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# Exhibiting Class: Art Exhibition and the New Chinese Middle Class

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**EXHIBITING CLASS:  
ART EXHIBITION AND THE NEW CHINESE MIDDLE CLASS**

By

**Ziwei Chen**

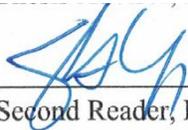
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## ABSTRACT

*Kanzhan*, translated as “going to exhibitions,” has emerged as one of the most popular leisure activities in urban China. Contemporary art exhibitions cover a wide range of subjects, including world-renown artists, jewelry and fashion brands, and pop-up museums. More and more visitors are taking art exhibitions experience as a way to exhibit their personal taste, which reflect the rise of middle-class values such as individuality and self-development in China. This paper is an anthropological exploration of the relationship between visitors and art exhibits and what those art exhibitions tell about the new middle class in China.

My research is based on original field research in the summer of 2018 and winter of 2019. I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews in art exhibitions in the city of Beijing and Shanghai. Drawing on anthropological theories of cosmopolitanism, body and emotion, and photography and self-presentation, I argue that going to art exhibitions is a critical means of performing and reinforcing one’s middle-class identity and aspirations in contemporary China. As such, the thesis contributes to the anthropological understanding of the role of aesthetics and taste in the production of class.

## LIST OF EXHIBITIONS

*Beyond Time: Audrey Hepburn.* (Chaoyang Joy City, Beijing)

*Hello, My name is Paul Smith.* (Today Art Museum, Beijing)

*Impression Monet 3.0.* (The China Millennium Monument, Beijing)

*Legit Dumpling House EST. 2018.* (Tongying Center, Beijing)

*Louis Vuitton: VOLEZ, VOGUEZ, VOYAGEZ.* (Shanghai Exhibition Center, Shanghai)

*Niki de Saint Phalle: Legendary Female Artist of the 20th Century and Her Wonderland.* (Today Art Museum, Beijing)

*Russell Young: Superstar.* (Modern Art Museum, Shanghai)

*Shanghai Biennale.* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai)

*Shoes: Pleasure and Pain.* (The Red, Beijing)

*Tribute to Da Vinci: Global Light and Shadow Art Experience.* (AMG LIVE, Beijing)

*Van Cleef & Arpels: When Elegance Meets Art.* (Today Art Museum, Beijing)

## INTRODUCTION



*Figure 1. Visitors taking photos in the pop up museum. July 21, 2018.*

*[“Legit Dumpling House EST. 2018” Tongying Center, Beijing]*

*Getting off the elevator on the third floor of a shopping mall in Beijing, China, I followed a trail of cartoon dumpling stickers on the floor into a pop-up museum. Though just a temporary built space cramped in the middle of a mall, the entrance was beautifully decorated in the architectural entrance of a traditional Chinese restaurant, while the yellow neon light on the outline of structure also gave it a modern touch. The space was sectioned into different themes revolving around dumpling, an iconic example of Chinese cuisine. For example, there was a section with an oversized bowl, where you could sit inside with oversized dumpling toys hanging from the wall, or pretend that you were pouring dipping sauce from a oversized vinegar jar.*

*There was another section with a pool of blue mini dumplings toys, where you could “swim” in the pool, or sit on a oversized strainer spoon as if you were a dumpling taken from the pool.*

The Pop Up Museum is defined as “a temporary exhibit created by the people who show up to participate” (Pop Up Museum, n.d.). In other words, rather than appreciating a finished art piece in a traditional art museums, visitors come to a pop up museum to be part of the exhibit, create their own scene, and take record of their creation through photography. Some people criticized it as an amusement theme park with a void of artistic value; however, such events are getting more and more popular, despite of a \$15 or above entrance fee and sometimes a time limit around 40-100 minutes. I saw many Chinese visitors, in their twentieth or thirtieth, well-dressed and equipped with high-quality cameras, swarming in with partners and friends. The passion for pop up museums is part of an increasing interest on art exhibitions in general in contemporary Chinese society. Over the past few years, *kanzhan*, translated as “going to exhibitions,” has emerged as one of the most popular leisure activities, especially among people in their twentieth and thirtieth. Promotions raged throughout *weixin* and *weibo*, two of the most popular social media platform, with lists of must-see art exhibitions, especially in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai. What kind of exhibitions are popular in contemporary China? What does it mean to *kanzhan* and what do the visitors do in these exhibition? What does it tell about contemporary Chinese culture?

This thesis is an anthropological exploration of *kanzhan* and contemporary art exhibitions in Beijing, China. Specifically, I want to understand popular art exhibitions in the context of museum and cultural development in China and explore the relationship between visitors and exhibitions across different designs and topics. On the one hand, the design and topic of each

exhibition have a direct influence on shaping the visitors' experiences and knowledge; on the other hand, visitors create their own experiences and ascribe meanings to the exhibitions. By looking into the visitors' behaviors in and their thoughts about these exhibitions, I aim to further explore and present the dynamic interrelationship between exhibition and visitors and contribute to the study of museum anthropology and visitors studies with new insight in the contemporary Chinese society. In this thesis, I argue that going to art exhibitions is a critical means of performing and reinforcing one's middle-class identity and aspiration in contemporary China. As such, the thesis contributes to the anthropological understanding of the role of aesthetics and taste in the production of class.

### Anthropological Approaches to Museums

Ever since museums turned public and exhibited a relatively limited set of objects, some of the most important questions that scholars in museology and anthropology focus on relate to power and authority. In *Exhibiting Culture*, Karp and Lavine (1991) pointed out the function of museums as making visible what used to be invisible and defining cultural and community identities. Decisions are constantly being made on what to present and what not and on how things are presented; such control on the presentation is under both our unconscious assumptions and intentional manipulation. Along the same line, Duncan (1991) commented on the function of public art museums with a sense of "political virtue" (p.88), when they on the one hand demonstrate the "goodness" (p.88) of a state and make it look good and on the other hand reinforce the civic-mindedness of its citizens, facilitating the relationship between "the individuals as citizen and the state as benefactor" (p.88). According to Duncan, art museums, as

“powerful identity-defining machines” (p.101), convert objects with material value and social status into “displays of spiritual wealth” (p.95).

Duncan pushed such transitions a little further in that art museums, at least in the traditional sense, are ritual sites akin to temples and shrines, where visitors go through a shift in mentality. Such an idea is rooted in Turner’s (1978) discussion on liminality, during which “individuals can step back from the practical concerns and social relations of everyday life and look at themselves and their worlds with different thoughts and feelings” (Duncan, 1995, p.78) In art museums, therefore, almost every object can be framed as art and be seen with “a new kind of ritual attention” (p.78). Alpers gave the example of seeing a crab in a science museum, which was isolated from its original context and transformed into works of art. Visitors are encouraged to look at those objects with visual interest, which Alper concluded as “a way of seeing” (p.25).

During the visiting experience, Greenblatt (1991) distinguished two types of experiences: resonance and wonder. By resonance he meant the power of pulling the viewer beyond the object itself and evoking a connection to the authentic cultural background; by wonder he meant the strength of stopping the viewer with exalted attention and arresting sense of uniqueness. Greenblatt proposed that museums can enhance their impact by emphasizing “a strong initial appeal to wonder, a wonder that then leads to the desire for resonance” (p.45). Such a increasing focus on wonder can also be seen in modern art museums, according to Greenblatt, where the core value lies in “the uniqueness, authenticity, and visual power of the masterpiece” (p.45), pool of lights creating surreal effect of as well as the empty surrounding walls with few objects.

Interestingly, Handler cast doubt on whether the viewing of objects is the main activity that takes place in museum. Instead, he defined museums as an institution where “social relationships are oriented in terms of a collection of objects which are made meaningful by those relationships--through these objects are often understood by museum natives to be meaningful independently of those social relationships” (Handler, 1993, p.35). Similarly, Baxandall argues that “exhibition cannot represent cultures” (Karp and Lavine, 1991, p.33), instead is a social occasion that involves three main components: makers, viewers and exhibitors. It is important to note that such relationships are not one-way but mutual and interactive. As Duncan argued, art museums are “both producers of ideology and products of social and political interests” (Duncan, 1995, 78).

#### Museums and Cosmopolitanism in China

China has a very long history of collecting treasures starting since the ancient dynasties, during which emperors and other royal members collected art and artifacts and displayed them as “a symbolic manifestation of imperial power and authority” (Denton, 2014, p.16). However, museums as public institutions to the broader citizenry are a more recent phenomenon that did not develop in China until late 19th century and early 20th century. The first Chinese museum, the Nantong Museum, was built by an industrialist Zhang Jian in 1905, after being rejected and overlooked by the Qing government, “inaugurating the era of modern Chinese museum undertakings” (Su, 1995, p.64).

Within the following century museums in China went through several periods of development with a common theme on nationalism. After the 1911 revolution, governmental institutions began to sponsor and construct museums mainly with remnants of imperial and

private collections, leading to the peak in the 1930s with a strong belief in the value of “social transformation” (p.70). Interrupted and seriously eroded by the War of Resistance and four-year civil war, museums did not get revived until shortly after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Along the cultural nationalization by the Communist Party of China, “political value became the main factor for the existence and development of Chinese museums” (p.70). Museum development in China went through another devastation during the Cultural Revolution, and it was only after the economic construction in 1979 did museums receive another wave of attention and importance by the state and the party in fostering “spiritual civilization” (Denton, 2014, p.21).

Although museums in China continue to rely on state funding as their main source and are therefore overtly express political influences (p.9), the recent museum expansion has been driven by new factors, especially the rise of “a leisure economy as part of the market reforms of the 1990s” and “a global rise in museums caused by growing consumer markets caused by growing consumer markets for culture” (p.21-22). In 2011 the National Museum of China held a temporary exhibition on Louis Vuitton, through which the state is eager to present a positive and modern image of China to both its own people and foreigners: “a chic urban China that is interconnected with the global metropolitan cultures” (p.2). Along with the emerging interest in cultural diversification and pluralization, museum development is facing a new “logic of the market” where commercialization of mass media and cultural industries are embracing “consumption, self-fulfillment, self-absorption, and cynicism” (p.8), philosophy of the popular entertainment that is “a far cry from the ideals of self-sacrifice propagated in the Mao-era mass

media”(p.8). Exhibitors are putting hours on making their exhibition “modern, sophisticated, and high-tech” (p.22), to appeal to the taste and interests of their visitors--or consumers.

It is under such historical and modern development that I became interested in exhibitions in contemporary Chinese society. What is important to point out is that almost all the art exhibitions in this research were not held in a form that is unique in the Chinese context. Museums in the traditional sense are usually defined with a variety of functions including collection, preservation, research, and exhibition, often built upon a core, permanent collection mainly through donation and purchase. In China, most of the cultural objects, as well as art pieces, are owned and organized by a limited number of national museums under the Chinese government, leaving other smaller, private organizations with limited resources. As a result, more and more venues, though with no permanent collections, rose with the increasing need of smaller, private exhibitions. Such phenomenon was also summarized by through the word choice in Chinese language. There were two different words for museum in Chinese, *bowuguan*, which is the museum in the traditional sense with historical and artistic artifacts, and *meishuguan*, which is only a site for exhibition--just a venue. With no permanent collection and corresponding functions, *meishuguan* is able to hold exhibitions of various themes and forms, often through collaboration or partnership with other organizations across the board. With a downplay in permanent collection and research, *meishuguan* is conveying a new perception on art exhibitions to the Chinese visitors with the sense of temporary and fast-changing but diverse themes and style.

The Middle Class in China

The concept of the middle class, according to John Smail (1994), originated in 18th century Europe, shortly after the start of the Industrial Revolution. Typically the middle class consist of four main white collar groups, including managers, specialized skilled workers, salespeople, and office workers, together accounting for the majority in social structures as a whole. However, various scholars found defining the Chinese middle class in this way, to be difficult as its historical development results in a lack of social cohesion among Chinese middle class (Li, Ren, Ying date). It has been argued that the formation of Chinese middle class did not take place until the “Reform and Opening-Up” in 1978, which eventually transformed Chinese society from a redistribution economy that is focused on power and authority to a market economy that is characterized by globalization and individualism. In *Privatizing China*, Zhang and Ong (2015) pointed out the transition where what used to be decided by the government and power now requires individual decision and encourages “self-enterprising” and “pursuit of personal glory” (p.40).

There are a number of Chinese phrases that can be connected to the western concept of middle class, including *zhongchan jieceng* (the middle stratum), *zhongchan jieji* (the middle income class), *xiaozi* (petty bourgeois), and *bailing* (white collar) (Ren, 2013). Li (2012) identifies four main kinds of people that consists of the Chinese middle class: traditional cadres and intellectuals, new middle class, employees of relatively good State-Owned Enterprises and joint-stock enterprises, and self-employed and private businessman. In particular, he pointed out the “new middle class” as “relatively young of age, usually highly educated, have new specialized knowledge, speak foreign languages, are adept at computers, usually work for foreign-funded enterprises or new industries” (p.120).

Alternative theories of class have been developed by E.P. Thompson and Pierre Bourdieu. E.P. Thompson (2001) argued that the concept of class is not only economic but also cultural, as it rises from human relationship, where “a group of people attempt to articulate their interests and stage their dispositions” (Ong and Zhang, 2015, p.67). Similarly, Chinese middle class might attempt to establish a shared perception of their class and status by performing cultural characteristics through consumption and lifestyle. Bourdieu’s (1984) argument on habitus focused on how socio-cultural relationships are cultivated and embodied, which to some extent correlates with economic capital. In this case, buying certain products and attending certain activities can be part of the habitus that organizes the definition of middle class taste and status. Studies of the Chinese middle class have identified the particular role of consumption and lifestyle in defining and maintaining its borders, especially in urban China. As Zhang and Ong (2015) stated, “What is central in the formation of middle-class subjects in China is the cultivation of a distinct “cultural milieu” based on taste, judgment, and the acquisition of cultural capital through consumption practices” (p. 80). The switch from objective economic feature to subjective and performative characteristics, they argued, is partially due to the difficulty in gauging one’s wealth simply through occupation. Stephanie Donald and Yi Zheng, for example, discovered the “cultivation of middle-class taste”(Ong and Zhang, 2015, p.30) through practices like reading, travelling, and education choices. Many middle class Chinese emphasize their cultural and behavioral characteristics as the defining feature of their identity, which is fundamentally based on their economic well-being. Such “self-conscious middle class aesthetics or ‘taste structure’” (p.35) has become an important way in constructing self-identity and winning social recognition. Ying concluded that “income is seen as the prerequisite, and culture

as the defining point of middle class identity” (p.40). In conclusion, middle class in China is not only defined in terms of economic status but more importantly through the spheres of lifestyle, tastes, and community, which “has to be constantly cultivated and performed through everyday consumption activities” (p.22).

### Research Method

This thesis expands on original, ethnographic research I conducted in summer of 2018 and winter of 2019. After receiving CITI certification and IRB approval, I visited a number of different exhibitions in Beijing and Shanghai, all of which were labeled as the most popular or must see exhibitions on social media and located in *meishuguan* or temporary exhibition space. I went to each exhibition as an ordinary visitor and conducted participant observation, taking detailed notes on both the behaviors of other visitors as well as the content and design of the exhibition. According to Harry Wolcott (2001), fieldwork is “a form of inquiry in which one immerses oneself personally in the ongoing social activities of some individual or group for the purposes of research” (p.66). The method of participant observation allowed me to see from the visitors’ eyes and understand how they make sense of the content and their experience. In terms of data collection and recording, I took photos of the exhibition (when photography was allowed) and also hand drew maps in my notebook to remember the route that most visitors took. In addition, I used my cellphone as the main note-taking devices for whatever I saw, heard, or thought during my experience. My cell phone not only offered great convenience but also helped me blend in better as many visitors were also using their cell phone to take photos, text friends, or browse. In addition to participant observation, I did 6 to 10 semi-structured interviews, asking visitors about their experiences and opinions. To avoid interrupting other visitors’ experience, I

only approached visitors when they were sitting in the resting area, stairs and other connection point, or at the exit. Those interviews offered a wide range of important insights on their understanding of the topic and the exhibition, as well as their personal backgrounds and experience outside the exhibition.

### Outline of Thesis

In Chapter 1, I focus on the topic of knowledge and how it is exhibited and reconstructed in the exhibition space. Many visitors brought in their previous knowledge regarding the exhibition topic and were eager to share with their peers and were actively reconstructing their knowledge by incorporating the new perspective offered by the exhibition. Within this cycle of exhibiting and reconstructing their knowledge, especially cosmopolitan knowledge, I examined how the possession and development of cosmopolitan knowledge is closely tied to their middle class experience and values. In specific, I recognized that their previous knowledge was often made accessible through their middle-class experiences like studying abroad and traveling, and that, by choosing to go to an exhibition and exposing themselves to another perspective, they were actively involving in continuous development of their worldview and critical thinking, which continue to distinguish them from the rest.

In Chapter 2, I looked into the interaction between the exhibits and visitors. While the Internet offers another access to the cosmopolitan knowledge discussed in the first chapter, many visitors were not satisfied with the possession of knowledge but rather choose to go to the exhibition on their own, in search of a more direct, physically and mentally, interaction with the art. I examined how visitors interact with exhibits through watching, playing, and participating in workshops, and identified how different interactions create different senses of experience using

the framework of resonance and wonder by Greenblatt (1991). In addition to recognizing the existence of resonance and wonder, I also supported Greenblatt's argument that the sense of wonder can lead to resonance to form a more engaging interaction. Furthermore, the pursuit of experience, including bodily interaction with and emotional response to the exhibits, reflects the rising Chinese middle class value of individual experience and cultivation self-development.

In Chapter 3, I discussed the practice of photo-taking, which has been a major activity in exhibitions, thanks to technologies like digital camera and smartphone. I especially looked into pop up museums where visitors are actively crafting their experience through designing the scene, posing, and taking photos. Most visitors fall into one of two groups that I identified: groups using smartphone camera or SLR camera. Through the comparison of role-playing, photo commenting, and interaction with other people in the space, I explored how the two groups differ in their interest in their visiting experiences. In specific, SLR camera users are more invested in producing high-quality photos while smartphone users enjoy the process of playing with the group. Despite of the differences, both group, I argue, were actively involved in the production of creating their own experience and producing high quality photos, reflecting the middle class pursuit of quality, do-it-yourself lifestyle, and self presentation.

## CHAPTER 1: KNOWLEDGE



Figure 2. Visitors in the exhibition of Van Cleef & Arpels. July 27, 2018.

[*“Van Cleef & Arpels: When Elegance Meets Art.” Today Art Museum, Beijing. ]*

*Brought by The Musée des Arts Décoratifs, or MAD, from Paris, the Van Cleef and Arpels: When Elegance Meets Art exhibition presented hundreds of High Jewelry creations from both the Van Cleef & Arpels Collection and private collections (Van Cleef & Arpel, 2018) . A black rope chain hanging all the way from the ceiling formed a curved path, which visitors can follow to take a turn and discover hidden spaces where jewelries were shining inside a bell-shaped display cabinet. Sounds of birds and water came from the dark ceiling, immersing visitors in a mysterious atmosphere. “Do you remember the story of the lost necklace? It’s a lady who had to pay for a necklace that she lost” “Yea...and she eventually found out that it was fake?” A young couple, shortly after entering the exhibition and looking at a few pieces of jewelries, together*

*recalled the full story of Necklace by Maupassant (1884). The short novel was in their high school textbook and was taught with regards to the dangers of greediness and vanity (爱慕虚荣).*

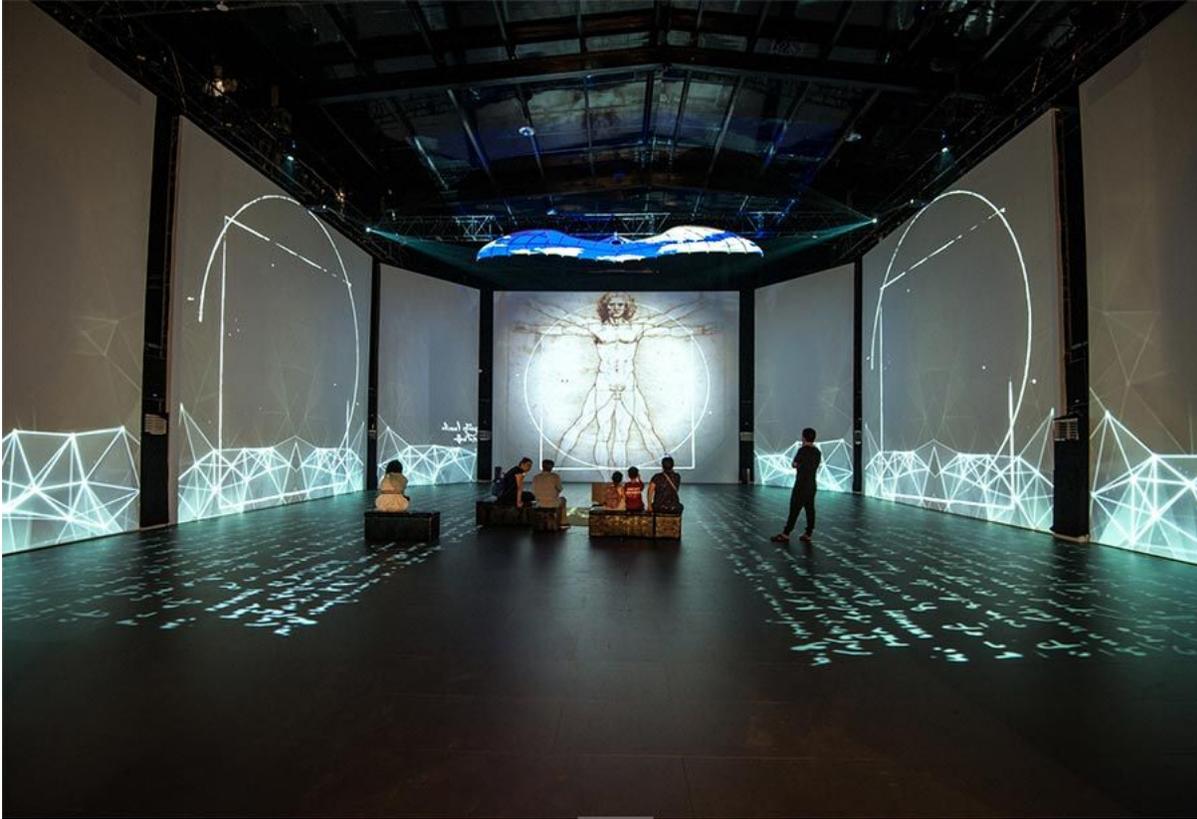
The high jewelries on display deserved admiration and appreciation due to their aesthetic, historical, and cultural values. For this young couple, they were also so far away from their ordinary lives, as price for a current product starts from thousands of dollars, not to mention the antiques by private collections. They managed to create a connection through the famous story, where Mathilde, the lower-to-middle class lady in the story, resonated with their admiration and distance to the high jewelries. The tragedy of Mathilde was both a warning and reassurance to the young couple: that there were high risks under the glamorous rich lives and that it is best to stay at where they are. Reflecting on the story, the luxury necklaces and rings in the exhibition were not only unapproachable because of the exorbitant cost but also unattractive because of the danger behind them. Looking at the jewelry creations that were unfamiliar and unapproachable, the young couple attached new meanings to them by reflecting on a story they learned in high school and the lesson that the story entails.

Throughout my visit in the Van Cleef exhibition, I noticed a variety of conversations among visitors: the formation of minerals and gems that people learned from geology class, the iconic zip necklace of the brand in the 1930s that they saw from a magazine, or the metalsmith activity they participated in at a workshop. What those conversations share in common is that they are not about what the visitors just learned from the exhibition, but about what they already knew before the visit. Exhibits most often trigger conversations when they remind people of their previous knowledge, and visitors, through the conversation, manage to create their own

connection to the exhibit. Similarly, in a study on digital kiosks in the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, Anna Reading (2003) discovered that people tend to lose interest in the lesser known aspects of the Holocaust and prefer to interact with more familiar topics like Anne Frank and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp. She concluded that visitors might extend or challenge their knowledge about Holocaust in a limited way but are more inclined to “‘what they already know’ from what is established within the socially inherited memory of the Holocaust of their cultural and national context” (p.79). Similarly, in this chapter, I am interested in what kinds of knowledge are referred to by the visitors as a way to connect to the exhibit, how this knowledge shapes the visiting experience, and what the knowledge tells about the visitors, their experiences, and their social class. In *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Carol Duncan (1995) used Turner’s (1966) discussion of liminality to define art museums as “a marked-off, ‘liminal’ zone of time and space in which visitors, removed from the concerns of their daily, practical lives, open themselves to a different quality of experience” (p.).

In my study, I argue that the visiting experience in an art exhibition is inseparable to the visitors’ life and identity. On the other hand, I explore how visitors reconstruct their previous knowledge and fashion a new understanding of themselves and their society, primarily through the liminal experience of the art exhibition. Taking both stages together, I point out how the art exhibition is closely related to contemporary Chinese middle-class aspiration, as both the possession of old knowledge and the formation of new understanding are made possible through middle-class experiences and lifestyles.

### Referral to Old Knowledge



*Figure 3. A World Tour of Optic Artistry Show- Tribute to Da Vinci. Retrieved from <https://www.247tickets.com/t/tribute-da-vinci-shanghai>*

*[“Tribute to Da Vinci: Global Light and Shadow Art Experience.” AMG LIVE, Beijing. ]*

*The exhibition was co-curated by directors from Museum Leonardino in Italy and the Central Academy of Fine Art in China, featuring immersive projections of hundreds of art works, virtual reality and demonstration of mechanical design, and restoration works of paintings and manuscripts. It was the second year Wang worked in Beijing and this time her parents came to visit from their small town in the north. She decided to take her parents here to experience to high-tech in the capital city. In the immersive projection room, she and her parents stood in the back watching the display of Da Vinci’s work. She explained to them that there was no original*

*work in this exhibition but her mom still took a picture of Mona Lisa on the projection screen, the only one that she recognized and could name. Later her dad pointed at the wing-like figure hanging from the ceiling, and Wang explained to them about the flying machine, including the principle of biomimicry behind the design. Later she explained to me that she learned about the flying machine from an article her colleague in Beijing shared on Wechat. She looked very happy talking about how she could teach her parents things about art and show them how much she had grown working in the big city.*

Unlike the short story by Maupassant, knowledge about western artists is barely covered in textbooks for students, especially for someone like Wang who grew up in a small town in the suburbs of Beijing. When she finally got the chance to work and live in a big city, she was exposed to not only the material life with city infrastructure, food, and entertainment but also the fusion of global information and the interest in arts. A colleague of hers shared an article about Da Vinci on Wechat, one of the biggest social media platforms in China. Knowing a colleague who is interested in Da Vinci and having access to the shared article about artists through social media are closely tied to her being in a social circle of urban youth. To some extent, the article and the information about Da Vinci indicates an aesthetic interest and global awareness that Wang did not have before she moved and that she aspires to connect to by clicking on the article.

Wang's experience in the exhibition was mainly shaped by her recognizing a work and explaining the design to her parents, like the flying machine. She brought into the exhibition with what she had learned from the article and her colleague and used her previous knowledge to connect to the exhibits. At the same time, the exhibits that she recognized were transformed into an acknowledgement of her efforts and growth towards the urban intellectual and aesthetic life.

In this process, her parents, who were pleased to see their daughter's growth in knowledge, were a symbol of her past before her new life in Beijing. By juxtaposing the old life with the new self right at the exhibition, she was able to see and demonstrate the change and used it as a proof and even further motivation to the new urban life that brings her access and interest to global art, which is one aspect of the middle-class lifestyle and character that a new urbanite is working hard to achieve.

While Wang is a new urbanite striving towards the middle-class life, there is another story about a middle-class student who shared his study abroad experience in France as a way to connect to peers and reinforce his status.



Figure 4. Visitors in the Monet Exhibition. August 2, 2018.

*[“Impression Monet 3.0” The China Millennium Monument, Beijing]*

*This is the third year that Impression Monet is on display in Beijing, this time featuring hundreds of digitized or duplicated paintings by Claude Monet in eight sections, designed as classic scenes of his art or life stage. I met a pair of college students who were both from Beijing: Qiao, a young woman studying history in Beijing, and Han, a young man studying art history in the U.S.. While many visitors came to the exhibition and realized that there was no authentic art work but only duplication, feeling somewhat cheated or misled, Qiao and Han seemed to have a good idea before coming here. “I went to the second exhibition in Shanghai last year during a family vacation, so I just want to check out this new series in Beijing this year,” said Qiao. “I study art history and I’m somewhat interested in the quality of the duplications, as I have seen some of the real works in Europe when I was studying abroad in France last semester, ” said Han. They shared with me that their favorite part was all the conversations they had about what they knew about the paintings, other artists they like, and, most importantly, Han’s exciting experience abroad. “I think what really matters for an exhibition is its huatidu (the degree of topic)...because nowadays there really isn’t much to do in Beijing besides eating out and watching movies...but in an exhibition like this we can talk about our experiences and other things,” said Qiao.*

Similar to Wang, Qiao and Han also went into the exhibition with what they already knew before the visit--what they have learned in class at students, and, more importantly, what they had experienced through traveling. While they did appreciate the description of Monet’s whole life, from which they also learned something new, they spent most of their time in front of paintings that they recognized and had a lot of talk about and passing by many that they were not

as familiar with. The conversation often drifted apart from the painting and art to other personal stories: in addition to Han's trip in Europe and Qiao's trip to Shanghai, they also mentioned their high school graduation trip to Japan upon seeing *La Japonaise*, a painting of Camille Monet in Japanese Costume (Museum of Fine Art Boston, n.d.). They actively formed their own visiting experience by connecting exhibits to their previous knowledge and in this process, all the stories and conversations together made a recollection of their memory as well as their relationship, which started in high school with an interest in art, history, and traveling.

While most Chinese are able to afford a trip abroad, a four-year undergraduate education in the U.S. private college and one exchange semester in France is still accessible to only middle-class families like Han's. Their education and traveling provide them with broad exposure to art and international vision, to which people like Wang aspire to. Going to art exhibitions allow them to be immersed in an environment full of ideas and things that they are familiar with from their middle-class experience, and go beyond everyday life and connect to each other through quality conversations.

Together Wang and Qiao and Han represent a common feature I discovered in the exhibitions, that many visitors connect to the exhibits primarily through what they already knew before the visit. They bring with them previous knowledge that they gained from people around them and from their own experience, which is inseparable to their ordinary life and social circle. The article from Wang's colleague and Han's abroad experience in Europe both indicate an interest in Western art and exposure to international culture, which are closely associated to the middle-class lifestyle and experience. They reinforced their current or aspired middle-class status through the possession of old knowledge and further encourage the cultivation of such

knowledge and interest by going to art exhibitions for more exposure and knowledge. In the following section, I explore how visitors use the visiting experience as a way to form new understanding back on their old knowledge, especially by obtaining a cosmopolitan view that further develop their middle-class vision.

### Fashioning A New Understanding



Figure 5. Exhibit of shoes in the shoe exhibition. August 7, 2018.

[*“Shoes: Pleasure and Pain,” The Red, Beijing*]

*Organized by Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the exhibition “Shoes: Pleasure and Pain” presented around 200 pairs of shoes across historical periods and cultural contexts to demonstrate the variation of shoes’ history, status, and design. Visitors can discover the Cinderella crystal shoe by Swarovski, the silver toe-knob paduka for Indian weddings, the high heels used in photography project that could only be worn by crawling, the NOVA shoes by United Nude created from rotational moulding, and so on. The exhibit that received the most impression and comment, according to my interviews, was the bound feet shoes from China in*

*late 1800s. “It’s very cool to see so many different shoes from different countries to be here at the same time,” said a young woman who encountered the exhibition with a group of friends while shopping. “We talked a lot about the Chinese shoes...they are just so small you know,” she looked at her friends, who were nodding to her comments, “It’s my first time seeing them aside from pictures in the textbook...maybe I did in the national history museum...”*

While the shoes themselves are officially called *chanzuxie*, translated as bound feet shoes, most visitors referred to them the three-inch gold feet (三寸金莲). The phrase is used often in old literatures describing the small feet of women, sometimes smaller than 10 centimeters, through feet binding. The practice of foot binding developed in ancient China because of the emperor’s interest in the beauty of hoof-like foot shape, and eventually developed into an aesthetic and social expectation of women across nation to be considered marriageable and popular. The practice was not abolished until the 19-20th century, when people realized the physical harm on the feet caused by the practice and received more support from western ideologies on natural feet. The tradition eventually became a cultural relic, symbolizing the backwardness of the country and the oppression to women because of gender inequality.

By using the phrase “three-cùn gold feet” instead of “bound feet shoes,” the group indicates a stronger association of the deformed human body instead of the material design of the shoes. Talking about the tradition and history alone, their voice and face turned serious with a somewhat negative attitude. By contrast, the conversation about the bound feet shoes itself was filled with the same sense of discovery, surprise, and excitement as when they look at and learn about other exhibit. In other words, the physical objects of bound feet shoes lose its negative historical connotation but was seen with new light of discovery and interest that belong to a

visiting experience. When it is displayed along with all other bizarre designs, it became just one of them, all born out of certain historical and cultural context. Although visitors brought with them their previous knowledge about the bound feet shoes, they established a cosmopolitan perspective through the juxtaposition of different exhibits and fashioned a new understanding of their own society and history, with more acceptance and a sense of interest and wonder.

The exhibition was located in Taikooli, Sanlitun, a very prosperous commercial center concentrated with foreign clothing brands, foreign foods, and even great number of foreigners. While most people encountered the exhibition during their shopping trip, the international element of the exhibition aligns with their interest and pursuit of global fashion, taste, and vision. Although the visitors brought with them their former understanding of the bound feet shoes, which helped them connect to the specific exhibit, they fashioned a new understanding of the shoes and the Chinese history behind, because of the diverse display of shoes from different cultures. The exhibition became a place where visitors can think beyond their home culture and history but establish a cosmopolitan view, treating different cultures with curiosity and respect. In the last example, I talk about an exhibition dedicated to an international celebrity can also inspire reflections on the definition of beauty across time and culture.



Figure 6. Photos of Hepburn shown in the exhibition. December 16, 2018.

[*“Beyond Time: Audrey Hepburn,” Chaoyang Joy City, Beijing*]

*In the center plaza of an indoor shopping mall, a two-floor temporary architecture was set up for an exhibition dedicated to Audrey Hepburn. The building was painted with black and white to honor Hepburn’s fashion style and there were small sections throughout the building displaying posters, dresses, and movie scenes that are related to Hepburn. Many young girls, well dressed up, were busy taking photos with the artistically designed scenes while appreciating Hepburn’s beauty. There I met Huang, who told me with her eyes shining with light that she has been such a big fan of Hepburn: she learned about Hepburn from her mom who also admires her a lot and she had seen most of her movies for several times as well as her biography. Though enjoyed her visit, she shared one of her suggestion for the exhibition in including more photos of Hepburn in*

*her later years. “Most people like her because first and foremost she is beautiful, and some of those who have learned a little more about her know she is exceptionally kind and philanthropic, but she also has her problems like smoking if you go a little further,” she said, “As a public figure and celebrity it is her job to main a good image, but I hope this exhibition is a chance for people to know her a person 有血有肉...for example, I was a little disappointed that there is almost no picture of her when she was old. I think she was still gorgeous even when she aged, just like this photo (she showed me her lock screen photo on her phone). Nowadays in China most people think of beauty as young and fresh but that’s not it. There is so much more about beauty. I wish one day we can change the stereotype or understanding of what beauty means and honestly Hepburn would be a great proof.”*

For visitors like Huang, the exhibits mean much more to them because of their extensive knowledge beyond the exhibition. She was excited to talk about the old posters and the content of the movie to her friend and even tell the story behind a photoshoot that she learned from books and online. While she brought her deep knowledge and admiration of Hepburn which shaped her visiting experience as well as her friend’s, the exhibition on the other hand brought a different perspective on the table with a connection to the contemporary Chinese society. In a room full of CD covers, there was only one photo of Hepburn in her old age. The photo not only aroused Huang’s admiration of her personal admiration but also reminded her of the absence of similar appreciation among the young visitors around her. There is indeed an obsession on a certain style of beauty that is closely related to young age--fresh skin quality, no wrinkles, fair skin color, and so on, and Huang felt the inconsistency between what she saw in the aged

Hepburn and such aesthetic trend, between the sense of beauty that Hepburn embodied decades ago and the pursuit of another beauty in the contemporary society.

“Exhibitions have a sense of history and culture that you don’t usually experience on a daily basis,” said Huang when we were talking about exhibition in general, “when we go out to restaurants and shopping malls, most of our conversations are no more than the daily and personal things (*jiachang liduan*). In an exhibition like this, you see something ‘beyond time’ just as the title suggests.” Huang represents a growing trend or need of the rising middle-class, who are no longer satisfied with their individual lives but are pining for stronger connection with the outside world and the historical world.

Both the young woman in the shoe exhibition and Huang in the Hepburn exhibition experienced a transition where the previous knowledge they brought in with them--the bound feet shoes or the beauty of Hepburn when she aged--was reconstructed in the exhibition space when associated with something new--the variety shoe designs from other cultures and time periods and the lack of acknowledge of the aged beauty among young urban visitors in China. Through the juxtaposition and exposure to information across time and culture, they established a more cosmopolitan view, which was incorporated into their old knowledge and established new understanding of the topic. As Huang has argued, such a cosmopolitan reconstruction of knowledge is often absent in the ordinary conversations in a restaurant or shopping mall. By going to the exhibitions and being open to a different perspective, visitors like the young woman and Huang not only gain new knowledge but also advance their cosmopolitan vision that distinguish them as middle-class from the rest.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the role of knowledge, especially the flow of knowledge among exhibition visitors. On the one hand, from the story of Wang recognizing the flying machine that she read from an online article, and Han relating the duplication of Monet's paintings to the real paintings he saw in Europe, we can see how visitors often bring their previous knowledge to the exhibition and certain exhibits become meaningful when relate to what they already know. On the other hand, from the young woman viewing Chinese bound feet shoes with curiosity in cultural diversity instead of national criticism, and Huang realizing the absence of aged Hepburn that indicates a problematic understanding of beauty, we can see how visitors fashion a new understanding of their old knowledge by incorporating a different perspective brought in by the exhibition. This two-stage flow of knowledge can be used as another interpretation of Duncan's definition of exhibition as a liminal, ritual space. While visitors bring in their old knowledge which is closely related to their personal experience and social status, the exhibition transforms the old knowledge into new understanding by introducing a more historical and cultural perspective, which, according to Huang, is not available during ordinary activities like eating out or shopping.

I continue to argue that visitors' experience is inseparable to their middle-class experience and value. Wang's knowledge of the flying machine comes from her new network while working in a big city as a white-collar, and Han's knowledge of art and painting comes from his study abroad experience in both the U.S. and France, the tuition and living expenses of which are only affordable to middle and upper class families. In other words, it was their middle-class experience that gives access to the knowledge that they were able to obtain before

the exhibition. In addition, by sharing their knowledge to their family members or friends, they reinforce a image of themselves with not only knowledge but access to such knowledge--as Wang trying to prove to her parents about her working in a big city and Han trying to connect to his girlfriends and continue to contribute to their conversation. On the second half of the knowledge flow, what the young woman in the shoe exhibition and Huang in Hepburn's exhibition share in common is that the exhibition provide them with a different perspective, across time and culture, that are not common in their daily life: viewing all kinds of shoes from different countries and in different ages juxtaposed in the same space, or thinking about beauty from an international celebrity in the 1960s to the contemporary Chinese society. For them the exhibition itself is another source of knowledge with a heavy emphasis on cosmopolitan view, a pursuit of which further extend their identity that are associated with middle-class values.

## CHAPTER 2: EXPERIENCE



Figure 7. Russell Young: Superstar. Retrieved from <http://www.mamsh.org/201820.html>

[“Russell Young: Superstar.” Modern Art Museum, Shanghai.]

*Walking through a hallway with black and white photos of historical moments in American history, I took a turn around the corner and was overwhelmed by a roll of photo booths, each painted in a bright color like pink or yellow. In front of each photo booth was a human size touch screen with the camera view of the photo booth, just like a giant cell phone in selfie mode. Attracted by the color and curious about the screen, I walked into a photo booth and as soon as my figure showed up in the camera screen, it started a 10-second countdown. Then a photo of me showed up on the screen with a QR code for me to scan so that I could save my photo in my phone. I was playing with each photo booth since they had different background colors and camera angles until I finally got tired and was ready to move on. I was going through each photos with my friend with so much excitement that we didn’t realize we were already on the second floor. Right after we lifted our heads, we saw four small screens, hanging on the wall, showing photos from the photo booths--selfies that were taken by us and other visitors just a few*

*minutes ago. “That’s so cool!” My friend ran over and started commenting on each of our selfies, laughing at the bad ones with embarrassment and appreciating the good ones with pride.*

Russell Young is a pop artist known for his large-scale silk screen paintings of cultural icons, and the exhibition in Shanghai, named *Superstar*, featured some of his most significant works, especially celebrities from the second half of the twentieth century to today. The activity that I participated in, named *Fifteen Minutes of Fame*, was a part of this exhibition that aimed to invite visitors into “experiencing their own fifteen minutes of fame and becoming a part of Young’s critique of popular culture” (Halcyon Gallery, 2018). The photo booths were set up on the first floor for visitors to produce their own pop artwork, and their photos would be shown on the screen on the second floor for fifteen minutes. It not only allowed visitors to be part of the exhibition and leave their own mark but also inspired reflections on the topic of fame as visitors appreciated Young’s artwork on celebrities during the rest of their visit. As my friend shared with me after our visit, “Life is so short. Your photos are gonna be replaced by someone else’s soon, no matter how much time you put in creating that perfect photo...and many things are out of your control, like we took so many photos and some are just terrible...my eyes were closed in one and the other one I was still talking when the photo was taken, but when it’s done, that’s it. You’ll see on the screen anyway and you just can’t change it.” As a visitor myself, I experienced the curiosity in participating in the activity, the excitement in discovering my own mark in the exhibition, and the reflection on both our own experiences and celebrities featured in the artwork.

This is just one of many examples of activities that contemporary exhibitions are creating to offer visitors more engaging interactions. In this chapter, I move to the exploration of

interactions and embodied experiences happening in the exhibition spaces, which range from passive viewing to engaged activities. In particular, I explore how visitors interact with the exhibits and how the interactions shape their experiences and reflect their goals and interests. While the first chapter found exhibitions to be a place where visitors present their cosmopolitan knowledge and transform it into new understandings, in this chapter, through the lenses of interaction, I focus on visitors' bodily interactions with the exhibits and the emotional experiences generated from those interactions. That is, for many Chinese visitors, it is not enough to just gain information about artistic and aesthetic creation and gain entry into middle class through corresponding knowledge. Rather, one must actively cultivate a personal relationship with the exhibits through bodily experiences and emotional connection as a middle class practice. Thus, I argue that the interest of experiences in exhibitions, both bodily and emotional, reflects the growing pursuit and cultivation of personal happiness, expression, and development among the Chinese middle class, which rose along with the rising attention towards individuality and personhood.

Such transition towards individual experience and development was well discussed in *Deep China*. In the book, a group of scholars discussed the transformation of morality and personhood in contemporary China through the lenses of economy, sexual desires, depression, suicide, and many more. For example, Yan Yunxiang (2011) highlighted the shift "from collective moral experience of responsibility and self-sacrifice to a more individualistic morality that emphasizes rights and self-cultivation" (p.10). Marked by the market reforms in the early 1990s by Deng Xiaoping, China is becoming a middle-class society where "the meaning of life has been redefined from the individual point of view" (p.10). Through interviews with young

people from both urban centers like Shanghai and agricultural villages like Xiajia Village, Yan examined the new life aspirations revolving around “the pursuit of individual freedom, prosperity, and happiness” (p.16). Yan pointed out how Chinese have been actively engaged in self-development through practices like personal memoirs, Internet-based chat rooms, postretirement education, volunteerism, and many more. Going to art exhibitions, similarly, is another practice that Chinese people are involved in to develop their subjectivity and taste. My exploration on art exhibitions will further contribute to the argument that contemporary Chinese society is seeing an increasing emphasis on “development of the self, moral education of the individual, and the cultivation of a richly affective personality” (p.29).

To study exhibition experiences, I use the framework of resonance and wonder by Stephen Greenblatt (1991) in *Exhibiting Cultures*. Greenblatt defined resonance as “the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand” (p.42). Using the example of the State Jewish Museum in Prague, he explained how the the synagogues art and the historic synagogues buildings created the sense of resonance by going beyond the materials and reaching to memories and reflections that were aroused from the artifacts (p.45-47). On the other hand, he defined wonder as “the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke and exalted attention” (p.42). Referring to the Museum of Modern Art in New York as an example, he explained how the design of space and use of boutique lighting elevate the exhibit as if everything but the object is excluded, and the masterpiece aroused the sense of wonder but generating “surprise, delight, admiration, and intimation of genius” (p.53).

Then, he discussed the new Musée d'Orsay, where some of the masterpieces in the Jeu de Paume and the Louvre were transferred and juxtaposed with far less well known paintings. Although the museum was very successful in creating a group of diverse and representative works for French cultural history, Greenblatt argued that the visual, aesthetic pleasure--namely wonder--was sacrificed as the masterpieces are mediated by the contextualization and unable to be viewed and appreciated adequately. At the end of the article, Greenblatt argued that “the impact of most exhibitions is likely to be enhanced if there is a strong initial appeal to wonder, a wonder that then leads to the desire for resonance” (p.54).

In this chapter, I examine Greenblatt's argument about the relationship between wonder and resonance, and explore what the discussion entails about the values of the Chinese middle class. I first discuss how I recognized the experience of wonder through my research and then the experience of resonance, especially how each experience originate from the bodily and/or emotional interactions between visitors and exhibits. Taking both sides together, I then discuss how the experience of wonder, according to my analysis, holds more fundamental value over resonance and how it demonstrates the rising Chinese middle class value of individual experience and cultivation.

## Wonder

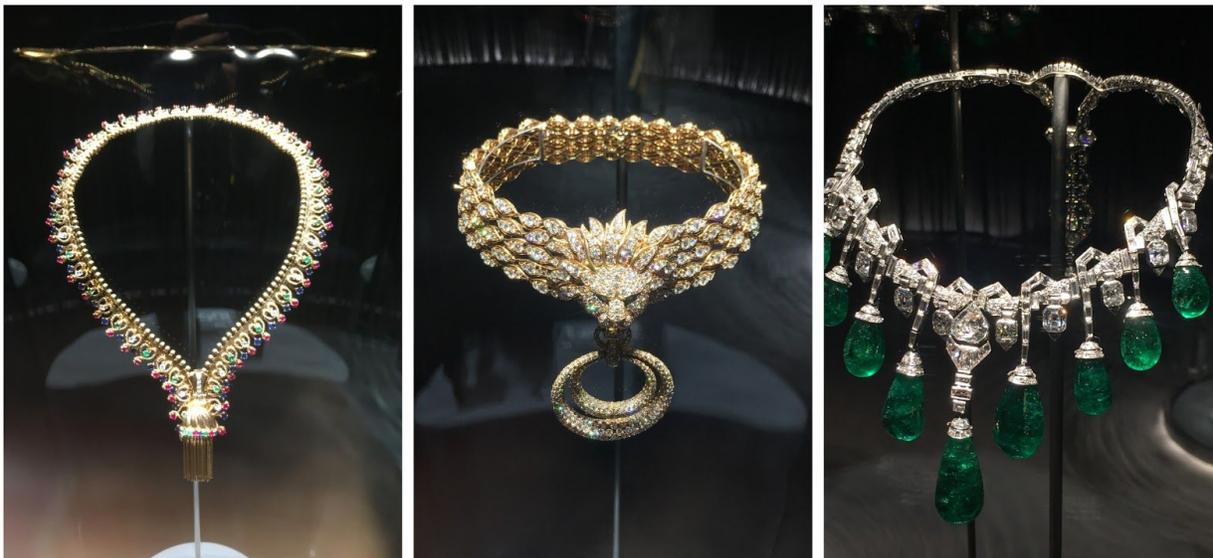


Figure 8. Exhibits from Van Cleef & Arpels exhibition. July 29, 2018

[*“Van Cleef & Arpels: When Elegance Meets Art.” Today Art Museum, Beijing. ]*

*“Wow,” Fang, a woman in her late thirties, couldn’t help expressing her fascination towards the exhibit, the Collaret Necklace (1929) originally owned by Princess Faiza of Egypt (citation). She laid her hand against the display window, looking at each emerald bead. A few other visitors also turned their heads toward her, as her exclamation was somewhat loud compared to the quiet exhibition environment. Turning to the other side of the display cabinet, Fang said to her friend with excitement in a high pitch, “Oh that’s the famous zip necklace!” Following her voice, her friend walked from another cabinet and Fang started explaining the mechanism of the necklace, as it can be turned into a bracelet.*

Fang, though somewhat dramatically, exemplified the emotional reaction towards the luxurious jewelry pieces, full of shock, fascination, and admiration. The light effect, along with the quality of the material, made each jewelry shine with full light and to the purest color.

“Which woman does not love jewelry?” Fang replied when I was chatting with her in the gift shop and asked her why she went to this exhibition, her eyes lit up as if there were emeralds shining from inside. Although she demonstrated her knowledge by recognizing the famous zip necklace and explaining the history and design to her friend, she argued that no knowledge is needed to enjoy the beauty: “Appreciation does not require knowledge. It’s the same as listening to music.” Here she is referring to the experience of listening to music, during which we enjoy the piece not because of the composition and techniques but because it makes us happy or moved. Similarly, her exclaiming the beauty of the necklace does not require knowledge of the history or the craftsmanship; rather, she was touched by its beauty and was attracted with surprise and attachment.

Another young woman I met in the gift shop, Yuan, offered similar comment. While she came to the exhibition primarily because she is studying jewelry in college, she also expressed the importance of personal experience: “It does not matter if you are professional or not. People come for different reasons. What’s more important is the feelings and emotion.” She gave the example of an old couple she saw in the exhibition. “There was a very old couple in the exhibition. I’m not sure if you have noticed or not. They look like residents from the nearby community. I was so moved when I saw them looking at each piece of jewelry. In my opinion, even if the papa could not afford to let the grandma own the luxury, at least now when they are old but still together, they can share the happiness in appreciating the jewelries together, and that’s what really matters.” As a student who is yet to support her own life and become one of the middle income strata, Yuan, through her interpretation and comments on the old couple,

reflected her aspiration for life that focuses on experiences and happiness, and such pursuit of happiness is shared by many current or yet-to-be young Chinese middle class.

Another visitor I interviewed pointed out that she had seen photos of the jewelries online but this time she came for the actual object. In other words, it is not enough to know of the exhibits but rather she wanted to physically see the treasure and experience the emotional reaction in front of the beautiful pieces. What Fang experienced when she could not help exclaiming in front of the emerald necklace, what Yuan felt moved by seeing the old couple smiling at each other in the exhibition, and what the other visitor was looking for through going to the exhibition, is what Greenblatt defined as the power of wonder. They experienced the shock, the fascination, and the admiration upon seeing the jewelries, and it was such emotion that stays within their memory and that goes beyond the knowledge of the object. Through the physical watching of and emotional reaction to the jewelries, visitors cultivated a personal connection with the exhibit and enriched themselves with not only the knowledge but also the emotional appreciation and memories.



*Figure 9. Thousands of people came to the opening ceremony of Niki's Wonderland, will you come with us? Retrieved from*

*<http://www.todayartmuseum.com/ennewsdetails.aspx?year=2018&id=359&type=news>*

*[“Niki de Saint Phalle: Legendary Female Artist of the 20th Century and Her Wonderland.”*

*Today Art Museum, Beijing.]*

*Walking into the second floor, I entered a hall full of Nanas, one of the most well-known series of Niki de Saint Phalle , who aimed to express the beauty of women through oversize statues. Every Nana is designed with exaggerations of women’s body shape and joyful poses, with the signature big breasts and hips painted with bright color and pattern. Walking towards the big Nana on the right, whose breasts were painted as beautiful flowers, I noticed a big mirror right behind it, reflecting the big buttocks also painted as flowers as well as my own reflection, right next to the statue. Once I walked away, I noticed a young man who was also attracted by the mirror and started walking around the statue and playing with the reflection in the mirror. He stood right in the middle of the Nana with each flower butt cheek on his side; then he took a step left and stood*

*with his hands on the hips, trying to see if he was wide enough to cover the flower on the butt cheek; then he walked to the front of the Nana and only showed his upper body as if he was peeking and laughed as his small figure in the mirror compared to the Nana; walking clockwise he came back to the back of the Nana again, bending over to imitate the posture of the Nana.*

The mirror right behind the Nana, in addition to reminding visitors of the backside of the statue, was also an incentive for interaction, just like the giant selfie machine in the exhibition I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter. It allows visitors to see themselves from a second person perspective, and more importantly, in the same space with the exhibit. The young man used the mirror as a guide to interact with the Nana and experience the spatial relationship between him and the artwork. At one point he was extending his arms to see if he could cover the width of the Nana, and he looked so small compared to the giant statue and as if he was her son. The idea of Nana statues was originally inspired by a pregnant friend of the artists and was designed to provoke the appreciation of woman's body and motherhood. It looked like the young man was playing with the statues and exploring the sizes, shapes, and color, realizing Niki's original goal of making them approachable and fun. I was so curious to learn about the young man's opinion; unfortunately, he tried to evade my interview, commenting that he did not understand art and that he was just there to experience it (体验一下).

An art student that I later talked to offered a different perspective. Ying learned about this exhibition from her fellow art students and she was exceptionally satisfied with her experience learning about the artists and appreciating the work. Interestingly, her favorite piece was also the big Nana with which the young man was playing with. When I asked her why it was her favorite, she replied with both confidence and a sort of lightheartedness, "It just feels very good (感觉非

常好)...it looks very natural and it makes me happy just to look at it...if I had a chance to take an art piece home, I am willing to put the Nana in my living room and look at it every day.” Seeing the surprise and confusion on my face, she continued to explain, “most lay people tend to think too much and are so determined to find the deep meaning of art...but to be honest artworks make a connection to us, first and foremost, through the presentation 形式 (or appearance)..it is a very direct thing...” Indirectly, she was affirming the young man who was playing with the status as a way of enjoying and appreciating art, while the young man himself negated his interaction as amateur.

The young man was denying his connection to the artwork probably because he was unable to find the deeper meaning. By contrast, the art student, with a more professional learning and training in art, tried to return to the most fundamental experience of feelings. In other words, the young man probably has not realized that simply by posing at the mirror and playing with the Nana, he has reached the core of art appreciation which is simply the feeling of joy and appreciation. Though not articulated, the interaction between the young man and the Nana was similar to Fang who was exclaiming at the delicate emerald necklace: both of them were attracted by the exhibit through the experience of wonder, even if they do not hold any professional knowledge. In addition, both the jewelry student and the art student, who possess more technical understanding of the subject, gave more credit to the importance of experience and feeling as appreciation of art and as the primary value of going to exhibitions. As discussed in *Deep China*, the active engagement in self-development not only involves learning and possessing knowledge but also cultivating individual subjectivity through experiences like going to art exhibitions and interacting with art pieces on a physical and emotional level.

## Resonance



*Figure 10. Exhibition workshop. Retrieved from <https://jingdaily.com/louis-vuitton-china-show/> [“Louis Vuitton: VOLEZ, VOGUEZ, VOYAGEZ.” Shanghai Exhibition Center, Shanghai.]*

*In downtown Shanghai, a free exhibition of the luxury brand Louis Vuitton caught the eyes of many young people. The exhibition opened in mid November, but when I came in late December, there were still a long line of visitors waiting to get in on a late Saturday evening. The exhibition, with the theme of “Fly, Sail, Traveling,” showcased the history of the House of Louis Vuitton from 1854 to the present. The exhibition space was broken down into small sections, each designed in a distinct theme like the desert or railway carriage. Towards the end of the exhibition, there was a live workshop, where professional artisans demonstrated their handmade production process, and visitors were invited to try out the process of decorating a leather tag for the bag, with tutorials by the artisan. While I was waiting in line for my turn, I noticed how*

*focused the young woman when it was her turn in the workshop. The leather tag was smaller than a quarter of her palm, and she had to use the heated stylus to trace an inner line roughly 2 mm from the outline. She had her head down, slowly moving the leather and the stylus. Then she lifted the leather with her left hand and used a thin brush to color the edge of the leather tag with the Louis Vuitton red. You knew her hands were shaking so badly from the shivering of the materials, and from time to time she would take a deep breathe, hold it, and give full attention to the process so that the thin brush could match on the edge. Her boyfriend was standing in front of the workshop table, filming the whole process with his phone. When she finished, she held the tag near her face and posed for her boyfriend with a big smile on her face. “It’s really not easy! My hands were shaking so badly and the line was not even at all...” she shared with me afterwards, “now I really want to save money and buy a LV bag, maybe the Nano series.”*

For Louis Vuitton, it is no doubt a successful marketing campaign to promote its product, its brand, and its culture. For visitors like the young woman, the workshop activity was probably the closest she ever got with Louis Vuitton, not through purchasing and possessing a product but through creating a personal connection and memory in the workshop. “It made me think of the documentaries I watched about craftsmanship (jiangxin). I really respect that.” she added. Through hands-on experiences, this exhibition was able to take visitors beyond the delicate products towards the time and effort behind the result, and the admirable skills and dedication of the all the artisans behind this brand, and even broader to many other luxury brands.

Hands-on experiences are an increasingly important component of contemporary art exhibits to keep visitors engaged and to encourage new insights into the subject of art. For example, I met an artist in the exhibition of Niki de Saint Phalle. A lady in her early thirtieth, she

explained how from a professional point of view physical interaction with and personal connection to the artwork were highly valued. “I have a friend of mine who teaches sculpture in college. He took his rising juniors to those art exhibitions, and many of them still could not fully grasp the charm of exhibitions. It really worries him that his students can only see a two dimensional view of the art piece but do not know how to feel the materials and their effect. Therefore I am a big fan of all the hands on activities in art galleries. Only when you have touched the materials and experienced the process can you truly understand the difficulty behind it. Those activities are truly spreading the spirit of art.” To some extent, her opinions on hand-on activities in art exhibition could explained the effect of the workshop in the Louis Vuitton exhibition, which offered an opportunity to the visitors to feel the material and struggle with the process. For the brand, it is through such bodily interaction that potential consumers can understand the rigor of the production process and the value of its craftsmanship.

In addition to calling on the rigorous craftsmanship behind the production, the workshop also managed to resonate with visitors over the perception of the brand itself and the luxury industry. At the exhibition exit I got to talk to a mother and daughter pair and asked them about their takeaway from the exhibition, the daughter replied, “I feel like LV is no longer so pretentious (浮夸). (After the exhibition) I think the brand has much more depth (内涵).” Another pair of young women also mentioned to me that the brand did not seem like “a shallow *nouveau riche*(暴发户)” any more. Many Chinese visitors came to the exhibition with a very specific perception of the brand due to its unique relationship with the rising middle class in China. The economic reform in the 1990s brought unexpected fortune to many ordinary Chinese people, who, with increasing purchasing power, found consumption and lifestyle as a new way to

change and showcase their social status and individuality. Through the higher consumption of clothing, food, accommodation, and entertainment, the rising middle class redefined themselves and deepened their individual sensibility--creating the sense of distinction by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) to demonstrate the middle class panache. It was with the rise of middle class that Louis Vuitton rose in the Chinese market as an iconic brand and symbol of economic status and personal taste. Louis Vuitton, with its iconic pattern, therefore sprout as a manifestation of wealth. The word “a shallow new rich (暴发户)” indicated that the young woman, and many others like her, had associated Louis Vuitton with people who had unexpected fortune but, without a prestigious bourgeois culture, could only show off through luxury consumption.

Even with such a presumption of the brand, many young Chinese people still chose to come to the exhibition in the hope of learning about the history of the brand to construct their cosmopolitan knowledge, as shown by the words of two young ladies, “I learned a lot about the founder and the brand history. I came here to enrich myself, and also to make myself more fashionable.” Not only did they learn more about the brand and the history, but they also established a personal connection to the brand through the workshop activity. For them, the experience of the workshop is enriched through physical interaction with the materials, personal stories with the artisans, and the appreciation for craftsmanship, which probably mean much more for them than simply owning a product. To some extent, the exhibition created the sense of resonance by invoking both the value of craftsmanship and the importance of history; however, it is worth mentioning that, in this case, the resonance rose from wonder, especially the full immersion experience the workshop.

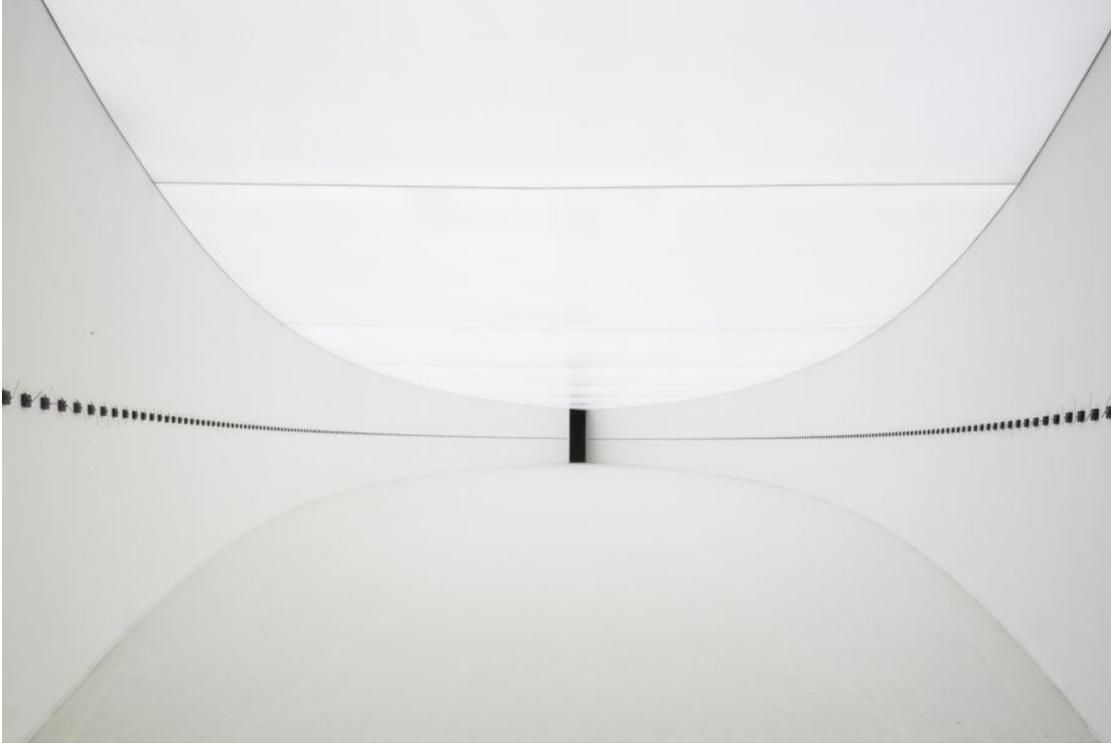


Figure 11. *ÁNGELA LEÓN CERVERA. 2018. Clockwise-Cristina-Lucas-2. Retrieved from <http://www.lustermagazine.com/xii-bienal-de-shanghai/clockwise-cristina-lucas-2/>*

*[“Shanghai Biennale.” Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai.]*

*Walking up the stairs to the second floor, visitors were lining up at the door of an enclosed structure. The bright light inside the architecture was spilling from the door to the dark exhibition hall, attracting the attention of everyone who was passing by. After putting on some shoe covers, I walked inside and was immediately embraced by a space full of whiteness. The inside was designed as oval and painted in white from the floor to the wall and the ceiling, extending the sense of space. Lined up along the white wall were a number of small black clocks, each was set up a different time. Visitors were speaking quietly, listening to the clocking ticking at the same time.*

This artwork, one of the most popular ones in the Shanghai Biennale, is called Clockwise (2016). Artist Cristina Lucas aligned 360 clocks, each shows 4 minutes more than the previous

one, to sum the total of 24 hours of a day. The “conception of linear, chronometric, and spatialized time,” (Mudam Luxembourg, 2017, p.10) which is fundamental to the organization of our society, was challenged by the coexisting of 360 clocks besides one another. The artwork therefore inspires thought on time through such sensory experiences, as visitors were immersed in this “multitude of cacophonous ‘voices’” (p.10) of time. Throughout my interviews in the exhibition, this piece was ranked as the favorite by many young visitors, and the most common reason given was that visitors could take very good photos here, which was well lit with unique background in comparison to the rest of the exhibition hall. To some extent, Shanghai Biennale, though an internationally established and influential exhibition, is not much different from the smaller, private art exhibitions. According to my observation in the exhibition hall, very few young visitors would read the text and introduction for each art piece; they wandered in the space browsing at the unfamiliar designs, and when confused, would move on and look for other works. While for many young Chinese visitors taking photos has become a popular and even major activity in an art exhibition, which I discuss in depth in the next chapter, it is therefore not surprising that most of my interviewees, in their twentieth, had the most impression on *Clockwise* due to its visual effect.

In addition, a group of young women I interviewed took a step further and revealed some of their own thoughts. “I really like the art with the clocks. Listening to the ticking made me think of time in general. Honestly treasuring time has become such a commonplace, but every time I come across an art work or any thing like that it’s a reminder for me.” While she might not necessarily understand the true intention of the artist in challenging the linear assumption of time, the art piece still resonated her with the idea of time, both through the direct visual cue of

the clocks and the indirect sonic cue of ticking. She was able to relate the experience with the art to her ordinary daily experience, and it is important to note that such sense of resonance rose from the sensory experience of being immersed with sound and light, which is essentially the power of wonder.

The young woman shared another piece in the exhibition, *In Search of Vanished Blood* by Nalini Malani, where videos were projected around the room through five Mylar cylinders in the center of the room. Through the combination of sound, projected images, and light, the artist extended her “considered exploration of violence, the regenerative power of myth, the feminine voice, and the geo-politics of national identity” (Auckland Art Gallery, 2014). The young woman shared with me how shocked and affected she was when the women’s portraits in the video were gradually covered by images of drops of blood. She cringed a little bit while talking about the blood scene, but continued to talk about her opinions on art exhibitions in general, “The artists here touched upon different topics like feminism, ecology, and war. I get across and sometimes get involved with these topics too in my daily life, but going to art exhibitions allows me to see those views from a more nuance expression by the artists.” Similar to the clock piece, this piece aroused the sense of resonance from the young woman and stimulated reflections on the topics from a different angle, and it resonated with the young woman in the same way as the clock piece--by the physical and sensual experience demonstrated as wonder.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored different types of interactions within the exhibition space, from the traditional one like viewing the jewelers through display window, to playing with the Nana statue through the mirror, to being immersed in the ticking of clocks, to decorating the leather tag

by hand. Using the framework by Stephen Greenblatt, I first identified the experience of wonder through Fang who was exclaiming at the delicate jewelries and the young man who was playing with a Nana statue through the mirror. Referring to the comment of a professional student I encountered in each exhibition, I explored the importance of physical interaction with and emotional response to the exhibit, which are becoming the core value of exhibition experiences in addition to the acquisition of knowledge, and which are in alignment with the increasing pursuit of experience of the middle class. Then I identified the experience of resonance through the Louis Vuitton workshop that inspired the reflection of craftsmanship and brand value and the immersive artwork in Shanghai Biennale that reminded visitors of themes like time and violence. I argued how in each case the resonance rose from the experience of wonder, which offered visitors physical interaction with and emotional response to the exhibit and then inspired the reflections on resonance. My data to some extent supported Greenblatt's argument that the impact of exhibitions could be better built on the appeal to wonder, which will then lead to resonance. More importantly, what the visitors have demonstrated through those interactions is the increasing focus on experiences out of their exhibition visit and a rising pursuit of expressing their emotions and individuality. Their interest in personal connections with the exhibit align with the growing Chinese middle class value of self development and personhood expression.

## CHAPTER 3 PHOTOGRAPHY



*Figure 12. Entrance of Paul Smith exhibition. July 22, 2018.*

*[“Hello, My name is Paul Smith.” Today Art Museum, Beijing.]*

*Paul Smith is a British fashion designer who began in men’s fashion but now designs a full fashion line for both men and women. The brand is especially known for the use of bright colors, simple design, and, more recently, the pink wall in Los Angeles. The exhibition set up in Beijing featured many of his clothing and o collaborations with other brands and celebrities, in addition to a number of immersive booths on his story and style. Entering into the exhibition hall, there was an information table on the right where visitors paid for the ticket, printed in Paul Smith’s*

*signature pink color with the designer's photo. "Aww this is so cute!" Two young women, in their early twenties, showed their surprise with a big smile when they got their tickets. "Let's take a picture over there!" One of them looked around and saw the big board at the entrance, painted in white with a big sign saying "Hello, Beijing." While there were other visitors who stood in front of the background and took a photo, the two young women went over, each lifting up their own tickets, and took a picture of the tickets. Using their iphone camera with the square frame, they put the sign "Hello, Beijing" on the top left corner of the photo and their tickets on the bottom left. "Let's lift our hand up a little, I want to show my sleeves!" "Wait I'm gonna switch to my right hand because I have my bracelet there." After some adjustment they took the photo, looked at it on the photo together, and then went over to the entrance.*

Aside from talking with friends and interacting with the exhibits, the most common activity in the art exhibition is taking photos. The two young women in the Paul Smith exhibition is a typical example of how visitors are involved in photography, even before officially entering into the exhibition. While the young women told me that they would like to keep the ticket as a memory, which is no different from what people did before the popularity of digital photography, technologies like smart phones and their camera functions allow them to combine the physical materials, the exhibition space, and, more importantly, their own body and identity, into one photo. They were not just interested in taking a photo of the ticket and the background, but rather their own hands holding the tickets at the exhibition entrance. By insisting to show their sleeves and bracelet, they added to the photo their own traces to indicate their personal connection to this experience. In this chapter, I examine contemporary photographic practices in popular art exhibitions, which have become exceptionally prevalent in exhibition visiting

through advances in technology. In particular, I aim to explore how exhibition visitors realize the presentation of middle-class selfhood through photographic practices.

Social scientists have been interested in understanding photography as “phenomenologically and sensorially integrated medium, embodied and experienced by both its makers and its users” (Edward, 2012, p.228). Some explored how people articulate their bodies in relation to pictures (Pinney, 2001), how people are engaged with history and reclaim the past, and how people use photographs as narration to establish social network (Poignant, 1996; Smith, 2003; Deger, 2006). By understanding photography as “tactile, sensory things that exist in time and space and are constituted by and through social relations” (p. 230), anthropologists continue to explore “the role of photography in the processes of identity, history, and memory” (p. 229). In *Tourism, Performance and the Everyday*, Haldrup and Larsen (2009), against the focus on only the material photograph or technology, called for attention to “photography’s hybridness of the technical and social performance of corporeal humans and affording non-humans” (p.230). They treat tourist photography as a process of the management and presentation of self which involves multiple social relations--for example, the process of posing that photographer, posers, and audiences are participate in.

In *The Middle Class in Neoliberal China*, Ren (2012) outlined the process of photographic practices in the context of the Chinese Ethnic Culture Park in 2004. Pointing out that the analysis of Haldrup and Larsen lacks “an understanding of historical, cultural, and political contexts,” he explored how contemporary photographic practices reflects “the neoliberal reconfiguration of power, the communicative redistribution of the sensible, and the individualized distribution of middle-class values and norms” (p.101). By putting on ethnic

outfits, posing in the replicated ethnic environment, taking photos along the way to record memory, visitors, according to Ren, become both the producers and consumers of photography. Referring to the concept of affective labor, “a particular kind of communicative work that incorporates feelings into the production of life” (p.103), Ren argued that photographic practices allow visitors to practice the do-it-yourself lifestyle associated with middle-class value and formation. In addition, Ren referred to two types of affective labor as Haldrup and Larsen pointed out: (1) inspection as the productive process to evaluate whether or not a photograph has turned out to be satisfactory and (2) play as the immediate process of consuming images with thrill and enjoyment. In alignment with Haldrup and Larsen’s point, Ren argued that “it is not about creating aesthetically pleasing photographs but about the joyful sociability the whole group has in play-acting in front of the camera” (p. 144).

In my research, however, I found that both inspection and play are important to the exhibition visitors depending on the photographic technology. Through the comparison on role playing, photo commenting, and interacting with others in the public space, I argue that emphasis on inspection is more prevalent among groups with SLR camera while interests in play is more prevalent among groups with smartphones. Groups using smartphone cameras are more involved in the play aspect of photographic practices: exploring and choosing photo backgrounds, collectively designing poses, playing the role of photographers and models in turn, and joking or complimenting on each other. On the other hand, groups with SLR camera are more involved in the inspection aspect of photographic practices: finding specific photo scene, adjusting camera setting, and sorting out good quality photos. While Ren pointed out the difference in interaction and participation brought by between analog camera and digital camera, I argue how in the

contemporary Chinese society, more than 10 years after Ren's research, is witnessing differences between smartphone users and SLR camera users.

It is worth mentioning that the interest in photo taking, during my research, is especially prevalent at a special kind of exhibition, popularly known as pop-up art exhibition. Pop-up art museums are set up with no artwork or artists in the traditional sense; instead, it "pops up" with themes like ice cream, animals, and 1980s, under which the whole exhibition is designed as photobooths. The exhibition is typically divided into a number of rooms or spaces, each with different design of the background wall, decoration, and props. Visitors are welcomed to stop by any sections, pose, and take as many photos as they want. Pop-up museums not only cater to the desire to take photos but also invite visitors to participate in creating the exhibitions as well as their memories, as the presence of visitors and their image are an integral part of the exhibition.

#### Smartphone Users



Figure 13. Leeyeeye\_ (September 1, 2018). Retrieved from [http://picdeer.com/media/1885727847790557022\\_5783335778](http://picdeer.com/media/1885727847790557022_5783335778).

*[“Don’t Quit Your Daydream,” Man Space, Beijing]*

*“Don’t Quit Your Daydream” is a pop-up exhibition created by the Crowd Art team from New York City. Located in a gallery space in the art district in Beijing, the exhibition takes visitors through 11 rooms decorated into different themes, all of which were designed for the perfect Instagram photos. Entering into one of the earlier rooms hanging with palm frond and English words in neon light, I noticed a group of young women, who were looking at the phone screen and commenting on the photos they just taken.*

*Lu: This one looks really good!*

*Fan: Right? I told you my photographer skills has improved!*

*Chen: I really like the leaves covering the face! Feels really good. I want one too!*

*Lu: Sure I will try to take the photo this time!*

*Chen: Let me find a phrase I like...*

*[Chen looked around and stood under the word forgotten in orange neon light. She reached out to the palm frond closest to the word and tried to get it closer to her face as a photo prop. Unfortunately the leave could only reach her forehead. She laughed with a little embarrassment.]*

*Fan: haha... Too short to reach it...Stand on tiptoe maybe?...Oh there is another leave behind that might be lower!*

*[Following Fan’s words, Chen tood a step back and managed to hold the other palm frond to her face.]*

*Fan: Do you want me to use your phone to take the photo?*

*Chen: Oh it’s okay just use yours. We can share the photos when we’re all done.*

*[Fan pulled out her iphone and turned on the camera. She moved her camera up and down, left and right, trying to get the words forgotten in the photo without being blocked by Lu’s face. She finally found the best spot, with her knees bending a little bit.]*

*Fan: Move the leave a little closer to your face; the shadow is getting on the other side...Good. Don't lift up your head too much! Take your chin a little back...Can you get your elbows a little closer to your body?*

*Chen: I'm holding my bag...*

*[Lu ran over and picked up Lu's bag and ran back to Fan to see the phone screen.]*

*Chen: Thanks! How is it now?*

*Fan: No that's too much!...a little bit more...and now your head is too low....*

*Chen: [sign] Taking photos is so difficult! How did you do it earlier? [looking at Lu]*

In this group of three young women, everyone was actively involved in photo taking either as the person posing for the photo, the person taking the photo, or the person helping with carrying stuff or offering additional comments from time to time. For every photo taken, there was a collective teamwork process that brought the best effort from each member. The “photographer” at the moment was eager to find the best angle by moving the lense up and down, left and right, while offering detailed instructions for the model in search of the best angle; the “model,” though challenged by the sometimes ambiguous instructions, followed them while maintaining the rest of the pose; the “assistant” was attentive to the process and always ready to give a helping hand. The group shared with me that it was their first time going to an exhibition that was set up for photo taking. While none of them have had much experience with photography, they found it a fun experience working on the photos together, as Chen said, “I will let them (the person taking photo) boss me around a little bit (when it's my turn); it's all for the effect. It's not that easy to get a great photo but I think I'm pretty happy with mine. Maybe because we all tried our best on it haha...”

In addition, the roles of photographer, model, and assistant are rotated among the group with the idea of reciprocation and collaboration. In this case, Lu was the one who modeled first,

and after getting a nice photo taken by Fan, Lu offered to be the photographer next; Chen, after being the assistant, offered her compliment on Lu's creative pose and asked to get a similar photo. "We take turns... Sometimes I can offer more advice to them if I have been the model or have tried different angle on the lenses." Lu commented on the experience, "I'm far from professional but I want to spend the time and try my best to take a photo that shows the best side of my friend...and also everyone's work is different." The last part of Lu's word also indicated the desire for personal uniqueness out of this collective work. Although they all want the same satisfaction for each other on getting the best photos, each of them managed to insert their personal preference and uniqueness into their own photo by choosing the words that they like, or by laughing at and resolving personal struggles, like what happened later when Fan was not tall enough to reach the leave when it was her turn. The chosen words are like the sleeves and bracelet for the young women in the earlier story, as Fan jumped into the conversation, "we're probably gonna have very similar photos because we're all on that (photography) level, but they are still different because I chose the words I like and reflects me, and I am shorter than Lu the angle of the camera should be higher so that it doesn't shows."



Figure 14. Visitors taking photos in the dumpling exhibition. July 21, 2018.

[“Legit Dumpling House EST. 2018” Tongying Center, Beijing]

*On the third floor of a shopping mall, a pop-up exhibit was set up with the theme of dumpling.*

*The combination of traditional Chinese food culture and the contemporary pop art design*

*attracted a lot of young visitors. Inside the exhibition, there was a human size dumpling*

*sculpture covered with a diamond-like cover, and around the sculpture was a number of small*

*rooms decorated with themes related to dumplings, such as a dipping saucer, garlic, and a*

*boiling pan. “We haven’t taken a photo with the garlic yet!” Two young women, dressed in very*

*fashionable jeans with a chain and cropped top, walked over to the section where a huge garlic*

*hung from the ceiling. The exhibition staff set up a small chair for Ye to climb up and sit on the*

*garlic and gave her some instructions: “Sit with your back straight. Also you can stretch your*

*legs and show some excitement!” “Three, two, one. Done!” Xu took the photo for Ye, and*

*instead of waiting for the staff to take over the chairs, she went straight, hugged Ye from the*

*back, and took her off the garlic sculpture. “I don’t know what to say about the pose the staff*

*recommended to you...It makes your legs so short!” The two girls looked at the photos and whispered. Finishing all the themed photo booths, they walked over to the exit while browsing on their phone, “Can’t believe we took so many photos! I’m done.”*

As the exhibition hall is a public space, visitors are inevitably in constant interaction with other people. In this case, Xu and Ye encountered the staff who offered them advice on poses. Unfortunately, as suggested by their comment in the end, they were not very satisfied with the results. To some extent, the staff offering advice disrupted the creative production of the group by inserting external opinions. Though well-intentioned and likely part of their job description, as the staff did the same thing with many other visitors during her shift, the advice was received with doubt and judgment. This is somewhat in stark contrast to the complimentary conversation often heard in the exhibition, just like how in the earlier story, Lu showed surprise and acknowledgement to Fan for taking a good photo and Chen praised Lu for the good pose of hiding half of her face behind and *palm frond* and used the same technique in her own photo. By casting doubt on the pose suggested by the exhibition staff, Xu and Ye indicated that the best photos only come from their collaborative work, acknowledging their own effort and creativity. Since Xu took the photo without giving much advice, her carrying Ye off the garlic sculpture could be seen as another way to reclaim and emphasize her participation as a friend and as a photographer.

For many visitors like Xu and Ye, it was a goal to check out every photo booth, making the visit more like an adventure. When they saw the garlic sculpture, they showed their surprise of discovering a theme that they missed, followed by the determination that they had to take a photo there to fulfill their journey. “I want to pose on my social media all different themes that I

took. They are all very fun and creative. It feels like a trip across time from one scene to another. I wish we can change outfits too haha,” Ye commented. Across different rooms, the women would try different poses and facial expressions, opening their mouth wide when they were sitting in the oversize dipping sauce pan, covering their eyes with the dumpling toy when they were lying in a pool full of plush dumpling toys, or crossing their legs and looking in the mirror when they were standing in the middle of a human-sized diamond dumpling sculpture. The themed booths function as movie scenes where visitors can create the story and express their understanding of the scene through poses. They were so immersed in this role-playing game that they did not even realize how many photos they have taken. The surprise they showed when scrolling down their photo album confirmed their production in the visit as fruitful and impressive.

Through the story of Lu, Chen, and Fan, and Ye and Xu, I explored how smartphone users in the pop-up exhibits are involved in a production process where the roles of photographer, model, and assistant are rotated and played by each member as a collaborative work. Visitors treat the experience as an adventure in trying out different themes and acting out different side of themselves, the effort and creativity from which are affirmed by the group through compliments and comparison to the poor advice given by staff members. In the next section, I focus on the SLR camera user and explore how their role playing, their interaction with other people, and their perception of photos and experiences are different from the smartphone users.

## SLR Camera Users



*Figure 15. Nicolas Asfour. (2018)Visitors taking selfies in front of the button wall. Retrieved from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/news-in-pictures-friday-july6-2018-7zlw99rfm>*

*[“Hello, My name is Paul Smith.” Today Art Museum, Beijing.]*

*One of the main attractions for the Paul Smith exhibition was a button wall--a whole wall covered with different colored buttons. Almost every group of visitors stopped at the button wall, posed, and took a photo with the background. Li, in a long, white dress, ran over to the button wall with excitement, “That’s so pretty! I want a photo here!” Zhang, in a pair of black pants with chain belts and a T-shirt, walked over with a heavy SLR camera in hand, hung from the neck, looked at the wall and said “The light is better in the middle.” Li looked over to the middle and nodded; she didn’t walk over because there were a group of visitors in the middle. “You*

*could tell that they are dancers from the tight leggings and their body shape; also how they pull up their hair into a very neat, high ponytail,” Zhang told me later. One of the dancers, probably saw Zhang with the camera, went over with her phone and asked if Zhang could take some photos for them with their phone. Zhang agreed readily and took a couple, where the dancers were posing with moves like split and back bend.*

*Zhang: Do you want to do a split too?” [the group left]*

*Li: “That’s not my style haha.” [walking over to the center]*

*Zhang: Let me adjust the setting...awesome your outfit is perfect for this background...Now just do whatever pose you want. [half bending her knees and looking into the lenses of her SLR camera with her right eye and closing her left eye]*

*Li: I don’t want my hat here.*

*Zhang: I am now also the assistant I guess haha.”[taking the hat and putting it on her head]*

*Zhang: Next. [Li Switched pose] Next. [Li Switched pose] Next. [Li Switched pose]*

*Zhang: Happy? Don’t you look like 1.9 meter in this photo? [pulling out the photo on the screen and showing to Li]*

*Li: My photographer is awesome! [running over to see the photo]*

For most groups with an SLR camera user, the role of photographer and models are easily recognizable and consistent throughout the visit. Zhang was the photographer who owned the SLR camera and carried it throughout, knew how to take good photos with it, and dressed more casually with little interest in posing for a photo herself; on the other hand, Li was dressed as the model and was featured in the scene. Compared to the smartphone users, there is little fluidity or exchange of roles and, as a result, less interactions between the photographer and model in discussions of creating a photo. Instead, Li and Zhang had more space to exhibit their own professionalism and also gave more respect and trust in the skills of the other party. As a photographer, Zhang decided to use the middle part of the wall for better lighting, and spent

extra time and adjusting the camera, both received acceptance and patience by the model; as a model, Li distinguished herself from the dancers with reference to her own style and did her own pose with full support from the photographer, who did not give any advice but asked her to do whatever she wanted.

The balance was temporarily broken when Li asked Zhang to take her hat. Zhang offered the help as a friend but commented that she had become an assistant, pointing out the additional job unexpected for an photographer. However, the status as a photographer was strengthened when the dancer group asked Zhang to take photos for them, and when Li gave compliment to Zhang by referring to her as her photographer. Unlike Fan, who argued that her photography skills had improved, Zhang showed her photo to Li with more confidence and showed off how she made Li look taller in the photo. “It’s so nice to have an exclusive photographer.” Li shared with me later that she doesn’t usually get such high quality photos, and Zhang continued, “I might take some video with my phone to share some real time posts, but those photos with the SLR camera take a long time to be transported and edited.” When asked about whether she would pose them on social media, Li replied, “The good quality one you know...good structure, good lightening, and maybe a nice facial expression haha...She (Zhang) probably knows more about it.”



Figure 16. Photos shared by visitors in the dumpling exhibition. Retrived from <https://www.xiaohongshu.com/discovery/item/5b4623f807ef1c1a009ed4d4>

[“Legit Dumpling House EST. 2018” Tongying Center, Beijing]

“Where is the room with the pig balloon?” Ma asked a staff member for direction while showing a photo on her screen. The staff pointed to a door in one of the photo booth and explained that the secret balloon room is behind the door. “Thank you!” Ma thanked the staff and called her friend Zhao to come over. It was a small room, with the wall covered in fake fur and the space filled with pink pig balloons; since the room was neither featured in the online poster nor directed by signs, only very few people were aware of it by reading through other people’s experiences online. After a few minutes, they came out of the room while looking at the camera screen. “Looks better than the one on Xiaohongshu (a social media platform),” said Ma. Zhao pretended to be hugging her SLR camera with a big smile. Looking through the record, Zhao added, “I’m gonna delete your unqualified ones (photos).”

“I am being really honest, I came here just to take photos.” said Ma with a shy smile. More importantly, Ma was very prepared for this experience with information collected from social media, which allowed her to know the secret pig room. In addition to learning from other visitors who shared their experiences on social media, she also reached out to the exhibition staff, who offered her directions and helped her find the room. Leaving the room, she was not only satisfied with the photo but made a comparison to the one she saw online, complimenting her friend Zhang’s photography skills and acknowledging their production that proved to be in better quality and effect. Such a pursuit towards the quality of the photos and the professionalism of the production is also indicated when Zhao referred to the lower quality photos as “unqualified” and decided to delete them. Different from the smartphones users who took a number of photos, laughed at the funny ones, and sometimes saving them into emojis, SLR camera users look for high quality photos and get rid of those that do not fit their standard.

“It’s different from going to a photo studio. First the background and design are much more creative and fun here. We can take our time, design our own photos. I think what we took here look more authentic.” Ma commented. While pop-up art museum usually costs around 60-120 yuan which is much higher than a traditional art museum, Ma indicated that she accepted it as a common price for such event and that she was just “looking for something to do.” Although said in a casual tone, Ma and Zhao chose to pay for a photo shooting experience that, different from eating in a restaurant or going shopping, requires role playing as almost professional photographers and models with the pursuit of high quality photos that are better than those they saw online.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I looked into my research in pop-up art museums and explored photo taking as the main activity. Specifically, I compared two different groups of visitors based on their photography media. Those who used smartphone experience a more fluid role-playing process where each member took turns being the photographer, the model, or the assistant, working together as a collaborative production. Compliments were given constantly as a recognition to each other's effort, and the advice of museum staff was seen as a disruption that was received with doubt. In general they tend to be more involved with the process, defined as play by Haldrup and Larsen (2009). They are more interested in checking out different themes as an adventure and like to keep the funny photos as a record of the fun process. On the other hand, groups with SLR camera has a more defined and consistent role-playing as the person with the camera stays as the photographer while the rest are models. Such difference is also noticeable through their outfit as the photographer is usually dressed more casually. Decisions on lighting, camera setting, and photo quality are often determined solely by the photographer, while decisions on poses belong to the model. Role-playing in this group is carried out with more emphasis on skills and quality, and receive with respect and space instead of collective contribution. Those visitors often come with very specific goal of taking good photos, and with preparation and research online. Only photos up to their standard will be kept and the rest are considered "unqualified," indicating a stronger focus on inspection defined by Haldrup and Larsen (2009).

While the two groups vary in their emphasis, what they all share in common is a pursuit of the middle-class do-it-yourself lifestyle and an experience of self presentation. Photo taking

turns out to be a production where everyone is actively involved in contributing their effort and idea, regardless of their skills or techniques. They exhibit their understanding of a good photo and their appreciation to the best side of their image, and they offer to and expect from each other the acknowledgement and even compliment. Different from the visitors Ren argued in his work, those visitors truly care about creating aesthetically pleasing photos, almost as a proof to their effort on presenting the best of themselves. Just like Ma said, visitors are paying for a photo-taking experience--different from going to a photo studio--where they are both the producers and consumers of the photos they created. It is through such a production process where the visitors exhibit their do-it-yourself way of living and practice presenting themselves with the pursuit of quality and effect.

## CONCLUSION

While I was wrapping up my thesis in Pennsylvania, United States, I looked up online in search of current and upcoming exhibitions in China. Just a few months after my last field research, a number of new exhibitions have risen with attention. For example, Fosun Foundation in Shanghai is holding an exhibition named *All About Love Speaks Forever*, featuring works by Japanese contemporary artist Yayoki Kusama; Lisson Gallery in Beijing is presenting works by performance artist Marina Abramovic. TeamLab, a Japanese group well-known for its digital art exhibitions, is presenting its new production, *Universe of Water Particles in the Tank* in Shanghai, while Chanel is bringing its international exhibition, *Mademoiselle Privé*, to Shanghai next month. Another exhibition that is also catching public attention is an exhibition by National Geographic, named *A New Age of Exploration* is on in China Century Monument in Beijing until late June, featuring hundreds of photographs worldwide including those dedicated to the natural sceneries in China.

Reading the features of recent exhibitions and reflecting on the exhibition that was popular a few months ago during my research, we can see much similarities. On the one hand, international artists and organizations continue to dominate the public attention. During my research, most exhibitions caught attention with features on or association with artists and organizations overseas--for example, artists like Da Vinci from Renaissance Italy, Russell Young from contemporary USA, and Louis Vuitton from France. Similarly, the new wave of public interest is drawn towards Yayoki Kusama from Japan, Marina Abramović from Serbia, and Chanel from France. It might be fair to suspect that visitors come to the new exhibitions with a

similar interest in learning about international artists, art style, and culture. On the other hand, interactive activities and immersive experiences continue to be embraced as attraction. In addition to installation work by Yayoi Kusama that often incorporates mirrors, the exhibition by teamLab is built upon digital implementations that are both photogenic and interactive.

Comments on the online forum reveals great excitement among visitors on taking nice photos and videos. I believe that both features, internationality and interactivity, will continue to attract exhibition spaces in China to introduce new programs and attract Chinese visitors to come and visit as leisure activities. More importantly, both features will continue to reflect and reinforce the middle class values I explored in my thesis.

In this thesis, I explored why contemporary art exhibitions have become popular in China and what visitors are really looking for from their visit. The art exhibitions that I selected covered themes ranging from established artists like Da Vinci, Russell Young, and Niki de Saint Phalle, decorative art like shoes and jewelries, fashion brands like Louis Vuitton and Paul Smith, and pop-up exhibitions on dumplings and cotton candy. Drawing data from participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I looked into the dynamic relationship between visitors and exhibitions and explored the activities and interactions happening in the exhibition space.

First, I focused on the topic of knowledge and analyzed how exhibition is a space where visitors exhibit their knowledge on the topic, most of which come from their previous experiences like education and traveling, which are integral to their middle-class status. In addition, going to art exhibitions, by exposing visitors to a different perspective, reconstructs their previous knowledge into new and more sophisticated knowledge and critical thinking.

Through the process of bringing in previous knowledge and transforming it into new knowledge, visitors not only exhibit their access and possession to middle-class experiences but also continue to add on to their cosmopolitan knowledge possession.

Second, I explored the physical interaction with and emotional response to the exhibits, both in the traditional form of watching and in the more interactive form as workshops and activities. What I discovered is an increasing focus on individual feelings, especially when appreciating and interacting with exhibits and “feeling good.” In addition, the popularity of workshops and other interactive activities reveals the increasing need beyond simply obtaining knowledge but further into establishing personal connection with the exhibit and the topic. Together the interest in interaction and activity comes down to the pursuit of experiences, which rises from the emerging emphasis on individuality and self-development.

Last but not the least, I turned to a new form of exhibition, pop-up exhibitions, where the major activity is photo taking and the major player is the visitor itself. I noticed two distinct groups of visitors who use either smartphone camera or the SLR camera. Through the comparison of role-playing, photo commenting, and interaction with other people in the space, I explored how the two groups differ in their interest in their visiting experiences. In specific, SLR camera users are more invested in producing high-quality photos while smartphone users enjoy the process of playing with the group. What the pop-up exhibitions offer to both group is the opportunity to create their own visiting experience and personal photos through their own labor.

Taking all the discussions together, I argued that art exhibitions offer an opportunity for visitors to express and explore middle-class values like cosmopolitan knowledge, personal experience and development, do-it-yourself lifestyle, and self presentation. In other words, going

to art exhibitions is a critical means of performing and reinforcing one's middle-class identity and aspiration in contemporary China.

This thesis contributes to the discussion on Chinese new middle class and its value by focusing on art exhibition as a specific practice of class. According to my field research and discussion, visitors are actively involved in exhibiting their knowledge, pursuing personal experience, presenting individual image, together constructing their middle class value and practice. This discussion further contributes to the broader anthropological understanding of the role of aesthetics and taste in the production of class. On a more practical level, this thesis can also offer inspiration for organizations in China to offer exhibitions that are better catered to the new middle class, which will continue to be the major audience component. For example, for exhibitions focusing on Chinese art and artists, it might be helpful to position them under the global culture and history to resonate with the cosmopolitan perspective that the new middle class are striving for. For pop-up exhibitions, it will be interesting to touch upon topics or themes that explore a different side of personhood and style, since what the visitors, either with smartphones or SLR camera, are looking for a place to express and explore different presentation of self and style. In addition, exhibitions will continue to benefit from incorporating interactive and immersive activities to enhance the experience of body and emotion.

Admittedly, this research suffers from several limitations. First, the selection of art exhibitions are limited due to time and personal subjectivity. Exhibitions of smaller scale and less publicity might have attracted different but significant groups of visitors that were not included in my research. Second, the field research was conducted only in the summer of 2018 and winter of 2019 and the reliability of data could be affected due to the one-year time length.

For example, the topics of exhibitions might be influenced by the specific public interest unique to the year between 2018 and 2019, and the composition of visitors might be unique during the time of my research since summer and winter are times when most students are out of school for vacation. Third, field research data is limited by the selection of interviewees and the interview process. For example, no interview was conducted with staff member in the exhibition organization, who could offer unique insight on the exhibition and the visitors from their perspective. Last but not the least, my identity as a native Chinese implies inevitable bias which might affect my role as a researcher. There might have been details that I took for granted or overlooked due to personal subjectivity.

Moving on for future research, there are a few other focuses that might generate important contribution. For example, the design of exhibitions, including the space, the text, and selection of exhibits, influences the visiting experiences and reflects ideologies of both the designers and the audiences. Additional research on social media, especially how visitors present their experiences through photos and offer their opinions through comments, can also generate insights about self-presentation online and how the online community shapes the exhibition experiences.

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