism, Chinese visitors often proactively seek to resolve potential issues before the trip even begins, ensuring that their experience is enjoyable and satisfactory. By taking

precautionary measures, she sought to prevent any potential conflicts that may arise if their interests were not aligned. In order for the experience to be successful, there were certain prerequisites that had to be met.

First and foremost, the relationship between the two individuals had to be extremely close, allowing them to share their preferences for exhibitions with one another. As Participant 17 stated: *“Going with close colleagues is also quite enjoyable. Sometimes, after my friends and I visit, I might go again with my close colleagues.”* The participant repeatedly emphasised the term 'close colleagues' in her statements, indicating that she views close relationships as a crucial factor for ensuring a pleasant museum visiting experience. This closeness allows them to freely share their interests in the exhibition and support and understand each other throughout the visit. Participant 5 echoed this sentiment, highlighting the role of familiarity in his experience:

*“At that time, we were just joking about the mediaeval paintings inside. We thought they were really ugly. I mean, they are a form of art, but definitely not my style. I wouldn't do that elsewhere, **just with the friends I went with**, spur of the moment, you know?”*

The comfort and familiarity inherent in such close relationships facilitate open communication and a shared sense of enjoyment, making the museum visit a more enriching and fulfilling experience for both parties.

Additionally, their preferences for exhibitions had to align, ensuring that they would both derive mutual benefit from visiting museums together. Participant 19 characterised the companions who visited the museum with him as *“like-minded friends”*. Participant 35 remarked: *“I think going to a museum with friends is great because you and your companion both share an interest in the museum.”* Similarly, Participant 15 noted: *“It depends on the personality of the friend I am with. For example, when I go out with one particular friend, we*

*tend to visit these kinds of places (museums) more frequently.*” These statements highlight the importance of having shared interests and common ground in their cultural pursuits. When friends share similar tastes and curiosities, it enhances the overall experience, making it more engaging and enjoyable. This alignment in preferences not only fosters deeper discussions and reflections on the exhibits but also strengthens the bond between the individuals as they explore and appreciate the museum's offerings together.

Furthermore, both individuals needed to exhibit a strong willingness and ability to travel to museums in order to view exhibitions. As Participant 10 stated, *“With a few close friends, it's always easy. We just ask, “Got plans today? No? Then let's go to the Chengdu Museum.” No problem, and off we go.*” This illustrates the ease and spontaneity with which they engage in museum visits. The mutual enthusiasm and availability of the friends are crucial factors in fostering a fulfilling museum experience, as they enable spontaneous and enjoyable visits to the museum. With these prerequisites in place, it was expected that their exhibition-going experiences would be mutually beneficial and enjoyable.

During the Focus Group 3 session, the participants had a discussion regarding their perceptions of the individual experiences in group visiting activities.

*Participant 38: “I think seeing it together with other people is definitely a social occasion. Since it is a social occasion, the purpose of seeing the exhibition becomes blurred to me, and is unimportant. (...) It was okay, and I was happy. I can come out in a social status, it must be because that person is nice. Because she's a nice person, everything you do with her, you think it's positive.”*

*(...)*

*Participant 37: “I have never really liked doing things with others, like watching movies or going to museums. I have been invited to go with friends before and it didn’t bother me, but I made it clear that I might not be able to fully enjoy the exhibition. **I was just there to accompany them.** So on that day, I might not be able to appreciate the exhibition properly. I really don’t like it when people talk to me while I am looking at things.”*

*Researcher: “You don’t like it?”*

*Participant 37: “No. Everyone should just look at things on their own. What is there to comment on? When two or more people go out, it’s often unavoidable that the person next to you will chat with you and you have to respond. (...) **If they start talking to me, I can’t tell them not to. I will just say something like “Oh, yeah, that’s right.”** Actually, the conversations we have are usually not very interesting. (...) **When two or more people go to see an exhibition, I won’t care too much about whether I’ve seen everything. As long as they are happy, it’s fine.** It’s a social occasion for them, like it is for (Participant 38). As long as they are happy, I am fine too.”*

*Researcher: “But you are not happy?”*

*Participant 37: “**I can reluctantly sacrifice some of my own experience for my friends.** (...) But I can always find another time to see the exhibition. I think going with them is also an experience, not necessarily an experience of seeing the paintings, but an experience of being together.”*

Participant 37 and Participant 38 exhibited diverse levels of prioritising group welfare.

Participant 38 prioritised socialising with her friends over focusing on the individual experience of seeing the exhibition. To maintain harmony within the group, she modified her objectives and behaviours during the museum visit, shifting her focus from appreciation and

education to social interactions. The level of satisfaction she experienced was partly influenced by her decision to voluntarily relinquish the benefits she was originally entitled to.

In contrast, Participant 37's experiences with friends were less enjoyable. She acknowledged that she might not be able to appreciate the exhibition properly. Participant 37 exhibited a strong inclination to foster group harmony, even if it meant limiting her own desires to some extent. Her dedication to maintaining peace and avoiding conflicts among her friends was exemplified by her statement, *"If they start talking to me, I can't tell them not to."* Despite her personal preferences, she was willing to relinquish some control and accommodate the needs of her friends. This willingness to prioritise the group's socialising and companionship over her individual experiences was further evidenced by her remark, *"As long as they are happy, I am fine too."* Despite feeling some powerlessness as her personal preferences were overshadowed, she provided a favourable evaluation of her overall experience.

The experiences of the two participants differ, but both illustrate how the cultural value of pursuing harmony influenced the social dimension of their experiences. Participant 38 derived a strong sense of social satisfaction from visiting the museum with friends. She did not prioritise her individual experience but rather valued the social interaction with her friends. This attitude highlights the importance of harmony in her social experience. She considered the interaction and communication with friends to be more significant than her personal viewing experience, thereby gaining satisfaction from the social activity.

Participant 37, on the other hand, subjectively and reluctantly sacrificed a portion of her personal experience, indicating her willingness to forgo her own preferences to maintain group harmony. Despite her personal experience being affected, her actions demonstrated a high regard for group harmony.

Both participants' experiences indicate that the value of pursuing harmony significantly influenced their social experiences. Whether gaining satisfaction from social interactions or reluctantly sacrificing personal experiences, they placed group harmony above personal preferences, demonstrating a high regard for collective interests and group relationships. This cultural value led them to prioritise coordination and cooperation with others in group activities, thereby enhancing the overall social experience in the museum.

The experiences of Participants 22, 17, 5, 19, 35, 15, 10, 37, and 38 collectively demonstrate the significant influence of the cultural value of striving for harmony on their social experiences during museum visits. These participants exhibited varying degrees of prioritising group welfare, whether through ensuring aligned interests before the visit, spontaneously enjoying the outing with like-minded friends, or making personal sacrifices to maintain group harmony. Their willingness to prioritise collective interests and foster group relationships over individual preferences emphasise how striving for harmony profoundly shapes the social dynamics and overall enjoyment of museum visits.

The following section will explore how visitors manage differing interests within a group, further examining the varied solutions they employ to ensure a harmonious and fulfilling museum experience for all group members.

#### **5.4.2 Varied Solutions to Differing Interests within a Group**

Visitors often face the challenge of balancing individual interests with group harmony during museum visits. This section explores the diverse strategies participants employed to manage differing interests within their groups while maintaining a harmonious social experience. The following accounts illustrate the varying approaches taken by participants to reconcile these differences and ensure a positive experience for all involved.

In Focus Group 3, the participants explained the measures they undertook to maintain their autonomy while engaging in group activities.

Participant 36: *“We visited separately even when we go together.”*

Participant 38: *“It would be best that we set a time and meet at the door afterwards.”*

Participant 36: *“Because I’m also the kind of person who will spend a lot of time in front of a picture when I see something that interests me. Everyone’s interests are different.”*

Participant 36 showed a tendency to keep independence in group activities. She attributed this to the fact that everyone has different points of interest and stays in front of different exhibits for different lengths of time. Therefore, even though she and her friends went to the museum together, they visited separately in the exhibition halls. In such a situation, they retained the experience of visiting together while ensuring the quality of the experience of seeing the exhibition for each person.

Facing a similar situation, Participant 6 chose to stay with her friend, despite having differing interests.

*“The bad thing is, if two people go together, **we will inevitably have to accommodate each other**. For example, if I want to look at something for a longer time, if I were alone, I would just stay there and not leave. But with friends, you can’t do that. (...) I’ve encountered this situation before, where my friend looked really anxious, **I told him he can wait outside**. (...) **I would feel a lot of pressure** because someone is waiting for me, and I would feel like it’s a hassle.”*

This disparity in interests had an unmistakable adverse effect on Participant 6’s personal experience. The participant experienced psychological pressure during her visit due to the

inconsistency of interests and pace, as she observed the group members needing to make mutual compromises, which negatively impacted her overall experience.

The experiences of Participant 36 and Participant 6 indicated that the striving for harmony exerted a significant influence on visiting the museum together as friends. In Participant 36's case, on the surface, the observation that the participant and her friends did not always maintain group cohesion throughout their visit appeared contradictory to the principles of collectivism. However, the reason for their separate visits was attributed to different interests and paces of visitation, and the aim to avoid conflicts, which aligned with the quest to maintain harmony.

Participant 6 endeavoured to spend as much time with her friend as possible, despite having diverse interests and varying speeds. Only when the disparity in tempo was so extreme that reconciliation was no longer feasible did instances of visiting separately occur. The experiences of the participants emphasised the importance of maintaining harmonious friendships during museum visits and showed the efforts to enhance individual experiences while balancing group harmony.

The participants demonstrated that striving for harmony significantly influenced how they managed their museum visits in group settings. They employed various strategies to balance individual preferences with group cohesion, highlighting the importance of both personal enjoyment and maintaining harmonious relationships.

The following section will explore the impact of striving for harmony on family visitors, examining how cultural values influence their museum experiences and interactions.

### 5.4.3 The Impact of Harmony Seeking on Family Visitors

The participants comprising Focus Group 7 were a middle-aged couple who visited the museum together with their son. Their experiences demonstrated that the notion of harmony is equally significant within the family unit. When talking about interests that didn't coincide with his wife's, Participant 47 said: *"Because we're a family, I usually have to go with her to see the things she's interested in, and I won't tell her, 'That's not interesting, let's go.'"* His statements suggested that he highly valued harmony in family and the striving for it had a significant impact on the family's museum visit experience. It was evident from Participant 47's remarks that conflict avoidance behaviour maintained the enjoyment of their experience despite the need to accommodate each other as a family. When a situation involving a conflict of interest presented itself, he demonstrated a tendency to make concessions for his wife. In particular, Participant 47 opted to refrain from using hurtful language and instead prioritised Participant 46's emotional well-being by accompanying her to explore the content that held her interest.

As parents, the participants placed great significance on the time they spent together as a family. They reported that their family relationships were strengthened and gave a highly positive evaluation of their museum visit experience. Participant 46 stated: *"Families get together, we (as) parents and our son go to the museum together, especially since our son is now an adult. These moments are very rare, so we cherish them."* The museum and its exhibits were instrumental in fostering their familial bonds.

Despite the fact that the participants' son had reached adulthood, the participants continue to display an indulgent attitude towards him, evidenced by their heightened sense of good mood and efforts made to engage in the exhibitions when they visit museums with him. Due to their son's enthusiasm, the participants, particularly Participant 46, were fully immersed and

attentive during their visit to the exhibition: *“That was why I watched it carefully, with my son.”* This favourable emotional state positively impacted her visiting experiences. Because such family moments were rare, they visited the museum with a serious and respectful attitude, striving to avoid conflicts and maintain harmony. This contributed to a more enjoyable and satisfying museum experience.

The emphasis on family harmony significantly influenced their museum experiences. To maintain this harmony, they actively participated and respected each other’s interests, enhancing the overall visit. These behaviours fostered closer relationships among family members and increased their engagement and satisfaction with the museum exhibitions. Striving for harmony influenced how participants managed their museum visits in family group settings, as they employed strategies to balance individual preferences with group cohesion, highlighting the importance of both personal enjoyment and harmonious relationships.

The subsequent section will examine how the cultural value of striving for harmony shapes visitors' responses to impolite strangers who disrupt their museum experience.

#### **5.4.4 Choosing Avoidance Despite Disrupted Experience**

Visitors often encounter inappropriate or disruptive behaviours during their museum visits, which can significantly impact their overall experience. This section examines how the cultural value of striving for harmony influences their attitudes towards and responses to such uncivil behaviours, highlighting their efforts to maintain harmony and avoid conflict.

Participants 3, 16, 20, 33, 35, encountered disruptive behaviours during their visit to the museum and specifically expressed their frustration with the photographic conduct of other visitors. They argued that taking photographs would hinder their ability to appreciate the true

beauty of the artefacts on display. Participant 16, in particular, was critical of the use of cameras to take pictures in the museum, and deemed it inappropriate behaviour to use professional cameras in such a setting.

The participants' experiences demonstrated that photography can exert an influence not only on the photographer's experience but also on the experiences of other individuals who are present at the location. Inappropriate or discourteous photography behaviours can cause varying levels of disturbance to visiting experiences. The participant expressed negative emotions when discussing the presence of other audiences taking photos, and complained that these behaviours adversely impacted her experience. Furthermore, Participant 3 expressed a considerable level of concern for her privacy, as well as apprehension about being captured on camera by others: *"I would start to worry about being accidentally captured in their photos."* This anxiety regarding the potential exposure of one's privacy actually resulted in psychological distress for the visitors and obstructed the smooth progression of their visit.

However, among the participants, only Participant 6 had ever taken steps to remedy the situation by stopping the impolite behaviour or negotiating with others to find a solution, as she stated: *"Yeah, I would, I'd just say it outright. But sometimes, I might get some backlash, yet I still speak up."* Her behaviour can be regarded as an exception among all the participants. The potential risks associated with preventing uncivilised behaviours are evident from her statement. It is probable that direct confrontation with audiences displaying uncivilised behaviours will occur. This situation probably constituted the primary motivation behind the hesitancy of the other participants to intervene and put an end to such actions. Influenced by the cultural value of striving for harmony, participants were reluctant to engage in conflicts with strangers, especially in the museum environment. Most participants chose to endure silently, even though this greatly impacted their own visit experience.

As previously mentioned, in Focus Group 1, a knowledgeable member of a friend group visited the exhibition together with other members of the group. However, an unfamiliar person followed closely behind them, eavesdropping on their conversation. This stranger then proceeded to push aside one of the original group members and monopolised the guide's attention by asking numerous questions.

Participant 28: *"He followed us all the way and even pushed Participant 31 aside."*

(...)

Participant 31: *"Yeah, he pushed me aside and stood in front of me the whole time."*

Researcher: *"Did he think that you were a researcher of the museum?"*

Participant 31: *"No. He knew."*

Participant 28: *"And he (Participant 29) wasn't wearing a workwear vest! (...) He saw and followed us walking back and forth the whole time, looking at this and that."*

Participant 31: *"We were the last ones left and waiting at the door when he ran up to Participant 29 to ask a question."*

(...)

Participant 28: *"**We were not disgusted with his behaviour.** Because I think he really has a unique perspective... You know, there were many people at that time, (and he could distinguish that Participant 29 was an expert)."*

The actions of this intrusive stranger generated noticeable hostility within the group, significantly diminishing the participants' overall museum experience. Despite the apparent displeasure, all of the original group members did not openly express their dissatisfaction. Instead, they chose to silently endure the situation. This behaviour can be attributed to the

Chinese cultural emphasis on harmony. The group decided to avoid conflict and maintain a harmonious environment, even at the expense of their own enjoyment, demonstrating the profound impact of the cultural value of harmony on their museum experience. Their strong commitment to maintaining social harmony led them to tolerate the disruptive behaviour of the intruder, highlighting that the striving for harmony during museum visits can sometimes come at the cost of individual satisfaction and engagement.

Participant 12 detailed a unique situation where superstitious elderly urged him and his wife to take their kids from the exhibition hall. He stated that some older visitors believed that the various artefacts on display, including exquisite pottery, jade items, sarcophagi, and tomb doors, had been unearthed from graves and possessed an excess of Yin energy, which made it improper for children to remain in their vicinity for extended periods. However, the couple did not follow the advice and instead continued their visit to the museum with their children.

Participant 12: *“But some elderly people would say things like these items were dug out from graves, and there is a lot of Yin energy. Children should not be exposed to them too much...”*

Researcher: *“They said that to you?”*

Participant 12: *“Yes, **I would hear some elderly people saying these things, but young people may not have this concept.** (...) Because it's not just... exquisite pottery, jade, and so on, there are also some stone coffins.(...) and the tomb doors. **Some elderly people would think... the old beliefs, that these things have heavy Yin energy, and small children should not play around them.**”*

Researcher: *“So, you heard them and took your kids away?”*

Participant 12: *“No, we didn't feel that way. Hahaha.”*



*The boat coffins, downloaded on January 28, 2024, from the Chengdu Museum official website: 成博宝藏|载魂之舟——商业街船棺 - 成都博物馆*

<https://www.cdmuseum.com/xinwen/201903/582.html>

This experience highlights Participant 12's efforts to maintain harmony and avoid conflict. Instead of trying to confront the elderly strangers with his own viewpoints and engaging in a potentially controversial discussion, Participant 12 chose a more peaceful approach by remaining silent and continuing with his initial plan. This decision not only reflects his obeying for the cultural value of harmony but also illustrates how such values can shape museum experiences.

The striving for harmony influenced Participant 12's museum visit by causing him to prioritise peaceful environment over potential confrontations, even when his personal values and preference were challenged. This avoidance of conflict ensured that the museum experience remained enjoyable for his family, even at the cost of tolerating unsolicited

comments from strangers. The emphasis on maintaining a harmonious atmosphere exemplifies the broader cultural tendencies that shape how individuals navigate public spaces and social interactions. His experience, while beneficial in maintaining peace, also shows the complex ways in which the cultural value of striving for harmony can influence and sometimes constrain visitors' actions and interactions within museums.

Overall, the data show that Chinese museum visitors generally refrain from engaging in confrontation while in the museum setting. When confronted with adverse circumstances, the participants often refrained from advocating for their needs or expressing their opinions, opting instead to keep silent or maintain a passive stance. This avoidance can be attributed to the significance they place on maintaining harmony, which is deeply ingrained in the Confucian tradition. The influence of Chinese cultural value of striving for harmony posed a challenge to directly confronting conflicts, significantly impacting their museum experience.

The next section will investigate the harmony-driven caution and distance participants exhibit in their attitudes towards social members.

#### **5.4.5 Attitude towards Social Members: Harmony-Driven Caution and Distance**

Although participants showed concern for other social members, they generally avoided specific interactions with them. This reluctance reflects the Chinese cultural emphasis on maintaining harmonious relationships, as participants preferred to stay within their established social circles and avoid conflicts with strangers. This section examines their specific behaviours during museum visits, highlighting how these cultural values influenced their interactions.

The influence of superstitious beliefs on Chinese museum visitors was also observed in the account of Participant 28, albeit in a different manner. During Focus Group 1, when asked

about merchandise they wished to purchase that were unavailable in the museum shop, Participant 28 expressed a desire for a small bronze figurines of acupuncture, stating:

*“For example, there was acupuncture. I think it's actually very good. For instance, if it could be made into small bronze figurines and **given to the elderly who believe in traditional Chinese medicine**, right? It's something that has been around for thousands of years, and all the acupoints on the body are covered. **I think some elderly might be interested.**”*

Participant 28's response demonstrated how the striving for harmony shaped her museum experience, deeply rooted in Chinese cultural values of collectivism. When asked about specific items from the museum's cultural and creative products that she desired but had not yet purchased, Participant 28 not only considered her own preferences but also took into account the perspectives of the older generation. This reflects her commitment to maintaining harmony by balancing individual desires with communal needs and showing respect for the elderly. Her expression highlights how the striving for harmony influenced her thoughts and behaviours during the museum visit.

Despite the consideration for the members of the broad community, participants were reluctant to connect with others. With the exception of Participant 6, who claimed to have conversations with strangers and even served as a guide for visitors from other provinces in the museum, most participants reported that their interactions with present other visitors in the museum were limited to overhearing conversations without joining in or exchanging more than a sentence or two. Furthermore, they rarely engaged in in-depth conversations with unfamiliar visitors, let alone forging connections and building friendships with strangers.

The difficulty the participants experienced in generating interactions with strangers may relate to the way Chinese people form relationships, particularly with unfamiliar individuals.

In interpersonal relationships, Chinese people tend to maintain harmony and avoid conflict and contradiction. This cultural background influences their view of interpersonal relationships, making trust and responsibility crucial elements in these relationships. Social circles and networking, known as “*guanxi*”, are highly valued in Chinese society. The perception of “*guanxi*” and the degree of trust and responsibility involved significantly influence Chinese people's willingness to cooperate with strangers. They often find it difficult to initiate relationships with strangers, even for simple, basic interactions.

As Participant 35 stated, “*I’ll share what I overheard with my companion.*” She found it challenging to initiate conversations with the present unfamiliar audiences, even when she heard them discussing a relevant topic. Despite her interest, she often opted to interact with her companions instead. Participant 35 also stated: “*I don’t belong to that group of people.*” The participant perceived herself as belonging to a social group distinct from the other present visitors. In the museum, there was nobody present to play the role as an intermediary to build trust and connections between the two parties. This lack of a mediating person resulted in no inclination to transcend the social boundaries and initiate communication with other visitors. This phenomenon can be attributed to the Chinese cultural value of striving for harmony, which profoundly influences social interactions.

The striving for harmony often leads Chinese to avoid potential conflicts and misunderstandings by limiting interactions to well-established social circles. Consequently, participants tended to engage in activities and share their experiences primarily with companions they have formed close ties with, such as family members and friends, rather than with strangers. This tendency ensures that their social interactions are harmonious and free of tension, but it also restricts the opportunity for broader social engagement and exchange within the museum setting.

The participant's experience highlights how the cultural emphasis on maintaining harmonious relationships can limit social interactions in public spaces like museums. The absence of an intermediary to facilitate trust and connections exacerbates this effect, making it less likely for visitors to reach out beyond their original social groups. As a result, while the striving for harmony contributes to a peaceful and conflict-free environment, it also diminishes the potential for enriching social experiences through interactions with a more diverse range of individuals.

This section has examined the impact of cultural values on the social experiences of visitors. The following section will continue to discuss their influence on physical experiences.

### **5.5 The Impact of Cultural Values on the Physical Experience**

Participants' respect for authority is also reflected in their attention to order during museum visits. This is evident in their dissatisfaction with inconsistencies between the museum's audio guide coding and exhibit numbering. Participant 32 from Focus Group 2 demonstrated a strong reliance on the audio guide, to the extent that she did not take the initiative to resolve the issue of mismatched guide sequences and exhibit numbers.

*“How can you circle back? When the first confusion occurs, you may be able to accept and go back, but when the second, third, or fourth similar situation happens, **you will feel as if it's not a must to view some parts.** It will affect the richness and completeness of the final experience.”*

Participant 32 exhibited a considerable measure of respect for the museum's authority, as evidenced by her reliance on the audio guide to determine which exhibits were worth visiting. In fact, when the audio guide had sequencing issues, Participant 32 believed that the value of

certain exhibits had diminished, and consequently, her own experience of the tour was significantly diminished.

Despite having the option to search for relevant descriptions based on her own viewing experience, she chose to skip certain exhibits. This highlights the potential for improving the Chengdu Museum's audio guide arrangement. More importantly, it shows the significant impact on the physical experience due to the respect for the museum's authority, which necessitates following the numbered sequence in the audio guide.

Participant 19 exhibited similar behaviour. He demonstrated a significant degree of adherence to the sequence and was attentive to the flow of the visit. When the flow of the visit was unclear due to a lack of guidance, Participant 19 tended to doubt himself on top of feeling dissatisfied: *“But maybe we were not professional enough and it was well designed but we just couldn't see. We are not specialists. It was possible that there was a logic, and we just didn't see it.”* He positioned himself in a subordinate role, believing that the museum provided implicit clues that he could not decipher due to his lack of relevant knowledge and expertise. His respect for the museum's authority also disrupted his physical experience.

In Focus Group 1, a unique situation arose regarding the sequence and flow of visits. The participants were a group of friends led by one member with specialised knowledge (Participant 29). However, repeatedly walking back and forth in the exhibition halls caused them discomfort.

Participant 28: *“The timeline on the right when we walked in, the Renaissance timeline, was there. But the paintings didn't follow that.”*

Participant 29: *“Well, because of security reasons, the Chengdu Museum put the most valuable paintings collectively in a separate room, so **the timeline seemed very messy.**”*

(...)

Participant 28: ***"It turned out to be walking around back and forth. Because it was the only way to follow that timeline... (If Participant 29 hadn't been there to lead us,) We'd have completely lost the point. (...) At the end of the day we would just know, oh, that's the most expensive one, and we went to have a look. And that's it. But actually, there was a lot of content and knowledge in it."***

Participant 29: ***"(...) We say in history it goes vertically, but in human society it goes horizontally, right? So it's very difficult for the museum to arrange this exhibition, and it's a question whether it's a vertical line or a horizontal line. (...) When you wanted to tell a story vertically, there was not (the relative painting). But horizontally, it didn't go by genre. So it was hard to choose."***

The participants demonstrated a considerable level of respect for authority. However, the origin of this authority was not the museum, but rather an individual who held specialised knowledge among their peers. In the museum scenario, Participant 29 possessed greater expertise compared to the other group members, thereby accruing relative power and authority inside the group. Participant 29 assumed an elevated stature within the group, earning the reverence and admiration of the other members. Similarly, it can be observed that assuming responsibility is a key component of authority. In this context, Participant 29 demonstrated his own capacity by utilising his expertise to guide and instruct the entire group during their visit.

The other group members showed a significant level of trust in Participant 29's viewpoints, which can be interpreted as an act of respect for authority. Compared to visiting alone or with a group without an expert, this compliance brought benefits, such as receiving explanations of the exhibits and having a more in-depth viewing experience. However, when Participant

29's chosen route did not align with the information provided by the museum, the participants tended to trust and support their in-group expert, following the friend's lead out of respect for authority. This resulted in a disrupted physical experience, leading to their dissatisfaction.

Participant 33's concern for others exemplifies how the striving for harmony influenced her physical experience in the museum. During Focus Group 2, she raised the issue of accessibility for individuals with disabilities, stating, "*Like, is it easy to move from room to room, or go upstairs?*" Despite not requiring any special accommodations herself, she recognized the physical barriers that visitors with disabilities frequently encounter in the museum. Her thoughtfulness reflects a deep-seated cultural value of maintaining harmony and consideration for the well-being of others. This striving for harmony not only shaped her own physical experience but also emphasised the importance of ensuring that all visitors can comfortably navigate the museum and appreciate the exhibits. By addressing the need for accessibility, Participant 33 demonstrated how prioritising a harmonious environment can enhance the overall experience for all audiences, fostering an inclusive and considerate atmosphere. This attitude of seeking harmony contributed to a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of the museum's *servicescape*, highlighting the interconnectedness of physical and social experiences in a culturally rich setting.

The findings show how cultural values manifest in visitors' experiences, specifically focusing on cognitive, affective, social, and physical experiences. In terms of cognitive experiences, the cultural value of respecting authority makes tourists place significant emphasis on the treasures of the museum. This emphasis has both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, the treasures attract tourists to visit the museum and enhance their understanding of local history and culture. On the negative side, an excessive focus on these treasures can negatively impact the overall experience when the museum does not prominently display them. The pursuit of these treasures also leads to a lack of autonomy and

deep reflection in tourists' experiences. Additionally, due to their respect for authority, visitors feel they have no right to influence the museum, resulting in a reluctance to interact with the museum's official social media accounts, potentially sacrificing part of the online experience.

Regarding affective experiences, respect for authority leads visitors to expect the museum to provide clear narratives that present the exhibits and their historical context. When the museum fails to offer the expected storytelling to connect the exhibits, visitors often find it difficult to resonate emotionally, thus lacking emotional engagement.

In terms of social experiences, the cultural value of striving for harmony affects visitors' social interactions. Firstly, when visiting the museum as a group, they strive for harmony within the group. Although exceptions exist, generally, visitors avoid conflicts within the group and with other strangers present, even at the expense of their own interests.

Additionally, influenced by collective attention, visitors are considerate of others' interests but find it challenging to interact with strangers.

For physical experiences, the cultural value of respecting authority makes visitors strictly adhere to the information provided by the museum, such as the visiting route and the sequence in the audio guides. Consequently, any disruption in these areas can disturb their experience. Moreover, visitors also consider whether the museum's facilities are accessible and convenient for all social groups, including minority groups.

## **5.6 Manifestation of Cultural Values in Visitor Experiences of Museum Servicescape**

The findings demonstrate the critical role of cultural values in shaping the museum *servicescape* experiences of Chinese domestic visitors. Specifically, respect for authority and striving for harmony emerge as the two predominant values at play in the museum experience.

Respect for authority reflects the traditional Confucian value that emphasises hierarchical social structures (Taylor, 1989), while striving for harmony aligns with the cultural emphasis on social cohesion and stability (Lau *et al.*, 2023). The subsequent sections will discuss how each of these factors distinctly influences visitor experiences in the museum context.

### **5.6.1 The Manifestation of Respect for Authority**

Existing research shows that the physical and social elements of the *servicescape* create a highly hierarchical environment, compelling consumers to conform to elite expectations to gain social acceptance (Dion and Borraz, 2017). This environment isolates consumers, reinforcing class differences and ultimately affecting their overall experiences (Dion and Borraz, 2017). In the context of tourism and hospitality, the cultural value of respect for authority significantly influences the behaviour and expectations of Chinese tourists (Gao *et al.*, 2021; Huang and Wen, 2021; Tian *et al.*, 2021). That is, Chinese tourists tend to show deference to authority figures, including service providers, and value hierarchical relationships, which markedly affects their behaviour and experiences in the tourism industry (Hsu and Huang, 2016).

Chinese tourists who prioritise respect for authority are inclined to follow established norms and rules, participate in guided tours, and show deference to tour guides and other figures of authority within the tourism context (Tsang, 2011). This respect often translates into a preference for organised travel experiences, such as package tours, where they value the guidance of tour leaders and adherence to predefined itineraries (Jin and Wang, 2016). Furthermore, this respect for authority influences their decision-making processes, leading some tourists to choose destinations and activities based on their perceived authority or popularity among others (Keating and Kriz, 2008).

The findings of this study indicate that the cultural value of respect for authority does not create a hierarchical structure among museum visitors within the museum *servicescape*.

Rather, in the context of museums, this value creates a hierarchy between the visitors and the museum, which is perceived by visitors as an authoritative institution. As such, when visitors engage with the museum *servicescape*, their respect for authority influences their experiences of both the exhibitions and augmented services.

Findings show that, in terms of cognitive experience, visitors place great importance on the exhibitions and actively seek out the treasures of the museum during their visits. This search for the treasures of the museum is driven by the visitors' belief that viewing such special exhibits provides a sense of fulfilment and enlightenment and a desire to acquire a deeper understanding of Chengdu's rich cultural and historical heritage. This behaviour aligns with existing research, which shows the ongoing importance of knowledge acquisition for museum visitors (Xu *et al.*, 2023). By focusing on these significant artefacts, visitors aim to enhance their cognitive experience, ensuring that their visit is both educational and meaningful. The process of discovering and engaging with these treasures not only satisfies their curiosity but also reinforces their connection to the cultural heritage being presented, thereby making their overall museum experience more enriching and memorable.

However, the identification of the treasures of the museum is decided by the museum, and visitors, due to their respect for authority, seldom question these selections. Indeed, respect for authority involves accepting the legitimacy of authority and its decisions, with Chinese individuals trusting government institutions based on traditional values rather than critically evaluating their actual performance or outcomes (Yang, Dong, and Chen, 2021). In this cultural context, museums, as state-operated institutions authorised by government entities (Bollo and Zhang, 2017), naturally gain the trust of visitors. As authoritative entities, the content and narratives presented by museums are perceived as embodying authority and

legitimacy. Consequently, visitors often do not critically evaluate the museum's identification and selection of its treasures; instead, they choose to trust and accept the information and arrangements provided by the museum.

The findings also indicate that the pursuit of the treasures of the museum can lead to a significant issue: when visitors perceive that the museum is not effectively showcasing these key exhibits, they frequently experience dissatisfaction, which negatively impacts their cognitive experience. This dissatisfaction stems from the implicit expectations that these treasures should be prominently displayed and easily accessible, as they are believed to best represent the cultural and historical essence of the museum. When these expectations are not met, visitors may feel that their educational and cultural enrichment goals have been compromised, leading to a sense of unfulfillment. Additionally, the failure to highlight these key exhibits can overshadow other aspects of the museum visit, diminishing the overall quality and depth of the cognitive engagement with the museum's offerings.

The findings suggest that, in the Chinese context, respect for authority significantly influences museum visitor experiences. This cultural value affects the cognitive dimensions of engagement with exhibitions, the core services of museums, in both positive and negative ways. Museum curators, who benefit from the high level of trust and respect that Chinese visitors have for their authority, must recognize the substantial influence they possess in shaping visitors' perceptions and understanding of cultural and historical heritage. This influence necessitates a thoughtful approach to curating exhibitions, ensuring that the selection of treasures and the narratives presented are accurate, diverse, and inclusive, thereby reflecting a comprehensive view of cultural heritage (Ang, 2019).

Respect for authority is also prominently evident in visitors' interactions with the museum, particularly in online contexts. Research shows that despite restrictions on freedom of

expression and the monitoring of online activities, with dissenting voices potentially facing censorship and surveillance, Chinese individuals remain willing to express their views on social media platforms (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021). Increasingly, they use social media and online platforms to voice opinions, raise awareness about social issues, and engage in discussions with authorities (Yang, Dong, and Chen, 2021). In the context of museums, Meng, Chu, and Chiu (2023) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, museum visitors showed a strong interest in online services and preferred a hybrid approach combining offline and online experiences. This hybrid approach not only met their needs during the pandemic but also expanded their channels for acquiring knowledge and participating in museum activities.

However, the findings of this study represent significant discrepancy from prior research findings above. That is, domestic Chinese visitors examined in this study show a lack of interest in the online services provided by museums. They primarily use basic functions such as ticket booking and are reluctant to engage deeply with the museum's online platforms. Notably, the root cause of this reluctance lies in their perception of lacking power to influence the decisions of public museums, which are government institutions. As such, rather than being concerned about censorship (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021), participants of this study feel that their voices and opinions are unlikely to be valued or adopted in the face of the museum's authority. Concurrently, due to their respect for authority, they trust in the museum's expertise in curation and collection, leading them to believe that their input is unnecessary. Consequently, they prefer to passively accept the basic online services provided by the museum rather than actively participate in interactions.

The findings suggest that the cultural value of respect for authority also significantly influences the cognitive dimensions of engagement with the augmented services of online museum *servicescape*, or *e-servicescape* (Harris and Goode, 2010; Tankovic and Benazic, 2018), in a negative way. These findings have crucial implications for museum curators and

managers. Museum curators and digital engagement teams must recognize the perception barriers that prevent deeper engagement with online services. Enhancing engagement of *e-servicescape* requires museum curators and managers to create more inclusive and interactive online experiences that highlight the importance of visitor input. Ensuring these platforms are user-friendly and foster a sense of community involvement is key to promoting greater engagement (Arnaboldi and Diaz Lema, 2022).

No existing literature demonstrates that respect for authority significantly impacts museum visitors' affective experiences. However, this study found that such cultural value does indeed play a crucial role. In terms of affective experiences, visitors heavily rely on official narratives provided by the museum, accepting the information presented rather than constructing their own narratives. When detailed narratives are lacking, visitors often struggle to connect with the exhibits, leading to feelings of emotional detachment and negatively impacting their overall visit.

In terms of physical experiences, research shows that outbound Chinese tourists often exhibit a high degree of trust in authority figures, such as tour operators, government recommendations, and official travel agencies (Jin and Wang, 2016). This trust results in a preference for predefined itineraries, as they believe these have been deliberately planned and endorsed by knowledgeable authorities (Jin and Wang, 2016). In museum context, visitors show a similar tendency. They depend on the routes and guidance provided by the museum, preferring to follow pre-set paths. A lack of clear guidance results in frustration and low autonomy, disrupting their ability to explore and enjoy the exhibitions independently. This dependency renders their movements within the museum passive and mechanical, thereby affecting their physical experience.

This reliance on the museum's narrative and guidance aligns with the broader role of museums in China, where they are utilised by the state as instruments to influence public perception and shape cultural identity (Zhang and Courty, 2021). Through their specific presentations and interpretations of history, museums continuously promote a sense of national identity (Zhang and Courty, 2021). They hold a key position in shaping and overseeing the interpretation of history and cultural significance (Wei, Yu, and Yuan, 2022).

The findings indicate that in the Chinese context, the cultural value of respect for authority plays a crucial role in shaping museum visitor experiences, emphasising its significance in the affective and physical dimensions of engagement with museum exhibitions. These findings are particularly significant for museum curators and managers. They need to understand how the cultural value of respect for authority influences visitors' affective and physical experiences. By comprehending this, they can design exhibitions and services more effectively to meet visitors' needs and enhance their overall experience.

After discussing the impact of respect for authority on visitor experiences, the next section will examine how the striving for harmony manifests in visitor experiences.

### **5.6.2 The Manifestation of Striving for Harmony**

The cultural value of striving for harmony leads Chinese individuals to avoid conflict and seek harmonious experiences, significantly impacting customer experience (Huang, Hassan, and Goh, 2024; Jin, Hoare, and Butcher, 2008; Wei, 2018). This study confirms that the cultural value of striving for harmony becomes a decisive factor influencing visitors' social experiences, both within their own group and in interactions with other visitors, in the context of museum visits.

In terms of in-group social experience, the findings indicate that visitors often choose to endure and compromise rather than express dissatisfaction or voice differing opinions when there are differences in interests and preferences among group members. This behaviour is evident in their selection of exhibition routes and viewing content, as well as in their interactions within the group. For instance, to avoid conflict and maintain harmony, visitors may suppress their interest in certain exhibits or silently tolerate the behaviour of their companions, even if such behaviour negatively affects their overall museum experience.

The emphasis on harmony prompts Chinese individuals to prioritise group cohesion over personal preferences, leading to a range of behaviours aimed at maintaining internal group harmony (Cai, Cohen, and Tribe, 2019; Kwek and Lee, 2010). This cultural value shapes how visitors engage with their companions. As a result, the striving for harmony becomes a decisive factor in determining the quality and depth of their social experience in the museum.

The findings indicate that, in the Chinese context, striving for harmony plays an important role in shaping the overall experience of the museum *servicescape*, particularly in the social dimension of engagement with their group members. Museum curators and administrators need to understand the cultural value of striving for harmony and its impact on the in-group social experiences of Chinese visitors. This awareness can guide the development of more inclusive and supportive services.

The influence of striving for harmony on visitors' social experiences is also evident in their interactions with other strangers present at the museum. Research has shown that interaction, including interactions between customers and strangers, is an important component of the *servicescape* (Gupta and Verma, 2021; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2010). The presence of strangers can affect consumers' psychological status, behaviours, and experiences (Arnould et al., 1998; Chou et al., 2023).

Research on museums has extensively explored interactions between visitors and strangers within the museum environment. Existing studies indicate that many visitors engage with encountered strangers in museums, and these interactions contribute to improving the overall visiting experience (Silverman, 2010; Kirchberg and Tröndle, 2015). For instance, a study by Reitstätter and Christidou (2024) on the Austrian Gallery found that although crowding caused by encountering strangers is often perceived as a barrier to learning and engagement, especially in narrow exhibition halls, groups of visitors may occasionally interact with unfamiliar visitors, thereby forming a social collective on-site. Similarly, research conducted in a technology museum in Munich, Germany, revealed that some respondents expressed a willingness to establish social connections with unfamiliar visitors (Sayffaerth, Rasch, and Müller, 2024).

However, the findings of this study highlight a sharp contrast in the context of Chinese visitors. The cultural value of striving for harmony significantly influences the social experiences of Chinese visitors within the museum *servicescape*, albeit with a rather negative impact. Chinese visitors exhibit a very low willingness to interact with strangers.

Ideologically, they consider the well-being of all visitors and hope that museums will meet the diverse needs of various social groups. However, in practice, they do not show a desire to interact with strangers they encounter.

This lack of social interaction with strangers limits the potential to create a vibrant and interactive museum atmosphere. The vibrancy of a museum stems from the exchange of ideas and the communal enjoyment of culture and history (Abdullahi and Omejeh, 2020). When visitors do not interact with one another, this dynamic atmosphere diminishes, resulting in a more sterile and less engaging environment. Consequently, the full potential of the museum's *servicescape* as a space for social interaction, cultural exchange, and collective learning is not realised (Chynoweth *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, this study found that while visitors are disturbed by uncivil behaviours, the cultural value of striving for harmony often leads them to silently endure these disruptions to avoid conflict, resulting in negative experiences. This passive endurance highlights the pervasive negative impact of striving for harmony on their social experience in the museum.

These differences highlight the contrasting effects of cultural values on visitor behaviour. In Western contexts, as shown by existing studies, interactions between strangers can enhance the museum experience. In contrast, the emphasis on harmony in Chinese culture discourages such interactions, leading to a more passive and potentially less enriching experience within the museum *servicescape*.

The findings indicate that, in the Chinese context, striving for harmony plays an important role in shaping visitor experiences of museum *servicescape*, emphasising its significance in the social dimensions of engagement with the present strangers. Museum curators and administrators need to understand how the cultural value of striving for harmony influences visitors' social experiences in interaction with strangers. They should be aware of the specific behaviours and expectations of visitors within this cultural context in the museum *servicescape*. By comprehending these factors, museums can design exhibitions and services that better align with visitors' needs and cultural backgrounds, thereby enhancing the overall visitor experience.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has delved into the significant role of cultural values, particularly respect for authority and striving for harmony, in shaping the museum *servicescape* experiences of Chinese domestic visitors. These values are deeply rooted in traditional Confucian principles and continue to influence contemporary experiences in the context of museum visits. Respect for authority manifests in visitors' cognitive, affective, and physical engagement with

museum exhibitions and services. It fosters a high level of trust in the museum's expertise and authority, leading visitors to accept the narratives and selections presented without critical evaluation. However, this trust also limits active participation, particularly in online services, where visitors feel their input is unlikely to influence the decisions of authoritative institutions. When museums fail to meet expectations, such as by not prominently displaying key exhibits or providing inadequate guidance, visitors experience dissatisfaction and emotional detachment, negatively impacting their overall experience.

Similarly, the cultural value of striving for harmony plays an important role in shaping visitors' social experiences within the museum *servicescape*. This value encourages group cohesion and conflict avoidance, often at the expense of personal preferences and individual expression. Visitors tend to prioritize maintaining harmony within their groups, enduring disruptions and suppressing their interests to avoid conflict. The mindset and behaviour extend to interactions with strangers, where the emphasis on harmony discourages social engagement, resulting in a more passive and less interactive museum environment. While this cultural value promotes a sense of collective well-being, it also limits the potential for vibrant cultural exchange and communal learning, which are essential components of a dynamic museum experience.

The findings of this study highlight the dual impact of these cultural values on museum visitor experiences. While respect for authority and striving for harmony foster a sense of trust, order, and social cohesion, contributing to structured and harmonious museum experiences for the domestic visitors, they can also result in passive engagement, limited critical thinking, and reduced social interaction. This, in turn, may prevent visitors from fully experiencing the museum as a space for cultural exchange, learning, and personal enrichment.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter begins by revisiting the primary motivation for the research and summarising its key findings to establish the context for considering the study's main implications. After this discussion, the study's theoretical contributions and managerial implications are outlined. Lastly, the chapter reflects on the study's limitations and suggests potential directions for future research.

### **6.2 Summary of the Research and Key Findings**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the museum experiences of domestic Chinese visitors and, in particular, how place identity and cultural values manifest in the experience of museum *servicescape*. Through a multidisciplinary literature review, it is posited that the *servicescape* model (Bitner, 1992) provides the most suitable theoretical foundation for this study. This model facilitates a holistic and comprehensive examination of museum service provision, thereby offering profound insights into the bidirectional influences of place identity and cultural values on visitor experiences.

To thoroughly investigate how these two factors manifest in the museum experiences of domestic Chinese visitors, the study adopts a qualitative approach and incorporates two data collection methods: one-on-one interviews and focus groups. The following briefly summarises the main findings for each research objective.

1. To investigate how place identity manifests in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*.

This study identifies four types of place identity and examines how they manifest in the experiences of Chinese domestic visitors within the museum *servicescape*. Through the literature review, place identity is defined as the emotional and psychological bond that an individual forms with a specific place, influencing their perception, connection, and interaction with the place, ultimately shaping their overall experience and behaviour. The study provides an in-depth analysis of domestic Chinese visitors, revealing four distinct types of place identity based on their visits to the Chengdu Museum: Chengduese, Sichuanese, New Chengduese, and visitors from outside Sichuan Province.

Among these, the place identity of new residents of Chengdu is characterised as emplaced identity, which involves how they attribute meaning and value to Chengdu after relocating there (Porter and Tanghe, 2016). In contrast, the influential factor for visitors from outside Sichuan Province is place attachment, which is formed through the interplay of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural factors, resulting in a connection to Chengdu (Sthapit, Björk, and Coudounaris, 2022).

The findings indicate that a bidirectional relationship exists between place identity and visitors' experiences of core services (exhibitions). The stronger the place identity or attachment to Chengdu, the more positive the visitors' cognitive, emotional, and social experiences within the museum *servicescape*. Conversely, positive experiences also contribute to the construction and reinforcement of place identity and attachment. Specifically, Chengduese and Sichuanese, owing to their place identity, are able to deeply interpret and integrate the meanings behind the exhibits, thereby attaining a more positive experience. This positive experience, in turn, further reinforces their place identity. Similarly, New Chengduese who have developed a place identity with Chengdu, as well as visitors from outside Sichuan with a strong attachment to Chengdu, often have positive experiences, which in turn deepen their place identity and attachment.

2. To investigate how cultural values manifest in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*.

This study examines how two cultural values—respect for authority and striving for harmony—manifest in the experiences of Chinese visitors within the museum *servicescape*. Through literature review and field research, the study found that respect for authority leads Chinese visitors to heavily rely on the museum's guidance during their visit. This state causes visitors to passively accept and follow the information and guidance provided by the museum, resulting in a unidirectional interaction with the museum *servicescape*, from the *servicescape* to the visitor. On the other hand, striving for harmony results in choosing to endure and compromise rather than express dissatisfaction or differing opinions in groups and a reluctance to interact with strangers, leading to a less interactive experience of *servicescape*. These cultural values create an intangible barrier, resulting in a unidirectional pattern of interaction within the museum *servicescape* in the Chinese context.

### **6.3 Theoretical Contributions**

This study enhances the theoretical understanding of factors influencing customers' *servicescape* experiences within the Chinese museum context. By integrating key findings with the *servicescape* and situating them within the underexplored realm of domestic museum consumption in China, this research presents a conceptual model outlining the role of place identity and cultural values in shaping museum experiences (Figure 1).

To frame this investigation, the study addresses the following research question:

How do place identity and cultural values manifest in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*?

Correspondingly, the research objectives guiding this inquiry are:

To investigate how place identity manifest in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*;

To investigate how cultural values manifest in the Chinese domestic visitors' experience of museum *servicescape*.

These objectives underpin the study's theoretical contributions by revealing the nuanced mechanisms through which place identity and cultural values shape visitors' museum experiences in the Chinese sociocultural context.

This study makes two primary contributions to the existing body of knowledge: 1) it expands the theoretical understanding of place identity; and 2) it reveals the significant influence of cultural values on Chinese consumers within the museum *servicescape*, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

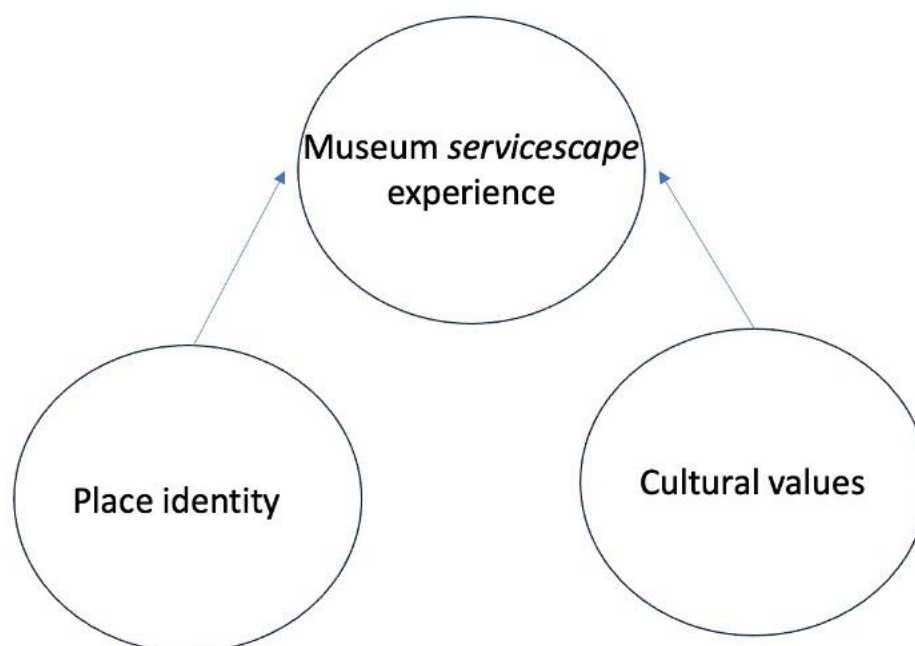


Figure 1: Literature review conceptualisation

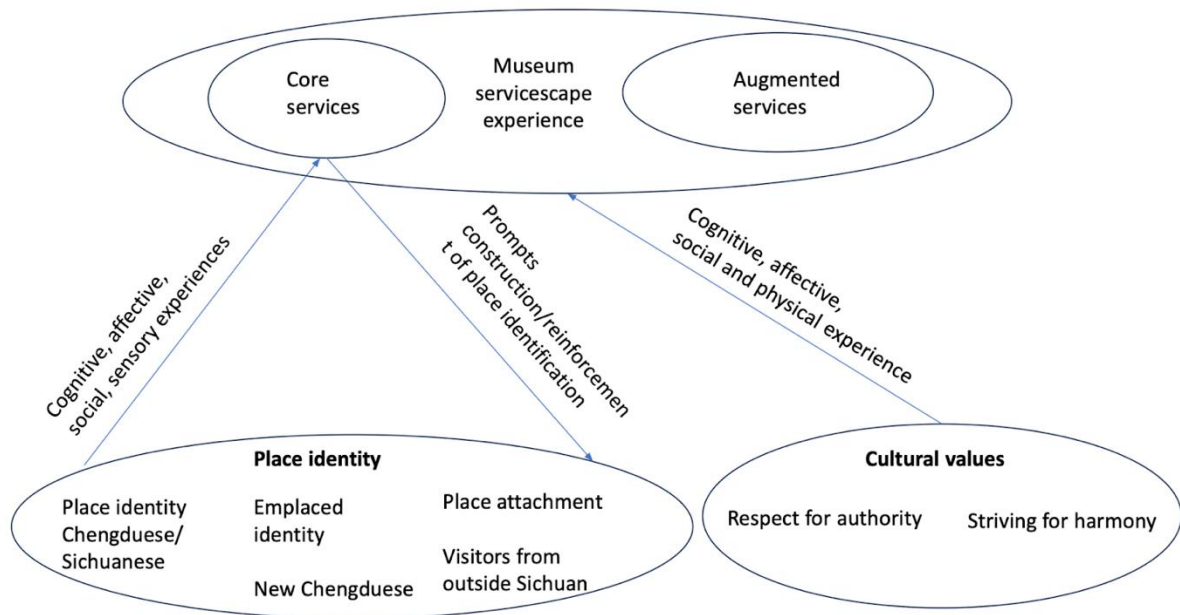


Figure 2: A conceptual model of the role of place identity and cultural values in museum servicescape experience within China

Firstly, this study advances the theoretical understanding of place identity by highlighting nuanced types specific to the Chinese domestic museum visitor context, as depicted in Figure 2. This study advances the theoretical understanding of place identity by highlighting nuanced forms specific to domestic museum visitors in China. The findings reveal several distinct dimensions of place identity, including emplaced identity, place attachment, the identity of new Chengdu residents as New Chengduese, and the identification experienced by visitors from outside Sichuan in comparison to local Sichuan visitors. In comparison to existing literature predominantly centred on Western contexts (Palmer, 2005; Panzone *et al.*, 2016; Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007), this research extends the conceptualisation of place identity, demonstrating that museum *servicescape* influence visitor experiences across cognitive, affective, social, and sensory dimensions. Additionally, the bidirectional relationship between museum experiences and place identity development as shown in Figure 2 further enriches understanding beyond national identity, emphasising local and regional

identity constructions previously less explored in literature (Hahn, 2023; Zhang and Courty, 2021).

Secondly, this study enriches the *servicescape* literature by incorporating cultural values, highlighting their significant influence in shaping museum experiences in the Chinese context, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. In contrast to previous literature, which predominantly emphasises the tangible and physical attributes of the *servicescape* (Bitner, 1992; Dion and Borraz, 2017; Gao *et al.*, 2021), this research highlights the significant influence of intangible elements, particularly the cultural values of respect for authority and striving for harmony, on domestic Chinese visitors' experiences within the museum *servicescape*. Respect for authority was found to shape cognitive, affective, social, and physical dimensions of visitor experiences, encouraging reliance on authoritative narratives, thus resulting in a largely unidirectional transmission of museum content (Cai, Cohen, and Tribe, 2019; Kwek and Lee, 2010). Furthermore, striving for harmony constrains social interactions, contrasting with the literature that promotes interactive visitor engagement within *servicescape* (Shoukat and Ramkissoon, 2022).

Through these insights, this study highlights the necessity of contextualising theoretical models of place identity, cultural values, and the *servicescape* within the Chinese context. By embedding place identity and cultural values explicitly within the distinct sociocultural dynamics of Chinese museums, this research addresses gaps identified in previous literature, thereby advancing the cross-cultural understanding of cultural consumption experiences.

#### **6.4 Practical Contributions and Implications**

Utilising the findings on place identity and cultural values from the research, this study offers several practical contributions for museum professionals, curators, and other cultural

institutions. These insights are crucial for enhancing visitor experiences, particularly among Chinese visitors. The researcher identified key practical implications, detailed next.

Firstly, museums function as platforms for learning experiences and community centres, providing diverse visitors with exhibitions that promote engagement and nurture a sense of belonging and social identity (Husemann, Zeyen, and Higgins, 2023). By recognising that visitors construct, reinforce, and renew their place identity through *learning from exhibits*, *actively assigning meaning to exhibits*, and *comparing with other regional cultures*, museums can design exhibitions that are more engaging and impactful.

Museums should clearly showcase and communicate the uniqueness of local culture and history to visitors. For visitors with local place identity and emplaced identity, since individuals often identify with their hometown and residence place and express pride through cultural consumption (Zhang *et al.*, 2023), highlighting the distinctiveness of local culture can deepen their connection and pride with the place. This also provides opportunities for them to reflect on and express their place identity (Małecka, Mitreğa, and Pfajfar, 2022), thereby enhancing their overall experience. For non-local visitors who can develop place attachment through repeated visits and emotional connections (Gross and Brown, 2008; Tsai, 2016), showcasing the uniqueness of local culture can help them appreciate the distinctiveness of the locale and strengthen their place attachment.

Museums should employ a variety of methods to highlight the uniqueness of local culture and history. This might include providing more detailed information, interactive elements, and storytelling that connects the exhibits to the broader regional and cultural context, thereby fostering a more inclusive and engaging environment for these visitors (Fan and Luo, 2022). For example, using local dialects in exhibitions, creating interactive exhibits, celebrating and commemorating important local festivals and traditions, and incorporating various forms of

performing arts such as music, dance, and theatre can vividly showcase the unique charm of local culture. By doing so, museums can provide a richer and more engaging experience for all visitors, both locals and non-locals, fostering a deeper appreciation and connection to the local cultural heritage.

Secondly, in societies with highly mobile populations like China, understanding emplaced identity is crucial for engaging migrants (Lin et al., 2022). Museums can play a vital role in this integration process by creating interactive programs and exhibitions that allow new residents to share their stories and connect with the local community (Naguib, 2013). Such programs might include workshops, storytelling sessions, and collaborative projects where migrants can share their cultural backgrounds and personal narratives. This approach fosters dialogue and mutual understanding between long-time residents and migrants.

Museums can curate exhibitions that reflect the diverse heritage of migrant populations, highlighting their unique backgrounds and contributions to local culture. This inclusive approach helps bridge gaps between communities, fostering a sense of unity and shared identity. By presenting migrants' life stories and cultural backgrounds, museums help them connect with their heritage and feel a sense of belonging in their new environment (Mulholland et al., 2020). These strategies not only support migrants but also enrich the cultural fabric of the entire community.

Thirdly, Chinese visitors' respect for authority necessitates authoritative narratives and clear guidance (Hsu and Huang, 2016). Museums should ensure that key exhibits are prominently displayed, accompanied by appropriate lighting and detailed information. Exhibits should be clearly interlinked in an engaging and comprehensible manner to effectively present the museum's historical narrative. To further enhance understanding, museums can regularly organise talks and presentations by curators and relevant experts, offering in-depth analysis

of key exhibits and themes. Providing clear tour guides can also assist visitors in planning their routes.

To align with the cultural value of harmony (Huang, Hassan, and Goh, 2024; Jin, Hoare, and Butcher, 2008; Wei, 2018), museums should design visitor experiences to minimise conflict, enhance group cohesion, and encourage friendly interactions. Museums should ensure adequate staffing to maintain order, guaranteeing a harmonious and safe environment, and minimising the impact of discourteous behaviour on other visitors. This ensures that every visitor can enjoy the exhibitions in an orderly setting.

### **6.5 Practical Implications for Museum Management/Marketing**

This research offers practical insights directly relevant to museum management, branding, and marketing strategies, particularly within the Chinese context, although these insights may also benefit museums in other regions targeting Chinese visitors or similar cultural audiences. These contributions can be articulated through five key implications:

Firstly, museums should strengthen their local cultural branding. By systematically curating exhibitions featuring distinctive local themes, museums can achieve differentiated brand positioning, thereby highlighting local uniqueness and reinforcing place-specific cultural branding. This aligns with recommendations to create culturally distinct museum identities, thereby enhancing local visitors' sense of pride and connection to place (Smith, 2022).

Practical approaches include leveraging short-video platforms for storytelling around featured exhibits, using digital marketing channels effectively to promote local cultural uniqueness.

Secondly, this study suggests adopting precise segmentation strategies to address diverse visitor groups, including long-term local residents, new migrants, and tourists from outside the region. Museums could offer tailored visitor experiences such as city memory

reconstruction workshops for local residents, encouraging community participation through the donation of personal memorabilia; creating customised programmes for new migrants to integrate their personal narratives into exhibitions; and employing interactive digital experiences, such as augmented reality (AR) exhibitions, to highlight regional cultural differences for tourists and non-local visitors (Furferi *et al.*, 2024).

Thirdly, findings emphasize the importance of establishing authoritative frameworks for knowledge dissemination within museums, reflecting the high value placed upon professional authority in Chinese culture. Museums should thus implement rigorous academic verification processes to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of exhibition content (King *et al.*, 2025). Practical steps include launching expert-curated specialised thematic video presentations, as well as introducing expert-guided tours and regular lectures. These strategies reinforce the museum's authoritative image and support visitors' cognitive and affective engagement with exhibition content.

Fourthly, acknowledging Chinese visitors' preference for social harmony, museums should innovate spatial design and service processes accordingly. Recommendations include creating clearly defined functional areas—such as separate quiet zones for reflection and interactive zones—to accommodate varying visitor preferences (Ahmady, Mahmoud and Hassan, 2023). Additionally, designing socially conducive tour routes and group-friendly exhibition interactions can facilitate collective visitor experiences. Adequate staffing, effective crowd management, and promoting courteous visitor conduct will further maintain a harmonious atmosphere, enhancing overall visitor satisfaction and comfort.

Finally, museums should actively participate in place branding through the strategic development of cultural products and digital engagement platforms, transforming intangible cultural heritage into tangible, memorable experiences (American Alliance of Museums,

2024; Centorrino *et al.*, 2020; Daskalaki, Kasimati and Ioannides, 2020). Suggested actions include producing culturally-specific merchandise embedded with local dialect audio elements and developing online platforms encouraging visitor-generated digital stories inspired by museum content (Fan and Luo, 2022). Additionally, museums can collaborate with urban renewal initiatives, extending exhibition spaces into historical districts, thereby creating dynamic interactions between cultural heritage and urban development initiatives. This integrated approach transforms the museum experience into a broader urban cultural exploration, strengthening visitors' connection to local heritage.

## **6.6 Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

It is essential to recognize the limitations of this study, which pave the way for several promising avenues for future research.

Firstly, this study employed qualitative research methods, including one-on-one interviews and focus groups. While these methods allow for a deep understanding of respondents' views and attitudes (Morgan and Smircich, 1980), the relatively small sample size and concentration in a specific region may limit the generalisability and applicability of the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In quantitative research, larger sample sizes enable more robust statistical analyses and enhance the potential for findings to be generalised to a wider population (Payne and Wansink, 2011). Therefore, future research should consider sampling from a broader range of regions and population and incorporating quantitative methods to validate and extend the findings of this study.

Secondly, although this study included participants with various place identities, the distribution of these identities was uneven, particularly with fewer participants from outside Sichuan provinces. This imbalance may affect the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the findings, limiting the full understanding of the experiences of different place identity

groups. Therefore, future research should focus on ensuring the representativeness of samples with diverse place identities, especially by increasing the sample size of visitors from outside the region to more accurately reflect their experiences and perspectives. This will require careful consideration of practical issues during research design and implementation, such as expanding the data collection scope, ensuring diversity in sample sources, and taking measures during recruitment to encourage greater participation from out-of-province visitors (Moser and Korstjens, 2018). Such an approach will not only balance the distribution of various place identity types but also provide more comprehensive insights, enhancing the generalisability and applicability of the research findings.

Thirdly, one of the limitations of this study is the data collection timeframe. The data for this study was predominantly collected in 2021. With technological advancements, such as the application of AI technology in museums (Ceccarelli *et al.*, 2024), there is significant scope for research into visitor experiences in museums. Moreover, a considerable portion of the participants in this study had visited Chengdu Museum multiple times, which presents an opportunity for future research to collect reflections on the experiences of local visitors over an extended period. Future research could extend the temporal dimension to consider longitudinal comparisons of visitors' museum experiences (Hermanowicz, 2016). This approach would facilitate an examination of the reciprocal influence between museum experiences and visitors' place identities over the long term.

Fourthly, the lack of a participatory approach in this study can also be considered a limitation. In museum research, a participatory approach can enhance visitor engagement (Seale *et al.*, 2021). This approach provides consumers with a platform to express their opinions, influence decision-making processes, and co-create services and policies that impact their lives, thereby empowering them through the co-production of knowledge (Ottmann, Laragy, and Damonze, 2009).

## 6.7 Conclusion

This study reveals the profound impact of place identity and cultural values on the museum experiences of Chinese domestic visitors' experiences in the Chengdu Museum, and *vice versa*. By conducting an in-depth analysis of the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical experiences of Chinese visitors in the museum, this research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and interpreting visitor experiences in cultural consumption contexts within China.

Firstly, this study emphasises the importance of place identity and place attachment to a location. By exploring the reciprocal relationship between place identity and place attachment and visitor experience, the research offers theoretical support for museums to incorporate local cultural elements into exhibition design and planning. This approach can enhance the relevance and engagement of museum exhibits for visitors who have a strong sense of place identity and place attachment.

Secondly, the study explores the significant influence of cultural values, particularly respect for authority and striving for harmony, on the experiences of Chinese visitors. These findings enrich existing theories on how cultural values shape service experiences and provide practical guidance for museums. By understanding these cultural influences, museums can design services and activities that better meet the needs of their visitors.

The primary contribution of this research is its provision of a more integrated and nuanced perspective on how place identity and cultural values manifest in domestic Chinese visitors' experiences within the museum *servicescape*. By highlighting the importance of place identity and place attachment, the study addresses the limitations of focusing solely on singular identity. Additionally, by examining cultural values, the research uncovers the complex mechanisms through which traditional culture affects visitor experiences, offering a

more accurate theoretical framework aligned with real-world contexts. This insight is crucial for enhancing the quality of museum services and visitor experiences.

The study also offers practical management recommendations, such as encouraging interaction and communication, creating an inclusive environment, and organising participatory activities to better serve diverse visitor needs. These suggestions provide concrete directions for museums to improve their service levels in practice.

This study demonstrates the important role of museums' social value in fostering community engagement and cultural sustainability. It highlights the necessity for museums to not only serve as collectors and presenters of heritage but also as dynamic spaces for education, reflection, and inclusive participation, thereby enhancing the overall visitor experience in a culturally informed manner.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Indicative interview and focus group protocol

I would like to thank you for agreeing to become a participant in my study. I am conducting research into the museum experiences delivery in China. This will be considered in a marketing perspective.

For now, we will start with some general questions.

No.	Question	Probing prompts
1	What do you expect from the experience before your visitation?	Are there any particular exhibitions or exhibits you are especially excited to see?
2	What's your favourite/least like part of visiting the museum?	

#### Questions specific to exhibitions

No.	Question	Probing prompts
3	What do you think about the museum's regular exhibitions?	
4	What is your experience of visiting this temporary exhibition at the museum?	
5	How does the museum change or construct the historical and cultural image of Chengdu in your mind?	

#### Questions specific to companions and other audience

No.	Question	Probing prompts
6	How do your companions influence your visiting experiences?	Can you describe a specific instance when your companions enhanced or detracted from your museum visit?
7	How do other visitors in the museum influence your visiting experiences?	Can you share an example of a time when other visitors positively or negatively impacted your museum experience?

#### Questions specific to augmented services

No.	Question	Probing prompts
8	How do you feel about the cafe and the shops in the museum?	
9	Do you follow the museum's account on Weibo and Wechat?  How are your experiences of interacting with them?	

## Appendix 2 Participants' information

### 1. Interview participants

Participant No.	Gender	Identity	Language used
Participant 1	Male	Chengduese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 2	Female	Hebei resident	Mandarin
Participant 3	Female	Chengduese	Mandarin
Participant 4	Female	Chongqing resident	Mandarin
Participant 5	Male	Sichuanese	Mandarin
Participant 6	Female	Chengduese	Mandarin
Participant 7	Female	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 8	Male	Sichuanese	Mandarin
Participant 9	Female	Sichuanese	Mandarin
Participant 10	Male	Chengduese	Mandarin
Participant 11	Female	New Chengduese	Mandarin
Participant 12	Male	New Chengduese	Mandarin
Participant 13	Female	New Chengduese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 14	Male	Chengduese	Mandarin
Participant 15	Female	Tianjin resident	Mandarin
Participant 16	Female	New Chengduese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 17	Female	Sichuanese	Mandarin
Participant 18	Female	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 19	Male	Chengduese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 20	Female	Sichuanese	Mandarin
Participant 21	Female	Chengduese	Mandarin
Participant 22	Female	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 23	Female	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 24	Female	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 25	Female	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 26	Female	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 27	Female	New Chengduese	Mandarin

## 2. Focus groups participants

Participant No.	Gender	Identity	Language used
Group 1			
Participant 28	Female	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 29	Male	Chengduese	
Participant 30	Male	Chengduese	
Participant 31	Female	Sichuanese	
Group 2			
Participant 32	Female	Hebei resident	Mandarin
Participant 33	Female	Sichuanese	
Participant 34	Male	Shaanxi resident	
Participant 35	Female	Shaanxi resident	
Group 3			
Participant 36	Female	Sichuanese	Mandarin
Participant 37	Female	Chengduese	
Participant 38	Female	Chengduese	
Group 4			
Participant 39	Female	Sichuanese	Mandarin
Participant 40	Female	Sichuanese	
Participant 41	Female	Sichuanese	
Group 5			
Participant 42	Female	New Chengduese	Mandarin
Participant 43	Male	Sichuanese	

Group 6			
Participant 44	Male	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 45	Female	Sichuanese	
Group 7			
Participant 46	Female	Sichuanese	Sichuan dialect
Participant 47	Male	Sichuanese	

## Appendix 3 Ethics Application

### The University's Research Ethics Application Form

This document outlines the information you are asked to complete on the University's online ethics application form, and the supporting information given.

When answering the form's questions it is best to answer them as comprehensively as possible to ensure that the ethics reviewers have sufficient information to enable them to make an informed judgment. Whilst the expectation is that the University's ethics review procedure is reasonably short, a delay can occur if insufficient information is provided as this necessitates a request by the ethics reviewers for further information.

Questions you are required to answer are highlighted in red.

#### Section A: Applicant details

First name: Zaiqing	Last name: Yu	Email:zyu3@sheffield.ac.uk
Home Department:M	Date application started:	
Applying as: Student	Registration Number: 180276183	

Note: The details above are populated from your University computer account. If they are incorrect please contact [helpdesk@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:helpdesk@sheffield.ac.uk).

Does your application need to be reviewed by a department that is not your home department?

Yes No ☒ X

If you are unsure about this, the answer is probably 'no'. Your department's ethics administrator will be able to send the application to the correct department if necessary.

Please enter the title of your research project:

The museum experiences delivery through the lens of marketing: a qualitative study of the *servicescapes* of museums in China

\* Has your research project undergone academic review, in accordance with the appropriate process? Yes

X No

Academic review is conducted to ensure that the methods and proposed purpose of the research are robust and appropriate. It is sometimes referred to as scientific review, and should take place before an ethics application is submitted. This is partly to enable the ethics reviewers to focus on the ethical issues rather than, for example, the design and methodology. This will also help to ensure that research is of a sufficiently high quality, and to avoid a situation in which it might be deemed unethical to involve participants at all because the research is not of sufficient value/merit. Academic review is conducted at departmental level within the University of Sheffield, and all departments define their own processes.

Different methods of academic review are used across the University; amongst others, these include assessment of a research proposal by module leader or dissertation supervisor, feedback on research proposal from a supervisor, a departmental confirmation review process, or a process to facilitate discussion of, and feedback on, a research proposal from colleagues, Head of Department or Director of Research.

Research funders also undertake academic review of research proposals as part of their processes for processing grant applications. If a project has been awarded research funding, then it can be assumed that it has received an appropriate level of academic review, and hence the 'yes' answer may be selected.

Whilst selecting 'no' in answer to this question will not prevent your application from being ethically reviewed, it is likely that it will take longer to obtain ethics approval if your project has not already undergone some form of academic review. If you are unsure if your research has undergone academic review, please check with your departmental Director of Research or your Course Leader/Supervisor.

Please enter details of any similar applications:

Programme Name

Module Name

## Section B: Basic information

### 1: Supervisor

Please add your supervisor below:

Click to add your supervisor

2: Proposed project duration **Start date (of data collection):**

1 January 2021

**Anticipated end date (of project):** 30 June 2021

### 3: Project Code (where applicable):

Please enter the Project code number if the project is funded or if it is healthcare research. For a definition of healthcare research see

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/governance/definition>

The costing tool is accessible at:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/pricing/costingtool>

### 4: Suitability

The following statements are designed to highlight whether your project is suitable to be reviewed by the University Research Ethics Procedure and whether there are any special considerations which need to be taken into account for your project.

Please indicate if your research:

- Is taking place outside the UK? Yes ☒ No

*If yes: The Alternative Ethics Review Procedure may apply to your research. If there isn't a local ethics review procedure (which is sufficiently robust), please include details in your application to show you have considered this route.*

*For further guidance see <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/alternative>*

*If the local ethics review procedure applies, please submit the relevant documentation via email to your Ethics Administrator.*

- Involves the NHS? Yes No ☒ X

*If yes: Research which only involves NHS staff or NHS premises may be reviewed via the University procedure. All other NHS research must be reviewed using the HRA procedure. For further guidance see: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/governance/index>*

- Is healthcare research? Yes No ☒ X

*If yes: Healthcare research must follow the Research Governance Procedure. For further details, including a definition of healthcare research see: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/governance/index>*

- Is the project ESRC funded? Yes No ☒ X

*If yes: This applies to all ESRC-funded projects including studentships. Your department's Ethics Administrator will ensure that the ethics review is undertaken in accordance with ESRC's Framework for Research Ethics*

- Is being led by another UK institution?      Yes      No X

*If yes: The ethics review procedure of the lead institution should apply, rather than the University of Sheffield's, on the condition that it is sufficiently robust. For further guidance, please see: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/alternative>*

- Involves human tissue?      Yes      No X

*If yes: If your project involves using tissue from a licenced tissue bank then ethics approval is not required as the tissue bank has a blanket ethics approval, but you must ensure you comply with the terms of this approval.*

*All other types of human tissue research (except the collection of human tissue sample(s) from healthy volunteers) must be reviewed by an NHS Research Ethics Committee. If it involves taking new human tissue samples you will need to obtain confirmation that appropriate University insurance is in place; email [insurance@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:insurance@sheffield.ac.uk) and request a copy of the 'Clinical Trial Insurance Application Form.' For further guidance see: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/policy-notes>*

- Is a clinical trial or human interventional study?      Yes      No X

*The University has a broad definition of clinical trials/human interventional studies; see: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/clinicaltrials>*

*All clinical trials/human interventional studies have extra governance requirements and must follow the Research Governance Procedure. The nature of the trial will determine the type of ethics approval required (University or NHS) and who the trial's sponsor will be (usually the University, the NHS Trust or the pharmaceutical company, although the University will not sponsor clinical trials of Investigational Medicinal Products). Please carefully check the type of ethics approval required before submitting your application.*

*For further details on the Research Governance Procedure see:*

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/governance/index>

- **Is a social care research?** Yes No ☒ X

*Certain types of social care research can be reviewed by the University procedure but your department's Ethics Administrator will need to be aware that it is social care research to ensure that this is undertaken in accordance with the Department of Health's requirements.*

*For further guidance on deciding whether your research can be reviewed via the University procedure see:*

- **Involves adults (over 16s) who lack the capacity to consent?** Yes No ☒ X

*Such research is subject to statutory regulation and cannot be ethically reviewed by a University research ethics committee. Further details can be found here:*

[https://www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.165638!/file/SREGP-Adults-LCC.pdf](https://www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.165638!/file/SREGP-Adults-LCC.pdf)

*If you are unsure whether your research is classed as involving adults who lack the capacity to consent, please contact your department's Principal Ethics Contact.*

- **Involves research on groups that are on the Home Office list of 'Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations'** Yes No ☒ X

A list of these groups is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2>

**If your research involves taking new samples of human biological material, testing a medicinal product, additional radiation above that required for clinical care or investigating a medical device then you also need to obtain confirmation that appropriate University insurance is in place. To do this, email [insurance@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:insurance@sheffield.ac.uk) and request a copy of the 'Clinical Trial Insurance Application Form'.**

## 5: Indicators of risk

The following statements are designed to highlight whether your research involves any particularly vulnerable participants or addresses any highly sensitive topics. You should consider how the potential risks posed by these participants and/or topics can be mitigated, and include this in your answers to sections C-F. Select yes for the corresponding box if one or more of the following apply.

## Potentially Vulnerable Participants

This includes, but is not restricted to:

- a. People whose competence to exercise informed consent is in doubt, such as:
  - i. infants and children under 18 years of age
  - ii. people who lack mental capacity
  - iii. people who suffer from psychiatric or personality disorders, including those conditions in which capacity to consent may fluctuate
  - iv. people who may have only a basic or elementary knowledge of the language in which the research is conducted
- b. People who may socially not be in a position to exercise unfettered informed consent, such as:
  - i. people who depend on the protection of, or are controlled and influenced by, research gatekeepers (e.g. school pupils, children and young people in care, members of the armed forces, young offenders, prisoners, asylum seekers, organisational employees)
  - ii. family members of the researcher(s)
  - iii. in general, people who appear to feel they have no real choice on whether or not to participate
- c. People whose circumstances may unduly influence their decisions to consent, such as:
  - i. people with disabilities
  - ii. people who are frail or in poor health
  - iii. relatives and friends of participants considered to be vulnerable
  - iv. people who feel that participation will result in access to better treatment and/or support for them or others
  - v. people who anticipate any other perceived benefits of participation
  - vi. people who, by participating in research, can obtain perceived and/or real benefits to which they otherwise would not have access

For further guidance see section 3.1.4 Assessing ethical risk

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/proceduralelements>

Involves potentially vulnerable participants?      Yes      No X

### Highly Sensitive Topics

This includes, but is not restricted to:

- 'race' or ethnicity
- political opinion
- trade union membership
- religious, spiritual or other beliefs
- physical or mental health conditions
- sexual orientation or sex life
- abuse (child, adult)
- nudity and the body
- criminal or illegal activities
- political asylum
- conflict situations
- personal violence
- personal finances
- genetics
- biometrics (where this is used to identify someone)

For further guidance see section 3.1.4 Assessing ethical risk

see <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure/proceduralelements>

Involves potentially highly sensitive topics?      Yes      No ☒

The core of this research is the marketing of Chinese museums, and sensitive categories pre-identified in the form are not expected to emerge. However, it should be acknowledged that a small likelihood exists of topics such as censorship and dialect protection may be referred to by the participants, which are not

directly related to the individual characteristics of the participants. Although these topics are sensitive, they are not expected to be extremely harmful to the participants.

The sensitivity of such topics might also pose additional emotional pressure on the researcher, and the researcher will hold debriefing sessions with the supervision team regularly.

## **Section C: Summary of research**

Guidance note: Your application is more likely to be approved quickly if you provide the ethics reviewers with enough detail so that they can make an informed judgement about the research without having to ask for further details. You should:

- provide sufficient information about all aspects of the research
- use appropriate language accessible to a lay/non-specialist person
- ensure consistency across all documentation
- pay attention to detail in the answers to your questions
- consider any potential risks posed by the research and state how you intend

to mitigate these risks (please note: research which may present a risk and/or presents potentially contentious issues may be undertaken providing these risks have been justified with appropriate steps put in place to mitigate and manage them).

### **1. Aims & Objectives**

*In this section you should provide a summary of the aims and objectives of the planned research. It should be in sufficient detail for the ethics reviewer to understand what the research will involve. Please remember that the ethics reviewer may not be an expert in your field so use language comprehensible to a lay person. You may also wish to include the scientific justification and background for the research.*

This research is focused on historical museums, which are not for profit, work in active partnership with diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the locality and the world, aiming to contribute to national dignity and eventually social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing. The primary social mission and function of museums is to educate the general public and to support active citizenship in society by offering beneficial

experiences to the visitors. Since museum consumption is experiential, the experiences can be conceptualized as ‘marketized existence’, and museum marketing is not one-way (from museums to the public), but the experiences lie in the centre in museum marketing. This research aims to critically examine how Chinese museums market their experiences to consumers and to determine how consumers experience museum *servicescapes*, through an exploratory qualitative study in one of the museums located in Sichuan Province, the southwest of China.

To achieve the aim, the following research questions will be addressed.

1. How do Chinese museums market their experiences to consumers?
2. What are the mechanisms for museum experience delivery through the lens of marketing?
3. How do China’s museums frame experiences they aim to deliver to their audiences in their communications and how are they aligned with the ICOM definition?
4. What are different domestic audience groups’ expectations and experiences of museums in China?

The notion of ‘*scapes*’ considers human activities as dynamic, overlapping, and interactional flows and processes. In marketing literature, the concept of ‘*servicescapes*’ combines services and ‘*scapes*’ together to emphasize both the tangible (e.g. the manmade physical environment) and intangible environment (e.g. the social factors of service environment which can affect consumers’ psychological status) where interactions between organisations and consumers happen. ‘*Servicescapes*’ is adopted in this research to argue that museum services and visitor experiences are not separate segments but an organic whole and have mutual influences on each other.

In the past few decades, the Chinese government has promulgated a series of supportive policies for the development of museums. For instance, in the year of 2008 the central government decided to promote the museums in the country by giving the public free access to all the state-owned museums and monuments. Under the advantageous circumstances, museums have been rapidly developing in China and the number of Chinese museum visitors has been continuously increasing. In 2019, with the birth of 181 museums, the total number of museums in China rose up to 5535, and the museums held 28,600 exhibitions, 334,600 educational activities, and received 1.227 billion visitors. All museums in China were closed during the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020. During this period, more than 2,000 online exhibitions were launched, with a total number of page views of more than 5 billion. In 2021, the fever of visiting museums continues in China. For example, Sanxingdui Museum in Sichuan

province saw a record of 19,847 visitors during the Tomb Sweeping Day holiday in April 2021.

## 2. Methodology

*In this section you should provide a summary of the methods of the planned research, including how the research will be analysed. It should be in sufficient detail for the ethics reviewer to understand what the research will involve. Please remember that the ethics reviewer may not be an expert in your field so use language comprehensible to a lay person.*

This research adopts a social constructionist and interpretivist ontological and epistemological standpoints respectively. Crotty (2003, p.42) argues that our knowledge of the world and its meanings depends entirely on human practice, which is ‘constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context’. This research takes a social constructionism ontological stance because the servicescapes of museums are constructed only in human activities in social contexts. The corresponding epistemology, interpretivism, postulates that social reality can only be obtained from inquiry into social phenomena, interaction between people, and the resulting meaning (Bryman, 2016, p.26). As the servicescapes concept highly values the interactions between organisations and consumers, and this research aims to explore the museum’s service marketing and consumer experiences, the interpretivist epistemology will guide the research.

Based on the research questions, the research design is multi-method qualitative. The research will be comprised of three parts: content analysis, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

The content analysis of marketing materials will explore the official website of the museum, the posts on the social media accounts (Weibo and Wechat), and other marketing materials such as outdoor advertising and leaflets. Only the information published by the museum will be adopted. The content analysis will help the researcher to get an understanding of the museum communications to address RQ3.

To explore the museum’s mechanism of experience delivery, this research involves two interviews with museum staff to address RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3. Since the number of employees in the marketing department in museums in China is not large (for example, there are less than 10 in Chengdu Museum), the researcher aims to conduct the minimum of 2 interviews with people – one with the marketing manager in the senior level and the other with a primary level worker who delivers the marketing

plans in practice. With the progress of the field work, if the researcher identifies and gets access to more related staff, she will conduct more interviews with museum staff. In addition, museum staff are normally busy. Hence the researcher will only interview people who work in an important position and are critical to the research questions.

On the consumer side, to explore the visitors' expectations and experiences (RQ4), the researcher plans to interview 25 visitors. Photo-elicitation method will be adopted in the interviews. The researcher will ask the participants to prepare up to 5 photos (memorable, interesting, or negative, as long as they are related to the visiting experiences) in advance and tell the story behind the photos in the interviews.

To explore the audience groups' expectations and experiences (RQ4), the researcher will conduct five focus groups.

The participant number of 30 was decided because the existing published research utilize similar numbers. Therefore, the researcher uses the number of 30 as a guideline and anticipates that conducting around 25 interviews and 5 focus groups will be sufficient to reach theoretical saturation. If not, the researcher will conduct more till reaching theoretical saturation.

The overall criteria in selecting interviewees and focus group participants is to represent various groups of visitors to museums and truly reflect the situation of domestic Chinese museum visitors. Snowball sampling will be adopted in this project because it may be difficult for the researcher to get access to the whole participant population and snowball sampling is feasible to build trust and invite participants in China. To maintain the validity of the respondents, the researcher will try to get access to diverse groups of visitors through referrals from the museum staff and participants.

Instead of online interviews and focus groups, the researcher plans to conduct the interviews and focus groups physically for the reasons as follows. Firstly, the data collection with museum staff and visitors is essential to be conducted in person, since the museums are physical locations where the core of consumer experience is produced. Furthermore, according to the Chinese cultural specifics of the national context, gaining access requires building of trust and rapport with museum staff via interpersonal interactions. China's context puts emphasis on personal relationships (guanxi) where personal interactions are required in order to build trust with museum gatekeepers and research participants. Hence, it is more feasible to build trust with the museum staff and the visitor participants physically than via online communication. Secondly, the researcher is a Chinese national and is currently in China, having returned to it given the pandemic, and having notified The University of Sheffield, following the guidance concerning international students' return to their home countries during the Covid pandemic. The current Covid-19 situation in China can be

considered as safe to conduct face-to-face data collection. The Chinese National Health Commission reported no new locally COVID-19 cases in mainland China ([http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/19/c\\_139890001.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/19/c_139890001.htm); accurate on 19th April 2021). Under such circumstances, at present, China's museums are normally open. Taking the Chengdu Museum, which is located in Chengdu city, Sichuan Province, as an example, advanced bookings are encouraged but not compulsory. Visitors are required to show the ID card and the 'Green Health Code' (no travel history within 14 days in the medium or high risk areas, or a negative test result after a fourteen-day medical quarantine) before entering the museum. It is also required to wear masks and keep a social distance of more than one metre. Should the application be approved, the researcher will follow the national and local authorities' guidance. Further considerations are presented in the risk assessment form.

For data analysis, the thematic analysis method will be adopted in this research (Bryman, 2016, p.584). In the beginning stage of data analysis, the researcher will transcribe the contents of interviews and focus groups exactly word for word. The researcher will read the text of the data closely and then the data will be interpreted into codes with given labels with the help of using Nvivo. The most frequent and significant codes will then be categorised and explored to discover the latent relationships of the codes, and conceptualised in a theoretical direction.

### 3. Personal Safety

*You should consider whether any of the planned research activities pose a risk for you or any other researchers involved in the project. Issues of personal safety should be particularly considered when the researcher is working outside normal hours, conducting activities off University premises (especially if working alone), working with potentially threatening people or conducting activities in a potentially dangerous environment. Procedures should be put in place to protect the researcher's safety as far as possible. (NB. Please check whether your department has any specific procedures relating to risk assessment)*

\* Have you completed your departmental risk assessment procedures, if appropriate? Yes No X In progress Not applicable

Please note that I have enquired about the risk assessment but the University is currently updating it and I will start the procedures as soon as the up-to-date document becomes available.

Does your research raise any issues of personal safety for you or other researchers involved in the project?      Yes ☒ No

If yes: Explain the issues of personal safety raised and how these issues will be managed

The data collection will be conducted in the museum during the opening hours with the consent of the museum. Therefore, the environment is considered to pose low risks to personal safety. However, as the global situation of Covid-19 is still severe currently, the researcher will take preventive measures. The researcher will invite potential participants only if they confirm that they do not belong to a group of population characterised as clinically vulnerable to Covid-19 and currently do not have any symptoms of Covid-19. To eliminate the handling of paper copies of participant information sheets, the researcher will provide the PDF of participant information sheets and make it accessible via a QR code. The researcher will inform the participants in advance to wear face coverings and bring a 75% alcohol-based handrub. Before each interview/focus group, participants will be asked to show their health codes. Participants will only be allowed to participate if the health codes is green (no travel history within 14 days in the medium or high risk areas, or a negative test result after a fourteen-day medical quarantine). The researcher will ask the participants to do hand hygiene before the interviews/focus groups and the researcher herself will also bring a 75% alcohol-based handrub and do the hand hygiene process. The researcher will handle consent forms wearing gloves. During the interviews and focus groups, the researcher will ask the participants to wear face masks properly (cover noses and mouths) and also keep a social distance of 2 metres at all times. The researcher will wear face coverings during the interviews and focus groups. If during the interviews/focus groups, a participant starts to present any symptoms related to Covid-19, the researcher will politely suspend the interview/focus group immediately and ask him/her to seek medical advice promptly.

If no Please explain your reasons for believing there to be no personal safety issues

## Section D: About the participants

### 1. Potential Participants

*You should include information on how you will decide who the potential participants will be. If potentially vulnerable participants will be involved in your research, you should justify why the research needs to be done using this participant group. Further information on conducting research with vulnerable participants is available at:*

[https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.112756!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-6.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.112756!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-6.pdf).

**How will you identify the potential participants?**

The researcher is aware that the museum is the gate keeper in this research and will first approach the museum for the gatekeeper permission, and then contact the staff and the visitor participants.

### 2. Recruiting Participants

*You should include details of how participants will initially be contacted, a summary of the information that they will be given and how they will indicate their initial interest in becoming involved (consent procedures should be covered in the next question)*

**How will the potential participants be approached and recruited?**

The researcher has a personal contact who works in one of the museums in Sichuan Province. The researcher will approach them with a request to circulate an invitation to participate in the study to their colleagues. If the museum is not willing to participate in the research, there are alternative historical museums in Southwest China, for example, Sanxingdui Museum, Jinsha Site Museum and Sichuan Museum. All the alternative museums follow the same health protocols.

In terms of the visitor participants, snowball sampling will be adopted in this project because it may be difficult for the researcher to get access to the whole participant population and snowball sampling is feasible to build trust and invite participants (Bryman, 2016, p.415). To avoid disturbing the visiting experiences, all of the

participants will be recruited in advance rather than on site. First, the researcher will ask the museum's permission to recommend this research to some of its regular visitors who are considered as having a high possibility to join museum related research. Secondly, the researcher will post participant recruitment on social media and ask the museum's permission to repost to approach more visitors. In addition, to ensure the participants feel comfortable to join the research, all of the focus group participants will be recruited as the natural groups of museum visitors (friends, families, etc).

The researcher will seek permission from the museum to conduct the interviews and focus groups inside the museum. The researcher will ask recommendations from the staff for a space which meets the requirements of privacy and feasibility (e.g. quiet enough to record).

The researcher will then go to the museum to meet and engage with interviewees. As the process develops, the researcher will engage with more interviewees by asking the initial interviewees to recommend their acquaintances who have similar museum visiting experiences.

Do you intend to advertise your study using the volunteer lists for staff or students maintained by CiCS?

Yes No X

If yes Please explain which other methods have been considered and why these are unsuitable.

### 3. Consent

*You should detail how you will give participants enough information so that they can make an informed decision about whether to take part in the research. The information should be understandable and free from complex terminology, with steps taken to ensure it is appropriate for the project's participants (e.g. by explaining research to children through the use of images and text). There should be an appropriate mechanism for documenting consent (e.g. a consent form or implied consent through the completion and return of a questionnaire). You should also consider whether the participants have the competence to give consent and that they are not subject to inducements. There are some research projects where it is not always possible or desirable to obtain informed consent (e.g. observational research or covert research); this may be acceptable provided it can be justified.*

*For further guidance see the University's Research Ethics Policy Note on 'Principles of Consent': [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.112749!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-2.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.112749!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-2.pdf) and Research Ethics Policy Note on 'Principles of Anonymity, Confidentiality and Data Protection': [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.112753!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-4.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.112753!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-4.pdf)*

Will informed consent be obtained from the participants? Yes ☒ No ☐

*Remember to upload your participant information sheet and consent form in section*

*F (where appropriate)*

**If yes: How do you plan to obtain informed consent? (i.e. the proposed process)**

The researcher will email/send the participant information statement when first recruiting participants in order to explain the research and research process. The consent form will also be shared and signed on the day of the interview. Prior to the beginning of each interview/focus group, the researcher will hand the written consent form to the participants, and explain the consent orally. The participants will have the opportunity to ask any questions they concern about the research. They will be asked to sign the consent form. If a participant agrees to join the research but refuses to be recorded, the researcher will not record but only make notes in the interview/focus group. The information sheets and consent forms will be translated into Chinese, the participants will receive the documents into Chinese. To ensure the rationality, the documents will be translated back in English by a qualified translator.

*Further guidance is available at:*

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/policy-notes/homepage>

**If no: Please explain and justify why you will not be obtaining informed consent?**

#### 4. Payment

*A factor that may cloud the judgement of a potential participant when deciding whether or not to participate in research is whether money or payments in kind (e.g. gift vouchers) will be offered. It is reasonable for expenses and compensation of time to be offered but any payments made to individuals to enable them to participate in research activities must not be so large as to induce them to take risks beyond those that would usually be part of their established life-style.*

For further guidance see:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/policy-notes/homepage>

Will financial/in kind payments be offered to participants? Yes No X

If yes: Please provide details and justification for this payment

## 5. Potential Harm to Participants

*The main objective of ethics review is to minimise harm to research participants. In answering this question the applicant should specify, however minor it may be, the 'degree' of harm expected (e.g. inconvenience) and how this degree of harm is justified (e.g. by the project's objectives). Consideration should be given to all foreseeable factors that may influence the potential for harm/distress to participants (e.g. there may be particular cultural challenges presented by conducting research in a particular country or an interview may raise sensitive issues). You should consider if your research may uncover [illegal activities](#) or may have findings with unrelated implications for the participant's safety.*

Further guidance can be found at:

[https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.112751!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-3.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.112751!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-3.pdf).

What is the potential for physical and/or psychological harm/distress to the participants?

The interviews with the museum staff will discuss the museum experience delivery mechanism, but the museum's plan may not be implemented smoothly. The museum staff might suffer from working pressure and the interviews might force them to recall such pressure.

In terms of the visitor participants, the museum visiting experiences might not be thoroughly positive, and the interviews and focus groups might recall some unpleasant visiting memories of the participants. In addition, there are possibilities that the participants disagree with each other in the focus groups and they might get displeased or even angry.

*You should outline the steps that will be put in place to minimise any potential for physical and/or psychological harm/distress to participants mentioned above.*

**How will this be managed to ensure appropriate protection and well-being of the participants?**

The research methods are non-invasive, and the topics are not sensitive. There are no questions about personal sensitive characteristics. It is unlikely that the interviews/focus groups will cause mental stress to the participants. However, the researcher is aware that any content may cause potential distress and will follow the consultative guidelines by the university and the Social Research Association. According to updated Ethics Policy published by the university (Research Ethics Policy Note no. 3, link: [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.755691!/file/Ethics\\_Policy\\_Senate\\_Approved.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.755691!/file/Ethics_Policy_Senate_Approved.pdf)) and Research Ethics Guidance published by Social Research Association (3.4 Points to consider, link: <https://the-sra.org.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/Resources/SRA%20Research%20Ethics%20guidance%202021.pdf>), the researcher will keep observation on the signals of distress of the participants during the interview, for example, whether he/she keeps avoiding the researcher's questions and eye contact, becomes nervous or cries. If a participant shows the signal of negative psychological states such as anxiety, insecurity and testiness, the researcher will try to comfort his/her mood, or pause the interview when necessary. If the participant still cannot recover, the researcher will remind the participant of their right to skip the topic or to withdraw from participating in the research with no negative impact on him/her. If necessary, the researcher will provide the Sichuan Province psychological counseling hotline number 96008 and 96111 to the participants who need psychological help. The researcher will also discuss the participants' status with the supervision team regularly. In the participant information sheet, the participants will be provided with the contact details of the supervision team to place complains or raise concerns if they need to.

## **Section E: About the data**

### **1. Data Processing**

**Will you be processing (i.e. collecting, recording, storing, or otherwise using) personal data as part of this project? (Personal data is any information relating to an identified or identifiable living person).** Yes

☒ No

If yes

Which organisation(s) will act as Data Controller (i.e. the organisation which determines the purposes and means of processing the data) for personal data collected and used as part of the project?

(Normally this will be the University of Sheffield, but if you are working collaboratively with external partners, there must be agreement regarding who takes on this responsibility – an alternative, or joint Data Controllers, may be applicable.)

Choose Organisation

University of Sheffield only ☒

Other

## 2 Legal basis for processing of personal data

According to data protection legislation you must have an appropriate legal basis for processing personal data. The University considers that for the vast majority of research, 'a task in the public interest' (6(1)(e)) will be the most appropriate legal basis.

If you don't feel this is appropriate for your research and wish to use an alternative legal basis, please contact the UREC for guidance. Further guidance is also provided here: [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.112753!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-4.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.112753!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-4.pdf)

If, following discussion with the UREC, you wish to use an alternative legal basis, please provide details of the legal basis, and the reasons for applying it, below:

Will you be processing (i.e. collecting, recording, storing, or otherwise using) 'Special Category' personal data?      Yes   No ☒

The following is classed as Special Category data:

- racial or ethnic origin;
- political opinions;
- religious or philosophical beliefs;
- trade union membership;

- data concerning health;
- data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation;
- genetic data;
- biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural (living) person;
- criminal records or allegations of criminal / illegal activity.

### 3. Data Confidentiality

It is essential that a participant's personal data are managed according to data protection principles, and data should be pseudonymised or anonymised wherever possible. Information relating to the extent to which a participant's data will remain confidential should be disclosed to the participant as part of the process of seeking informed consent. Researchers should take care not to promise participants a level of confidentiality and/or anonymity which they may later find they are unable to meet without jeopardising the research itself, and should think carefully in advance about their plans for the analysis, publication and dissemination of the research findings – complete confidentiality/anonymity is often very difficult to ensure. It is good practice to consider possible future uses of the research data as well as the immediate project.

More guidance can be found here: [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.112753!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-4.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.112753!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-4.pdf)

**What measures will be put in place to ensure confidentiality of personal data, where appropriate?**

The researcher will be cautious about confidentiality through data collection and analysis. The consent form will involve the participants' personal data which is sensitive. During the interviews and focus groups, the information will be put down in the 'Field notes' and then pseudonymized in the 'Memo'. In the note expanding session, the researcher will alter the personal information (e.g. living area) that may expose the participants' privacy without changing their original verbal meaning. The photos that the participants bring to the interviews will be scanned and the people or anything which can identify

the participants in the photos will be blurred out. In later stages the pseudonymized transcripts will be adopted, and the researcher won't be able to trace back the personal data to a particular participant.

The consent forms, original photos and the 'Field notes' which contain personal information of the participants will be locked and stored in a secure location. The pseudonymized data will be stored in a strong password protected University Google site.

The participants will be informed both orally and in the Information Sheet that they can withdraw from the research at any time within 2 weeks' time of the interviews/focus groups without any negative consequences. The date is set because once data have been pseudonymized and included within a large dataset it will not be possible for the researcher to trace back to the original personal data and therefore it will not be possible for a participant's data to be withdrawn from the research, and the data cannot be removed from the study beyond this point. 'A large dataset' here referring to a text corpus that includes the transcripts of all interviews and focus groups. This text corpus will be set up and utilized only by the researcher. Since an average transcript of an interview might be 20 pages and 40 pages for a focus group, the researcher anticipates about 700 pages of the text corpus. Museum experiences are multi-sensory, and mostly visual. The photos brought by the participants provide contexts for their conversations. Basically the photos constitute the visual data that are collected in conjunction with the spoken data. Therefore the data set will include both visual and spoken data. Two weeks' cooling off time allows the participants to carefully consider and decide whether they are willing to join in this research. Since data collection will take place in China and the researcher will be facing time pressure, once data collection is completed, the researcher will need to go back to UK and continue the research process. Therefore, it would be not practical to give the participants extended period to make decisions.

If No

Please outline how your data will be managed and stored securely, in line with good practice and relevant funder requirements.

#### 4. Data Storage and Security

Any personal data collected as part of the project must be managed in line with data protection principles and legislation, and careful consideration should be given to how all data, but particularly

personal data, will be kept secure. If your research is externally funded, you must also meet the requirements of the funder with regards to data storage and management. Participants should be informed of the arrangements for data storage and security as part of informed consent procedures. If you are planning to record activities on audio or video media you will need participants' permission to do so. You must also ensure that there is a clear understanding with participants as to how these recorded media will be used, stored and (if appropriate) destroyed, in line with data protection legislation. For further guidance relating to data storage and security, refer to the University's Information Security Training available through MUSE, or contact [info-security@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:info-security@sheffield.ac.uk).

**In general terms, who will have access to the data generated at each stage of the research, and in what form (e.g. identifiable, pseudonymised, anonymised)?** This does not need to include specific names of individuals, but should outline any relevant research teams, collaborating/partner organisations, or service providers such as software suppliers or transcription/translation/anonymisation services).

In most conditions, only the researcher will have access to the data. However, the researcher will use pseudonymised data when having discussions with her supervisors. The pseudonymised data will also be entered in Nvivo. In future studies, the researcher will continue to do research on museum marketing and might join in other research projects. Therefore, with the consent of the participants, the researcher will share the pseudonymized data with other researchers.

**What steps will be taken to ensure the security of data processed during the project, including any identifiable personal data, other than those already described earlier in this form?** Please note that there are specific requirements for managing any personal data that is to be transferred outside the EEA; for more details, see the Specialist Research Ethics Guidance Paper '[Anonymity, Confidentiality and Data Protection](#)'

The consent forms, original photos and the 'Field notes' which contain personal information of the participants will be locked and stored in a secure location.

The pseudonymised data will be kept in the university Google drive, which has intense protection (password and multi-factor authentication). It should be noted that Google is abandoned in China and the researcher does not have a direct access to the university Google drive as in the UK. However, the researcher has purchased a VPN (Virtual Private Network) to get connected to Google sites. The VPN

access is limited to establishing the channel from the terminal location to the endpoint and does not have the capability of other subsequent transmissions and processing. More importantly, the researcher will only upload and store the pseudonymised data to the university Google drive.

Will all identifiable personal data be destroyed within a defined period after the project has ended?

Yes X No

Please outline when this will take place (this should take into account regulatory and funder requirements. It does not need to be a specific date, but should indicate an appropriate timeframe e.g. 3 years after publication).

One year after the defense of the thesis or one year after the last publication that comes from this project, whichever comes sooner. Firstly, there exist the possibility that the data will need to be verified in the thesis defense. Secondly, the researcher will make efforts to get this research published in journals. In consultation with the supervision team, publication in marketing journals can be a lengthy process. The timeline has been advised by the supervisors.

## Section F: Supporting documentation

Information & Consent

Are the following supporting documents relevant to your project? **Participant**

**information**      **sheet(s)**                      Yes      X      No      **Consent**      **form(s)**

Yes X No

*You can download a template information sheet and consent form from:*

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/universityprocedure2/uerprocedurec>

### Additional Documentation

*If any other supporting documentation (such as a complete research proposal, a letter of support from a research partner or a covering letter) is relevant to your application, please upload it here.*

### External Documentation

Use the box below to provide links to additional documentation which is already online.

## Section G: Declaration

In signing this declaration I am confirming that:

- The form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.
- The project will abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy:  
<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure>
- The project will abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy:  
<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/index>
- There is no potential material interest that may, or may appear to, impair the independence and objectivity of researchers conducting this project.
- Subject to the project being approved, I undertake to adhere to any ethics conditions that may be set.
- I will inform my supervisor of significant changes to the project that might affect my answers to the questions in this form.

- I understand that the project, including research records and data, may be subject to inspection for audit purposes, if required in future.
- I understand that personal data about me as a researcher in this form will be held by those involved in the ethics review procedure (e.g. the Ethics Administrator and/or ethics reviewers) and that this will be managed according to the relevant data protection legislation.
- I understand that this project cannot be submitted for ethics approval in more than one department, and that if I wish to appeal against the decision made, this must be done through the original department.

After you press the 'Submit' button, your form will forward to your Supervisor for their review. They may return it to you for changes to be made. Once your Supervisor is happy with the form it will be ethically reviewed by the appropriate number of people in line with the University's Research Ethics Policy.

You will receive notification of the decision on your project in due course - you must not commence the research until you have received notification that the project has ethics approval. Please contact your Supervisor if you have any queries.

Please check this box if you would be happy for your application to be anonymously used for teaching purposes?

**Signature**

#### **Appendix 4 Participant 27 Transcript (English Translation)**

Researcher: Okay, let's begin then.

Participant 27: Sure.

Researcher: So, do you visit the Chengdu Museum often? Would you say you go frequently?

Participant 27: Let me think... I've probably been twice. Maybe once each semester.

Researcher: Once a semester, got it. Do you usually look forward to it beforehand?

Participant 27: Hmm... If there's a themed exhibition, then yes, I do get excited.

Researcher: The temporary exhibitions, you mean?

Participant 27: Yes, their temporary exhibitions are very interesting.

Researcher: So do you check in advance whether there's a temporary exhibition before going?

Participant 27: Yes, they post updates on their official WeChat. If I see something that interests me, I'll go.

Researcher: So your main reason for visiting is to see the temporary exhibitions?

Participant 27: That's right.

Researcher: Oh right. So what did you think of the temporary exhibition?

Participant 27: Oh, I thought it was really well done in terms of design.

Researcher: The design?

Participant 27: Mm, yes – the design was excellent. The curatorial theme and the objects on display were really strong. Because the exhibition brought together items from museums across different cities under one single theme, I felt the thematic coherence was very powerful. You could see collections from museums all over the country, all centred around that one theme. I think the curation was extremely well-executed.

Researcher: I see. So for instance, if they're doing an exhibition on ceramics, they'll gather ceramic pieces from various museums across the country so visitors can see them all in one place?

Participant 27: Yes, and sometimes they go even more specialised. Like the last time I visited, it was a traditional Chinese medicine exhibition. Actually, I think it was called a natural history exhibition. It gathered objects like medical instruments, books and various materials on Chinese medicine from different museums in different cities. Let me think – yes, a lot of artefacts related to traditional Chinese medicine, mostly tools and texts. The whole display was based around that. I thought it was brilliant – you don't have to go from city to city to see those things. You're in the Chengdu Museum you can see it all at once.

Researcher: Got it. And when you mentioned “design” just now – what exactly did you mean?

Participant 27: Design – well, because I study design myself, I pay attention to this sort of thing. I found the overall experience of the design really strong. For example, as soon as you walk in, there's a visual anchor – like a headline theme – and it introduces the development of Chinese medicine, the history and evolution of traditional Chinese medicine. Then, as you move through the space, you can see that the whole layout is arranged chronologically, progressing through different historical periods. And throughout the display, depending on the type of content – say, medical diagrams like meridian charts, or objects – they'd use different types of presentation. Books, for example – if they were bamboo slips – were displayed differently again. They also had interactive digital screens where you could swipe through and learn about renowned doctors in ancient Chinese history, especially those from the Sichuan region and so on. So it was really varied. You could see real artefacts, and then on top of that, there were other layers of experience. What really struck me was a painting I'd been wanting to see – and it was actually there! It was from the Qing dynasty, I think, but it

still gave me a lot of insight. Also, I remember there was one particular exhibition area where the lighting effects were fantastic. From above, they projected lots of Chinese characters – using carved stencils – so that the light would cast those characters onto the floor. And because the lighting across the exhibition was balanced between light and shadow, it made the whole thing visually intriguing. I think in museums, design plays a crucial role – it guides the visitor's gaze.

Researcher: So you found it interesting?

Participant 27: Oh yes. And there was another thing I found really interesting – they had this huge wall full of traditional Chinese medicine drawers. A whole wall! And the best part was, you could pull them open and smell what was inside.

Researcher: Right.

Participant 27: I thought that kind of interaction was... what's the word... very grounded. Very down-to-earth. It wasn't one of those virtual, digital screen-type displays – it felt very real. You could actually use your sense of smell to engage with it. I thought that was great.

Researcher: Your sense of smell – I see.

Participant 27: Yes, exactly. It really did engage all five senses, in a way. And even the action of pulling out the drawer – that was a kind of tactile experience too, I think.

Researcher: So standing in front of the drawers, physically reaching out and pulling them open, then smelling what's inside – it's a multi-sensory experience, is that what you mean?

Participant 27: Mm-hm, exactly. Loads of people were trying out those drawers – everyone thought it was quite fun.

Researcher: And did you enjoy it yourself?

Participant 27: I smelled every single one of them. There were maybe fifteen or twenty drawers, and I went through all of them, one by one. Haha.

Researcher: So it must have left a strong impression.

Participant 27: Yes, definitely. I really liked that exhibition.

Researcher: Right. So you're the kind of visitor who really makes full use of the interactive exhibits.

Participant 27: Yes, but it's actually very simple. I think as long as you're human – even kids – anyone can use them.

Researcher: Mm, but I feel like it still depends on the person. Some visitors might just passively look at things, whereas you – you really engaged, you explored everything actively.

Participant 27: I think that probably has a lot to do with how interested someone is in the theme.

Researcher: Ah, so you were already really interested in traditional Chinese medicine?

Participant 27: Mm, yes. I find that theme really fascinating.

Researcher: Got it. And apart from that exhibition, have you seen any other temporary ones?

Participant 27: Yes – the last one in that same exhibition hall was about several decades of Chengdu's rapid development, right? Wasn't it to celebrate the founding of the Party?

Researcher: I think so, yes.

Participant 27: That one felt very festive – like proper Chinese New Year vibes! Haha. But honestly, I think the main reason it didn't resonate with me is because I didn't grow up in Chengdu. I'm not a local who's witnessed that development first-hand, so the narrative didn't strike a strong chord with me. But I imagine it would feel quite meaningful for local Chengdu residents.

Researcher: Right, and as someone coming from another city, do you feel like it helped you understand Chengdu better?

Participant 27: Hmm... I'd say it was okay. It did help a bit. At least you could see some old photographs, the old city walls, and how the city gradually developed into this modern international metropolis. Haha.

Researcher: That sounds like quite high praise.

Participant 27: Yeah, I guess it is. Chengdu really does feel like a modern international city now. And actually, I thought the exhibition was quite interesting overall. There was also a big video area – almost like watching a film – and it gave you a clear sense of what Chengdu is aiming for in the future, how it plans to grow. It was quite forward-looking, quite optimistic.

Researcher: Oh, so it showed how the city is planning for the future?

Participant 27: Mm, yes – part of the exhibition was animated. I thought that was really well done.

Researcher: That's great. So, because you're from Wuhan, which is also a major modern city, did that exhibition make you feel there's anything different between Chengdu and Wuhan?

Participant 27: You mean in terms of comparing the cities through the exhibition?

Researcher: Yes.

Participant 27: I feel like Wuhan's developed faster than Chengdu overall. But personally, I think Chengdu is more refined when it comes to aesthetics and lifestyle.

Researcher: Is that based on your personal experience of living here?

Participant 27: Mm, yes – partly from experience, and partly from the scenes and content in the exhibition. I think Chengdu really presents a more lifestyle-oriented atmosphere. It's got more of that “everyday warmth.” The scenes felt very lived-in. I don't get that same feeling in Wuhan – though maybe that's just because I rarely go out when I'm in Wuhan.

Researcher: I see. So when you say Wuhan is developing faster, but Chengdu feels more vibrant and “lived in,” what makes you feel that way?

Participant 27: Well, for example, the images and videos in the exhibition showed Chengdu's modernisation. But in reality, I think parts of Wuhan are already at that stage. Some areas of the city are already highly developed. So in that sense, I'd say Wuhan is ahead.

Researcher: Are you referring to technology?

Participant 27: In what respect?

Researcher: You mentioned technological development just now, didn't you?

Participant 27: Ah yes, technology-wise, Wuhan actually seems to have more research capacity than Chengdu, right? Wuhan has biotechnology, and also optics—what's it called?—Optics Valley. Yes, lasers and those types of products. They actually have quite a lot of that, so in terms of industrialisation and various other aspects, Wuhan seems richer compared to Chengdu, I think. And Wuhan has more universities than Chengdu; in fact,

Wuhan has more than one or even two 985 universities. Logically, Wuhan should therefore develop faster than Chengdu. Also, I feel that the urban development, like communities, residential areas, buildings, and housing in Wuhan, after all, considering Chengdu's position in a basin, should be faster overall. Much faster, actually. But now I feel Chengdu is catching up. They're always competing.

Researcher: Right, so did the exhibition make you feel intuitively, like, 'Oh, Wuhan already has these things'—did it give you that kind of impression?

Participant 27: A little bit, yes. But still, I think Chengdu is doing... Since Chengdu is more updated now, I still feel in some areas it might be ahead of Wuhan. For instance, the architectural design in Chengdu's new districts, their new High-tech Zone, and the planning of landscape and greenery—I think Chengdu's progressing very quickly and doing very well in those areas.

Researcher: Okay, were these impressions you had before seeing the exhibition?

Participant 27: Actually, I hadn't expected they would put on an exhibition like this.

Researcher: And was this something you realised after visiting the exhibition?

Participant 27: Hmm, I'd say it's something I realised after the exhibition, but it also includes my experience of the city itself.

Researcher: Yes, certainly.

Participant 27: Exactly.

Researcher: So it's an overall impression?

Participant 27: Yes, it is.

Researcher: Alright, did you visit the permanent exhibitions on floors two, three, four, and five? The ones that are always there?

Participant 27: Yes, I have.

Researcher: What did you think?

Participant 27: I really liked the exhibition on basement level one—the one with lots of animal specimens—even though it was a bit sad.

Researcher: Oh, you liked that one?

Participant 27: Yes.

Researcher: Many children also really like that one.

Participant 27: Really? Even though there were so many animal specimens, I felt a bit sad for the animals. But aside from natural history museums, it's rare to see something like that inside a regular museum. And the setting they created, including the environment—when you enter, you immediately hear birdsong—I loved that. I thought the overall experience was excellent.

Researcher: Hmm, it seems you're a very sensitive and observant person, since you noticed details like environmental sounds and lighting.

Participant 27: Yes, exactly.

Researcher: So, would you say this had quite a big influence on you, making you feel quite happy?

Participant 27: Yeah, definitely. I found it really enjoyable—the animals were genuinely adorable. The museum combined scenes, animals, sounds—even the air conditioning wasn't too cool or too warm. It created a very natural atmosphere, which was quite pleasant. I think overall, that particular exhibit was really well done.

Researcher: Right, you even noticed details like the air conditioning!

Participant 27: Oh! Because it was definitely intentional, not overly—Oh, and my absolute favourite was the interactive wall at the end. Children could interact with the entire wall by tapping it.

Researcher: Yes, exactly.

Participant 27: And then the animals on the wall would start moving. I thought that was really lovely. It's enjoyable for children and adults alike. After interacting, there was also a camera on the wall where you could take a group photo, saying how many of you are 'animal protectors' or something like that.

Researcher: Yes, that's right.

Participant 27: I found that really fun—I even took a photo on purpose. I love these kinds of interactive elements.

Researcher: Right, so you particularly enjoy exhibitions that have interactive elements?

Participant 27: Oh, now you mention it, actually, the shadow puppets upstairs—I thought those were great too.

Researcher: Ah, you saw the shadow puppets as well?

Participant 27: Yes, and they were lovely. They had movement and sound effects as well. It's quite rare to see so many puppets and shadow puppets of all different sizes. It felt meaningful.

Researcher: Great. Would you say visiting these exhibitions has constructed, deepened, or perhaps altered your impression of Chengdu's historical and cultural image?

Participant 27: Hmm... probably not, actually... because my understanding of Chengdu was already quite... how should I put it? Not extremely detailed, but I'd say the museum definitely showcased another aspect. By using artefacts, films, or certain materials we usually can't see, it helps illustrate historical stories. I think this is a valuable supplement. If we talk about evidence-based history, this is a very helpful addition.

Researcher: Right, understood.

Participant 27: Apart from that... well, let me think. I also really appreciated how they used images and various methods to illustrate what Chengdu was like in the past. It provides a more intuitive impression, compared to just textual information.

Researcher: I see. You mentioned you had some prior understanding of Chengdu, as both Wuhan and Chengdu are major cities in Central and Western China. Given that, how specifically did the museum supplement your existing knowledge? For instance, what was your impression before, and how did it change after visiting the museum?

Participant 27: Oh, one thing I did find particularly special was the traditional Chinese medicine culture. Not because I had a particular interest in it, but precisely because traditional Chinese medicine is generally regarded as a universally recognised medical system among Chinese people, right? However, through this exhibition in Chengdu, I discovered there have been many remarkable traditional Chinese medicinmasters based here. Chengdu has its own

unique branch and distinctive treatment methods. That genuinely surprised me—I hadn't anticipated it.

Researcher: Ah, so it filled a gap in your previous knowledge.

Participant 27: Yes, it did. And it enhanced my understanding of Chengdu's traditional Chinese medicine culture. I realised that, compared to Wuhan, Chengdu has a deeper connection with traditional Chinese medicine. Although Wuhan has Huazhong University of Science and Technology's hospitals, I feel people there are more inclined towards Western medicine. Hubei does have some traditional Chinese medicine masters, but the cultural atmosphere in Chengdu seems richer and more influential.

Researcher: Right. Earlier you mentioned your overall experience visiting the exhibitions was very good. Was there anything in particular during your visit that made you happiest?

Participant 27: Happiest? Let me think... actually, everything was pretty enjoyable.

Researcher: Haha, great!

Participant 27: Yes, I really enjoyed everything. The museum wasn't crowded, and the themes were ones I personally enjoyed. Most importantly, artefacts that normally would require travelling across multiple cities to see were all available in this one museum. I thought that was fantastic.

Researcher: Right, so when you go, do you usually go by yourself or with friends?

Participant 27: Hmm, I usually go with friends.

Researcher: Okay. And when you go with friends, would you say your friends influence your personal exhibition experience?

Participant 27: Not really. Because the things we each want to get out of the visit are quite different. For example, one of my friends is in the Institute of Religious Studies — he's studying philosophy — so we're really looking for different things. We focus on different points, so it doesn't really affect me.

Researcher: I see. So once you're inside, do you go around together or split up and then meet again afterwards?

Participant 27: We usually look around separately. He tends to take his time, he's a bit more meticulous, whereas I might move through certain sections a bit quicker, so I'll usually finish first and might go off to explore another part of the museum.

Researcher: Oh, right — so even though you go together, you each focus on your own experience. Do you chat about it afterwards?

Participant 27: We do. I'll say things like, "Oh that bit was done really well," or "That artefact came from such and such place," or "Wow, I had no idea China had already developed this or that back then." That kind of thing. Like, for example, he said something about surgical instruments — apparently they existed really early on. And you just think, wow, that's way earlier than the West! So yeah, we have those kinds of discussions.

Researcher: That's great. And when you're looking around the exhibition, do the other visitors affect your experience?

Participant 27: Not really. When I've gone, it's usually been pretty quiet, so it's been fine.

Researcher: Oh, so fewer people makes it more comfortable for you.

Participant 27: Yeah — although, apart from young kids, they can be a bit noisy. But otherwise it's fine.

Researcher: And when that happens — if kids are being noisy — what do you do?

Participant 27: If it's really noisy? Usually one of the security staff comes over and says something.

Researcher: Oh, so the security actually steps in?

Participant 27: Yeah, and I think that's really well done.

Researcher: So you don't need to say anything yourself, like ask them to be quiet?

Participant 27: Exactly.

Researcher: That's quite nice then. Do you ever chat with strangers inside the museum, while you're looking around?

Participant 27: No, not really.

Researcher: What about, say, if someone near you was talking — would you eavesdrop a bit?

Participant 27: Hmm... I've done that before when I was in Wuhan, but not really in Chengdu. People don't really speak that much here. Or if they do, there aren't many guides, so you don't really catch what they're saying.

Researcher: On that note, do you ever use things like audio guides in the museum? Or would you consider hiring a human guide?

Participant 27: Hmm, yes, that's a good point. I've actually never thought about hiring a guide, and I've never really thought about using an audio guide either. I think I just prefer to take my time and wander around by myself. I don't really know why — maybe I'm not that focused on “learning” in a formal sense. I just like to see what's interesting, quickly take note of it myself, and then maybe do some follow-up or collecting of info afterwards.

Researcher: So when you say follow-up, do you mean doing research online later?

Participant 27: Oh, if it's something that really sticks with me — like if it gives me an idea for a paper — then yeah, I'll go and look up some academic papers.

Researcher: Ah, so you'd use university resources, rather than just a search engine?

Participant 27: Yeah, not Baidu — proper resources, right.

Researcher: Very professional! Alright, and have you ever used any of the commercial facilities in Chengdu Museum, like the souvenir shop or the café upstairs?

Participant 27: I haven't been yet. Is there a café?

Researcher: You didn't know?

Participant 27: No idea.

Researcher: There's also one at the top floor—not exactly a café, just a small place selling drinks where you can have a rest.

Participant 27: Oh, maybe I'm a bit like my younger sister—I prefer going somewhere that's popular for social media posts. If I go somewhere specifically for drinks, I'd rather it be, well... Since I haven't actually been there, I can't really describe it. But my friend told me they've been there.

Researcher: Oh, are you someone who's quite particular about the quality of drinks?

Participant 27: Yeah, I'd say so.

Researcher: Right, so if you walked in, took one look, and thought the drinks didn't look very appealing, would you just leave without buying anything?

Participant 27: Yeah, I wouldn't drink anything.

Researcher: Understood. Did you visit the souvenir shops in the museum?

Participant 27: I think so, because you inevitably pass through the shop when you exit.

Researcher: Perhaps that's exactly how they designed it. Haha.

Participant 27: Yeah. Actually, I really liked the shop on the ground floor because it had lots of stones.

Researcher: Oh yes! You're interested in the stones?

Participant 27: Yeah, in fact, I preferred those small stones. But that day my friend was in a rush, so I didn't really browse carefully. Still, I thought they were lovely, much nicer than the creative products upstairs. I felt The Chengdu Museum's cultural and creative products weren't quite as good as some other museums. The Palace Museum or perhaps the Suzhou Museum might be doing a better job. The Chengdu Museum seemed a bit weaker.

Researcher: Hmm, where exactly do you think The Chengdu Museum fell short?

Participant 27: It just wasn't... It wasn't attractive enough for me. If you asked me now, honestly, I can't even recall what I saw there.

Researcher: So it didn't leave much of an impression?

Participant 27: Exactly.

Researcher: Maybe it's because museum gift shops often sell things like bookmarks, fridge magnets, and greeting cards, which you quickly forget after looking at them once.

Participant 27: Or maybe the cards just weren't designed attractively enough.

Researcher: Right, the designs weren't appealing?

Participant 27: Exactly. We have certain expectations when it comes to design, and that's why museums like Suzhou Museum or the Palace Museum stand out. Their products look quite appealing.

Researcher: Understood. Now, those small stones you mentioned—if you'd had enough time, would you have considered buying them?

Participant 27: Definitely! I really liked those. Haha.

Researcher: Would the price matter to you?

Participant 27: Preferably they should be affordable. If the price was similar to Taobao, I might have bought several. Or if they offered some discounts or bundles, that'd be fine by me.

Researcher: Great! You really have a youthful spirit—liking animal specimens and small stones.

Participant 27: I just find them really cute. Compared to things designed by people, they're simpler, more genuine.

Researcher: You prefer their simplicity because they come directly from nature?

Participant 27: Yes, exactly.

Researcher: Got it. Do you follow The Chengdu Museum on social media?

Participant 27: Yes, on WeChat official account.

Researcher: Ah, you do. And why do you follow them? Is it for booking tickets?

Participant 27: Yes, but also to check exhibition information.

Researcher: So you actually look at the content they post?

Participant 27: Yeah, I do.

Researcher: What do you think of their content?

Participant 27: It's pretty good. I think they do a clear job presenting their themed exhibitions. They often post very clear, detailed photos of exhibits. Those photos are excellent. For

example, their photos are better than what you might take yourself with a phone, so you can just use theirs instead. I think that's great.

Researcher: Ah, so do you also take your own pictures inside, of exhibits and such?

Participant 27: Yes, I do.

Researcher: Just for recording purposes?

Participant 27: Yeah, for my own records.

Researcher: Would you also post those online, like on your WeChat Moments or Weibo?

Participant 27: I would—I usually post them on Weibo. When posting there, I often use Apple's 'live photos' because some exhibits have moving parts. Live photos capture short animations, maybe just a fraction of a second, but it looks pretty nice.

Researcher: So, when you take pictures and post on Weibo, is it mainly just for personal record-keeping?

Participant 27: Partly as a record, yes, but also to share with others.

Researcher: Oh, you mean you'd recommend the museum to friends so they might visit?

Participant 27: Yes, exactly. I think there's value and meaning in doing that.

Researcher: That's brilliant! So it's a way of spreading the word and attracting new visitors.

Participant 27: Oh, speaking of which, do you know there's someone quite famous on Weibo for documenting museum visits?

Researcher: No, I didn't know that.

Participant 27: He's called Yichan Jun—you should look him up.

Researcher: Alright, I'll note that down immediately.

Participant 27: Yichan Jun. He's even created a national museum map. He's really impressive.

Researcher: Ah, so do you follow his recommendations when choosing museums to visit?

Participant 27: If he recommends a museum I'm really interested in, I'll definitely go. For example, if he visits a museum about tombs or burial sites, I'd really want to experience that for myself.

Researcher: Are they themed museums?

Participant 27: Not exactly themed. He travels to different cities specifically to visit museums, and then he documents all the exhibits, takes photos, and presents them to the public in various ways. He's essentially saying, "Look, we have this and that," and he does it quite well. He's a young lad from Hubei.

Researcher: Oh, I see. So if you come across that kind of content on Weibo, it makes you want to go?

Participant 27: Oh, definitely. If the exhibition is well-curated or the artefacts are particularly unique, I'll want to go.

Researcher: So it's fair to say he influences you?

Participant 27: Oh yes. And in our field of study, we're really encouraged to visit museums, galleries, exhibitions and so on. So we're meant to see a lot.

Researcher: Right. So in your field, you have a fair amount of trust in the quality of museum design?

Participant 27: Hmm, actually, I'd never thought much about how museums might present something especially unique... But Chengdu Museum (成博) gave me that feeling—like, wow, a museum can be made this interesting. And I think the interesting part is rooted in really strong aesthetic design. For instance, the background wall colours—I remember when I saw the Party-building exhibition, it was all bright red. I thought, “Will this red be too overwhelming in a gallery space?” But actually, the way the text and newspaper clippings were set against that red was really striking—it photographed beautifully too. So I think their use of colour, the framing styles, the way they constructed the display walls and the composition on those walls—it all showed a lot of thought. I really admire that.

Researcher: That's a perspective I hadn't considered before.

Participant 27: Well, it's something I personally care about—I'm into it.

Researcher: Got it. You mentioned their social media just now, which is the online part—but would you be interested in offline activities or other engagement methods if they reached out to you?

Participant 27: I haven't really noticed anything like that. I might just be too busy to catch any offline events.

Researcher: Fair enough. That's all the questions I have. Is there anything you think I've missed?

Participant 27: Let me think... No, I don't think so.

Researcher: Okay. If it's convenient, could we have a look at some of your photos now?

Participant 27: Sure—shall I send them to you now?

Researcher: That would be great.

Participant 27: Alright, let me find them real quick.

Researcher: No rush.

Participant 27: Actually, I visited the Ganzi Museum before too.

Researcher: Oh, over in western Sichuan?

Participant 27: Yes. I thought it was fantastic—really didn't expect that. Oh, I found the photos! Sending them now. You haven't been there, have you?

Researcher: No, I haven't. I've never been to Ganzi Museum.

Participant 27: I'll send you the really beautiful ones, the highlights. I've got five... Actually, I found more—six. You can pick whichever you like. I took a few of the wider scenes and some closer ones too.

Researcher: Lovely. If there's one that really stood out to you or that you think is worth discussing, let's talk about it?

Participant 27: Hmm, let me think...

Researcher: The blue-green background behind that figure is so beautiful.

Participant 27: That one we could talk about—it's at the entrance. That little figure.

Researcher: Is it the lacquered meridian man?

Participant 27: Oh, I think it is! What struck me is that behind the small figure, they used this curved LED screen that shows scenes of people and environments shifting over time—probably to show the relationship between the human body and nature, I guess? I didn't have time to watch the whole thing.

Researcher: So the background screen actually changes?

Participant 27: Yes, it keeps changing. It's not just a single theme—I just happened to catch it at that moment. In the second photo, you'll see the yin-yang and five elements. That's really classic Chinese culture. What stood out was how they used that display method—it's a brief explanation of yin and yang and the five elements, and you can even see which ancient texts they've referenced. It talks about the meaning of yin-yang and the Taiji symbol in Chinese culture—what they are, how they relate. I found it really interesting. That's why I photographed it—thought it might be useful if I ever do a research project later and need to refer to ancient texts. My classical Chinese isn't very good, so I could borrow from theirs.

Researcher: Alright.

Participant 27: And then... this one is about the Sage of Medicine and the King of Medicine. They had some sculptures—one was a statue of the Medicine King, and they also introduced some ancient texts. Of course, these ancient books aren't originals; they're reproductions of editions from a certain time period—like a Qing Dynasty version, or whichever edition it may be. And they created a sort of continuation based on that.

Researcher: I see, and this includes the medicine cabinet you mentioned—the one with the drawers you can pull open?

Participant 27: Oh yes, they recreated a scene to show what an ancient pharmacy or clinic might have looked like. What would you call it? Like a consultation room or dispensary of sorts.

Researcher: Oh right, it's on the right-hand side.

Participant 27: Mm, you can pull open the drawers—though only a couple of rows can actually be pulled, the rest are fixed. It's very well done.

Researcher: Got it.

Participant 27: And then there's that large display scene—I think I mainly took that one to show my mum and dad. You can see the setup, the walls, the whole environment—I thought it was beautifully done. The lighting was so well planned—highlights drew your attention to certain parts, while the darker areas served more as pathways you'd walk through. And the last one—I really liked this one—it's the part where they project Chinese characters onto the floor. That was amazing.

Researcher: Mmm, yes—it's like you're walking right through the middle of it. Very immersive.

Participant 27: Oh, definitely. It was done with such attention to detail. They managed to turn cultural elements into decorative features, which also act as points of emphasis. I think that works really well.

Researcher: Do you usually take photos at museums to show your parents?

Participant 27: Yes, because my parents live in Wuhan. They'll ask me what I've been up to, so I'll share things with them—tell them what I'm seeing at the moment. I'll say something

like, “Oh I’m visiting this exhibition,” and I’ll mention that it’s actually done better than the ones in Wuhan, and so on.

Researcher: Ah I see. I think you must’ve gone on a weekday—because when I visited the Chinese Medicine exhibition on a weekend, it was much, much busier. It was so crowded in front of the medicine cabinet I couldn’t even squeeze in.

Participant 27: Really?

Researcher: Yeah. And honestly, if you hadn’t shown me, I wouldn’t even have realised there was that floor projection with the characters—I have no memory of it. Probably just couldn’t see it with so many people around.

Participant 27: Yeah, exactly. That’s why I made a point to go on a non-holiday weekday. I knew it would be much quieter that way.

Researcher: Makes sense. Alright then—I think that wraps up our discussion.

#### Appendix 4

Participant 27: Great.

## **Appendix 5 Focus Group 2 Transcript (English Translation)**

Researcher: My first question is, what were your expectations before you went to the museum?

Participant 32: I was looking forward to seeing whether the content would be rich—after all, I wouldn't want to spend half a day getting there only to finish the visit in ten minutes. I also cared about whether the space would be open enough. If it's too crowded with people pushing and shoving, the visiting experience would definitely be affected.

Participant 35: I usually check if there's a special exhibition at the time.

Researcher: Was there one when you went?

Participant 35: Not really.

Participant 33: Yes, I did have expectations. I was mainly looking forward to the cultural and creative products—the souvenirs. Those are more attractive to me. Since I've been to the museum several times already, I tend to pay more attention to the surrounding area.

Researcher: Okay. Participant 34, did you have any expectations?

Participant 34: I guess I expected it to be different from other museums I've been to.

Researcher: In what way?

Participant 34: The exhibits, the guidance, and some of the services. I usually compare those things, so I had expectations around them.

Researcher: What kind of services?

Participant 34: Well, for example, the security staff. Like the most recent visit—did they scan the codes? Did they check anything?

Researcher: Are you referring specifically to COVID measures?

Participant 34: Not just the pandemic.

Researcher: Oh, by scanning codes, you mean digitization, right?

Participant 34: That's right. I also compare things like cleanliness—whether the floor is clean, whether there's any trash lying around, whether visitors are littering, and whether the toilets are clean.

Participant 33: That's important, really important.

Participant 34: Exactly, because it really ruins the experience otherwise.

Participant 33: Yeah, and accessibility for people with disabilities. Like, is it easy to move from room to room, or go upstairs?

Participant 35: In that case, there are volunteers to help.

Participant 33: But there weren't many today, were there?

Participant 35: No, not really.

Participant 32: Those are value-added services.

Participant 33: But still, you don't quite get it...

Participant 35: The Shaanxi History Museum has a dedicated team of volunteers. They might be the same group rotating shifts daily, except for one rest day. The Forbidden City has volunteers like that too, right?

Participant 32: Yes, they do.

Participant 34: I do feel that Chengdu is more advanced in terms of digitization compared to Shaanxi.

Participant 35: The Chengdu Museum feels more modern.

Researcher: Who mentioned accessibility for people with disabilities?

Participant 33: I did.

Researcher: Why did you bring that up? Is that something you particularly care about?

Participant 33: Yes, because sometimes a friend might have a broken leg or something like that but still wants to go to the exhibition. She has to think about how to get there and around

the museum. If there's an elevator that provides direct access, of course that's better. But if not, having a ramp is also really important, right?

Researcher: All right. The second question—did the museum meet your expectations?

Participant 33: How should I put it? Kind of.

Participant 32: There wasn't really anything particularly memorable.

Participant 33: Yeah, the museum's so-called treasure wasn't all that special. It was a nice piece of craftsmanship—for example, the rhinoceros had a support underneath it—but overall, you just looked at it and thought, “Why is this the treasure?” There was not a particular area, with a dozen lights: This! Is our treasure of the museum!

Participant 34: That kind of setup is probably only at the Shaanxi Museum.

Participant 33: Exactly. Today I followed the museum map. Sure, it had explanations, but you had to keep looking around. It didn't feel great.

Participant 32: The visitor flow wasn't very clear.

Participant 33: There were signs and labels, but you still had to look up and down constantly to figure things out.

Participant 34: Not very intuitive.

Participant 35: I think this could be compared to the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes. There, they show you a short film before the tour, so you get an overview of what you're about to see.

Then you go in with a narrator in a group, so you already have a rough idea of what to expect.

Participant 33: Yeah, today felt a bit disorganized. But the content itself—

Participant 32: There was quite a lot.

Participant 33: Yeah, yeah, there was a lot to see.

Participant 35: There was one part I didn't really understand. It was about the daily life of Chengdu people. I'm not sure what the “500” part was referring to. It had this big LED screen showing their travel, entertainment, and food—just everyday life. But I actually think

that section should have been placed right at the beginning, like when you first enter the area with the rocks. That way, you'd immediately get a sense of the overall context. Otherwise, if you're just looking at isolated figures, you might not connect them to the bigger picture.

Participant 34: Well, it relies a bit too much on the audio guide. If you don't listen to it, you won't really know which things are important and which aren't. Take the rhinoceros, for example—it's there, but if you don't hear the explanation, you wouldn't know it's significant. But I have to say, I was pleasantly surprised by how clean the toilets were.

Researcher: Yeah, we'll come back to that later. For now, I'd like to focus on the exhibition itself. We just touched on the issue of visitor flow.

Participant 35: It just wasn't very clear. There didn't seem to be a main path through the exhibition.

Participant 32: You don't know whether to enter from the left or the right—it seems like either way is fine. But when you reach the middle, you realize you've missed parts. Then what? How can you circle back? When the first confusion occurs, you may be able to accept and go back, but when the second, third, or fourth similar situation happens, you will feel as if it's not a must to view some parts. It will affect the richness and completeness of the final experience. At that point, I'd rather have a confusing order on my phone than in the actual space.

Participant 35: It's not like one, two, three, four—it might go one, two, four, three, five.

Researcher: Okay. Aside from that, what did you think of the exhibition overall?

Participant 32: For me, it was actually quite good.

Researcher: What did you find good about it?

Participant 32: I'd say it met the basic expectations. The two things I care about most are whether the content is rich and whether the space is comfortable. The overall space was quite open. Even though there were a lot of people, it didn't feel too crowded. And in terms of

content, it gave me a decent understanding of Chengdu—its history and all that. I especially liked the last section on folk life. It was very visual and intuitive. Out of all the layers of content, that part felt the purest. A lot of the previous exhibitions I've seen weren't as well done.

Participant 33: I would recommend this place to my friend. If he doesn't understand something, I'd explain it to him or just tell him it's a good place. But if he came on his own, it would be like me coming on my own—just a bit confusing.

Participant 35: It feels kind of fragmented.

Participant 33: There's so much content, but you need to piece it all together and figure out how one part connects to another.

Researcher: What do you mean by "fragmented"?

Participant 32: It means that although there's a lot of content, there's no clear main storyline to help tie it all together. There's no sense of continuity.

Participant 33: Like, if you're following a timeline, you go through one section and it says Eastern Han Dynasty, and then suddenly it jumps to Western Han, and then Western Han again, and then something else—it's like, wait, what's going on?

Participant 32: You have to piece it together yourself. The museum doesn't do that for you.

Participant 34: The layout of the exhibition hall is like a big square. Once you enter, there's no guide telling you where to start or how to move through it. You can look in one direction or another, but some people might just follow the flow of the crowd. As you're looking around, you can sense that...

Participant 33: It's totally possible we didn't take the best route today, since there was no one guiding us—no professionals helping.

Participant 34: Actually, they do have a solution. Their official WeChat account provides a suggested route. You could just follow that order.

Participant 32: What I mean is...

Participant 35: But they don't have volunteers guiding visitors.

Participant 34: Maybe they do. We just didn't look for them.

Researcher: So what do you mean—do you think it would be better to organize everything by dynasty?

Participant 32: Or at least have a clear logic. That would be fine. If there's a complete system, I'll follow it.

Participant 34: There needs to be proper signage. You need to clearly show the theme or title. Even adding numbers like 1, 2, 3 before each section would help.

Participant 35: The overall lighting in the museum is a bit dim, so it's hard to notice the labels, even though they are there.

Participant 32: Sometimes there are arrows on the floor that say "please continue to visit," but they're not very noticeable.

Participant 33: Yeah, like this big glass case—it's labelled K1. Then there's another one next to it, but there's no context. It's just there for you to look at.

Participant 32: I think the museum needs to be more proactive with its signage. Don't make it too subtle.

Participant 33: They could also have something where you can scan a QR code, like in other museums. For example, if you want to hear more about a specific exhibit, you just scan the code to listen, instead of searching for info on your own phone.

Participant 35: I think some exhibits had QR codes, but not all of them.

Participant 33: Probably because some are paid. We saw one today that cost ten yuan.

Participant 32: Yes, exactly.

Participant 33: Maybe the one that costs more.

Researcher: You didn't use the paid audio guide, did you?

Participant 32: That's right.

Participant 35: It was strange because it was the first one listed. When I opened it, I thought, "Wait, isn't this supposed to be free? Why do I have to pay?" Then I scrolled down and saw that the next two were free.

Researcher: So none of you used the paid audio guide?

Participant 33: No.

Researcher: Why not?

Participant 35: Because it already says the museum is free.

Participant 33: Yeah, the museum itself is free—why charge for the audio guide?

Participant 35: Exactly.

Participant 32: And if there is a charge, what's so special about it? What makes it worth 10 yuan? I don't know. If I don't know what I'm getting, I wouldn't pay, right?

Participant 35: If it were a real person guiding you—well, in China, we expect a person to charge a fee. A human guide charges for their service.

Participant 32: But a recording shouldn't cost anything.

Participant 35: Yeah, paying a live guide is a service fee, but if it's just an audio explanation on the museum's official platform, I think it should be part of the museum's cultural offering.

Participant 33: You can give me the option to tip, but don't make it a charge.

Participant 34: They actually have a special setup. For example, the guide we chose was the free version, but below that there's another option—well, not a section exactly, more like a small label—featuring a local celebrity's explanation. I listened to that one, and honestly, I didn't understand a word.

Participant 32: Chengdu dialect.

Participant 34: I thought it was really strange. Don't they serve visitors from outside Chengdu?

Participant 32: Yeah, I heard that part too. I couldn't understand it.

Participant 33: Also, a lot of the wall text is only in Chinese. Some of the small cards have English, but the big panels don't.

Researcher: I first wanted to ask about the celebrity audio guide. Was that one available through the museum's official account?

Participant 32: No.

Participant 34: I saw it. There's a version with a male narrator, and below the regular version there's one in dialect.

Participant 32: I was looking for the Mandarin version and didn't find it. I only came across the dialect version and assumed that was the only one.

Participant 35: It turns out there are two versions.

Researcher: So there's one in Mandarin and one in dialect?

Participant 33: But why isn't there any English? There's no English at all.

Participant 34: The app interface is in English, but we selected the Chinese version ourselves.

Researcher: So it's actually available in Mandarin. Okay.

Participant 35: And the only place to rent an interpreter device is on the first floor, right?

They don't have any staff guides there. Like, if I go to a certain area and want to rent an interpreter, there's no one I can ask?

Participant 32: If it's all standardized...

Participant 35: But maybe the service varies. Young people might prefer scanning the QR code and using the self-service option, but for older visitors...

Participant 34: Also, it felt too digital. And did you notice that when you walked in, there weren't any staff around except for security?

Participant 35: Yeah, I noticed that too.

Participant 32: Except for a few attendants.

Participant 33: But not anyone in a proper uniform.

Participant 32: And no one actually approaches you or offers help.

Participant 34: I did see someone, but I had no idea what her role was—she just took something and left. It feels like you'd have to go to some hidden counter and ask if there's a guide available, and only then someone would show up.

Participant 35: Like a guide station?

Researcher: So was it hard to find the guide station?

Participant 34: I couldn't really tell where it was.

Participant 32: Isn't it on the first floor when you just come in?

Participant 33: Near the security check?

Participant 32: No, it's a bit further down from the security check.

Participant 34: There's a corner, and that corner is where the guide station is.

Participant 32: It's not even near the entrance—you only really notice it when you're exiting.

Participant 34: That's probably because you two weren't late. We were waiting for you, and while we were there, no security came over or anything. After you enter, you actually have to go downstairs—or upstairs—to find the guide stand. I was there and saw it, but since you didn't go that way, you didn't see it. But for the average visitor...

Participant 32: They just follow the crowd and don't notice it at all.

Participant 35: So if someone comes for the first time, they might be pretty confused about what to do?

Participant 32: They'd just go in and look around on their own. No one's going to approach them or guide them.

Researcher: So do you feel like the museum sends the message: "Don't ask us—just explore on your own"?

Participant 32: Yeah, it's like, "Help yourself. If you need something, go figure it out. Buy your own drinks, find your own bathroom."

Participant 33: Yeah, that's the vibe—it really is.

Participant 32: There's no human service at all.

Researcher: Would you say the museum feels unfriendly?

Participant 33: Not exactly unfriendly—just very self-service. Kind of laid-back, like, "If you want to come, then come."

Participant 34: I wouldn't say it feels friendly, but it doesn't feel unfriendly either.

Participant 35: At the Shandong Museum, you immediately notice the service desk when you walk in. There are all kinds of staff to help you with rentals and guides. You also see volunteers in red vests offering free explanations. You feel like you can go ask them anything, and then walk straight in.

Researcher: Okay, one more question about the exhibition. None of you saw the temporary exhibition today, right? Just the permanent exhibitions. So, would you want to come back to see it again because of the permanent exhibition?

Participant 35: You mean just to see the same content again?

Researcher: That's right.

Participant 33: But their permanent exhibitions change too.

Participant 35: Really?

Participant 33: Yes. I felt it was a bit different from what I saw before, though the major exhibits were still the same. There were some small changes. I don't come here very often, but I could see myself coming again in a year or two.

Researcher: Once or twice a year—under what circumstances?

Participant 33: When I have time, I might think, "Okay, I can go again." Since it's a permanent exhibition, I can still discover things I missed before.

Participant 35: Or maybe if I didn't get to see everything last time.

Participant 32: Like that shadow puppet—saw that again.

Researcher: Okay. Would you come again if there were a new temporary exhibition?

Participant 33: Yes.

Researcher: Why?

Participant 35: Because temporary exhibitions only run for a limited time. If you're interested in the topic, you might think, "If I don't catch it now, I might miss the chance."

Researcher: So it's a sense of urgency?

Participant 32: Well, yeah, but it's not a huge deal. It's more like—if it's hosted here, it should be decent.

Researcher: You mean, if it's shown here, it can't be too bad?

Participant 32: Yeah, I have some confidence in it.

Participant 33: I've seen a few already. I even took photos. One was a temporary exhibition on reform and opening up—or maybe poverty alleviation. There was a mural with some typos next to it, but overall it was still good. The whole thing had a clear order.

Participant 32: I saw some previous exhibitions too—like the BBC one, or the Bulgari exhibit.

Participant 33: Oh, the one about wild animals?

Participant 32: Yes, yes!

Participant 35: I didn't see that one, but I found it on the museum's app.

Participant 33: That one was about insects and stuff.

Participant 32: Yeah, it was good.

Participant 33: I also saw the pottery exhibition—that series was beautiful too.

Participant 35: If I happen to be visiting Chengdu, I'd want to check whether there's a special temporary exhibition worth seeing while I'm in town.

Researcher: Did any of the exhibits have interactive features?

Participant 34: No?

Participant 33: Yes, I saw one. There was a mural where, when you touched it, the corresponding part above would move. But it wasn't obvious unless you interacted with it. I usually try those things, and it helped me understand it better.

Participant 35: I didn't see that.

Participant 34: I didn't notice anything like that either.

Participant 32: I saw it, but I didn't feel like trying it.

Participant 33: It wasn't easy to spot—it was tucked away in a corner.

Participant 35: If I had seen it, I might've tried it. I remember there was a museum—I forget which—that had a puzzle where you could piece together a painting.

Participant 34: Well, I did something interactive—I watched a peep show. Does that count?

Participant 33: Yes, I did too.

Researcher: Was it because you went as a group? If you see something interesting, do you feel the urge to show it to your friends?

Participant 33: Yes, definitely.

Researcher: Okay, let's talk about how your peers influence you.

Participant 33: They have a big influence.

Researcher: What do you mean by that?

Participant 33: Well, if my friend is standing there looking at something, I'll naturally want to see what he's looking at. Like, "Oh, what are you looking at?" And if I see something interesting, I'll definitely call him over and say, "Hey, check this out—it's cool!"

Researcher: So your interest in something can increase your friend's interest in it too?

Participant 33: Yes. If he thinks it's fun, then I feel like I've shared something meaningful.

Researcher: What if he finds it boring?

Participant 33: Then it's on him!

Participant 32: Haha, blaming others.

Researcher: Has that ever happened?

Participant 33: Yes, for sure. But I still enjoy sharing. It makes me happy.

Researcher: Do you feel a bit disappointed when their reaction isn't what you hoped for?

Participant 33: I'm used to it, haha.

Researcher: So when you share something, do you expect a strong reaction from the other person?

Participant 33: Not really—I try to stay neutral about it. If they respond well, of course I'll be happy. But if they don't react much, I understand—we all have different interests.

Participant 32: What she said makes sense to me. One part is actively sharing, and the other is being curious about what others are interested in. Sometimes I'll focus on one specific thing and share that, and in return, the other person might give me new knowledge. Like, say we're looking at a map, and they point out, "Look, this street is in the west," or "That one is in the north." On my own, I might not notice those details, because I wouldn't know what to look for. But their insights enrich my understanding. They add meaning to what I'm seeing.

Researcher: Okay. What about you two?

Participant 35: I think going to a museum with friends is great because you share a common interest in the experience.

Researcher: So when you go with a friend or partner, you're talking throughout the visit, right?

Does that conversation always add to your experience? Or are there moments when you think, "Maybe I'd enjoy this more on my own"?

Participant 32: You mean the positive or negative impact of going together with someone—not how we feel about the exhibition itself?

Researcher: Yes, I mean how your companions influence your overall experience.

Participant 35: Well, unless the other person isn't really into it.

Participant 32: Like if they're just on their phone the whole time.

Researcher: Does that happen?

Participant 35: Yeah, it's like going to the movies with a friend, and they fall asleep or keep checking their phone—it definitely affects your experience.

Participant 33: Totally! It really changes how you feel. I've taken friends to museums before who weren't interested at all. They wanted everything to be interactive. They wouldn't quietly explore unless they had to take a photo. Then they might take it seriously. Honestly, in those cases, I feel like it's better to go alone.

Participant 32: But overall, today felt like a mostly positive experience.

Participant 34: That friend of yours—he wasn't really there to see the museum. He was just pretending.

Participant 33: Yes, exactly!

Participant 33: When that happens, you start thinking, "Why didn't I just come by myself?"

Participant 33: Yeah, in those cases I usually just do a quick walk-through. There was a special exhibition that day, but I can't even remember what it was. I didn't really look at it. I spent maybe an hour in total and left in under two. I could tell my friend was getting tired—he was just tagging along with me. So I thought, "Forget it." We ended up looking at the animals on the basement floor and then left. If he had been more engaged, it could have been a much better experience—for both of us.

Researcher: So thinking about today's visit, do you still feel like having a companion added to the experience?

Participant 33: Yes, absolutely.

Participant 35: Speaking of that, I'm reminded of the Picasso exhibition we saw when we went to Beijing for a concert. There were so many people there, but you could tell some of them actually knew about Picasso and came to really see the exhibition. Others were just there to check in and take photos.

Researcher: Okay, let's shift and talk about the other people in the audience—not your friends, but strangers. Did they influence your experience?

Participant 32: The other visitors were honestly kind of a negative influence today. Like, when you're standing in front of something, someone just leans right in front of you to look. And kids were running around yelling and whooshing past us.

Participant 34: There was a father and son standing near me, reading a description together. But this guy next to them didn't seem okay with it—he was annoyed they were talking. Then, after they finished, he turned to me and said, “Can you move a little faster?” and then walked right in front of me.

Participant 32: Did he push you?

Participant 35: You said you could walk around, but—

Participant 34: He was rushing me. He literally asked if I could hurry up.

Participant 32: Acting like he owns the place. Too much.

Participant 34: I was like, “Alright, chief curator.”

Researcher: So that sounds like a pretty bad experience.

Participant 34: Yeah, it was.

Participant 35: And then there are the people who go to art exhibitions just to take photos for social media. You can't even see the artwork because they're standing there forever.

Participant 33: Yeah, they just stay in front of the display, and no one else can see it.

Participant 34: I think this museum isn't too bad in that respect—there weren't that many people. But at the Shaanxi Museum, it's a real problem.

Participant 35: Right, everyone crowds into one spot.

Participant 34: It's like a scene from a celebrity funeral—everyone's holding up their phones, filming everything.

Participant 35: It's not as bad now, but in the past, people taking photos in museums was really annoying, especially with the flash.

Researcher: How about today? Did you notice anything like that?

Participant 32: No, no one was using flash or doing anything disruptive.

Participant 35: Not as much in recent years. It used to be worse.

Participant 32: Also, there weren't any staff stopping people from taking photos, which probably means they allow it now. Otherwise, you'd have someone standing there monitoring it.

Participant 33: Yeah, and even the people pretending to be interested were okay today—they weren't too disruptive.

Participant 35: At the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, the guide takes you into a cave with a flashlight and explains everything, pointing to specific parts. But on our tour, there was a man in the group who seemed to already know a lot in advance. He brought his own flashlight and would shine it on the same spots after the guide did. I found that kind of distracting.

Researcher: Did it affect your experience negatively?

Participant 33: It was okay. Today, there was someone who liked to explain things to their partner. He was sharing his knowledge.

Participant 35: Sometimes I actually want to listen in.

Researcher: That brings me to my next question—did you interact with other visitors? I mean passive interaction, like overhearing what others are saying. Would you say that had a positive effect?

Participant 33: Oh yes, definitely.

Participant 32: But sometimes I find it a bit distracting.

Participant 35: You mean you might end up bothering someone?

Participant 32: No, I mean there was this one time I saw a father explaining to his son. He was trying to guide him, saying things like, “Look, doesn’t this Buddha look more Western than Chinese?” The son didn’t reply, and the dad kept asking, “Does he look more Chinese or more Western?” I think he was trying to educate his son, maybe homeschooling or something, but it was just a bit loud.

Participant 35: Yeah, I overheard that too.

Researcher: Did you ever think about talking to them?

Participant 35: No. But I might hear them mention something I didn’t know, and then I’ll turn to my friend and say, “Hey, did you hear that?” So I’ll share what I overheard with my companion.

Researcher: If you're already listening, why not talk to that person directly?

Participant 35: Because I just happened to overhear it. I don't belong to that group of people.

Participant 32: I think that might be a cultural thing. Maybe if we were in America, people would strike up a conversation.

Participant 35: Yeah, that would be normal there.

Participant 33: I think I talked to someone today, but I forgot what it was about. He said a few words and then left. It was during a landscape painting exhibition. I overheard two people who seemed to be experts talking about how good the brushwork was. I picked up a couple of things, but it wasn’t my area, so I just listened and thought, “Okay, you guys go ahead.”

Researcher: So it was mostly passive listening?

Participant 33: Yes, exactly.

Researcher: Alright. So overall, the interaction with other visitors was...

Participant 32: Very minimal—almost none.

Researcher: So would you say other visitors were more of a negative, disruptive factor than a positive, enjoyable one?

Participant 32: Yes, for me—but maybe it was positive for them?

Participant 33: I actually overheard some interesting information today. So I'd say it was good for me.

Researcher: So, overall, did the three of you feel that kids making noise or people taking pictures didn't affect you much?

Participant 35: Just a little bit.

Participant 34: The main thing is, I didn't hear anything too distracting today. In my group, it was just an adult and a child.

Participant 35: The only thing I heard was a kid playing around.

Participant 34: I just think the father was kind of pretending to know what he was talking about. He didn't really know much but still wanted to sound knowledgeable—and he wanted me to move along faster.

Participant 33: Yeah, that annoyed me too.

Participant 34: I felt like giving him a piece of my mind outside.

Researcher: Okay, let's take a breath and calm down.

Participant 32: It's not just the noise—it's the physical presence, too. People lean their heads in front of you, or push their kids forward. Or when they're trying to take a photo, they bump into you without realizing it because they're adjusting their position. That kind of thing forces you to step aside.

Participant 35: I don't think it's caused by traffic flow though.

Participant 32: Well, I had someone bump into me twice. His bag kept hitting me and he didn't even move—he just kept shifting further in.

Participant 33: I actually had a good experience today. I was taking a picture, and as soon as I raised my phone, a kid said to his friend, “Get out of the way.”

Participant 34: Maybe it’s because the museum wasn’t crowded today. I felt like there was plenty of space to move around, and I didn’t feel like people were crammed together or constantly bumping into each other. I could take my time and not feel rushed. It’s not like Shaanxi Museum or the one in Lanzhou, Gansu—those places can feel really packed.

Participant 32: Yeah, the Nanjing Museum is the same. You absolutely have to move quickly because there’s no space.

Participant 34: Same with the Palace Museum in Beijing.

Researcher: So, to sum up, if there’s physical interference or sound that’s too intrusive, it might bother you—but sometimes you enjoy overhearing something interesting. Okay, next I’d like to ask about the museum’s commercial facilities, like the cultural and creative gift shop or the coffee shop upstairs. Did you use any of those?

Participant 35: I made a purchase, but I didn’t eat anything.

Participant 33: I had coffee on the top floor.

Participant 34: I bought a bottle of water from the self-service machine.

Participant 32: Yes, that’s right—you both bought water.

Participant 33: The coffee shop is on the top floor. It’s a bit pricey. I’ve been there once, but I don’t plan to go again. I think it’s a little expensive.

Participant 35: It depends on the size of the museum. For example, you can’t go through the whole Forbidden City without eating or drinking, right?

Participant 32: But here, a visit takes maybe two or three hours, and you can just go out for food afterward.

Participant 34: The Forbidden City has designated spots for dining and refreshments.

Participant 35: Yeah.

Researcher: Okay, you mentioned buying creative products—so you did visit the museum shop? What did you think of the overall experience there?

Participant 35: It was good.

Researcher: What made it good?

Participant 35: I thought the product design was really creative and interesting.

Researcher: What do you mean by interesting design?

Participant 35: The way the cultural products are made. I didn't buy anything this time, but I saw a Sanxingdui mask design turned into a set of teacups and thought, "Wow, how did they come up with that?" It was really clever.

Participant 32: And it's closely related to the exhibits—you can't just buy that kind of thing on Taobao.

Participant 35: Right. It's not just basic bookmarks or generic souvenirs like fridge magnets. For example, there was a magnet featuring the Stone Rhinoceros. The original artifact is made of stone and has a certain colour, but the magnet came in different colours—pink, blue, etc.—and various textures. It didn't look exactly like the original, but it still looked really nice in its own way.

Researcher: So you're saying the Stone Rhinoceros souvenir had a different texture than the original artifact?

Participant 35: Yeah, the real one is stone-coloured. But the magnets come in different colours like pink and blue.

Participant 34: One thing I thought was especially good was how the fridge magnets felt. When you touch them, they actually feel like stone. You get the sense that you're touching something real. If they had used plastic or rubber, it would have felt kind of cheap.

Participant 35: For me, texture and design really matter when it comes to cultural products.

Researcher: So you did buy a cultural product—what was your motivation?

Participant 35: Mainly to keep it as a souvenir. It's tied to the museum's treasures. When I saw it, I knew it would remind me of the Chengdu Museum.

Researcher: But there are so many ways to commemorate a visit—why choose to buy a cultural product?

Participant 35: It's just intuitive.

Participant 32: It represents the place—it captures the memory of that moment and location.

Participant 33: Speaking of Chengdu Museum—yeah, when you think of Chengdu, you remember it has exhibits like these.

Participant 34: Like when you go to Dunhuang, the Mogao Grottoes are the main thing you remember. When you go to Shaanxi, it's the Terracotta Warriors. Even if they're not inside a specific museum, that's still your memory anchor.

Researcher: So what stands out to you is that the souvenir is connected to a specific relic?

Participant 35: Yes. And it has to look nice too.

Researcher: Aesthetics matter?

Participant 35: Definitely.

Researcher: Are there any cultural products you wanted to buy but couldn't find?

Participant 32: Yes. For example, we saw some with really expressive faces—exaggerated expressions, vivid figurines, some playing musical instruments. If I found something like that in the shop, I'd want to buy it.

Participant 35: I saw that too, but my first thought was, "Where would I even put this at home?"

Participant 32: That's the thing. If they had more options—like miniature versions, maybe something you could stick on the fridge, or wear as a brooch—I'd definitely take a closer

look and maybe get one. But sometimes they only have one design, and it's not practical, so I just leave it.

Participant 35: The one I saw looked like furniture. It was about this tall.

Participant 34: Yeah, there was that rapping figure—about that height. I even asked her whether we should buy it and take it home, and she said, “Why would we buy that?”

Participant 33: Like the Stone Rhinoceros. It's not even a model—it's just a printed image. Sure, it looks good, but it's just a grey picture.

Participant 32: Decorative items like that might not be so popular anymore. People don't have that much space to display things.

Participant 33: Yeah, maybe practicality matters more now.

Participant 35: And some of those items are difficult to carry home.

Researcher: So that's a key issue with cultural products—they need to be both practical and beautiful?

Participant 33: Exactly!

Researcher: Alright, next question—did you check the museum's social media before your visit?

Participant 32: No.

Participant 35: You mean social media?

Researcher: Yes, like the museum's Weibo, WeChat, Douyin, or Xiaohongshu accounts.

Participant 35: I just followed the official WeChat account.

Participant 33: You followed it before you came here?

Participant 35: Yeah.

Participant 33: That's great. I followed it too—the guide recommended it and said you should use it to make a reservation.

Participant 35: For me, whenever I go to a place with a museum, the first thing I do is search on WeChat to see if they have an official account. Then I check how to book tickets and what exhibitions they have.

Researcher: Do you feel the information they post on their WeChat account meets your needs?

Participant 35: I'm satisfied. I mainly use it to check what exhibitions are currently on and to make ticket reservations—those two things.

Researcher: Okay. And you didn't follow the account?

Participant 32: No. But I did book a ticket—does that count? I just went in and booked it without following the account. I don't usually check the info they post.

Participant 33: Same here.

Researcher: So, you follow or access the official account only to book tickets, but you don't really pay attention to it otherwise?

Participant 33: Yes, exactly.

Researcher: So even if you follow it, you don't usually look at the notifications it sends. Is that what you mean?

Participant 32: Yeah. I only open it when I need to buy tickets. If there were another way to book, I probably wouldn't check it at all.

Researcher: Why's that?

Participant 32: I trust what I see on-site. I don't need the account to tell me what's going on. If I want to check for temporary exhibitions, I'll use other platforms like iMuseum or a more integrated app.

Participant 34: I think this issue has two sides. First, the museum's public account doesn't have a wide enough reach. A lot of people don't even know museums have official accounts. Most only find out when they need to book tickets. That's the first problem. Second, after booking, the content they push out often isn't very engaging. So people lose interest.

Researcher: So if the content they push isn't appealing, what kind of content would you like to see?

Participant 32: Content that actually has substance—not just slogans. For example, if there's a temporary exhibition coming up, they should provide details through the account: what it's about, how long it'll run, its special features, whether it's free or not.

Participant 33: A lot of the time, the titles in those posts just aren't appealing to me. I see the headline and just scroll past it without clicking.

Participant 32: There's just too much info being pushed out by these public accounts. If they send out everything, I end up ignoring all of it.

Participant 35: It's mostly just regular promotional content. You don't really need that much.

Participant 32: Yeah, it's more like you only want to check when there's something specific you're interested in.

Researcher: So none of you really interact with the official account?

Participant 33: No.

Participant 32: No. I don't even know if there's anyone actively running it.

Researcher: Earlier you mentioned getting museum info from other channels—like integrated apps that list different exhibitions. Are there any other platforms you use to get museum updates?

Participant 32: Maybe Weibo?

Participant 33: I've seen posts on Xiaohongshu. Some people visit an exhibition and share it, and then I click on one post, scroll a bit, and the algorithm starts pushing more related content to me.

Participant 32: It's about seeing other people's experiences.

Participant 35: Or I'll search directly on Weibo.

Researcher: So would you say most of the ways you access museum information are through social media?

Participant 35: Yes, but I think it's more self-initiated. When you want to visit a museum, you actively search for it yourself.

Researcher: What would be the most engaging or effective way for a museum to reach you?

Participant 35: It has to be about the exhibitions themselves. If there's a big campaign, I might come across it and get interested.

Participant 33: Ads in WeChat Moments, like the ones you see everywhere else, could work—but you rarely see museum ads. Or maybe something in the back of a taxi, like “You're welcome to visit...” kind of promo.

Researcher: Since you mentioned taxis, what about offline advertising, like ads on the subway or buses?

Participant 35: Very, very rarely see those.

Researcher: Would that appeal to you?

Participant 33: Yeah, definitely. I didn't even know there were offline interactive activities until I actually got to the museum. There was one I wanted to try, but by then it was already over.

Participant 32: Yeah, like those long corridor ads in the subway—they're eye-catching and really effective.

Researcher: So even though you haven't seen much of that kind of promotion, you think it would be appealing?

Participant 32: Yes, definitely.

Participant 34: Another thing is how the city itself positions the museum—whether it's treated as a key tourist destination. For example, Shaanxi History Museum...

Participant 35: It's a must-visit if you're in Xi'an.

Participant 33: Sanxingdui too. But there's barely any promotion.

Participant 34: But our image of Sanxingdui isn't tied to Chengdu—it's about the Sanxingdui archaeological site, not this museum. I came today partly to see if they sold Sanxingdui ice cream, since that went viral. But turns out, that's only available at the Sanxingdui Museum.

Researcher: I'm curious—why were you interested in Sanxingdui ice cream?

Participant 34: I saw a post about it on Weibo or somewhere. Someone shared it, and I thought it was really creative—turning a cultural relic into food. It's something more people can relate to.

Participant 35: Does it feel like it brings you closer to the artifacts?

Participant 34: Yes, exactly. I thought it was a really fun idea.

Participant 33: And everyone loves food.

Participant 32: Yeah, like the ice cream from the Mogao Grottoes or the Forbidden City.

Even some parks offer special cherry blossom ice cream.

Participant 34: The Forbidden City ice cream didn't taste that good, though.

Researcher: So the expectation is that it not only looks good and relates to a cultural relic, but also tastes good?

Participant 35: Ideally, yes. But even if it doesn't taste great, I'd still try it once.

Participant 34: Just once.

Participant 32: I wouldn't have high expectations, but it's nice to have it.

Participant 33: Yeah, it adds something to the experience.

Researcher: Is there anything you wish the museum's social media offered, but it doesn't?

Participant 32: I remember discovering Nanjing Hongshan Zoo through a forwarded post. I love animals, and a friend shared an update from their public account, like personality changes in a tiger or other behind-the-scenes stories. I thought it was super interesting, so I followed them. But I've never seen any of my friends share posts related to this museum.

Participant 34: What about pandas?

Participant 33: There's iPanda—live streaming for pandas.

Participant 34: I just don't think Chengdu promotes its museums much.

Participant 35: But from what we saw, the museum actually has a lot of content.

Researcher: So you feel the museum's outreach hasn't been strong enough to reach the general public?

Participant 35: That's right.

Researcher: Finally, after visiting the museum, do you feel it has shaped or changed your understanding of Chengdu's culture and its people?

Participant 34: Yes, it has.

Participant 32: Definitely. I was amazed.

Participant 35: It's a culture of enjoying life—eating, drinking, and having fun.

Participant 32: Before today, I only saw Chengdu as a laid-back city where everyone just chilled. You know, the usual stereotype. But today helped me connect that image with its history. Like that sentence we all remembered—it said that even when people were enjoying music and entertainment, they never forgot to keep developing the economy.

Researcher: Does this stand out to you?

Participant 32: That sentence really struck me. I think in the north, we might only say it the other way around—like, "While trying to develop the economy, you can also enjoy some entertainment and leisure." But in Chengdu, it's the opposite. Doing both at the same time feels completely natural—even righteous. The guide said it very matter-of-factly, and the museum exhibits reflected that, too. I used to think Chengdu was just a laid-back city where people were relaxed—that was my superficial impression. But now I realise that atmosphere has been shaped by a long history.

Participant 35: Didn't Li Bai or someone say that it's hard to get into Sichuan?

Participant 34: Before, my impression of Chengdu was mostly limited to the Three Kingdoms period and Shu culture—things like *The Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms*. But now I've learned that Chengdu actually has a much longer history, going back to the Neolithic Age and Sanxingdui. That really changed my view. I didn't know much about Chengdu's earlier history before. Now I feel like Chengdu's timeline is actually quite similar to that of Shaanxi.

Researcher: So has the museum refreshed your understanding of Chengdu?

Participant 34: Yes, definitely.

Participant 32: And about that map—the west side of Chengdu has that grid layout. Is it kind of like Beijing? Actually, before we came to the museum, a friend of mine mentioned that the western part of Chengdu is a bit like Beijing. At first, I didn't fully get it—I thought, "Okay, some of the buildings look similar," but I didn't know the historical reason. But after seeing the map today, with its design clearly laid out—those straight roads and even hutongs—I could see it. Only the west side is like that, not the east. Now I get where that idea comes from and I agree with it more.

Participant 34: Take the two rivers surrounding Chengdu. I used to think that had always been the case, but it turns out that wasn't true in the Sui Dynasty. In the Ming Dynasty, they expanded the city specifically to be surrounded by water, because of a shortage.

Participant 33: You really pick up new facts like that.

Participant 32: Like Dujiangyan and its water management wisdom.

Participant 33: The world's first paper currency, Jiaozi, came from here. Wow, we were amazing!

Researcher: So does that give you a sense of pride or cultural identity?

Participant 33: Absolutely. It's like, wow, we were amazing back then—and we still are.

Researcher: You said the western part of Chengdu resembles Beijing in its layout. Does that mean the museum gave you a historical explanation for that?

Participant 32: Yes, it even showed the old city wall. I didn't know anything about that before—like which map they were using, or that the wall even existed.

Participant 33: Did you see the model of the Shu Palace?

Participant 32: The big one?

Participant 33: Yes. Didn't it remind you of the Forbidden City? Everything's very linear and orderly.

Participant 32: I didn't have a clear concept of Chengdu's road layout before.

Participant 33: Same here.

Participant 32: Now I have a better sense of how the city was built—the layout of the east and west, and where the central axis is.

Participant 33: Some cities are more circular in design. Ours is very square.

Researcher: That's all I have to ask. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Participant 34: The staff at the cultural and creative shops were just chatting the whole time.

Participant 32: Don't forget—developing the economy!

Participant 33: It's like, they're at work, but also kind of at home. When you visit the gift shop, the feeling is similar to the rest of the museum—it's a bit chaotic, lots of things scattered around, and no clear guidance. You just figure it out yourself.

Participant 34: It's not even like a museum store. Some cultural museums have enclosed spaces.

Participant 33: This was more like a few small stalls.

Participant 35: "You're done now—come and buy something!"

Participant 33: Exactly! That's what it felt like. Kind of messy.

Participant 32: Whether you buy or not is totally up to you. From entrance to exit, the whole experience is self-directed.

Participant 35: I feel like the museum is a bit lacking in its educational role. When we were in school, museums were never part of our learning. But imagine if, back then, during a history lesson, you could actually visit Chengdu Museum and learn about that part of history in person. It would've left a much stronger impression than just reading from a textbook.

Researcher: Do you think you would've liked to visit the museum when you were in school?

Participant 35: Sure—just like in some foreign art museums, you see groups of students coming in to paint.

Participant 34: My cousin's family lives in Canada. In geography class, they'll say, "Today we're going to learn about this island," and then they actually go visit that island at 6 a.m. It's super memorable.

Participant 33: When I visited the Greenwich Museum, they had a really intuitive way of presenting the periodic table—like right beneath it, there were real samples of each element.

Participant 32: Yeah, you could actually see what nickel looks like in its raw form—what it looks like as a lump, all contained in little bottles.

Participant 35: Normally, we just see this stuff in books, but here you actually see it in a museum. It's the combination of both that makes it so memorable. Same with the Shaanxi Museum—they have a lot of items you read about in textbooks. But I always wonder—why didn't our teachers take us to these museums when we were in school?

Participant 33: I remember seeing a temporary exhibition at the Changsha Museum—it was about a tomb, but I can't recall whose it was. They had reconstructed how many levels the tomb had and how the pavilions were arranged. Each floor would light up as you looked at it, almost like a light show. There was a frame for each level, and when a visitor walked by, lights would illuminate the features. There was also a video on the side, and an interactive section where you could draw. It was beautifully done. But we don't seem to have anything like that here.

Participant 32: At the Chengdu Museum, there are lots of handmade artifacts. If they could help us understand how those were made, it would create more of a connection. Even if they had just a short film or something interactive next to the display, it would help a lot.

Participant 35: That reminds me of something I saw at Shaanxi History Museum. I came across it on iMuseum—it was an exhibition on cultural relics restoration. When you enter, there's a big glass window where you can see restorers working inside. But I kept thinking—wouldn't it be better if there were lectures or explanations to go along with it?

Participant 33: Today I saw a restored weaving machine. The sign said it took three years to repair it and another year to create the model. Now it can even produce silk and satin again. But I kept wondering—how?

Participant 32: Yeah, some kind of demo or display would've helped a lot.

Participant 34: Speaking of that, I was thinking about the coffin we saw today. I kept wondering: was the body placed in the center? Were objects buried with it—on the head? The feet? Where exactly were those items placed? How did that work? Is that something the museum can explain?

Participant 35: Honestly, I feel like museums still come across as too serious and disconnected from everyday life. They're these big buildings filled with nice things, but you don't really feel involved. You just get told when something is from and that's it.

Participant 32: Even the explanations are quite brief—like a one-minute summary. They just tell you the name, where it's from, and how important it is, and that's it. There's no deeper context.

Participant 33: Remember the part about ancient medicine today—the meridians? I can't recall which museum it was, but they had a whole wall explaining how ancient people moved and exercised. It was fun, useful, and interactive—you could actually learn by doing. That's what makes it engaging.

Researcher: So first and foremost, do you want to see how cultural relics were discovered and restored?

Participant 35: Not always—it depends on what it is.

Participant 34: For me, I'm more interested in how these objects were used in their original context. One of the things that stood out today was the Song Dynasty drainage bricks. There was a whole section explaining how they were curved to help drain water, with a canal beside it. It was very detailed. But then I saw a roof tile display, and I was like—what is this for? We know traditional eaves had many layers and four corners, but here you couldn't see how it was used. I wanted to know: where does this go? What's its purpose?

Participant 32: Yeah, not a great explanation.

Researcher: You want to know three things: how it was discovered, how it was restored, and how it was used. Just seeing a static object isn't enough—we want to know the story behind it.

Participant 34: Exactly.

Participant 35: That's the story.

Researcher: And you want to understand how these things relate to your life?

Participant 33: Yes, definitely.

Researcher: Okay.

Participant 34: I had quite a strong impression today. There was a piece of silver I had seen on TV before. But when I saw it in person, it turned out to be so small—completely different from what I'd imagined. On TV, it looked like a big, neat box, but in reality, it was tiny.

Participant 35: That's knowledge materialized.

Participant 34: Exactly. It was much smaller than I thought.

Participant 32: That brick we talked about earlier—it was laid out on the floor to mimic how it would've looked. It probably only covered about a square meter. Even though it was fake, I think you could still get a slight sense of it when you stepped on it.

Participant 34: I touched it. I thought it was fake.

Participant 32: But it was clearly meant to give a bit of an immersive feeling.

Participant 33: The experience was quite limited, though.

Participant 32: Still, better than nothing.

Participant 34: One thing I think Chengdu Museum did really well was the animated mural display. Participant 35 showed it to me—it was playing on a loop.

Participant 35: Yeah, there was a booth with a screen showing a day in the life of someone—starting with travel, what they did, what their daily life looked like.

Participant 34: They broke down elements from the murals and reconstructed them into a vivid scene from that time. I thought that was pretty well done.

Researcher: So it helped you visualize what life was like back then?

Participant 34: Yes.

Participant 32: It made it much more vivid and intuitive.

Researcher: Anything else?

Participant 32: I think when the museum helps you understand how things were made or restored, you really start to feel connected to the objects. It's better than just being lectured at.

Participant 34: Yeah, it gives you a mental picture of what life was like during that dynasty.

Participant 33: Have you seen National Treasure?

Participant 32: The one that's more like a mini-drama?

Participant 33: Yes! It explains how things were made and restored.

Participant 32: And it connects everything to a broader historical context. History isn't fragmented—there's always a bigger picture.

Participant 34: I know a bit about the history of the Three Kingdoms. There was a war after the Song Dynasty—I can't remember exactly. Two famous figures were involved. I think the

museum could create videos like that to tell these kinds of stories. Like the one with the three seals...

Participant 33: But in the museum, it was just one picture, right?

Participant 34: Yes, exactly.

Participant 33: And just one sentence of explanation. The lighting was dim, and I could barely read the text. I only remember that the person's name had three characters, and it probably meant he was a general.

Participant 34: It just didn't feel as engaging as the folk life section.

Participant 35: Is that because the folk exhibits are more recent?

Participant 34: That could be part of it.

Researcher: So they're more connected to daily life?

Participant 32: Yeah.

Researcher: Oh, and I forgot to ask—after visiting the museum, when you want to look up more information, do you turn to its social media or website?

Participant 32: I don't think I would.

Participant 34: I'd rather read a history book.

Participant 33: I'd just search on Baidu.

Participant 32: I feel like their social media is mainly for marketing, not for learning.

Participant 35: Yeah, it's more commercial.

Researcher: Did any of you take photos or check in on SNS?

Participant 34: Yes, I did.

Participant 35: I didn't check in.

Participant 33: I took pictures of cultural relics.

Researcher: So the motivation was to document the relics?

Participant 32: Yeah, I just thought they were interesting and wanted to capture them.

Researcher: So it wasn't really about checking in or showing off?

Participant 34: Right.

Researcher: Did someone mention a kind of “national museum passport” idea?

Participant 34: That was me.

Participant 33: Oh, that sounds like fun!

Participant 35: He's talking about clocking in at museums—like marking which provinces and cities you've visited.

Researcher: So you'd like to see museums across the country collaborate on something like that?

Participant 34: Yes, like starting with Shaanxi History Museum, they could give you a card labeled “National Museum Passport.” At each museum, you get a stamp. Once you've collected them all, maybe the Palace Museum in Beijing could send you something—like a small gift or certificate—saying you've visited all the major museums in China. That would feel really meaningful.

Participant 32: An official certification.

Participant 33: Wow! That's such a cool idea.

Participant 32: Some countries do this with bookstores, but I haven't seen it with museums.

Participant 35: If that existed, I think a lot of people would use it.

Participant 32: Me too.

Participant 33: Some people might just do it to collect stamps, but that's okay. At least they're visiting.

Participant 32: It could even include themed events or salons—you'd get updates through a newsletter or something.

Participant 33: Or exclusive invites to special exhibitions, including international ones.

Participant 32: Right, it shouldn't just be about a certificate.

Researcher: So would you be interested in going on a “museum clocking” trip?

Participant 33: Oh, absolutely!

Participant 32: But the museums selected should be high-quality—worth visiting, with meaningful exhibits.

Researcher: What do you mean by “quality”? What kind of exhibits feel high-quality, and what feels low-quality?

Participant 33: That’s a tough question.

Participant 32: For starters, the proportion of genuine artifacts matters. You can’t just show me a bunch of replicas. That feels a bit like cheating the visitors. Of course, I understand that sometimes it’s hard to display the originals, so a few replicas are fine—but they should be clearly labeled and relevant. And there should be a good variety.

Researcher: So variety and authenticity?

Participant 32: Exactly. And how well they’re presented also matters.

Participant 33: I once saw a relic with a sign saying “under restoration.”

Participant 32: Yeah, I’ve seen that too—it’s fine occasionally.

Participant 35: And then there’s “temporarily removed for protection”—you go to see something, and the case is empty with a little sign, like, “Oops!”

Participant 33: It just makes you want to come back and see what it looks like for real next time.

Participant 32: The presentation matters too—as we talked about earlier.

Researcher: You mean curatorial ability?

Participant 32: Yes.

Researcher: What was the most enjoyable part of your visit to Chengdu Museum?

Participant 32: Just one?

Researcher: You can share more.

Participant 34: What I appreciated most was that it wasn't crowded or noisy. You could actually hear your phone, and you had the time and space to stop and take a good look at the exhibits. Nothing felt rushed. You could really stay and absorb what you were seeing.

Researcher: Uninterrupted viewing?

Participant 34: Exactly. I felt like I could quietly connect with the artifacts and take my time. That really left a good impression on me.

Researcher: What about you?

Participant 32: There were things I didn't expect to see—like those clay figures with such expressive faces. I've never seen so many in one place. It was visually and mentally stimulating. Also, that map—it helped me understand the city's layout and gave me new insights.

Participant 33: That map is my favourite too. I tell everyone about it—I really love it.

Participant 32: Getting new knowledge like that is really satisfying.

Researcher: So Participant 33, the map stood out to you?

Participant 33: Yes, it's my favorite. Everything else was fine—I've been there a few times, so it was about discovering the little things I'd missed before. I found some new details, but I can't quite remember them now.

Researcher: So it's about making new discoveries?

Participant 33: Yes—new finds and new explanations. I hadn't read some of the interpretive panels before, so it was interesting to go over them.

Participant 35: Same here. The exhibits are grouped by dynasty, and I noticed how the terracotta figures and statues reflect the characteristics of each period. The Tang Dynasty pieces, for example, are really beautiful, while others are more simplistic. The contrast was quite striking.

Researcher: Did that make you happy?

Participant 35: Yes, definitely.

Researcher: Great.

Participant 34: Another thing I appreciated was how it confirmed a lot of the history I already knew. But I do have one regret—I didn't see Zhuge Liang's repeating crossbow. It's such an iconic part of Three Kingdoms history. There were crossbows on display, but not that one.

Researcher: Got it.