

The Art of Museum Diplomacy: The Singapore–France Cultural Collaboration in Perspective

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Published online: 29 June 2012

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Abstract In the aftermath of the devastating terrorist attacks in the USA and Europe, most notably the 9/11 attacks on New York, there has been renewed interest in the role of cultural diplomacy in international relations as a strategic platform for engaging with other nations and for wielding “soft power” on the international stage. Central to this renewed interest on cultural diplomacy is that culture can provide a critical platform for contact and negotiations when political relations are in jeopardy or for recalibrating relationships with emerging powers. This study provides an analysis of cross-cultural museum exchanges as an instrument of “soft power” and cultural diplomacy by considering Singapore’s motives and outcomes of engaging in the Singapore–France cultural collaboration. The study demonstrates that while cross-cultural museum exchanges can serve as symbolic gestures of political goodwill, their effectiveness in shaping the preferences of other nations through exerting “soft power” on the international stage is limited. These exchanges are often apolitical in their initiation because museums seldom take their nations’ political goals into consideration in selecting their prospective partners and the subject of collaboration. While cross-cultural museum exchanges are apolitical in their initiation, their consequences are nonetheless political due to inherent unequal power relations between the collaborating parties.

Keywords Museums · Cultural diplomacy · Soft power · Singapore · France

Introduction

In the aftermath of the devastating terrorist attacks in the USA and Europe, most notably the 9/11 attacks on New York, there has been renewed interest in the role of cultural diplomacy in international relations as a strategic platform for engaging with other nations and for wielding “soft power” on the international stage. Central to this renewed interest in cultural

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diplomacy is that culture can provide a critical platform for contact and negotiations when political relations are in jeopardy or for recalibrating relationships with emerging powers (Bound et al. 2007). In the on-going “war on terror”, cultural diplomacy is seen as a means to cultivate a foundation of trust with other nations, and to engage with and influence the battle of ideas, particularly with Islam (ACCD 2005).

The renewed interest in cultural diplomacy stemmed in part from a greater appreciation of the importance of “soft power”, a term coined by Harvard Professor Joseph S. Nye to describe the attractive power exerted by nations and international organizations in world politics. Nye (2004a, p. x) defines “soft power” as the “ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment”. He argues that nations have ability to shape the preferences of other nations through “soft power” resources such as a nation’s political ideologies and persuasion, conduct of foreign policy, national branding, and cultural appeal in the world (Nye 2004a). Cultural diplomacy can help nations wield “soft power” by developing their attractive powers to other nations.

In the museum arena, contributions to efforts in cultural diplomacy can be best demonstrated by the British Museum’s successful engagements with China and Iran through high-profile artifact exchanges with these nations. Its director, Dr. Neil MacGregor, successfully persuaded the Chinese and Iranian governments to agree on mutual exchanges of cultural artifacts with the UK, which opened up avenues for dialogue with the two nations at a time when their political relations with the UK were not at their peak (Adams 2009). The cultural collaboration, which culminated in two highly attended blockbuster exhibitions at the British Museum, namely *The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army* and *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, held in 2007 and 2009, respectively, underscored the importance of cross-cultural understanding between nations.

While cross-cultural museum exchanges are gaining prominence as diplomatic tools for fostering better ties between nations, such are not without controversy. Empirical data on the impacts of such cross-cultural museum exchanges on both the lender and host are generally lacking. Cultural exchanges motivated by diplomacy are also perceived to relegate arts and culture to a form of government propaganda deprived of independence and criticality (Jenkins 2009). Cultural diplomacy may also manifest itself as a new form of cultural imperialism which promotes an unequal power relationship between Western and post-colonial nations (Mirrlees 2006). This brings on the questions: Are cross-cultural museum exchanges effective diplomatic tools for fostering mutual understanding between nations and wielding “soft power” on the international stage? Do museums consider themselves as instruments for promoting cultural diplomacy and therefore undertake cross-cultural museum exchanges that will advance their nations’ political goals? Will these cross-cultural exchanges inevitably breed to a new form of cultural imperialism?

This study seeks to address these questions through a case study of the Singapore–France cultural collaboration, an agreement between the Singapore and France governments to encourage bilateral cultural cooperation and exchanges through reciprocal exchanges of exhibitions between the National Museums in France and Singapore (MICA-MFA 2009). It will take a neo-imperialist approach by examining the issue of cross-cultural museum exchanges from the perspective of Singapore, a former colony of Great Britain, in its collaboration with France, a major imperial power in the world until the mid-twentieth century.

The study demonstrates that while cross-cultural museum exchanges can serve as symbolic gestures of political goodwill, their effectiveness in shaping the preferences of other

nations through exerting “soft power” on the international stage is limited. These exchanges are often apolitical in their initiation because museums seldom take their nations’ political goals into consideration in selecting their prospective partners and the subject of collaboration. While cross-cultural museum exchanges are apolitical in their initiation, their consequences are nonetheless political due to inherent unequal power relations between the collaborating parties. In the case of the Singapore–France cultural collaboration, there is an unequal partnership between Singapore and France. The exchange is a hefty investment for Singapore, which also commands less bargaining power in demanding the best collections from France due to the different quality of artifacts that are on exchange between the two nations.

The study was informed by a combination of methodologies including personal interviews with museum professionals who were involved in organizing these exhibitions and members of the public who attended the exhibitions, personal observation as well as textual analysis of exhibition labels, exhibition catalogs and media articles concerning the exhibitions. In what follows, I review the literature on “soft power”, cultural diplomacy, and museum collaborations, and highlight the contribution of this study to the existing literature. This is followed by a presentation of my research findings and key arguments. I conclude with a summary of the key arguments and suggest avenues for future study.

Conceptualizing the Study of Museum Diplomacy

Emergence of “Soft Power” as a Political Discourse

The concept of “soft power” was first coined by Professor Joseph Nye to describe the shifting nature of power faced by the USA at the end of the Cold War (Nye 1990, 1991). He argued that the USA was not facing a decline in power but a diffusion of power in the post-Cold War era (Nye 1990, 1991). To cope with this changing nature of power, Nye (1990, 1991) proposed that the USA would need to look beyond military might and economic prowess to consider other dimensions of security, such as co-optive power, broadly defined as the ability to influence others’ preferences through attraction. “Soft power” resources such as popular culture, political ideology, and transnational corporations could help a nation create a situation in which other nations would define their national interests in alignment with its own (Nye 1990, 2004a).

Nye (2004a, p. 8) defined “soft power” in contrast to “hard power,” and their association could be summarized in the diagram below (Fig. 1):

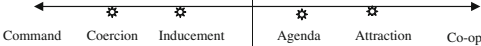
Spectrum of Behavior	Hard			Soft		
						
Most Likely Resources	Force Sanction	Payments Bribes		Institutions Values Culture Policies		

Fig. 1 Association between “hard” and “soft” powers (Nye 2004a, p. 8)

Although Nye (2004a) argued that “hard power” and “soft power” were distinct from one another, Huntington (1998) and Sondhaus (2007) argued that “hard power” could create soft power while “soft power” of ideas rooted in culture could create and sustain “hard power”. Nye (2004a) proposed that the effectiveness of “soft power”, unlike “hard power”, was highly dependent on its contextual circumstances.

A significant body of academic literature centered on America’s “soft power” on the international stage. Proponents of “soft power” argued that it was an essential component of America’s comprehensive global power. Fraser (2003) argued that “soft power” had historically served as a strategic resource in US foreign policy by tracing how movies, television, music, and fast food had strengthened the American empire. Brzezinski (1997), in his comparison of America’s global power and the global powers enjoyed by earlier European and Asian empires, concluded that cultural appeal was a significant pillar of America’s global power. The most prolific writer on American “soft power” was Professor Nye, who had analyzed American “soft power” against the “soft power” of Soviet Union, Europe, Asia, and non-state actors and called for the USA to increase its “soft power” influence in world politics (Nye 1990, 1991, 2003, 2004a, b). In the on-going “war on terror”, American “soft power” was emphasized as an important strategy towards combating terrorism (Lennon 2003; Armistead 2004; Satloff 2004; Rugh 2006; Chouliaraki 2007; Reinoid 2008; Williams and Covarrubias 2009).

Opponents of American “soft power” argued that the effectiveness of “soft power” was overstated. Tracing the decline of Pax Britannica in the twentieth century, Sondhaus (2007) claimed that the soft power aspects of current US hegemony would not be influential in preventing US’s decline in the long run. Huntington (1998), Maier (2008), and Hiro (2010) asserted that “soft power,” by virtue of its adjective, was inferior to “hard power,” and was only attractive when grounded in strong military powers or economic successes. Other critics perceived “soft power” as a form of American cultural imperialism. Schiller (1969, 1976, 2000) proposed that America’s cultural and media dominance had offered an apparatus for consolidating the powers of the American Empire. Mirrlees (2006) refuted the “soft power” arguments of scholars such as Fraser (2003), Nye (2004a, b), and Armistead (2004), arguing that the authors had appealed to “dubious moral, universalist and contextual criteria to rationalize the process and effects of American soft power” (Mirrlees 2006, 207). He concluded that American “soft power” was American cultural imperialism in disguise. Smandych (2005) drew similar conclusions in his review of cultural imperialism theory, proposing that “soft power” was an open apologist for American cultural imperialism.

Cultural Diplomacy as an Instrument of “Soft Power”

Cultural diplomacy, broadly defined as “the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their people to foster mutual understanding” (Cummins 2003, quoted in Schneider 2003), is a useful avenue for wielding “soft power” on the international stage. The tenancies of cultural diplomacy extended back to the early days of human settlements, conquests, trade, and missionary movements, facilitating flows of cultures, languages, and religions across regions (Arndt 2005; Bound et al. 2007).

Early literature on cultural diplomacy focused on the transatlantic exchanges and propaganda between the USA and Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Much had been written about the emergence of a state-coordinated cultural offensive in the USA promoted by the Division of Cultural Relations and its subsequent reincarnations, which spearheaded initiatives such as the establishment of US education abroad and the “dollar” diplomacy aimed at deepening interdependence with Europe (Cherrington 1939; Rosenberg 1982; Ninkovich 1981; Hunt 1987; Endy 2004; Arndt 2005). The American cultural offensive was met with

equal enthusiasm from the European nations which launched the Alliance Française, Goethe Institute, and British Council, among others, to promote cultural diplomacy (Taylor 1978, 1981; Duignan and Gann 1992). The Europeans also capitalized on their cultural strengths for diplomacy towards the USA, with the French promoting art, the German sponsoring classical music, and the British focusing on language and literature (Parsons 1985; Gienow-Hecht 2009).

The end of the Cold War in the 1990s gave rise to a surge in writings which focused on cultural diplomacy at the onset of the Cold War, particularly in the American context. One strand of literature had focused on the role of US broadcasting and propaganda agencies such as the US Information Agency and Voice of America in transmitting American images, values, and ideologies around the world (Wagnleitner 1994; Hixson 1997; Puddington 2000; Dizard 2004; Cull 2009). Others examined the role of educational and cultural exchanges such as Fulbright program, American studies program, and cultural tours of Jazz music, dance, and cultural artifacts in winning the hearts and minds of people abroad (Horwitz 1993; Prevots 1998; Von Eschen 2006; Davenport 2009; Krenn 2010; Scott-Smith 2010). Some writers explored how developmental aid such as the Marshall Plan had transited many nations into democratic states compatible with American political ideologies (Mills 2008). Cultural diplomacy during the Cold War was hardly a one-sided affair, as several writers chronicled the reciprocal nature of such cultural exchanges between the USA and Soviet Union (Barghoorn 1960; Prevots 1998; Richmond 2003). The Soviet style of cultural diplomacy, however, received much criticism for its authoritative and manipulative nature (Barghoorn 1958, 1960).

In the face of declining US popularity in the recent years, there had been calls to the US government to engage foreign audiences and strengthen “people power” by embracing cultural diplomacy (Finn 2003; Brown 2006). Cultural institutions and interest groups in the UK and USA had jumped on the bandwagon by making policy recommendations to their governments on strengthening support and assistance for cultural diplomacy (Schneider 2003; ACCD 2005; Bound et al. 2007). Despite the fervor of cultural diplomacy, some distractors claimed that cultural diplomacy subverted arts and culture to government propaganda, compromising their criticality, creativity, and independence (Jenkins 2009; Brown 2010).

Museum Collaborations as a Form of Cultural Diplomacy

While the internationalization of museum exhibitions had gained currency in the last two decades, it was not a recent phenomenon. Since the 1960s, the US government was already organizing and financing the display of American cultural artifacts abroad as part of the nation’s cultural diplomacy efforts during the Cold War (Krenn 2010). The strategy of staging “blockbuster” exhibitions gained popularity in the 1970s after Thomas Hoving, then Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, successfully launched *The Treasures of Tutankhamen* exhibition around museums in the USA from 1976 to 1979 (Rectanus 2006).

Existing literature on museum collaborations focused on the operational aspects of such collaborations as well as the benefits and risks of engaging in partnerships (Wireman 1997; Middleton 1998; Swartz 2001; Janes 2009). The cultural franchising of museums in the form of Guggenheim Bilbao and Abu Dhabi Louvre also attracted much academic attention (Dolan 1999; Rectanus 2002; Camara 2005; Allred 2006; Poulin 2008). Salmore (2008) examined the collaboration model of the French Regional and American Museum Exchange (FRAME) organization, a consortium made of 12 French and 12 American museums, investigating how long-term collaborations between museums could be structured and how participating museums were affected by the collaboration. On the nexus between museums exchanges and cultural diplomacy, Tenenbaum (2001) examined how the US government appropriated “The New American Painting (1958–9)” organized by Museum of Modern Art as a form of cultural

diplomacy to promote an anti-communist stance during the Cold War. Wallis (1994) explored how international exhibitions had been organized under the banner of cultural festivals to promote cultural diplomacy for a favorable impression of lending nations in host countries.

Despite the proliferation of museum exchanges and partnerships worldwide, academic literature on the phenomenon remained thin, focusing mainly on the operational aspects of the collaboration or the political–economic agenda of such collaborations. This study builds upon the existing literature by considering the nexus between cultural and political spheres in such cross-cultural museum exchanges. Specifically, it analyzes Singapore’s motives and outcomes of engaging in the Singapore–France cultural collaboration through the perspectives of the Singapore government and its national museums. It will take a neo-imperialist perspective by considering Singaporean policies towards museum exchanges from France under a bilateral cultural agreement between the two governments.

The Singapore–France Cultural Collaboration

On 20 January 2009, Singapore and France signed an agreement to enhance cultural cooperation between the two countries (MICA-MFA 2009). Signed in Paris by the Singapore’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the French Republic, the agreement aimed at intensifying bilateral cultural cooperation and exchanges through bringing exhibitions from renowned French museums for display in Singapore’s national museums and for Singapore’s national museums to present exhibitions in French museums (MICA-MFA 2009).

The agreement for Singapore–France cultural collaboration was the corollary of a successful collaboration between Singapore’s National Museum of Singapore (NMS) and France’s Musée du Louvre in an exhibition *Greek Masterpieces from the Louvre*, held earlier at the NMS from 19 December 2007 to 16 March 2008, featuring 130 artifacts from the Louvre’s Greek and Hellenistic Galleries. The exhibition, which recounted the different aspects of life in ancient Greece, intended to introduce Singaporeans to the ancient civilization of Greece, deemed as one of the most ancient and beautiful of all human civilizations (NMS 2008).

The first project realized under the agreement was the *Christian Lacroix, the Costumier* exhibition at the NMS, held from 20 March 2009 to 7 June 2009 (NMS 2009). The exhibition, depicting the costume design work of French designer *Christian Lacroix*, showcased 80 spectacular costumes and 60 sketches from the Centre National du Costume de Scène (National Costume Centre, Moulins, France) collection and from Lacroix himself (NMS 2009). Aimed at enhancing cross-cultural understanding between Singapore and France by introducing Singaporeans to French fashion as an art form, and cultivating a deeper understanding and appreciation of theatre and opera amongst Singaporeans, the exhibition was opened by French Ambassador to Singapore and the Singapore’s Acting Minister of Information, Communications and the Arts (Lui 2009).

Similarly, Singapore presented an exhibition *Baba Bling: The Peranakan Chinese of Singapore* (Title in French: *Baba Bling: Signes intérieurs de richesse à Singapour*) exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB) (NHB 2009). The exhibition held between November 2010 and February 2011, featured an iconic collection of Peranakan artifacts from Singapore’s Peranakan Museum (NHB 2009). The exhibition aimed to introduce the French public to Singapore’s Peranakan culture, a hybrid cultural form between Straits Chinese and indigenous Malay communities, and deepened their understanding of Singapore’s cultural heritage (Kwok 2009). Opened by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the exhibition also received significant political endorsement.

Although there are several exhibitions being planned for under the agreement, this study will draw on the above three exhibitions as case studies to examine the issue of cross-cultural museum exchanges between nations since they draw on cultural themes representative of both nations (i.e., the selection of art and fashion symbolic of French culture, and the choice of Peranakan culture which is unique to Singapore), as well as the political involvement and attention extended to these exhibitions from both governments.

Museum Exchanges and the Rhetoric of Cultural Diplomacy

On the Political Stage: Cultural Diplomacy and the Rhetoric of Museum Exchanges

It was a recent realization in Singapore that museum exhibitions could be harnessed for cultural diplomacy to “provide ‘soft power’ in navigating the sophisticated nuances in international political relations” (NHB 2008, 24). In 2006, then President of the USA, Mr. George Bush, visited the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in Singapore as a symbolic gesture of his interest and desire to learn more about Asia before attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit (Singapore Embassy 2006). The unveiling of ACM’s blockbuster exhibition, *On the Nalanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and Southeast Asia*, featuring artifact loans from the National Museum (New Delhi) signified Southeast Asia’s historical links with India and China at the commencement of the East Asian Summit held in Singapore in November 2007 (Au-Yong 2007). Museum exhibitions, in these instances, served as a useful platform for political messaging aimed at developing the attractive powers of the USA and Singapore before negotiations at the APEC and East Asian Summits.

The interest in leveraging on museum exhibitions in Singapore for political messaging and cultural diplomacy could be attributed in part to the growing recognition of “soft power” as a diplomatic strategy in world politics, notwithstanding that the Foreign Minister of Singapore then, Mr. George Yeo, was the former Cultural Minister from 1991 to 1999 and was known to be sympathetic towards the arts and culture. The idea of the Singapore–France cultural collaboration was first hatched in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which approached the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) on a joint application to the lottery board, Singapore Pools, for funding cultural exchanges with France. According to Dr. Kenson Kwok, ACM’s Founding Director:

In 2007 or 2008, there was a proposal from MFA to work on a cultural exchange with France, for whatever strategic reasons they have for working with the French. Together with MICA, they managed to get from Singapore Pools some money to fund this exchange, not only of exhibitions, but also of performances, personnel and skills. An agreement [between Singapore and France] was then signed in January 2009.

(Personal Communication, 3 August 2010)

The choice of arts and culture as the area of cooperation between Singapore and France was hardly surprising, considering that the French had been capitalizing on the arts for cultural diplomacy since the twentieth century. Geo-politically, the cooperation could be read as an endeavor to increase French cultural and linguistic influences in the largely Anglo-phonetic region comprising countries which were previously British or Dutch colonies.

Although the Singapore–France cultural collaboration was a top–down initiative suggested at ministerial level and involved no consultation with NHB and its museums at the conceptualization stage, it was welcomed as an additional funding stream for the museums.

As Ms. Szan Tan, National Museum of Singapore's (NMS) lead curator who oversaw the setup of the *Greek Masterpieces* and the *Christian Lacroix* exhibitions in Singapore, put it:

I would be interested in being involved in any exhibition right from the start. But top-down or bottom-up, whatever it is, as long as it's a win-win, it is something we all benefit and we are offering something to the Singapore audiences, we welcome it.

(Personal Communication, 22 July 2010)

In fact, the exhibitions which were proposed under the Singapore–France cultural collaboration framework, the *Christian Lacroix* and *Baba Bling* exhibitions had already been planned for by the museums even before the agreement was conceptualized. Dr. Kwok shared on how his long-time friendship with the President of MQB, Mr. Stephen Martin, played an influential role in securing the collaboration between ACM and MQB:

It was through the Asia-Europe Museum Network (ASEMUS) that I got to know Stephen Martin, and we were both on the EXCO of ASEMUS. Over the years, we got to know each other and we like each other. He came to the opening of ACM at Empress Place, and he was very impressed with ACM as a museum. So while the MFA thing was going on, the directors were already getting along very well and the director in France already had some interest in the Peranakan collection. So why was he interested in Peranakan? He told me that Peranakan, being an overseas Chinese culture, would be interesting as it was not the mainstream Chinese culture, which the French audiences were familiar with.

(Personal Communication, 3 August 2010)

Ms. Tan confided that the *Christian Lacroix* exhibition “did not arise from cultural diplomacy, but was parked under the Singapore–France collaboration for funding purposes” (Personal Communication, 22 July 2010).

While the exhibition exchanges between France and Singapore were couched as a cultural diplomacy endeavor, the exhibitions which took place under the agreement arose through the museums' own networks with their partner museums. That being said, there were also exhibition exchanges which arose from political contacts between nations which led on to successful collaborations. The *Greek Masterpieces from the Louvre* exhibition, a precursor to the Singapore–France collaboration, was one such example. As shared by Ms. Tan:

For Greek Masterpieces from the Louvre, it was top-down. The initial agreement came from MFA and MICA, after that, we took over from them very quickly. It was museum-to-museum, so we worked directly with the Louvre.

(Personal Communication, 22 July 2010)

The case of the Singapore–France collaboration demonstrated that museums did not generally consider cultural diplomacy as a major motivation for engaging in exhibition exchanges, but saw such framework agreements as funding opportunities to support their programming or as political gateways to gain access to the renowned museums overseas, that would benefit their own objectives and missions. This stance was confirmed by Dr. Kwok:

[Cultural diplomacy] was not a major motivation. We just thought: what would turn the Singapore public on? We would have our own brainstorming sessions about what we want to do, but allow MFA to ride on us for cultural diplomacy if they want to. Because we need people to come in and see the exhibition, we can't do things just because MFA is happy.

(Personal Communication, 3 August 2010)

From Socio-economic Perspective: Towards a Distinctive Global City for the Arts

For the Singapore government, the economic and social imperatives of the collaboration certainly took priority over its political significance. It saw the Singapore–France cultural collaboration as an excellent avenue to position Singapore as a “Global Arts City by providing greater international exposure for its national museums and its artists to showcase their works in France” (MICA-MFA 2009, p. 1). This cultural collaboration would contribute to Singapore’s long-term vision for the arts and heritage scene, which was to “transform Singapore into a *Distinctive Global City for the Arts*, where arts and culture would make Singapore an attractive place to live, work and play, contribute to the knowledge and learning of every Singaporean, and provide cultural ballast for nation-building efforts” (MICA 2008, p. 6). In line with Global Arts City vision, this cultural collaboration would “enhance overall vibrancy of Singapore’s arts and culture scene and build the audience base while professionalize a pool of local arts talent and arts companies and raise the profile of Singapore as an arts hub” (MICA 2008, p. 6).

One major objective of the Singapore–France collaboration was to facilitate “the showcasing of Singapore arts and culture in France” (MICA-MFA 2009, 1). The importance of the Singapore–France collaboration as a platform for national branding, both for the nation and the museums, was underscored by Dr. Kwok:

[Showcasing our Peranakan collection at MQB] is a brilliant exposure for ACM. For exporting, it doesn’t benefit the local audiences, of course, but why ACM is doing it and why MICA is putting money into it is the national profiling. But I am more interested in the profile for the museum, and also the fact that we may be attracting people to come and see the real thing.

(Personal Communication, 3 August 2010)

At the same time, the museums recognized that such profiling would have little impact on the monetary value of the collections, as Ms. Lucinda Seah, an Assistant Director (Programs) at ACM put it:

As to whether our artifacts will be validated after travelling, this is certainly milky or contentious. I don’t think the exhibition will make our artifacts more monetarily valuable but the profiling is the real significance.

(Personal Communication, 4 August 2010)

Similarly, national branding was an important consideration for the French in lending their collections to Singapore. In his speech at the opening of *Christian Lacroix* exhibition, French Ambassador to Singapore, H.E. Pierre Buhler (2009), said:

I dream of a season which would prosper and develop into a branding tool for the image of the European Union in Singapore, and become a common good around which we, Europeans and Singaporeans, could rally together.

Since its formation, NHB had staged over ten blockbuster exhibitions, collaborating with renowned museums such as The British Museum¹ and Vatican Museum² to bring world-class collections to Singapore audiences (NHB 2008). The aims were to increase Singaporeans’ exposure to world cultures and deepen their appreciation for arts and culture. This was

¹ The *Eternal Egypt: Treasures from the British Museum* exhibition was held at the ACM from 11 February 1999 to 30 May 1999.

² The *Journey of Faith: Art and History from the Vatican* exhibition was held at the ACM from 18 June 2005 to 9 October 2005.

also the underpinning objective for hosting exhibitions from renowned French museums. Ms. Tan spoke on the social roles of the national museum:

I feel that as the national museum, we really need to expose our audiences to something more global, more international. Overseas artifacts, when put together with audiovisuals and programming, help you understand another culture, another civilization. The more you see good things, the more your cultural cultivation and aesthetic taste will improve. We need to grow these in Singapore, because in the long run, we cannot be empty shells with lots of great facilities, we need to have a soul, and international exhibitions help us achieve this.

(Personal Communication, 22 July 2010)

Seen in this light, the Singapore government's agenda for engaging in museum exchanges were to adopt cultural diplomacy as a means to achieve the economics and societal objectives of transforming Singapore into a *Distinctive Global City for the Arts*.

At the Expense of Forging Warmer Ties: A Meaningful (Political) Pursuit?

At the diplomatic level, the exhibition launches offered an excellent networking opportunity for political leaders, ambassadors, and business leaders, and a symbolic gesture of warm ties between Singapore and France. As a double launch, the *Christian Lacroix* exhibition also marked the commencement of *Voilà!*, a month-long French Festival in Singapore aimed to showcase its diversity of France and raise its profile in Singapore. Overall, the exhibition launch of *Christian Lacroix* was deemed successful, judging from the accolades published on the French Embassy's website such as "lavish exhibition whose guests declared unanimously, a great success!" and "one of the most successful openings ever" (French Embassy 2009).

While the cultural collaboration was deemed as a meaningful political pursuit on the diplomatic front, it nevertheless reinforced an unequal power relationship manifested in the differential quality of artifacts that were on exchange between both nations, in which France with its high-profile collections and mature cultural scene commanded more bargaining power than Singapore in demanding the lender's best collections. The Singapore's national museums generally found it acceptable to receive second-grade artifacts from France, citing that some artifacts were simply too valuable to risk travelling out of France. As Ms. Tan explained:

If you compare what have travelled out [of France] with what they have in the store or on display, there is a difference. But we can't demand those artifacts. For the artifacts themselves, it is not safe.

(Personal Communication, 22 July 2010)

Yet, Singapore was prepared to lend its best collections to France, as it was deemed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Singapore to showcase its collections in France. According to Dr. Kwok:

When we agreed to do the exhibition, I already thought: Okay, we have to lend them some of our best pieces, as it is unlikely that we will have a Peranakan exhibition in France ever again. So here is your big chance on the international stage, so better make it a good show. So I said to the curators, we have to be prepared to lend things and too bad if the conservators say cannot. It would be such a waste if we didn't send them good things and did a second-rate show. And they said 'You must lend us some of your key objects.' So you know, both of us were thinking alike.

(Personal Communication, 3 August 2010)

The cultural collaboration was also characterized by unequal monetary contributions between both nations, which arose from the pricier French artifacts which attracted more insurance and freight costs when they were shipped into Singapore. Even then, the museums felt that it was money well-spent because the exchanges offered Singaporeans the opportunity to view priceless artifacts from ancient civilizations that they would not otherwise had access to, which would in turn help cultivate cultural worldview among Singaporeans. Ms. Tan assessed the *Greek Masterpieces from the Louvre* exhibition:

For Greek Masterpieces from the Louvre exhibition, it was worth every single cent even though it was expensive. I am sorry to say if you want good works, you have to pay good money. It was a fair deal, because the works were huge, so transport-wise, they were very difficult and they needed separate shipments. Louvre was very nice not to charge for crating. The crates were beautiful. They facilitated the installations and protected the works.

(Personal Communication, 22 July 2010)

Through Museum's Eyes: Implementing the Singapore–France Cultural Collaboration

The national museums generally considered hosting blockbuster exhibitions an important component of museum programming that would help maintain their interest and relevance to the public, while increase their profiles internationally. As explained by Dr. Kwok:

You need to build up your collection and at the same time, you also need to bring in decent shows from different countries. Building up a collection takes many years and people can't wait until you have a collection anyway. They want to see new things from elsewhere.

(Personal Communication, 3 August 2010)

Museum professionals in Singapore gained valuable learning points as they met with cultural differences in working with their foreign partners. Museum exchanges, in these instances, facilitated mutual understanding and cultivation of “soft power” among museum professionals from different cultures. Ms. Seah shared on how mutual respect and understanding had helped resolved cultural differences between ACM and MQB:

When we were discussing interactive for Baba Bling, there was this lady from MQB who was very adamant that: ‘Do you have something scary? I want something scary for the children.’ I think she is coming from the perspective of St George the Slayer. Dragons are scary in European contexts, but in Peranakan culture, they are happy and auspicious. So we have to explain to them: ‘It won't make sense to put a scary dragon there.’ They were not very happy but they bought the idea.

(Personal Communication, 4 August 2010)

The museum professionals also stressed the importance of upholding their own professionalism and efficiency to earn the respect of partner museums. As shared by Ms. Tan:

There is always underlying currents and we need to be sensitive and learn how to stand on our own feet and gain the respect of others, by not just being efficient but also knowledgeable. We need to learn how to manage them.

(Personal Communication, 22 July 2010)

For the *Greek Masterpieces from the Louvre* and the *Baba Bling* exhibitions which the museum professionals in Singapore worked directly with their counterparts in the Louvre

Museum and MQB, the collaboration went very well. Dr. Kwok was full of praises for his counterparts in MQB:

They were very systematic and meticulous. They were very good professionals in that they have worked for many years in other museums. They knew about the packing, freights and planes, so from the logistics point of view, it was really easy to work with them. From the curatorial point of view, they didn't have many demands, except that they wanted our key objects and they were happy that we were sending some of these.

(Personal Communication, 3 August 2010)

This was in contrast to *Christian Lacroix* exhibition in which NMS had worked through a third-party exhibition organizer. Ms. Tan shared on the challenges faced due largely to miscommunication:

[The organizer] didn't try his best because both sides were his clients, and it didn't help that some of French requirements were not communicated to us at the beginning, such as sponsoring business class air-tickets for their exhibition designers.

(Personal Communication, 22 July 2010)

The case of the Singapore–France collaboration demonstrated that mutual respect, professionalism, and direct working relationships between museums contributed to a successful collaboration.

It was a cultural learning experience as much as a business transaction for the museum professionals in Singapore, as they learnt about the working styles, business practices, and audience profiles of their working partners. Museum professionals would have to develop their cultural quotients to understand the cultural subtleties inherent in the interactions. As articulated by Ms. Tan:

They are very subtle. They do not tell you things directly. You need to deduce things. I thought I had to negotiate with them, but at the same time, I respect them because they really know their cultural background. But no matter what, to me this is a business transaction. By and large, with any culture or any people, it's always a new experience.

(Personal Communication, 22 July 2010)

Museum professionals in Singapore also recognized that different audiences from different nations had different expectations, and one size would not fit all in engaging audiences. As shared by Dr. Kwok:

In ACM, we will research the subject and recast it to what we think our local audiences will understand and we try to make it relevant to present times. In Europe, in a more sophisticated kind of environment, something entirely dead but has no relevance to today will have interest in itself. It is a different kind of audience who are prepared to accept something from a foreign culture that is completely dead.

(Personal Communication, 3 August 2010)

Museum Diplomacy as (A)Political Cultural Pursuit?

The study of the Singapore–France cultural collaboration demonstrated that museums exchanges facilitated cross-cultural understanding between the governments, museums, and people of both nations. At the government level, the exhibition was meaningful in offering opportunities for political and business networking. At the museum level, the

exchanges offered a platform for profiling of Singapore collections on the international stage, and facilitated a cultural and academic exchange not only of collections but also the working styles, business practices, knowledge, and expertise between museum professionals in both nations. At the social level, there were people-to-people exchanges, best exemplified by the Singaporean public's exposure to French and Greek cultures arising from the collaboration.

Contrary to academic literature on "soft power" which proposed that culture could shape the preferences of other nations on the political stage through attraction, this study of the Singapore–France cultural collaboration demonstrated that culture, in the context of museum exchanges, was not intended to inspire any political alignment in terms of national interests. Rather, the cross-cultural museum exchanges between Singapore and France were intended to facilitate better understanding of different cultures while contributing to national profiling of Singapore and France.

In the case of Singapore, "soft power" was appropriated as a political means to meet economic and social objectives of positioning Singapore as a *Distinctive Global City for the Arts*, rather than serving a political end in itself. The opportunity to showcase its collections overseas under the Singapore–France collaboration offered a useful platform for Singapore to increase its national profile and attractive powers in France. Such national profiling was intended to serve an economic objective, which was to showcase Singapore's "distinctive lifestyle and entertainment offerings that would attract tourists, foreign talents, and international interest in Singapore" (MICA 2008, p. 21). While Nye's (2004a) concept of "soft power" could be applied here to describe the attractive nature of the power enjoyed by Singapore through exporting collections, Singapore's intention to increase its "soft power" was to develop its economic attractiveness to tourists, foreign talents, and foreign direct investments and promote social engineering of its people rather than developing its political influence on the international stage.

There could be a domestic dimension to "soft power" beyond its common application to world politics. Building on Nye's (2004a) concept of "soft power," it could be argued that bringing in collections from French museums was appropriated in Singapore's context to serve social goals oriented towards increasing the cultural worldview of Singaporeans. By hosting overseas collections and presenting them in an entertaining and educational way, the national museums provided a channel for the Singapore government to increase its "soft power" domestically by attracting Singaporeans to learn more about other cultures and in the process, increase their cultural worldview, and deepen their appreciation for arts and culture.

Museum exchanges were intended by the Singapore government and its national museums as a form of cultural exchange, since the collaboration was a mutual exchange which benefitted both France and Singapore. The cultural exchanges were apolitical in their initiation because museums did not take their nations' political goals into consideration in selecting their prospective partners and the subject of collaboration. They also had the option of reinterpreting the overseas loans for their own audiences, but it might not be an option that they would want to exercise, as in the case of MQB which chose not to reinterpret their loans from Singapore.

While cross-cultural museum exchanges were apolitical in their initiation, their consequences were nonetheless political due to inherent unequal power relations between the collaborating parties. The exchange was a hefty investment for Singapore, which also commanded less bargaining power in demanding the best collections from France due to the different quality of artifacts that were on exchange between the two nations. Nevertheless, the exchange offered Singapore an opportunity to profile its collections on the international stage while exposing Singaporeans to collections from overseas.

Conclusion

This study provided a neo-imperialist study of cross-cultural museum exchanges as an instrument of “soft power” and cultural diplomacy by considering the Singapore’s motives and outcomes of engaging in the Singapore–France cultural collaboration through the perspectives of the Singapore government and its national museums. For the Singapore government, cultural diplomacy served a means to achieve economic and societal objectives of transforming Singapore into a *Distinctive Global City for the Arts*. For the national museums, cultural diplomacy was seen as funding opportunities to support their programming or as political gateways to gain access to the renowned museums overseas that would benefit their own objectives and missions.

The study demonstrated that cross-cultural museums exchanges could facilitate cross-cultural understanding between the governments, museums, and people of both nations. At the government level, the exhibition was meaningful in offering opportunities for political and business networking. At the museum level, these exchanges facilitated mutual understanding and cultivation of “soft power” among museum professionals from different cultures, although this was not without challenges. Mutual respect, professionalism, and direct working relationships between museums could contribute towards a successful collaboration. At the social level, there were people-to-people exchanges, best exemplified by the Singaporean public’s exposure to French and Greek cultures arising from the collaboration.

The study also revealed that while cross-cultural museum exchanges could serve as symbolic gestures of political goodwill, their effectiveness in shaping the preferences of others through exerting “soft power” on the international stage was limited. These exchanges were often apolitical in their initiation because museums seldom take their nations’ political goals into consideration in selecting their prospective partners and the subject of collaboration. While cross-cultural museum exchanges were apolitical in their initiation, their consequences were nonetheless political due to inherent unequal power relations between the collaborating parties.

The contribution of this study can be accounted on two levels. At the theoretical level, the study showed that the effectiveness of museum exchanges as an instrument for promoting “soft power” on the international stage was limited. Rather, museum exchanges were appropriated as a political means to meet economics and social objectives of increasing a nation’s economic attractiveness and the cultural worldview of its citizens. By hosting overseas collections and presenting them in an entertaining and educational way, the national museums provided a channel for the Singapore government to increase its “soft power” domestically by attracting Singaporeans to learn more about other cultures and in the process, increase their cultural worldview, and deepen their appreciation for arts and culture.

At the empirical level, this study had gathered invaluable information on museum exchanges in the Singaporean context, which could offer useful insights for governments and museums seeking to undertake cross-cultural collaborations with other nations. The study revealed that while cross-cultural museum exchanges were apolitical in their initiation, their consequences were nonetheless political due to inherent unequal power relations between the collaborating parties.

The findings gleaned from this study hope to stimulate further research on “soft power,” cultural diplomacy and museum exchanges. I will highlight three avenues for further research. First, a comparative study between lending nations and host nations can provide a more well-rounded perspective on the dynamics on museum exchanges. Such a study will

shed light on how differences in national histories, cultural habits, quality of collections, working styles, and availability of funding can influence the negotiating processes between contracting museums. This can help museum professionals identify suitable partners and strategize their approaches to realize win–win outcomes in museum exchanges.

Second, further research can delve into the other aspects of museum cooperation such as the exchanges of skills and expertise through international training programs and internships. Many training programs organized for museum professionals in developing worlds, such as the British Museum's International Training Program, are argued to be a form of neo-colonialism which extends the “soft power” of developed nations while threatening indigenous methods of museum management and conservation (Kreps 2008). More research in this area can shed light on how win–win collaborations between museums of developed and developing worlds can be realized.

Third, there is a need to develop a credible set of empirical data on the phenomenon of “soft power” and cultural diplomacy in relation to museum exchanges. Changes in public perceptions and behaviors do take time. A longitudinal study to track public opinions and behaviors on their reflections on museum exchanges and audiences' perceptions towards lending nations will be useful in concretizing “soft power” impacts of museum exchanges. The results of such a study can shed light on the contribution of museums in the political and social arenas, and will be useful for museums and policy makers interested in cultural relations for the development of their long-term strategic directives.

Acknowledgments The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insights on the previous draft of this article. She would also like to thank her supervisors Dr. Marilena Alivizatou and Dr. Paul Basu for their guidance, as well as her interviewees Dr. Kenson Kwok, Ms. Szan Tan and Ms. Lucinda Seah for their sharing. All views expressed in this article are the author's own, and are not representative of the views of her employers.

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