

# **To View Two Views**

## **A case study of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions**

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by

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## **Abstract**

Cross-cultural communication occurs when a museum located in Culture A stages an exhibition representing Culture B. By analysing data gathered from a questionnaire presented in such an exhibition, this study aims to reveal the patterns of visitors' interpretations of the displays.

This thesis highlights the importance of the museum as a location for cross-cultural communication while stressing the significance of information gathered from 'the visitor's point of view'. It continues with an outline of the structure of cross-cultural communication in exhibitions. The categorisation of exhibitions is discussed, and the question of communication models is raised. The methodology of the study proceeds with a definition of key concepts of quantitative and qualitative methods; appraising the contribution of semiotic theory with the concomitants 'emic approach' and the principle of empathy. Semiotic terms and concepts and the possible process of cross-cultural communication are presented. The site and nature of the exhibition (T.T.Tsui Gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum) gives evidence of the Chinese-British context. Both Chinese culture and the displayed objects are emically analysed. The gallery presentation is treated as a narrative consequent upon which sign-function analyses of the displayed objects may be compared with the visitors' interpretations of the inherent messages. Collected quantitative and qualitative data coupled with findings from the investigations enable informed comment to be made on the performance of cross-cultural communication in exhibitions. Subjecting various types, needs and issues of code-switching to detailed examination confirms its pertinence in cross-cultural communication. The study is appraised and further study of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions recommended. Practical suggestions for mounting these kinds of exhibition are offered, and the value of this study is verified.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Tseng Nai-Chao and Zhuang Xue-Fei, for their unfailing support and encouragement.

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## **Preface**

As institutions for collecting, preserving, and exhibiting cultural artefacts, museums continually provide interfaces between cultures. They can therefore challenge and reshape structures that create profound cultural barriers in their field, and adapt their artistic, intellectual, and scholarly practices to the diverse world in which we dwell (Association of Art Museum Directors, 1992:15-6).

The aim of this study is to understand and offer some thoughts for improving cross-cultural communication within museum exhibitions, to draw up some guidelines for organising exhibitions of other cultures and thereby increase the competence of museums in this direction. It is also an attempt to provide an effective approach to the analysis and understanding of this type of communication.

The study reveals patterns that visitors to museums perceive in such displays and in particular, the ways in which they interpret the presentation of the source culture. It also shows how qualitative methods such as semiotic analysis (defined in 3.3) with an empathetic emic approach (an insider's viewpoint, defined in 3.2) can assist researchers in analysing exhibitions of cultures.

## **Chapter summary**

Chapter 1 examines the role of museums in cross-cultural communication (1.1<sup>1</sup>) and reviews earlier studies of museum exhibitions of other cultures (1.2). The final section (1.3) identifies the need for examinations of cross-cultural communication from the viewpoint of visitors; a review of museum visitor studies is also included.

Chapter 2 identifies the nature of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions and discusses the concept of 'culture'. The categorisation of

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<sup>1</sup> "1.1" indicates Section 1 of Chapter 1 of this thesis.

exhibitions is described (2.1). It reviews the two commonly accepted models of communication. The general meaning of cross-cultural communication is contrasted with the particular case of museum exhibition (2.2). The concept of understanding a culture (2.3) and the issues related to exhibiting a culture are discussed (2.4).

Chapter 3 details the methodology of the study. Key concepts are defined, and quantitative and qualitative methods are discussed and compared. The possible weaknesses are also assessed (3.1). Major theories and methodologies of semiotics relevant to this study are introduced (3.2). The concepts and methods of emic approach and the principle of empathy are considered (3.3). The application of semiotic and emic approaches to museum exhibitions are then discussed (3.4).

Chapter 4 deals with terminology relating to semiotics and communication studies, such as types of signs and sign functions, and the concept of pertinence (4.1). The possible semiotic process of museum cross-cultural communication is then proposed (4.2). Further discussed are the intentions to analyse the ways intended messages are interpreted by visitors (4.3). The strategies for the study are then defined (4.4).

Chapters 5 and 6 present a case study of the T.T.Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art with references to various other exhibitions. The background of the case study is included (5.1). The case study is made up of an emic analysis of Chinese culture (5.2) and of the displayed objects (5.3); an analysis of the T.T.Tsui Gallery narration (5.4); and from detailed interviews (6.1) an analysis of visitors' responses to the exhibition (6.2). These allow the analysis of sign-function value of the objects in their own culture, and the comparison of the message conveyed by the display of these objects with the interpretations made by the visitor. The quantitative data of the in-depth interview was presented (6.3) and followed by summaries of major findings from the interviews at the observable level - the raw material for qualitative analysis (6.4). The performance of cross-cultural communication in exhibitions is thus examined.

Chapters 7 and 8 draw detailed conclusions from the case study. Chapter 7 presents the visitors' code of sign-interpretation (7.1) as well as particular features of cross-cultural communication. Different types of decoding are analysed (7.2). It also attempts to describe the pertinence of sign-production for exhibitions of a foreign culture both at paradigmatic (7.3) and syntagmatic levels (7.4).

Chapter 8 contains an analysis of various types of code-switching occurring in cross-cultural exhibition communication (8.1). The needs and issues of code-switching in this kind of communication are discussed in great detail (8.2). The pertinence of code-switching between cultures (8.3) and media are then identified (8.4).

Chapter 9 evaluates the methodology (9.1) and the study as a whole (9.2). It also offers some practical suggestions and recommendations for further study of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions (9.3), and for museums proposing to mount this kind of exhibition (9.4).

Finally, Chapter 10 verifies the value of this study.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**



## **1.1 Museums as cross-cultural communicators in the post-colonial global village**

The world is becoming a global village (McLuhan, 1967) where technology is reducing the constraints of time, space and distance and where people are sharing the planet far more than ever before. The globalisation refers to the rapidly developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals world-wide.

The world is also in the post-colonial era. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1995:2) defined it as the totality of practices in all their diversity, which characterise the societies from the moment of colonisation to the present day, since colonialism does not cease with the mere fact of political independence and continues in a new-colonial mode to be active in many societies.

If there is to be unity and harmony in the global village, where a rich variety of ethnic groupings with wide contrasts in cultural values, beliefs and practices exist, there will need to be a much greater understanding, appreciation and tolerance of cultural differences by all members of the human race. This kind of global society should be able to root out imperialism and colonisation and concern itself with the celebration of diversities.

Hence, at the closing stage of imperialism and colonisation and the beginning of the global age, many problems people confront are related to communication (Mohammadi, 1997:26). The extended contact with other cultures and domestic co-cultures makes it imperative for us to make a concerted effort to understand and get along with people who may be vastly different from us (Samovar & Porter, 1997:3). In such a world the essential communication is thus cross-cultural.

It is generally recognised that conflict and prejudice arise because of lack of acquaintance. However, does merely bringing people of different backgrounds together develop understanding and mutual acceptance? Allport (1954:281) points out that the level of understanding and mutual acceptance is determined by the kind of contact and the situation in which contact occurs. He suggests

that casual, superficial contacts may often do more harm than good, but that contact accompanied by true acquaintance usually does lessen prejudice.

Research into communication between cultures has revealed that misunderstanding can be reduced by direct knowledge of cultural patterns of behaviour. For example, Gudykunst and Kim (1992a:235-243) suggest that to become 'intercultural' we need to work at three competencies: awareness, knowledge, and skills.

McLaren (1998) extends this idea in suggesting that to better understand people from other cultures, one must learn to appreciate and to be aware of their diversity and how they view their world. She (1998:184-6) believes that how much we know about another culture will determine our ability to understand and appreciate differences which affects the extent of our sympathy towards others and respect to different behaviours. Her understanding is that with appropriate skills we can act in a way that is acceptable to others, increase our knowledge and so be able to understand others and hone our skills. One needs to learn all one can about cultures outside our own.

Furthermore, during the past twenty years, intellectual discourse in the humanities and human sciences has developed an interdisciplinary or rather, anti-disciplinary theory of cultural studies. This discourse occurs through interactions between various fields such as modern linguistic, anthropological, political, and historical theory, and is concerned mainly with issues of subjectivity and consciousness, ideology and hegemony. A study of these issues is crucial to successful cross-cultural communication, since an understanding of the unwitting or complicitous agencies of oppression, such as gender, racism, and colonialism enables us to examine the stereotypes that bar real cross-cultural understanding.

As Barnlund (1997:29) points out, we need more than just an increased amount of factual knowledge about each other. Grasping the way in which other cultures perceive the world and understanding the assumptions and values that are the foundation of these perceptions can potentially enlarge our own way of

experiencing the world. It also enables us to maintain constructive relationships with societies that operate according to a different logic than our own.

Museums are places where cultural objects are collected and preserved. They maintain a record of cultural values and communicate them to present and future generations (Burcaw, 1987:1-29). As Riegel (1996:83-104) suggests, museums are institutions which represent other cultures by means of exhibitions, a role which has developed from the colonial period.

Museums incorporate technologies of classification and, as such, are implicitly bound up with conceptions of individuality and diversities of cultures within the global scope of cultural categories. They are places in which the culture and history of human beings are represented through the expression of the differences and similarities between peoples (Prösler, 1996:21-44).

Museums can strengthen our sense of our own cultural identity and consciousness and those of other cultures, since the knowledge incorporated in their displays presents aspects of different cultures and their relationships. In this way museums form a significant part of the global diffusion of ideas and images. They are among those establishments which have the capacity to exemplify and promote cross-cultural communication.

A role museums have not yet fully explored is that of cross-cultural communication on more than a superficial level. Museums wanting to achieve this would need to investigate and develop the potential of promoting the appreciation of other cultures in the contemporary, post-colonial world. In fact, at the present time, many museums world-wide are fundamentally changing the way they function with regard to the cultures they represent - which reflects both a change in attitude towards ideas of relationship between dominant and suppressed cultures, and a growing demand from grass roots pressure to more faithfully present the cultures they display. An example of this is the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture (MIAC) in Santa Fe, USA, where Native Americans have been consulted in the preparation of exhibitions to provide an Indian viewpoint on their content making them different from the usual anthropological exhibitions (Simpson, 1996:54).

Some exhibitions have been dedicated to the representation of multiple perspectives, to voices previously ignored, as well as those traditionally excluded (Macdonald, 1996:7). For example, by documenting Chinese American history across America, the Museum of Chinese in the Americas intends to provide "access to the previously silent historical record of lives lived in Chinatown" (Cooper & Liu, 1991:50).

Museum staff are increasingly recognising and showing sensitivity to the views of the cultures they want to represent. In museums in New Zealand, increased awareness of Maori beliefs relating to Maori display objects has led to greater respect being shown to Maori culture by non-Maori curatorial staff. Maori taonga, in the Maori's view, are imbued by the artist who created them with power and authority, and are held in great awe. In museum displays, the foliage of trees and other plants are placed as offerings in front of the taonga as would happen in a live cultural setting i.e. before an altar (Simpson, 1996:197).

The challenge of presenting cultural objects according to the desire of the community that produced them is immediate, complex, and of vital importance if museums are to justify their claim that the understanding of another culture, time, or place as one of their goals. It is also a challenge recognised by the Association of Art Museum Directors: "The fulfilment of 'promoting a greater knowledge and understanding among people' must be an integral component of a museum's core function" (Association of Art Museum Directors, 1992:15-6).

To conclude, museums are institutions which house collections of objects from many cultures and which, at the same time, provide space for the understanding and misunderstanding of cultures since museums remain, epistemologically, a space in which the 'world' is ordered, realised, and mediated with the assistance of material objects.

If the museum is to respond to the gauntlet thrown down by the Association of Art Museums directors, then it requires the development of new practices for the competent and impartial representation of other cultures. An analysis of how museums can be a beneficial means of expressing different cultures, amplifying cultural identity, and promoting successful communication between cultures, is

thus crucial. This study intends to provide such an analysis in the hope of further understanding of this type of communication as a first step to its improvement.

## **1.2 Review of current studies in museum exhibition and cross-cultural communication**

In this section, a brief review of the studies of museum exhibition and cross-cultural communication is given to illustrate how, and to what depth, scholars have examined these two areas.

### ***Contemporary studies in exhibition communication between different cultural groups***

In past decades, museums have been transformed from static artefact storehouses to active means of communication (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994:1). Esteve-Coll (1991:37) points out that “the museum is not just a passive collection of wonderful objects but a springboard into the community”. Thus a division between the museum’s traditional and recent roles has been defined by Weil (1990:43-56) as a space concerned with things and as a means of communicating ideas.

The concept of museum as a repository for scholarly use has been replaced by the concept of it being a medium of mass communication (Silverstone, 1988:231-41). The communicative role of museums has been defined as ‘the presentation of the collections to the public through education, exhibition, information and public services as well as outreach to the community’ (Walden, 1991:27). Among these, the presentation of collections through exhibitions plays an essential part and consequently, there have been significant improvements in exhibition presentation (Dean, 1994:1; Belcher, 1991:43).

When considered as a medium, Hooper-Greenhill (1994:1) suggests that, museum exhibitions should be studied much like other communication operations. Karp and Lavine (1991:1) indicate: “Every museum exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who present it”. Any exhibition is a statement of position, a suggested way of seeing the world. It may contain certain assumptions,

address some matters while ignoring others, and is intimately bound up with broader social and cultural relations which are a question of 'power'.

Studies concerning the issues of the power relations in cultural institutions such as the mass media have been brought into the field of museum studies by scholars like Karp and Levine (1991), Bourdieu, Darbel, and Schnapper (1991), and Bennett (1995). There is a general consensus amongst these scholars that it is the function of the museum to select and preserve cultural artefacts which have the ability to influence the presentation of cultures. There are also additional considerations when it comes to representing other cultures, concerning the ways in which museums display cultures, construct differences, and produce relations of power (e.g. Karp & Lavine, 1991; Karp et al, 1992; Kaplan, 1996).

As Kaeppler (1996:19) indicates, museums have reached a stage where they are rethinking how they represent other cultures to an ever-widening museum public. Since the 1980s, the exclusion of perspectives other than those of the white Anglo-Saxon males in museums began to be challenged (Vergo, 1989; Healy, 1994; Macdonald & Fyfe, 1996) and in the 1990s cultural diversity has become the slogan of the museum. Museums are busy introducing multicultural collecting policies (Kaplan, 1996:117).

The politics of whose portrayal and which voices are presented has become a principal concern for museum professionals. *'Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display'* and *'Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture'* published after the conference on 'the Poetics and Politics of Representation' held at the Smithsonian in 1988 contain a large number of critical analyses of the representation of minorities as well as many cases of innovative exhibitions which aim to give those minorities voice (Karp & Lavine, 1991; Karp, Kreamer & Lavine, 1992).

During the 1990's, critical writings on museum exhibitions have proliferated. Publications are now discussing museum exhibition histories and practices as a way of exploring how museums assign meaning and present knowledge

through the exhibition itself (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, 1995; Sherman and Rogoff, 1994; Greenberg, Ferguson, & Nairne, 1996; Maxwell, 1999).

The construction and functions of museum exhibitions are regarded as social processes and structures. *'Museums and the Making of Ourselves'* (Kaplan, 1996), for example, considers the museum as a social institution with a powerful impetus in moulding national identity within specific historical contexts.

Along the same lines, the overall elevation of public cross-cultural awareness, the defining and encouragement of different ways of understanding other cultures, and an interest in cultural diversity have also become major concerns of the museum. In Gomez-Pena's words: "Multiculturalism is the very core of the ... society we are living in!" (Association of Art Museum Directors, 1992:14).

Attention has also been given to the subject in conferences held world-wide in recent years. For example, the two-part symposium 'Politics of Images' held at the Tate Gallery, London and the DIA Foundation, New York in the autumn of 1990 and a working seminar at the Centre for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 15th-17th April 1994 contemplated the politics of exclusion and questions of explorations in art exhibitions (Greenberg, Ferguson, & Nairne, 1996:xxi; Ramirez, 1996:35).

Many professionals have attempted to address criticisms and initiate new practices (e.g. Lumley, 1988; Vergo, 1989; Sherman & Rogoff, 1994; Duncan, 1997; Barringer & Flynn, 1998). Questions of representation and interpretation of material culture, the nature and history of the collections in relation to the debate on the cross-cultural dimension have been taken up by some scholars (e.g. Pearce, 1995, 1992, 1990; 1989; Simpson, 1996). For instance, the theories of interpretation and material culture formulated by Pearce (1989) express the important role museums play in the didactic capacity of cultural reassessment.

Most of the studies of exhibitions expressed criticism, concerned with the representation of previously neglected segments of society; they tended to examine the complex mixture of historically structured narratives, practices and strategies of displays, and the concerns and imperatives of various governing



ideologies. They attempt to reveal how the relationships between objects, bodies of knowledge, and processes of ideological persuasion were enacted.

To name a few, Porter (1988:102-127) noted the under-representation of women and domestic life in museum exhibitions and practices; Duncan (1997) defined art museums as powerful agents which have helped to reshape art history and question previously held cultural assumptions and values; Barringer and Flynn (1998) edited '*Colonialism and the Object - Empire, material culture and the museum*', which emphasised the importance of exhibitions of cultures as instruments of control and of the deep ambivalence inherent in the apparently universal precepts of colonialist epistemology.

These studies provide a theoretical and intellectual basis on which museum professionals can develop their understanding of the communication process involved in the construction of an exhibition. A logical progression from previous studies would be to focus on the communication process involved in the visitor's perception of an exhibition's message.

### ***Contemporary studies in cross-cultural communication***

Although the examination of communication between two or more cultures existed earlier, the study of this subject was stimulated by the anthropologist Hall (1959) in his book '*The Silent Language*' which describes how, in any culture in close contact with another, the behaviours and non-verbal communication will almost inevitably be affected.

The number of specific studies of communication between cultures started to increase in the 1970s. The first volume of *The International and Intercultural Communication Annual* edited by Casmir, was published in 1974 (Casmir, 1974 - 76; Jain, 1977 - 83), and the first edition '*International Journal of Intercultural Relations*', edited by Landis, in 1977.

Early scholars in this field focused on theory (e.g. Gudykunst, 1983; Kim & Gudykunst, 1988) and research methods (e.g. Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). Most of these kinds of study were concerned with inter-ethnic communication (e.g. Kim,

1988), diplomacy and negotiation across cultures (e.g. Korzenny & Ting-Toomey, 1990).

Theories in this field first concentrated on seeking to establish broad classifications of value orientations in different (national) cultures. Such orientations are, for example, individualism (a tendency to act as individuals) versus collectivism (acting as part of a collective or social group) (e.g. Hofstede, 1980). It was found that the centrality of values is crucial in the understanding of differences between cultures.

The fundamentals of studying communication between cultures were originally viewed by scholars as being different from those of studying communication within a cultural group, and were consequently regarded as being separated from existing communication theories. This position was later challenged by several theorists (e.g., Ellingsworth, 1977; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Sarbaugh, 1979). For example, Sarbaugh (1979:5) points out that variables operating in communication are the same in both intercultural and intracultural cases.

The next task in studying communication between cultures was thus to use contemporary communication theory to account for intercultural interactions. For example, Berger and Calabrese (1975) categorised the interrelations as being between uncertainty, amount of communication, nonverbal affiliative expressiveness, information seeking, intimacy level of communication content, reciprocity, similarity and liking.

This trend generated a large amount of research and theoretical extensions to cross-cultural settings, such as the study of initial interactions in individualistic and collectivistic cultures (e.g. Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984); the study of acquaintance, friend, and dating relationships across cultures (e.g. Gudykunst, Yang, & Nishida, 1985); the explanation of communication between people from different cultures (e.g. Gudykunst, Chua, & Gray, 1987; Gudykunst, Nishida, & Chua, 1986; Gudykunst, 1986; Gudykunst, 1988; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988).

Some scholars examined communication networks across cultures (e.g. Rogers & Kincaid, 1981); others developed theories to explain and predict

changes in cultural differences that occur over time as a result of communication among different cultural groups (e.g. Barnet & Kincaid, 1983; Kincaid, Yum, Woelfel, & Barnett, 1983; Kincaid, 1988).

Additionally, theories from other disciplines have been borrowed in the analysis of cross-cultural communication. Gudykunst and Halsall (1980) organised diverse research findings on tourists' adjustment to foreign cultures using a theory developed from prison literature. Recently, Young (1996) analysed intercultural communication by analysing and attributing the thoughts of contemporary philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Habermas.

New theories have also been developed through research conducted specifically on cross-cultural communication. Tafoya (1983) examines the causes of hostility in intracultural and intercultural settings and offers a typology of discord; Ting-Toomey (1985) presents a theory of conflict and culture to examine the roots of conflict and its management in different cultural contexts; Kim's (1988) study focuses on the communication processes that take place when individual immigrants relocate to another culture.

Most of the studies on communication between cultures use objective approaches; however, subjective perspectives have also been employed (e.g. Curtis, 1978; Pearce & Lannamann, 1978; Cronen & Shuter, 1983; Koester and Holmberg, 1983; Kang & Pearce, 1984; Alexander, Cronen, Kang, Tsou, & Banks, 1986; Applegate and Sypher, 1983, 1988). For example, Cronen, Chen, and Pearce (1988) focus on how individuals construct meanings and relate to social aspects of communication.

Of the few theories that have been specially developed to explain aspects of cross-cultural communication, Fitchen (1979) focuses on the mutual experience between communicators from different cultures; Collier and Thomas (1988) contend that the more one communicator recognises the cultural identity of another, the greater the cross-cultural competence.

The majority of studies on cross-cultural communication have been carried out in Western countries, although there are a few non-western perspectives, for example, Nishida's (1984) model of Japanese-North American

communication; the results of the seminar on 'Communication Theory from Eastern and Western Perspectives' in Kincaid (1987) focused on East-West differences in explaining communication.

### ***Location of this study***

Although there are studies which look at the representation of various cultural groups in exhibitions, which is the first part of cross-cultural communication; there are hardly any that focus on cross-cultural communication. Additionally, despite increasing interest in studies of this type of communication, and the growing number of East-West perspective studies, there has been a relative paucity of work on communication across cultures with reference to museum exhibitions. Almost no scholarly books have appeared expressly in this field.

Questions such as how exhibition organisers can recognise what happens to cross-cultural communication in the context of museum exhibitions; in what ways can exhibitions avoid imparting 'Occidocentric universalism'; how visitors perceive displays of another culture; have scarcely been broached.

One may thus conclude that current studies of exhibitions of another culture have had little impact on either the adaptation of studies on general communication to cases of cross-cultural communication or the creation of models more relevant to research into cross-cultural communication. The specific contribution of this study, therefore, is to encourage such investigations.

### **1.3 The scope of this study**

A good initial strategy for exploring cross-cultural communication in museums is to focus on the issue of agency i.e. who interprets what and how. This was considered by Young (1996) to be one of the major aspects of communication, especially in cross-cultural situations, which raises a cluster of questions closely related to the problem of interpretation, such as how individuals choose a particular construction of meaning.

The viewpoint of museum professionals, the agents of communication in the construction of exhibitions, has been the primary focus of most contemporary studies of museum exhibition culture. These studies focus on the content of exhibits (i.e. what is on display), or on the modes of representation (i.e. what exhibits do), rather than the visitors (i.e. what visitors expect or perceive). Visitors - who form the other side of the communication process and are after all those who make meaning out of exhibitions (Miles, 1993:28) are therefore, also agents - have so far not been paid adequate attention by visitor studies - the field of studies exploring the role of the visitor in the museum.

#### ***A brief overview of museum visitor studies***

Initial interest in improving the experience of visitors in museums had already begun in the late nineteenth century. Goode (1897: 241-62) suggested that museums provide labels for visitors to appreciate what they were viewing. In 1916, Gilman (1916:67-74) demonstrated by photographs how the design of exhibitions neglected to cater for human physical capabilities and the alleviation of museum fatigue.

Museum visitor studies began in the 1920s (Bicknell & Farmelo, 1993:7), when resourceful education environments were discussed in the writings of Robinson (1931:418-23), a professor of psychology. He quantified tempero-spatial visitor behaviour to evaluate museum exhibitions - concealed observers with stopwatches and notebooks in hand, recorded how long visitors spent in front of a display.

Several key works followed. As initiators, Shettel (1968) and Screven (1976) directed museological attention to the subject of museum-based evaluation. Wolf (1980) questioned what were then the standard methodologies and Hood (1983) employed psychographic survey tools to quantitative methods. Loomis (1987) presented his comprehensive guide to evaluation, which has influenced many later studies.

Visitor studies first focused on the demographic details of visitors: age, sex, and geographical origin amongst others. About a decade later, statistical studies of museum visitor patterns began to examine what proportion of adults visited museums, who they were, and why they visited (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995:3). Only in the last twenty years has there been a tendency towards gaining an understanding of the visitors' perception of an exhibition (Miles, 1993:28). This kind of approach involves looking at the affective aspects (the feelings, motivations, attitudes and emotions) of the visitor (Bicknell. & Farmelo, 1993:9).

For example, Miles and his colleagues assumed that, by perfecting the medium of communication (the exhibition), a successful transfer of messages would take place (Miles & Tout, 1979). This theory was moderated later to pay more attention to probing the needs and expectations of potential and target visitors (Miles & Tout, 1991). Other research of this kind includes Hood (1986) and Crawford (1990). Visitor studies were also carried out for the purpose of supporting museum administration, such as Borun (1977) and Loomis (1987).

In the later 1980's, studies began to note the importance of the social context of museum visits, and the prior experience of visitors. Visitors and their needs gradually attracted museum professionals' attention (e.g. McManus, 1988, 1987a). More recently, marketing techniques have been used to identify the perceptions and attitudes of visitors toward museums (e.g. Trevelyan, 1991).

Bibliographies reveal that, by the 1970s, behaviour studies and surveys made up the main stream of museum evaluation (e.g. Larrabee, 1968; Elliot, & Loomis, 1975). Later, evaluation advocates paid as much attention to visitors' talk and to accounts obtained by open-ended interviews as to survey data. For

example, McManus (1988; 1987a) carried out a series of such studies in the Science Museum, London.

It is only in recent years that a large and growing body of research has been dedicated to what visitors do after they arrive in a museum or gallery (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995:4-6). Such visitor studies have mainly been carried out in relation to specific museums and exhibitions (Lawrence, 1991; Falk & Dierkling, 1992; Bicknell & Farmelo, 1993; Hooper-Greenhill, 1995).

There is very little qualitative work with visitors in museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995:6). Subject-oriented research has not yet been identified and studied from the aspect of cross-cultural communication. Museums know relatively little about how visitors respond to exhibitions of another culture and, in particular, the study of visitors' reactions to such exhibitions from a social scientific perspective has been rather limited.

Loomis (1993:13-23) has, nevertheless, introduced a visitor-centred model in which visitor commitment, the process of visiting and the outcome of the visit in behavioural and experiential terms are all taken into account. However, the following aspects of the experience of visiting museum exhibitions are especially neglected: how visitors react; what they will make of an exhibit; what information of the display they will take away.

Other scholars have also suggested new approaches to encourage further research. Macdonald's (1993:77-81) is based on social and cultural anthropology. Zavala (1993:82-85) presents three models for constructing the visitor's experience. The first considers the narrative reconstruction of the experience. The second, the elements in every museum visit. The third, the relationship between the visitor's expectations and the cultural traditions of the museum.

In brief, visitor studies play an increasingly important role in modern museums and the further development of this subject is urgently needed. A variety of educational, psychological, sociological, and anthropological approaches have been utilised for visitor studies (Bicknell & Farmelo, 1993:7). However, the study of exhibitions in terms of cross-cultural communication, and

from the viewpoint of the visitors is an academic tradition notably absent from museum studies so far.

Post-colonialists seek to obtain what Said termed the 'permission to speak' by going beyond the exhibition and exhibited objects to give a voice to those who were left out by colonial/conventional accounts, to include the perspective of those never taken into account. However, even if museums attempt to give full voice to the culture they are representing, if the role of the visitor as agent is not considered, how much of the displayed culture's voice can be heard is still a question.

The study attempts to enter the minds of visitors to see: What elements make it an experience that transforms, broadens or questions visitors' visions of the world of the displayed culture, and determine that visitors leave museums with enhanced knowledge and feeling of the displayed culture in addition to their perceptions of the world and hence the skill of cross-cultural communication? Also, what communicative strategies determine if visitors get the message from the displayed culture? Or, in brief, What makes an exhibition visit really cross-cultural?



# **Chapter 2**

**The issues of cross-cultural  
communication**

## **2.1 Definition of exhibition of another culture**

'Culture' is not a precise term of intellectual discourse, and there may be little agreement as to its meaning. However the aim here is to define the scope of 'culture' relevant to this study.

Most inquiries into cross-cultural communication deal with the definition central to the study of social science and closely associated with anthropology (e.g. McLaren, 1998:14-6; Hall, 1959:31), i.e. "the way of life of certain groups of people which has developed in time and space" (Thompson, 1990:127-162).

Culture is a body of common understanding, the sum total of a group's ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, on which beliefs, values, customs, and forms of social and economic organisation are established. It is a repository of knowledge, experience, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe. It also includes the physical products of the group - the material objects and possessions - clothing, shelter, tools, utensils, and so on - acquired by the group of people in the course of generations through the struggle of individuals and groups (Samovar & Porter, 1997:13).

Therefore, by implication, 'culture' includes systems of values; is particular to one group (cultures are, in fact, defined in terms of their differences from other cultures); is not innate but learned and is transmissible from one generation to the next; and is the total accumulation of an identifiable group's beliefs, norms, activities, institutions and communication patterns. All the above facets of culture are interrelated.

As well as the above definition that defines culture as a state in which individuals exist, it is simultaneously a process which changes constantly according to the individual, the time and the place. New technology conspicuously changes the culture where it is developed and those in which it is later used. Attitudes towards human institutions: marriage, education, and health change radically also, though not suddenly (McLaren, 1998: 14).

Culture is dynamic and the process is dialectic. In his early work, Geertz (1973) employed Parsons' view to develop a model of culture. His model departed from the view that culture is unconsciously learned and an inherited way of life and holds that members of a culture are not simple rule-followers but are partly autonomous with respect to their culture.

Culture is the result of a combination of the person's personality, values and the social context (McLaren, 1998: 15). There are tensions between individual experience, society and culture. The action of the members is both constituted through culture and at the same time reconstitutes it. Culture influences but does not fully dominate the mind of the person. The actions of the members of a culture are predictable to a certain extent but not entirely. The members of a culture are not mere representatives of that culture, they are also active contributors (Fay, 1996:50-71; Young, 1996:37, 39-40).

Since culture is the aggregate of a whole group's lives and histories, although cultures do change, the deep structure will tend to remain constant. Visible changes such as dress, food, transportation, housing, are just elements attached to the existing value system. Elements associated with the deep structure of a culture such as ethics, morals and religious practices are passed down and thus tend to persist generation after generation. In the United States, for example, studies conducted on American values show that most of the central values of the 1990s are similar to those of the past 200 years (Samovar & Porter, 1997:14).

The definition of a cultural group may be made on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, gender, profession, geography, physical ability or disability, or type of relationship, among others. There are also variations within a culture. Subcultures, or groups similar in age, education, wealth, interests, and many other factors, may exist within a larger culture (McLaren, 1998:18).

Furthermore, there are differences between an individual's behaviour and that of his/her culture, which can be illustrated by Hanson's comparison between the study of individual and institutional behaviours. The former pertains to people's needs, desires, intentions, motivations, and the nature of their

motivation. The latter concerns the structure of values, beliefs, norms, customs, symbols, patterns of behaviour and their organisation (Hanson, 1975:10, 106).

Or, in White's (1975:5-7) words, when things and events are considered and interpreted in terms of their relationship to human organism, they may properly be called human behaviour. When things and events are considered and interpreted in terms of their relationships to one another rather than to human organisms, one may call them culture.

Culture involves a set of ideas and dispositions, a set of symbols and rules. It is not simply private or psychological but also public and social. Studies of a culture are an exploration into the shared meanings connected to the ideas, norms, customs, and patterns of behaviour of the members within a group, which might be quite different from what is actually seen. In brief, the meaning intrinsic to a culture is implied rather than taken at face value.

Some anthropologists treat the culture and society as either a harmonious whole or as an aggregate of individual aspects. They have defined 'culture' broadly to include social structures and economic systems. Parsons (1968), for example, considers that linking the individual to culture is the social system includes the economic, the political, the educational, and religious dimensions as well as the family, media, etc. In brief, the social system is less general than culture.

As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, in its broadest terms culture is the institutionally or informally organised social production and reproduction of sense, meaning and consciousness. Museums are obviously cultural institutions and every exhibition mounted by a museum is, therefore, a cultural presentation.

Like any form of communication, museum exhibitions are processes and products of social, historical and institutionalised formations. In every exhibit, there are inevitably various subjective interrelated aspects, e.g. class, gender, nationality, ethnicity, age, family. An exhibition also includes an enormous number of sense-making representations that have been established through displaying and viewing.

There are thus various perspectives in any one exhibition such as scientific, technological, artistic and social historical. It is very difficult to separate one from the other. Consequently, for the purpose of this research, a definition of culture with reference to exhibitions is needed.

Burcaw (1987:116) suggests that museum exhibitions can be categorised by theme: an aesthetic and entertaining exhibition will display objects which people enjoy looking at; a factual exhibition conveys information; and a conceptual one presents ideas. They may also be categorised by subjects: arts, science, social history, natural history, culture, and so on.

Belcher (1991:58-65) classifies exhibitions in a similar way. He postulates three categories: emotive (affecting emotion of), didactic (imparting information to), or entertaining, the viewer. Treinen (1993:88) suggests that exhibition themes may also be categorised as follows: natural processes (as in geology or biology), technologies (transport, steam engines), culture (epochs based on time and space), or art (style, stylistic differences).

As with other examples of complex communication, museum exhibitions have a variety of goals, not all well integrated, and some more dominant. In order to facilitate this study, 'an exhibition of a culture' is defined according to the objectives given to the exhibition, as explained by the Turkish Minister of Culture and Tourism, who stated that the purpose of the exhibition 'The Age of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent' (Washington, D.C., Chicago, and New York in 1987-88) was to enable those people who could not visit Turkey to see [Turkish] culture and resources (New York Times, August, 1983, Quoted by Wallis, 1994:270).

As discussed in preceding paragraphs, culture encompasses physical and mental aspects and, to a certain extent, influences the behaviour of group members in uniform and predictable ways (Thompson, 1990:127). 'Chinese culture', for example, refers to those socially transmitted patterns of behaviour and material characteristic of Chinese groups. Therefore, an exhibition of Chinese culture is "a set of displays concerned with Chinese culture, which tells

stories about the Chinese way of life including their systems of values, from a Chinese perspective”.

Further, as Dean (1994:3-5) indicates, exhibitions range from being object-oriented at the one extreme to being concept-oriented at the other. Collections are central to the object-oriented exhibition, ignoring relationships, values, and hidden or implied meanings, whilst the concept-oriented exhibition, rather than making collections central, focuses on the latter and on the transfer of information. Weil (1990; 1995) specifies these two focuses as ‘things’ and ‘ideas’.

Therefore, a cultural exhibition portrays a way of life including significant artefacts and other expressions rather than merely classifying the objects within it. This kind of exhibition might incorporate ‘things’ such as artefacts of the source cultures or their representations as the primary channels of communication, but they are necessarily exhibitions about ‘ideas’ of the displayed culture, thus intending to convey a range of ideas which exist in that cultural context. It is about the way that the cultural group conceives the reality and the value system it has generated.

A display of Chinese objects, for example, is only a part of displaying Chinese culture. The available objects are chosen to demonstrate the differing emotions and conceptual principles that lie behind them. For example, a vase with a chrysanthemum pattern and a plate with a lotus pattern are both material illustrations of Chinese culture, but whilst the former symbolises longevity, the latter symbolises a peaceful life.

Any type of exhibition is by its very nature interpretative and the selecting and arranging of objects is ultimately a subjective choice showing what the communicators suppose an object to say. Because of the process of selecting, interpreting, and presenting objects which communicators have decided have value or significance, the objects often take on new meanings that are sometimes endowed with unconscious interests (Edson & Dean, 1994:152).

An exhibition of a culture, therefore, should help visitors to be aware of that culture’s rules and codes to prevent their responses being confused by or being

based upon their own codes. This kind of exhibition should aim to represent, as closely as possible, the displayed culture while avoiding the construction, by the visitors, of a deviant version.

In addition, one might pose the question as to what is meant by 'Chinese' or 'Japanese' culture? The word 'China', for example, can express different meanings. It can mean a people (an ethnic entity), a country (a political entity) or a location (a geographical entity).

Culture is sometimes but certainly not always, the same as ethnicity and nationality. A Chinese person, brought up in China in a Chinese household would be Chinese by culture, by ethnicity and by nationality. A Chinese born in America, adopted and brought up by English-speaking Americans would be Chinese by ethnicity but American by culture and nationality.

Generally speaking, ethnicity can be easily defined, but culture and nationality can depend on the choice of the individual and political decisions. However, the definition of the term ethnicity itself, is controversial in contemporary archaeology. Scholars such as Banks (1984) recognises that ethnic groups share a sense of heritage and history; originate from an area outside of, or which predated the establishment of, their present nation-state residence.

It has been argued that the traditional identification of 'cultures' and their association with past ethnic groups is inadequate. Jones (1997) proposes a new framework for the analysis of ethnicity that takes into account the dynamic and situational nature of ethnic identification. She defines the origin of ethnicity as being based on shared experiences which people may not realise have affected their outlook on life, but some time or other will make them recognise that they do belong to one particular culture. The practices of a particular culture which have become symbols of an ethnic group stem from common habits and experiences, possibly modified by the needs of their current situation.

Therefore, ethnic identification involves identifying those factors, possibly unrealised by those concerned, which produce the feeling of belonging to a particular group. Although the factors defining an ethnic group may remain

largely constant, they will be affected by major changes such as forced migration to another area or the introduction of new factors such as television, new road connections or large scale immigration by other groups (Jones, 1997).

Nevertheless, culture, as defined above, is a way of life that a group of people developed in time and space. Chinese culture would be the set of norms, values, beliefs, symbols, etc. developed in the geographical China over five thousand years by the indigenous people, and now shared by a population spread out all over the world who feel that they belong to the group. It is the personal choice of the individual that can finally decide the culture. Whilst geographical adjectives are a convenient means of identifying cultures, others can be employed, e.g. 'Jewish' or 'Muslim'.

From the Chinese viewpoint in general, 'Chinese' includes Han, Manchou, Mongolian, Hui, Tibetan, and Miao, six major ethnic groups, together with several other minor ones. Exhibitions of one culture, for example, China, are often only representative of a group or region as it is impossible to tackle every aspect and every stage of the culture concerned in one exhibition.

As Karp and Lavine (1991:6) have argued: "Each exhibition can be just one aspect of a discussion". For instance, the T.T.Tsui Gallery emphasises art in Chinese society; the 'Cradle of Knowledge' exhibition, held in the Gas Hall of the Birmingham Museum in the spring of 1995, dealt with the role of technology in Chinese history, whilst the Chinese Gallery in the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art focuses on ceramic technology.

As mentioned previously, exhibitions in museums can be categorised by the objects or themes presented; a presentation of paintings is normally considered an art exhibition, an array of animal specimens a natural history exhibition and so forth. There is a close connection between art and the culture of which it is a constituent part. The claim made for painting by Fiedler (1949:52,57,60), that art is a production of reality by a mind, to some extent accords with the idea that culture is an interpretation of reality by a group of people. As a cultural category, 'fine art' is more individual expression than 'culture' which is rather the art of an ethnic society as a whole.



To understand an unfamiliar culture requires effort and knowledge and differs from an exhibition of fine art. Kant (1911:49) defined the aesthetic appreciation of art as a disinterested pleasure involving not the institutional attitude but an individual perspective. It is at the same time possible to grasp the idea of the artist and appropriate to interpret the artwork according to the personal feelings of the viewer.

That is to say, an individual response is essential to experiencing an art exhibition, whilst an understanding of a particular culture is essential to an exhibition of that culture. The transcendental quality of an exhibition about another culture, offering another way of seeing the world, of ordering things, is not shared by other artistic productions.

To summarise, for the purposes of this study, the term 'culture' means a system of learned values particular to one group and passed down from previous generations. An exhibition of a culture should demonstrate the particular group's collective ways of dealing with reality and should help visitors to experience the viewpoint of an insider.

## **2.2 Definition of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions**

The previous chapter addressed the definitions of 'culture', and 'exhibition of a culture'. In this chapter, the definition of 'cross-cultural communication' is discussed and broken down into three phases: communication, exhibition communication, and cross-cultural communication.

### ***Communication***

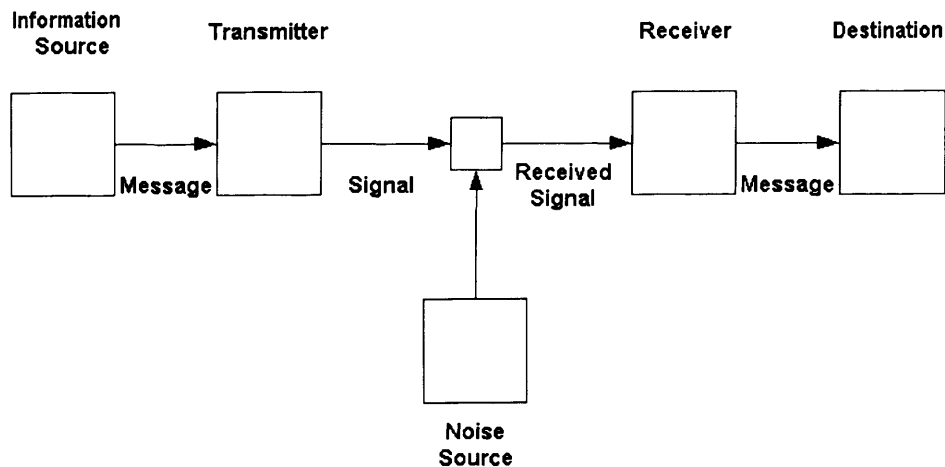
Different meanings have been given to the word 'communication' in common use. An earlier definition was "the passing of ideas, information, attitudes and goods from person to person" (Carey, 1990:15-7). A stricter, more modern definition is "the institutions and forms in which ideas, information, and attitudes are transmitted" (Corner, & Hawthorn, 1985:10-2; Thayer, 1963:26-7).

Various perspectives of communication can be found in the work of scholars such as Weber, Durkheim, Kuhn, and Geertz. The most viable tradition of social thought on communication seems to come from the colleagues and followers of Dewey in the Chicago School. Based on their thoughts, two contrasting ideas of communication can be distinguished. Carey (1990) labels these two alternative concepts as the 'transmission view of communication' and the 'ritual view of communication'.

The 'transmission' view of communication is the passing of messages and is defined by terms such as 'imparting', 'sending', or 'giving information to others'. The 'ritual' view of communication is the preservation of a society over time and is related to terms such as 'sharing', 'participation', 'association', and 'the possession of a common faith', i.e. not the passing of information, but the representing of shared beliefs (Carey, 1990:15,18).

There are also generally two types of structural representation of communication. The first regards communication as a linear process by which A sends a message to B, upon whom it has an effect. The second regards the communication process as a conversation, a negotiation and exchange of

meaning. In the latter case, the persons involved, the messages and 'reality' all interact so as to produce meaning or understanding.



**Figure 1: Shannon and Weaver's linear model of the communication process**

(Source: Shannon, C., & Weaver, W., 1949, *The mathematical theory of communication*, Urbane: University of Illinois Press, p.5)

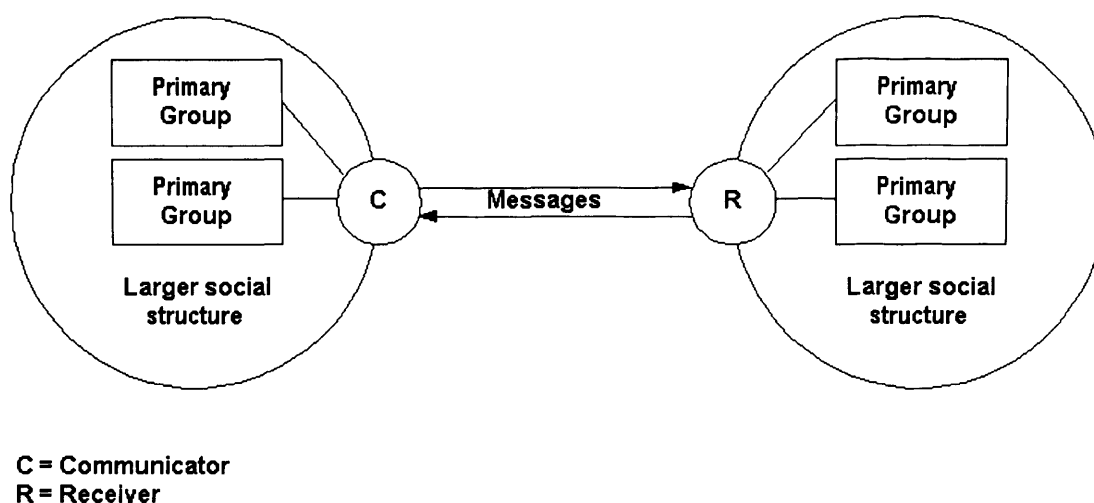
Shannon and Weaver were the first to produce a linear model of the communication process by which a source encodes and then transmits a message along a channel (Figure 1). The destination is affected on receiving and decoding the message. More elaborate and sophisticated versions of this theory, such as Gerbner's (1956) have been produced since Shannon and Weaver.

The essential assumptions of their models are that the purpose of communication is to achieve efficiency, which is reached when the destination receives and decodes a message identical to that encoded at the source. None of these models address the meaning of the message, nor the social context or relationship of the people involved.

However, communication is now seen as a transaction in which both parties are active. They are not necessarily equally active, which is more likely to be the case in interpersonal communication, and less so in mass media and their audiences - but to both parties the transaction is in some way functional. To a

greater or lesser degree information flows both ways (Miller & Steinberg, 1975:38; Fisher, 1978:145).

A schema of linguistic communication has been developed, which can be merged with the second type of communication model (Figure 2). It places more emphasis on intersubjective exchanges and considers communication to be an intersubjective operation. It focuses on the relationship between the constituent elements necessary for meaning to occur, which exists in both the transmission and ritualistic views.



**Figure 2: An intersubjective communication model**

(Source: Riley & Riley, in *Communication Models*, McQuail, D. & Windahl, S. ed., 1987:34)

### ***Exhibition Communication***

Communication is now used as a major justification for the existence of museums. For example, the British Museums Association Policy Statement on performance measurement, as presented at the 1990 summer conference in Glasgow, stated that museums should be assessed in three main areas: Curation, Operation and Communication (Museum Association, 1990). Museum communication with the public occurs mainly through exhibitions.

A museum exhibition is “an assemblage of objects, through which visitors move from one display to another in a sequence designed to be meaningful.

Accompanying labels and/or graphics are used to interpret, explain, and to attract the visitor's attention. Usually an exhibition deals with a broad, rather than a narrow, subject" (Burcaw, 1987:116). Museum exhibitions are often planned to convey specific teaching points or ideas (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991:52), to provide the information necessary for learning to occur (Dean, 1994:2).

Hooper-Greenhill (1991:57-9) points out that it is extremely difficult to find out what, if any, model of communication underpins the attempts at communication by museum professionals. She suggests that a new communication model for museums must be proposed, as shown in figure 3. This model appears to fall into the 'ritual' view of communication. Within it, meaning in museum display stems from interactions between exhibition organiser and exhibit, and between visitor and exhibit.



**Figure 3: A new communication model for museums**

(Source: Hooper-Greenhill, E., A new communication model for museums, in *Museum Languages: Objects and Texts*, Kavanagh, G. ed. 1991:59)

Based on the discussion above, the following is a definition of communication appropriate for museum exhibitions: a complex process involving the social and cultural context within which the museum is located; the environment of the museum itself; the museum personnel who directly or indirectly organise the exhibition; the intended / unintended and explicit / implicit messages; and the visitors with their social and cultural backgrounds. By means of these structural elements meaning is produced, maintained, adjusted, and transformed such that both communicator and visitor are able to participate and work actively.

The transmission view of communication considers a museum exhibition to be a vehicle for distributing information and ideas. It is concerned with the way visitors are affected, whether displays illuminate or conceal reality; whether they convert or strengthen attitudes; generate credibility or uncertainty, and focuses on a mechanical analysis of the functions of exhibitions and museums.

A 'ritual' view of communication defines reading a display as a kind of audience participation, where the observer is at a play in a space where a particular view of the world is interpreted. What is displayed before the visitor is not pure information but a description of the confrontational forces in the world. Nevertheless, neither of these contrary views of communication necessarily repudiates what the other asserts.

As Kaplan (1995:38) indicates, exhibitions may be seen as a kind of collective ritual, enacted to assert and perpetuate power; and they are based on objects and knowledge. The processes of information conveyance and viewpoint transformation cannot be fully appreciated unless they are cast within both the transmission and ritualistic views of communication.

An effective exhibition is made up of more than just the information, the exhibited objects and the arrangement of the displays. Again, in Kaplan's (1995:41) words: "An exhibition that communicates must educate and excite the mind and the senses; when communication is optimal it creates an 'affect' among spectators and audiences".

### ***Cross-cultural communication***

The term 'cross-cultural' is used in different ways in at least two disciplines. One is a comparative analysis prioritising the relativity of cultural activities (Lloyd, 1972:16-8). This method, pioneered in social and cultural anthropology, compares whatever the particular object of study might be with perspectives from other cultures, such as Watson's (1970) study of proxemic behaviour.

Within this concept, a cross-cultural exhibition is a comparative analysis between two or more cultures. For example, Gallery 33 in the Birmingham Museum presents objects from North America, Africa, the Pacific Islands and Australia together with artefacts from contemporary cultures in Birmingham. The displays are organised according to various themes but not the origins of the objects. It is an exhibition that demonstrates differences and similarities between cultures through their artefacts. This type of exhibition will always be cross-cultural.

The other approach has developed in the study of socio-linguistics. It considers what happens when languages and dialects come into contact, the nature of widespread multi-lingualism and dialectal diversity, individual bi-lingualism and a more extensive individual repertoire (Metge & Kinloch, 1978; Pride, 1985). In this context, a cross-cultural exhibition is an exhibition where the elements (emitter, message, recipient, etc.) have different cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, exhibitions may be categorised as cross-cultural or mono-cultural.

For example, an exhibition of Chinese culture in a Chinese context targeted at Chinese visitors is 'mono-cultural', but the same exhibition located in a non-Chinese society, or its own cultural context, but intended for both indigenous and overseas visitors, is cross-cultural. The definition depends on the different cultures of the participants.

Nevertheless, even in the field of study relating to communication between cultures, there is still a lack of clarity about the terms 'cross-cultural' or 'inter-cultural'. 'Intercultural communication' implies 'communication between members of different cultures'. 'Cross-cultural communication' indicates 'a comparison of patterns of communication across cultures' (Asante & Gudykunst, 1989:9-10). 'Cross-cultural' is thus thought more appropriate for this study since observing other cultures normally involves comparisons with one's own culture.

As sources and responders come from different cultures in cross-cultural communication, problems arise because culture is largely responsible for the construction of an individual's meanings including communicative behaviours. The complexity and sophistication of the intersubjective model mentioned in previous paragraphs has enhanced the older communication models, but still needs to be adjusted to highlight the uniqueness of cross-cultural communication.

As Porter and Samovar (1997:20) indicate, the link between culture and communication is crucial to understanding cross-cultural communication because it is through the influence of culture that people learn to communicate.

To understand others' worlds and actions, one must try to understand their perceptual frames of reference.

In addition, with respect to the moderated two-way communication model illustrated in previous paragraphs, both cultural and recent cross-cultural communication studies emphasise the differentially distributed power of the participants (Young, 1996). If the result of the communication is for one culture to be transformed by another, it is not 'cross-cultural communication' but 'cultural imperialism'.

The objective of cross-cultural communication is thus 'to find common ground while preserving genuine difference and diversity, to find a tongue with which each can speak their humanity to the other on equal terms'. As described by Young (1996:3): "It is possible and desirable for all cultures to change, but not to change by blending with one another or being submerged by a single culture. Each culture must change to the extent necessary for it to recognise differences, to acknowledge the *prima facie* validity of other cultures, to incorporate some degree of tolerance of cultural diversity".

As for "the type of communication that takes place between members of the same dominant culture, but with slightly differing values", this is identified by Sitaram and Cogdell (1976:28) as 'intracultural communication'. For example, an exhibition of British youth culture in a British museum would be an intracultural communication.

As mentioned in 1.2, the view that the communication between cultures is different from that of intracultural communication was challenged by the idea that all communication displays the problems of cross-cultural communication to an extent, even communication among culturally very similar people (Steiner, 1975; Ellingsworth, 1977; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Sarbaugh, 1979; Kim & Gudykunst, 1988; Samovar & Porter, 1997).

This view does, however, allow one to better examine communication and to gain more insight by choosing cultures with greater differences. The wider the range of contexts examined, and the greater the difficulties involved, the greater



will be the understanding of similar issues of mono-cultural or intracultural communication (Samovar, & Porter, 1997:22).

In view of the above discussion, this study chooses to investigate the communication between the researcher's culture - Chinese and the culture where the research is located - British. The reasons are: within the two types of cross-cultural exhibition (exhibiting a culture abroad / exhibiting the same culture in its home culture to foreign visitors), the former poses far more problems. However, an analysis of the former is more likely to resolve problems appertaining to the latter than vice-versa; the greater the social uniqueness and thus the variance between them, the greater the number of issues raised in their cross-cultural exhibition.

## **2.3 The issues of understanding another culture**

The general aim of cross-cultural communication is to be aware and respect others' and one's own values (McLaren, 1998:16). As Samovar & Porter (1997:75) point out, to better understand people from different cultures, we must learn how they view their world and to appreciate their diversity. Such appreciation will help us develop a perspective that makes the formation of a global village, in the post-colonial era, more likely to be successful.

Accordingly, the common goal for an exhibition of another culture should be to provide a way of seeing and comprehending the world of other cultures and thus increase awareness of the world's cultural diversity. This is not a simple concept and needs to be discussed here.

In the field of cross-cultural communication, a key contention crucial to this study is, for there to be real understanding the parties must be able to draw upon matching assumptions (McLaren, 1998:7-9; Samovar & Porter, 1997:20; Szalay, 1981:133-46). It is not easy to reach this beyond the imaginative constraints of generation and class within any given society, and even more difficult to communicate across cultural boundaries where there is no organic compatibility between the frames of reference of the two sides of communication. When they communicate there can be no guarantee that the meanings encoded by one and decoded by the other are at all related.

Anthropology has traditionally aimed at understanding and explaining cultures as well as attempting to provide a methodological account of the study of cultural difference. The term 'relativism' has been used by anthropologists to label the view that all cultures are of equal value, and the values and behaviour of a culture can only be judged using that culture as a frame of reference (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992a). From this point of view, the notions of 'truth' and 'meaning' apply only within systems of ideas and institutions. All cultures must therefore be understood from within, on their own terms (Hanson, 1975:22).

In particular, since 'culture' is the collective way a group interprets reality, then understanding another culture is to discern how the people of another

culture interpret the world and their logic in classifying things. Intellectual knowledge is not necessarily sufficient in bringing about cross-cultural understanding.

In 1.2, it was found that the centrality of values in the understanding of difference between cultures is crucial (Hofstede, 1980). Without an appreciation of underlying implications of daily practices and symbols it would be impossible to truly understand the culture. For example, knowing that in a Chinese name, the family name precedes the personal, is only an acknowledgement of the culture. To understand it, one must realise that it is because the Chinese value the family more than the individual.

Yet to understand a culture is not like becoming a member of that culture. There is a difference between, in Fay's (1996:17-29) words, 'knowing' and 'being'. However thoroughly one understands another culture it will not be like having that culture as one's background, something learned through life, deeply etched in one's mind and differing from all others.

Nonetheless, the idea of cultural relativism - i.e. that those interpreting another must analyse it in the light of their own cultural background, leads to certain problems, which are discussed below.

### ***Cultural relativism***

Anthropologists, such as Winch (1958; 1972) consider each culture to have its own unique way of seeing the world and form of rationality. Each culture has concepts and rules that its members understand, explicitly or implicitly. Cross-cultural understanding is therefore the interaction between rationalities (sets of rules) (Young, 1996:35).

From this viewpoint, it would appear that a culture should be interpreted according to their own standards of rationality and intelligibility. Hanson (1975) points out that there are difficulties in claiming this kind of understanding. One is the epistemological problem: thought and behaviour are intelligible only in terms of a shared experience and which differ from one society to another. Can

people who have different ways of perceiving in fact grasp those of another culture? What sort of cognitive and other experiences must one undergo before being justified in claiming that one understands a foreign culture?

Another difficulty is that, although internal understanding usually improves one's appreciation of different beliefs and customs, the appreciation that determines one's evaluation is one's own; it is not indigenous to the culture concerned (although these two cultures may have more or less similar norms and understandings).

Winch (1972) believed that the interpretative task of internal understanding can be achieved through knowledge of the set of rules members of a society use in interpreting each other's conduct. Understanding another culture is knowing which rules apply in a situation. Similarly, Hanson (1975:56) suggested we discern the principles of significance of the culture concerned.

However, Hall (1966; 1976) points out that there is a highly selective screen between people and their outside worlds, a filter which effectively designates what people pay attention to as well as what they choose to ignore. The culture of one side of the communication may blur their vision so that they see in a way damaging to their relationships with those whose culture differs from their own. The problem of understanding another culture is then of incommensurability between sets of rules.

Within such a situation, to understand another culture can become a form of cultural dominance, if the meaning of the culture being understood is fixed and reinforced by the interpreter's own ideas of that culture. The understanding will thus become, although not purposely, 'cultural imperialism'.

### ***Cultural imperialism***

The most powerful reinforcer of economic and political control had long been the 'knowing' of other peoples. In colonial history, this 'knowing' underpinned imperial dominance and became the mode by which the known people were increasingly persuaded to conceive themselves: as subordinate to Europe. A

consequence of this is the suppression of a vast wealth of indigenous cultures beneath the weight of imperial control (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995:1).

Furthermore, revealing the meaning of different customs and beliefs in their own right presents other problems. As long as native people know why they behave in a certain way and can explain it, it is not difficult for outsiders to understand. Mostly however, natives can give no satisfactory account of their inner motives. It is simply that, in Fay's (1996:19) words again, 'being' is not a sufficient condition for 'knowing'.

How then can an outsider understand internally the activities, judgements, and beliefs of a people who can offer no satisfactory criteria, rules or rationale for themselves? If there are several criteria, which should one follow?

An additional difficulty in understanding a culture is that in all societies there are discrepancies between what most people actually do, and what they say and believe one should do (Brown, 1963; Hampshire, 1982). There are also differences in the way members of subcultures or people of different status perceive their own culture. No individual is ever familiar with the total content of the culture in which they participate.

All of the problems reviewed above engender doubt that it is possible to achieve an internal understanding between cultures. However, as discussed in 2.2, culture is not fixed, but changeable. For example, in a western community it now seems extraordinary that two centuries ago possessions passed only to male members of a family, and a married woman had no income of her own (McLaren, 1998:17). As history has shown very clearly, every society experiences change therefore accommodating the possibility of understanding between cultures.

Another feature is that culture is not innate but learned, as discussed in 2.1. Members of a culture are neither all-powerful liberal free agents in interpreting their world, nor are they mere repeater stations for the culture. This cultural freedom is something for which people in all societies can strive (Young, 1996).

It can thus be concluded that the ideal of total understanding of another culture may be impossible but to some extent an understanding of a culture is attainable. However, there are some more general questions. How can one differentiate between understanding and agreement? How can one tell when one is communicating well enough to know that one sees things differently?

To understand a culture does not mean 'pardoning all', nor does mere understanding of another's viewpoint lead, in principle, to approval of it (Hanson, 1975:36). The rules or practices in the culture concerned may be in conflict with the outsiders' values. Whilst it may not be possible for outsiders to accept that idea, at least they can recognise it as part of the culture and why it is so, rather than simply condemning it as wrong or rejecting it as bizarre. The point is not that value judgements of the outsiders must be abandoned, but that those of the culture in question must be discerned.

Cross-cultural understanding means neither regarding other cultures as peculiar nor setting aside one's own values and diluting one's own cultural identity. It consists of appreciating the differences between one's own culture and another's and learning something about the world at large. This will result in people becoming less wary in relating to groups of different cultures and will reduce the barrier between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Bochner, 1982:37).

There are various levels at which a culture can be understood. For example, understanding is increased when outsiders notice the differences between their own culture and another culture, provided that their response is not judgemental. Other levels involve recognising how to appreciate, if by that one means the ability to identify and to enjoy a vision, a thought; appreciating the different perspectives with which other people observe the world.

As one of the main objectives of this treatise is to discover how visitors understand an exhibition of a foreign culture, one must know, before making this analysis, how to tell whether a visitor has understood, at any level, the cultural significance of the objects on display.

The question of how to determine whether a visitor has understood the displayed culture is to know what is in another person's mind. According to the

discussion above, understanding another culture requires, as Fay (1996:25) indicates, the ability to interpret the meaning of the various states, relations and processes which comprise their lives.

It can thus be argued that no one can call something a symbol without some understanding of its meaning. If anyone describes a symbol only as a pattern, the explanation would not be clear, but if they recognise it as a symbol, they are discerning something deeper (Sandbacka, 1987:84-5). There is a distinction between the understanding derived from appreciating a symbol as a symbol and appreciating the meaning of that symbol. There is no understanding involved in interpreting a symbol from another culture using one's own cultural code.

Correspondingly, any inquiry to evaluate the visitors' understanding of the culture on display, has to assess what criteria the people native to the culture employ in determining the appropriate descriptive term. Visitors may not be able to say which object in particular represented an informative communication but if, when they mention an object, they refer to it more or less through the perspective of the source culture, they have understood the theme. This criterion can be used to find out whether visitors have understood the displayed culture and, also how they have perceived it.

The last question to clarify is how the researcher can ascertain the standard against which an understanding is internal. To what extent and in which way can one be sure that the standard of the researcher is that of the culture concerned and not his/her own?

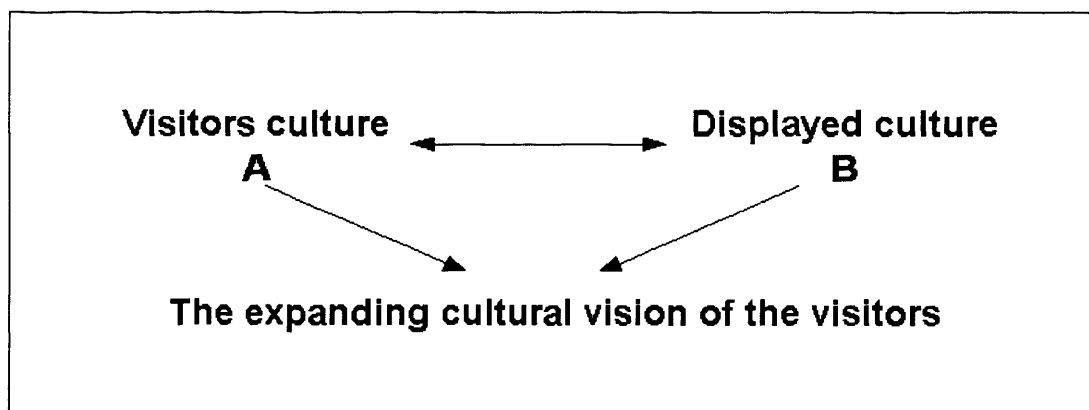
In anthropology, the 'emic approach' is meant to reveal a kind of insight close to that which natives have of themselves. Advocates of the emic approach maintain that the guiding spirit of an emic approach is to rid oneself of preconceptions about universal structures (Rogers, 1964; Kay, 1970) (see 3.3).

Another useful approach is empathy, which is a tool, in psychology, to check interpersonal understanding, or to check with someone else 'our understanding' of something out there (Wann, 1964). Empathy, being applied to anthropology, aims at grasping cognitive, affective and spiritual elements of human

experience and arriving at an imaginative understanding of the minds of the people dealt with and of the thought behind their cultural activities (Dray, 1964; Bell, 1986).

Both emic and empathetic approaches are methodological models which try to reach explanatory judgements by appealing to processes of internal understanding, i.e. by referring to the native's thoughts (Melas, 1989:146). Whether the above two methods can meet the challenge to determine a standard internally for understanding a culture, will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

To sum up, 'understanding another culture' requires that the ideas, beliefs and actions of a cultural group be understood from its own viewpoint, in order to comprehend their significance. Positive cross-cultural communication in the museum context is therefore an exhibition of another culture, which makes visitors aware of the point of view of that culture. An investigator can tell from visitors' statements the extent to which the foreign culture has been understood. The purpose of a cross-cultural exhibition can also be expressed as follows:



**Figure 4: The purpose of a cross-cultural exhibition**

A beneficial cross-cultural exhibition induces in the viewer feelings of empathy with the people of that culture. Visitors must be able to move among the displays, switching their response from their own cultural mode to a non-judgemental sensitivity to, and discernment of, the different viewpoint of the culture exhibited. In the next section, the issues of exhibiting another culture are considered.



## 2.4 The issues of exhibiting another culture

There are factors common to museum exhibitions, such as combining expert and lay knowledge and collecting available objects. Additional factors are involved when exhibiting another culture: when and why to present, how to approach the culture, and most importantly the question of interpretation e.g. the choice of theme; particular time and range of history of the culture concerned; choice of objects representative of the source culture; studies of objects; selection of appropriate media for translating concepts between cultures.

The museum effect, described by Alpers (1991:27), is the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive observation. In *Works and Lives* Geertz (1988:131) asks, "What happens to reality when it is shipped abroad?" which is the core issue of exhibiting another culture: what will happen when the reality of a cultural group is isolated and viewed in another way of seeing?

Similarly, as Young (1996) indicates, the problems of studying cross-cultural communication are of the nature of cultural membership, action and agency, rhetoric (form and effect), reference and relativity (sometimes called indeterminacy), and fundamentally, the problems of interpretation.

'Interpretation' in the context of museum exhibitions means how the organisers select and present objects, and how the visitor perceives the display - i.e. the ways of seeing or ordering an exhibited reality.

There are various ways of interpreting a display even within a single culture, and the most apparently unambiguous display can be interpreted in diverse ways. The possibilities are even greater when the interpretation involves more than one culture. It is said that any interpretation will be largely determined by the culture to which the interpreters belong, and by the nature and quality of the relationships existing between the respective groups (Bochner, ed., 1982:5; Fay, 1996:72-91).

The first phase involves the selection of aspects of the culture concerned. As an exhibition of a culture is all-embracing and does not exist as a clear and distinct element, it would be impossible to convey any culture by even a series of exhibitions. Any exhibition of a culture, whether poorly or adequately presented, can only ever be a segment of that culture offering no more than a specific perspective on the culture in question.

Exhibitions of other cultures eventually experience the stress of, in Said's (1993: 240) terms, seeking a static essence of that culture against a background, in reality, of dynamic change. They have to represent a culture which has developed over a long time and a wide area within the limits of an exhibition (Sherman & Rogoff, 1994:275).

Another problem facing organisers is that they need to reify the processes of that culture and freeze this reification into a fixed, organic whole, whereas the reality is the accumulation of a way of life, internally interrelated, uncertain in outcome and always changing. To some extent, this reification is a product of the limited time and resources available to individual organisers.

Above all, in selecting the beliefs, value systems and associated practices of a particular group which the organiser does not share, it becomes a problem to decide just what these beliefs are, what their concepts of reasoning are like, and what segment of their reality to choose. As Simpson (1996:265) indicates, "traditional methods of taking information and artefacts from the community by an outsider, to be presented by and to 'Others', often with little evidence of respect for alternative viewpoints, have resulted in resentment, hostility, and suspicion".

One way of counteracting this issue is to consult the cultural group concerned. Nevertheless, there are further issues such as whom should the museum approach? What will be then accounted for or left out? When launching onto such collaborative processes, one of the tasks facing organisers is negotiating with the frequently perplexing politics and relationships of the cultural group involved, to identify those who can speak for their cultural identity

(Simpson, 1996:51). After all, it is the responsibility of the organisers to decide the stance of the exhibition.

For example, when the Royal Academy was going to hold 'The Sacred Art of Tibet' exhibition in 1992, the Tibet Liberation Organisation who loaned objects, wished to have the Tibet - Chinese political circumstances indicated. This request was not approved by the curators, who declared that the museum must remain impartial and not become involved in the politics of the situation; accordingly some items (considered sensitive) were omitted (Simpson, 1996:37).

In ethnography, the aim is to observe and appreciate how other people see their experiences, the need to avoid judgements between one culture and another which would amount to a form of cultural imperialism or ethnocentrism. As complete objectivity and impartiality are probably impossible to achieve, an exhibition is likely to reflect individual perceptions of the displayed culture and may be unintentionally influenced by the organisers' personal preferences in interpreting foreign customs and beliefs, referring to their own concepts rather than observing the culture in terms of its own rules of significance.

The major problem for museum communicators is to choose one of many viewpoints, knowing that whatever they select, they may be criticised. Their choice of criteria will reinforce a certain (probably conservative) view of the culture concerned, overlooking the possibilities of change.

Confronted with objects of other cultures, with their own codes of meaning, the communicator must consider: how they should be interpreted; whether any particular interpretation is correct, and whether the meaning is dependent on its cultural context. If a curator makes no judgement at all about another culture, there arises the difficult question of what criteria the exhibition is going to employ.

This problem is especially severe when concerning the imperial/colonial history from which resulted the unequal power relationships between the exhibit context (coloniser) and the exhibited culture (colonised). In this kind of case, the 'internal' viewpoint is extremely difficult to identify because the colonial history

may have confused it. (Echo-Hawk, 1985; Fourmile, 1990; Vecsey, 1991; Sullivan, 1992).

One may suggest interpreting a display of another culture by rendering a 'literal translation'. In fact, beyond the straightforward 'translation' of cultural facts is the particular individual's way of seeing and ordering reality. Particularly, in the translation of the artefacts on display which are complicated expressions of the source culture.

Since there are no identical cultures, it is impossible to have completed one to one correspondence of 'equivalent meaning' in different cultures. For example, 'breakfast' to the Chinese brings to mind a baked cake covered with sesame seeds, fritters of twisted dough and soy bean milk. For the British, the image will be of milk, toast, bacon, corn flakes, etc. Many of the images and metaphors we use are not universal, and the connotative meaning and force of a particular idea may be distorted or lost when transferred to a different cultural setting.

A common difficulty arises when, in attempting to stage a representation of a whole cultural group, it is easy, even inevitable, for the communicator to ignore the differences between urban and rural peoples, between rich and poor, between upper and lower classes, or between culturally different ethnic groups. For example, the exhibition 'Festival of Indonesia' centred two principal art exhibitions on classical Indonesian sculpture and on the elite court arts. A major protest arose because the two approaches completely neglected the culture of the Indonesian Muslims, who account for 90 percent of Indonesia's population. (Daniel, Sherman & Rogoff, 1994:275)

Another concern is that the museum, as a cultural institution, is essentially European in origin, and in many of its assumptions. This leads one to consider the problem of ethnocentrism in exhibiting other cultures. Particular exhibition styles and strategies may lead to political overtones and influence visitors' perception of the culture on display. It is also possible to repress interpretations other than those intended by the exhibitors. These have been demonstrated in

the analyses and discussions, for example, in *Colonialism and the Object* edited by Barringer and Flynn (1998).

There are various other issues regarding interpreting objects for exhibitions of another culture. For example, following research at Harvard into collections of unprovenanced Chinese bronzes, Max Loehr claimed that changes in decorative forms followed a chronological sequence and could be used to date them. This claim held up remarkably well until scholars such as K.C.Chang in anthropology and Susan Cahill in art history contended that there is meaningful and decipherable content in the decoration of Chinese bronzes, and showed that Loehr's view on meaning was quite misleading (Association of Art Museum Directors, 1992:44).

A further complicated issue is of displaying sacred objects and other items of cultural significance. This is due to differing perceptions of the nature of the artefacts, difficulties in defining terms such as 'sacred objects' and the appropriate way to present, or 'worship' them. This kind of object also leads to a perplexing delineation of ownership because of the contrariety of interests amongst the groups involved (Fourmile, 1990; Welsh, 1992: 856-8).

On the other hand, the meanings generated by exhibitions actually arise from interaction between displays and the visitor. Visitors do not necessarily accept the interpretations offered to them in the museum which are only points of reference, open to quite varied interpretation. For example, Macdonald (1995: 21) shows (in the case of an exhibition at the Science Museum) that visitors interpreted their visit in ways not expected or planned by its designers.

To exhibition organisers and visitors, an object such as the Buddha's head is an object that varies in significance and status according to each individual's perspective. They may see it as a curiosity or a work of art, perhaps rare and financially valuable; as of academic interest; or as a religious icon.

There are other issues in cross-cultural communication generally that need to be considered in dealing with exhibitions of another culture. One is the importance of stereotypes (Bochner, 1982:48,51): pre-conceived ideas which make visitors feel that they know what the culture is like before they have

actually had contact with it. The existence and nature of such stereotypes can determine visitors' perception and judgement of the culture on display.

Of the complex issues involved in exhibiting other cultures, this study can examine only a limited number. These issues actually are all about the basic museum practices that involve interplay between collecting, classifying, displaying, the exhibit and the part played by the public. The underlying principle issue is the problem of interpretation: the interpretation of the displayed culture, and the interpretation by the visitor.

After discussing the issues of exhibiting and understanding another culture, one can conclude that the way in which the museum presents the culture and how the visitors observe the display are of major importance. In making the visitor aware of the reality of a culture, it would be useful to know how concepts develop in visitors' minds when visiting such an exhibition.

# **Chapter 3**

## **Methodology**

### **3.1 The qualitative and quantitative approaches**

All theories of communication studies have different approaches, with varying emphases and significance. Psychology tends to concentrate more on the behavioural, organic and mechanistic aspects of human action whilst sociology, in questions of meaning and interpretation. Information theory is predominantly concerned with defining and measuring the amount of information contained in a particular message. Symbolic interactionism, as its name implies, is involved with social interaction through symbols, and focuses directly on communication (Jensen & Jankowski, 1991).

Approaches to the study of communication can be divided into 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' (Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 1994). Qualitative refers to the type, nature and essential character, whilst quantitative refers to the extent, size and amount, of the subject (Layder, 1988; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:8-11).

Backgrounds to the qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry lie respectively in the humanities and the natural sciences. The former is normally associated with hermeneutic and textual analysis, and the latter with the systematic formulations of social science. Accordingly, communication is conceived as the transmission of meaning by the humanities, and the transmission of information by natural science (Alasuutari, 1995:6-11; Jensen, 1987:31).

In general, qualitative analysis focuses on the occurrence of analysed objects in a particular context, as opposed to the recurrence of similar elements in different contexts. It concentrates on the production of a meaning, while quantitative analysis concentrates on the products of information. As a result, qualitative analysis attaches primary importance to those elements derived internally from the respondent's own conceptual framework. Quantitative analysis tends to emphasise an external perspective (Bullock, Little & Millham, 1992:85-88).

The quantitative approach gathers objective information and the qualitative approach looks into the subjective insight of the subject. In other words, the



goal of social science is to develop 'universal generalisations', and to discover 'social laws' that are valid across cultures and time periods. In contrast, the goal of a humanities inquiry, as Geertz (1973) suggests, should be to understand specific cases and not generalise across them.

More recently, researchers in social sciences have become increasingly conscious of the limitations of the quantitative research tradition (cf. Lowery & DeFleur, 1988; Lincoln, 1989). In the field of communication studies, Rogers (1985:232), for instance, indicates that researchers focusing primarily on communication outcomes cannot afford to overlook the character of the communication system that is producing and delivering the meaning.

In seeking explanations at the structural level, qualitative research can be very useful in identifying the patterns of associations between elements. It can help to show how attitudes, motivations and behaviour are put together, more or less coherently and consciously, into frameworks that make sense of the subjects' experiences. Although qualitative researches place people at their core, they are not about particular individuals, but centre on the various patterns or clusters of attitudes and related behaviour which emerge from such qualitative studies (Hakim, 1987:26-7; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992:4-8; Lindlof, 1995:57; Silverman, 1993). Qualitative research is thus of primary importance to this study.

Qualitative research encompasses semiotics, narrative, content discourse, archival and phonemic analysis. Researchers also use the approaches, methods, and techniques of ethnomethodology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminism, deconstructionism, ethnographies, interviews, cultural studies, and participant observation, among others (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:5).

However, qualitative and quantitative methods are both only tools, and their usefulness depends on their power to bear upon the research questions asked (Kvale, 1996:69). The two approaches usually interact and interweave in the conception and practice of social research. The issue of qualitative versus quantitative methods has been a heated topic in the social sciences for some

time and there have been attempts to bridge the gap (Sieber, 1973; Brannen, 1992).

Since the introduction of museum exhibition research, researchers have been paying more attention to the observable, objective effects of communication, predominantly in exhibition content and museum organisational analysis; visitor studies also seek to improve the impact of museum communication. For both lines of inquiry, most researchers have adopted a social science approach.

Qualitative analysis has only recently been acknowledged to be important for visitor studies (Krütler, 1995:65). For example, Zavala (1993:82-3) proposed three types of approaches all based on the idea that museums are sites of symbolic power. There are the consideration of the experience of the visit, its educational effects, and its conditions of possibility.

Also the later view of museum exhibitions as a means of communication involves approaching an exhibition of another culture as a text. The term 'text' refers to any signifying structures composed of signs and codes, (independent of its sender or receiver, and is central to the generation and exchange of meaning) (O'Sullivan, 1994:238). Or, it refers to the products of an organisation of signs (Kim, 1996:3) and is therefore appropriate for semiotic analysis.

As Eco (1976:8) indicates, semiotics studies all cultural processes as those of communication. Semiotics, which is the study of the life of signs within society (Saussure, 1983:15), is a means of making human matters, which are signification systems, intelligible by investigating the structure or organisation of assumptions, standards, conventions and behaviour patterns. Semiotics embraces most disciplines of the humanities and social sciences and any area of human activity, whether literature, music, or architecture can be approached in semiotic terms (Kim, 1996:1-4).

An exhibition of another culture uses various communicating devices, which are, full of signs and can be subjected to semiotic analysis. Like any text, an exhibition is the product of social, economic and political conditions, and meanings are produced by such institutionalised discourses. From the semiotic

approach of analysing texts, exhibitions can be read to ascertain the internal nature of the communication in addition to the frequency of recurrence; to gain the insight as well as measure it (Cannizzo, 1991: 151).

Since the late 1970s some studies have looked at museum exhibitions as texts, examining fundamental issues concerning the nature and origins of meaning generated by its communication. Semiotic studies have treated museums and exhibitions like any other observable socio-cultural phenomena, as signifying systems, as forming and formed (shaping and shaped) hidden social logic (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991).

The first example is that of Hodge and D'Souza (1979) who used a semiotic approach to analyse the Western Australian Museum's Aboriginal Gallery. This analysis revealed how exhibitions construct significance through a hidden ideological programme. Other similar analyses have been reported in Duncan and Wallach (1978, 1980).

These analyses concern the connotation of the exhibition contents rather than the understanding of the visitors. They analyse the unintended rather than the intended effects of signifying systems. They are theoretical rather than practical, concern the underlying ideological agenda of museums and galleries rather than the process of meaning-production (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991:51-2). They are assertions rather than proven research. The analysts, in Zavala's (1993:82) terms, were caught in complex webs of symbolic power, which may have little to do with the expectations, cultural appetites and experiences of those who visit the museums.

Although visitors will actively interact with the museum exhibition environment, the task of exhibition organisers is nevertheless to put displays together to tell deliberate stories, and to relate intended messages. Choosing what they want to display and being aware of the meaning they wish to transmit, they will construct their exhibits to emphasise what they expect them to say. In every exhibition, there is an intentional message (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994:1-3; Dean, 1994:1-3; Kaplan, 1995:37-58).

For a practising museum worker, the studies of unintended messages such as Hodge and D'Souza's analysis mentioned above, can make very discouraging reading (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991:51-2). Since, although they help museum workers by alerting them to areas of difficulty and enabling them to analyse the finished product, they do not help in the design of exhibitions.

Since an exhibition can merely aim at making available the required messages for the visitors, a guideline for the process of meaning production is of the most immediate interest from the viewpoint of the museum communicator. Hooper-Greenhill (1991:51-2) therefore recommends employing semiotic studies of communication to examine the intended messages of exhibitions.

Semiotics explores the fundamental structure and functions of all sign systems. It is concerned with how the symbolic is structured and how it generates meanings (Kim, 1996:1-2). This study attempts to answer the following questions: what is a sign in the setting of cross-cultural communication; how many types of signs there are; and how do they function in this kind of process. Semiotics can help to answer most of these questions in a systematic and comprehensive way with its doctrine or general theory of signs.

Studying exhibitions as a means of communication also involves a concern with the dynamics of intention and response. From this aspect, the semiotic approach may also help museum workers to understand how to relate a given set of objects to convey the intended meaning. Being relevant both to imparting information and making meaning, it can help to analyse the intended message of the exhibition and the meanings constructed therefrom by individual visitors.

This study considers the shaping forces that determine how the potential of sign is going to be realised in the context of exhibiting another culture. This corresponds to the intent of semiotic analysis which, as in all analytical scientific research, is to make comprehensible the mechanism of the system under study (Eco, 1976:8). It is an attempt to go beyond the phenomena observed and to give general expression to the structure or organisation of a particular system.

Earlier references to the primary issue of cross-cultural communication suggested that different ways of seeing or ordering reality constitute two sides

of the communicative process. Semiotic analysis may help to reveal the intrinsic effective components of exhibitions by exploring them from the inside and looking extremely closely to discern the internal structure of the process. It shows how messages are constructed in relation to the theme of an exhibition, and in complex interaction between the communicator, message, and receiver and thus leading to deeper understanding.

However, semiotics also has its shortcomings. It is concerned with sign systems, but not references to interactional and situational requirements. As discussed in the next section of this chapter, semiotics is a one-sided analysis that consists of intricate patterns of analogies and contrasts that the analyst can locate without reference to the subjective experience of the persons involved (Alexander & Seidman, 1990:9). In other words, researchers can employ semiotic methods according to their own cultural code to analyse a sign system of another culture; they also can work at the theoretical level without practical investigations.

Due to globalisation and post-colonialism, the nature of cross-cultural communication, and the issues of exhibiting another culture, it is necessary to use methodological and conceptual approaches which take the perspective of the cultural group being studied as the basic unit of analysis.

The emic approach, which in cross-cultural studies is equated with quantitative/objective approaches, often appears in tandem with the 'etic' approach, itself often equated with qualitative/subjective approaches (Asante & Gudykunst, 1989:19), and which studies a subject from the inside point of view, allows the insider's perspective to be elucidated. The distinction between etic and emic research, the limitation of the emic and the empathetic approach as a complement to emic research are discussed in section 3.3.

The above discussion evidences the need to adopt a multiple approach to cross-cultural communication research. Burgess (1982) calls for 'multiple research strategies', i.e. researchers ought to be flexible in the selection of a range of methods appropriate to the problem under investigation. Other museum visitor studies scholars like Munley (1987:127), Macdonald (1993:77-

81), and Zavala (1993:82-5) call for a pluralist methodology, suggesting that research should pay as much attention to visitors' talk and to accounts obtained by open-ended interviews, as to survey data. This kind of research might be elusive but has a significant ability to cope with the research needs of this study.

### 3.2 An Outline of Semiotics for this study

Consequent upon the evaluation of methods, a semiotic approach with other methods has been selected for this study (3.1). This section includes a brief introduction to the philosophy and terminology and some of semiotics' most important concepts. The other methods used will be explained in the next section (3.3).

Semiotics is the science of signs, a systematic study of sign systems such as languages, the deaf-mute alphabet, and military signals. In the views of Fiske and Hartley (1978), there are two central concerns of semiotics: revealing the relationship between the sign and its meaning; dealing with the way by which signs are combined by following certain rules or codes.

'Signs' are 'message-carriers', the cardinal elements of any semiotic system. In the English writing system, for example, words consisting of letters are message-carriers that convey meanings. Peirce (1960:2.303<sup>2</sup>), one of the pioneers of semiotics, defines a sign as "something which stands for something to somebody, in some respect or capacity".

Eco (1976:16), another semiotician, defined a sign as "everything that, on the grounds of previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else". In semiotics therefore, a sign is anything as long as anyone makes any sense of it.

Barthes (1973:112-3) gives the example of a rose. A rose is normally just a flower, but if a young man presents it to his girlfriend it becomes a sign, for it refers to his romantic intent which she recognises that. The rose in this example becomes a message-carrier. Another example of a sign is the traffic light. A red, green or amber light alone is merely a coloured light. Once they are in a set beside a road, they became traffic lights guiding the traffic flow.

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<sup>2</sup> Volume 2, Section 303 of eight volumes of 'Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce', edited by Hartshorne, C., Weiss, P. & Burks.

Anything can be a sign as long as it has three essential characteristics: a physical form - the sign-vehicle; reference to something other than itself; and use and recognition by people as a message-carrier. Therefore, anything that has meaning within a culture is a sign and an object for semiotic investigation.

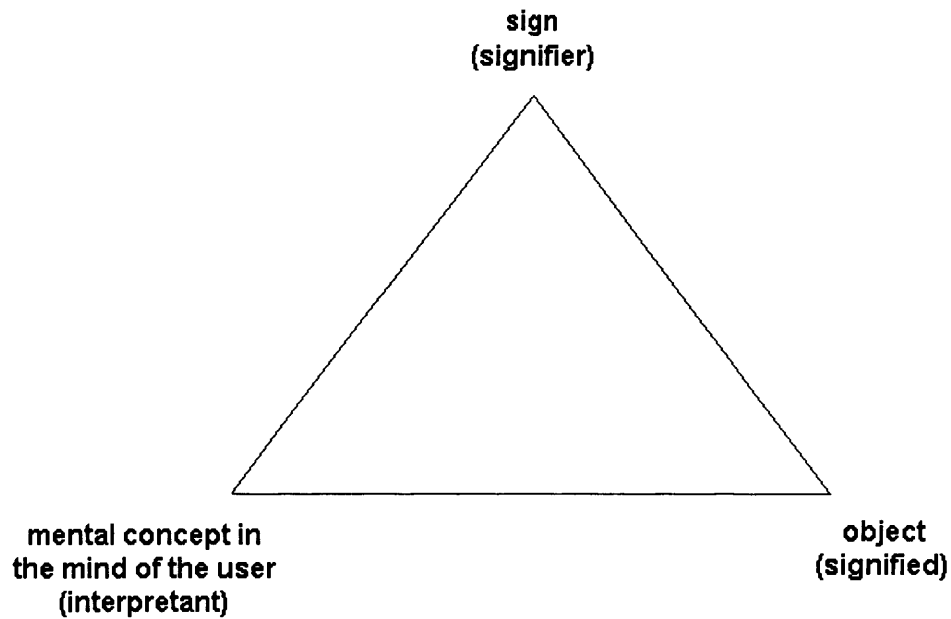
The semiotic study of signs has developed from Saussure's proposed separation of a sign into two elements: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical form of the sign as perceived by the recipients' senses. It is usually an artificial and conventional device, such as words, signals or images. The signified is the mental concept of what the sign points to. Using the Barthes' example quoted above, the rose is the signifier and the romantic intent is the signified.

Saussure (1983:68) also indicated that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and conventional. There is no defining property necessary to be the signified of a signifier. For example, any flower can be a signifier of romantic intent, but in western society, it is conventionally the rose.

As semiotic method assumes that there need be no fixed and universal signifieds or signifiers; both can be purely relational or differential (Saussure, 1983: 65-69). Other than arbitrary connections initially and convention later, there may be no 'natural connection' or any intrinsic reason for a signifier-signified relationship. For example, it would be difficult to prove any significant quality of a rose that would justify its association in Western eyes with romantic feelings.

How then is meaning generated by the signifier-signified relationship? There are two influential models of meaning: Peirce's and Saussure's. Peirce identified a triangular relationship between the signifier, the user, and the signified as a necessary model for generating meaning. This model is pictured below:



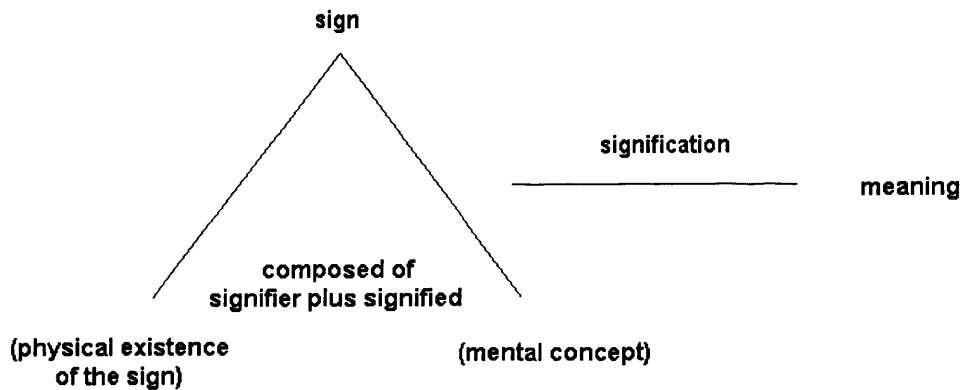


**Figure 5: Peirce's model of meaning**

(Source: Zeman, J., 1977, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*)

According to this model, meaning is generated when a signifier refers to something other than itself - the signified, and has an effect, the interpretant in the mind of the user. For example, when users see the trademark 'Ford' (the signifier), a mental concept 'a brand of car' appears in their mind (the interpretant), and the meaning has been conveyed - 'a Ford car' (the signified). There will be no meaning if any one point of the triangle is missing (Fiske, 1994:42). In the example, if the user did not know the Ford trademark, no mental concept (interpretant) would appear and nothing would be signified.

Saussure's model is visualised in figure 6 below by Fiske:



**Figure 6: Saussure's model of meaning**

(Source: Fiske, 1994, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, London: Routledge, p.44)

Using the same example and applying Fiske's visualisation of Saussure's model, the sign would be the Ford trademark. The relationship between the concept of 'Ford car' and the physical reality of a Ford car is 'signification'. It is the way of giving meaning to the world, of understanding it. The meaning the signifiers hold must somehow be learned.

For users of signs, the signifieds are influenced by previous experience. Shifts in the relationship of signifiers and signifieds occur not through the control or will of users, but through the circulation and life of the signs over time (Saussure, 1983:71-77). The use of the swastika throughout history by (amongst others) the Greeks, Egyptians, Buddhists, Taoists and Nazis, each time symbolising different meanings, is an example<sup>3</sup>. It can be seen that the rules and conventions which have been developed by its use within a culture confirm the meaning of a sign.

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<sup>3</sup> It is believed that the symbol of the Swastika was originally a representation of the sun. According to some, it represents a wheel of the sun-god's chariot. In India, the swastika was an attribute of Suparshiva, one of the founding teachers of the Jain sect. In China, it was a Taoist emblem symbolising the divine power of Taoist immortals. It is one of the auspicious signs on the Buddha's foot and, when represented on the breast of Shakyamuni, symbolises his heart. The same form sometimes accompanies early Christian inscriptions, as a version of the cross (Hall 1994:6).

Saussure (1983:18-20) defined the rules and conventions which control the relationships between signifiers and signifieds as 'language', and the use of signs as 'speech'. 'Language' is the system governing people's employment of signs and 'speech' is the process of employing the signs within a 'sign-system'. For example, the 'language' of traditional Chinese culture suggests that a bride should wear a red gown at her wedding, red being a signifier of good luck. The 'speech' of this 'language' is displayed in her active choice of a red gown, as opposed to another colour.

There is a fixed relationship between 'language' and 'speech' - the 'language' being evolved through 'speech'. Using the example above, it is only through continued use that a red bridal gown should enter the 'language' of the Chinese wedding ceremony. On the other hand, 'speech', the use of the sign, is governed by 'language'. Now that the tradition has developed it is a firm convention that a bride will wear red and not another colour. Thus the relationship between 'language' and 'speech' is dialectical.

Although the power of a 'language' is in the assembly and operation of its signs, the 'language' is actually realised by the 'speech' or its performance. Barthes (1977:15) points out that 'there is no language without speech, and there is no speech outside language'. In semiotics, the language is then regarded as the 'competence' and the speech the 'performance'. To use the 'Ford' example again, the 'performance' is the action of making meaning and the knowledge of the brand of a car is the 'competence'.

According to semiotic theory, messages are produced by the selection and articulation of signs. This is comparable to words which are combined into sentences, and paragraphs. For example, when an English-speaking person senses impending danger, he may wish to pass on a message of warning. From a selection of words at his disposal - 'be' and 'careful'; 'look', 'out'; 'watch', 'gaze', and perhaps 'no', 'problem', 'there', 'it', 'is', 'fine', 'all right', he may choose to articulate some of the selected words into: 'Be careful!', 'Look out!', 'Watch out!', 'No!'. They would not articulate the selected words as 'It is fine!', 'There is no problem!', or 'It is all right!' to pass the idea of warning.

In semiotic terms, these selections and articulations operate at two levels: paradigmatic and syntagmatic. A paradigm is a set of signs that are in some way similar to one another. For example, a closet of clothes is a paradigm, as is a group of shoes. Syntagms are then certain signs chosen out of paradigms. For example, to choose a shirt out the closet (a paradigm of shirts), a pair of shoes out of the group (a paradigm of shoes), and to put them on, is a syntagm of dressing (Kim, 1996:57,59).

Or, in the previous example, to chose the word 'problem' from a selection is at the paradigmatic level. To select 'watch' and combine it with 'out', or 'look' with 'out', or the combination of 'There is a problem' from all the others such as 'Is it no problem?', is the syntagmatic level.

In Eco's (1976:48-9)<sup>4</sup> terms, what correlates the signifier and the signified is the code. Based on the assumption that signs are arbitrary and conventional, insofar as human actions or productions convey meaning, there must be an underlying system of conventions and distinctions which makes this meaning possible. This is the 'code' (Sebeok, 1991:16)

Since their conversion to Christianity, English people have celebrated the birth of Christ. One tradition has been the Christmas dinner which for many years, has meant roast turkey. This has given rise to the expression 'like turkeys voting for Christmas'; meaning approval of some action which would be detrimental to one's personal interests. Thus in the English code 'turkey' symbolises Christmas dinner, whereas in Chinese code it does not, and hence the English expression would be meaningless. Moreover, since the turkey was not native to England, the English expression in English code, would similarly have been meaningless prior to the introduction of turkeys to England.

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<sup>4</sup> There are more than 100 definitions of the term 'code' in the literature of semiotics (Kim, 1996:61). It is often compared with the definition of 'language' mentioned above, designates the rules of a sign system. It is a set of signs as well as the procedures by which they are arranged. In order to avoid one weak point of semiotics - the confusion of terminology, in this study, the term 'code' will only be used to designate the 'set of unambiguous rules whereby messages are convertible from one representation to another' (Sebeok, 1991:16), i.e. the 'code' of the communication.

Every cultural group, to various degrees, has its own distinctive code which makes its own unique signs. For instance, the sound-image or the written form 'dog' is inseparably linked in English with the concept 'dog'. The word for dog in Chinese is pronounced 'gou' and the written form 狗. They are different 'signs' in different 'codes' which represent the same animal. Another example is a bouquet of white roses; a sign for purity of friendship in Western society, but one of sadness in Chinese society, the same sign expressing different ideas according to different codes.

In the same way, the code of 'speeches' varies in different cultural contexts. For example, a vase with flowers and a framed picture of a person put together somewhere in a living room is a common interior arrangement in the house of a Western family, but in a Chinese residence, only the picture of a dead person can be put together with flowers. Flowers with a picture, in the Chinese code, is a 'speech' about remembrance of the deceased.

Even within a culture, there are various features determining the possible combination of the sign with other signs. For instance, a chair in the Western code of household furniture, may be linked with tables or sofas, whereas in another context, with other items (in a string of artefacts, furniture styles, industrial products). A fork will be naturally combined with a spoon and dish, whereas the three elements may be syntactically linked to a table, or food according to Western dining codes.

In brief, as different types of sign can signify different variations or facets of reality, it is the code which determines which variety or facet is signified. The reason why certain events occur in people's minds when they see a sign-vehicle, is the code.

Semiotics tries to seek out this 'code', and to analyse the structural connections which create a sign system. It is hoped that when analysing the signifiers and signifieds of signs, at both paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels, aspects in their make-up which are hidden or neglected will become apparent (Hawkes, 1977:123-150; Guiraud, 1992:1-4).

Semiotic investigation is concerned with structures, and more particularly with examining the general laws by which they work. It is analytical, not evaluative and contains a distinctive doctrine which is the belief that the individual units of any system have meaning only by virtue of their relationships to one another. Images do not have a 'substantive' meaning, only a 'relational' one. Also, individual phenomena are regarded as instances of such laws.

To summarise, semiotics starts with the infrastructure of signs - signifiers, signifieds and interpretants; and the arbitrary and conventional relationships between them and involves the generation of meaning in various disciplines. It proposes that the meaning of a sign is confirmed by a system of rules and conventions which are developed by its use within a culture. For semioticians, messages are produced by the selection and articulation of signs at two levels - paradigmatic and syntagmatic.

Semiotics also finds that every cultural group has its own code, an underlying system of conventions and distinctions which makes meaning possible. There are different 'signs' in different 'codes' representing the same idea. There are also different ideas expressed by the same sign but according to different codes.

For museum communicators, producing an exhibition involves setting goals, identifying potential or available resources, writing the storyline, designing, mounting and presenting the exhibition to the public. Every stage actually entails a series of selections and articulations. When setting goals, for example, museum communicators collect and choose ideas from many sources: visitors' suggestions, board members or trustees, collections management personnel, community leaders, curators, current events, directors, educators, staff and volunteers, and articulate the chosen ideas into the purposes of the exhibition (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994:8-18).

Every step taken by exhibition organisers to produce an exhibition involves selection and articulation at paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels as does any other signification. The sign-vehicles within museum exhibitions, are normally objects and labels, but models, photos, multimedia, and so on, are also employed in modern exhibitions. The displayed items are then the language of

the exhibition, and the arrangement of the exhibition, the speech. The selection of available collections for display is on the paradigmatic level whilst the arrangement of displays is on the syntagmatic level.

### 3.3 The etic, emic and empathetic approaches

This section discusses the terms, concepts, and methods of emic analysis relevant to this study and the issues of applying linguistic phonemic analysis to other fields of research. The strengths and weaknesses of the emic approach and a supplementary strategy - the empathetic approach, are also discussed.

In studies of cultures and cross-cultural communication, two approaches have been identified, arising from the distinction between the 'etic' and 'emic', i.e. the outsider's and the insider's views. The concept of 'etic' seems to correspond with the quantitative/objective approach for studies and the 'emic' with the qualitative/subjective researches (Asante & Gudykunst, 1989:19-21).

The use of the terms 'etic' or 'emic' as an analytical method comes from a phonological paradigm developed by a linguist, Pike (1971), who used them to differentiate between behaviour as seen from outside a culture but not understood, and behaviour as seen from inside a culture and understood. He gave the example of interpreting a cricket match by the rules of baseball.

'Etic' and 'emic' are derived from the linguistic terms 'phonetic' and 'phonemic' which refer to the ways in which humans produce and hear speech (Pike, 1971:37). Phonetics refers to all possible speech sounds and phonemics to those of a particular language. The former studies how sounds are made by the mouth and heard by the ears, but without necessarily referring to what those sounds mean. The latter studies the structure of a particular language - i.e. how the sounds are used (Clark & Yallop, 1990:1-2; Hodder, 1989: 139).

To take two English words 'ear' and 'poor' as examples, one can keep the rest the same and vary one element to produce - 'year' and 'pool'. English speakers would consider both such pairs, ear-year, and poor-pool, different, whilst monolingual Chinese people would not distinguish the pairs because in Chinese there is no /y/ as an initial, and the difference between /r/ and /l/ is not recognised as meaningfully different sounds. Therefore 'r' and 'l', which are English phonemics, are not so in Chinese.



In phonetics, 'r' and 'l' are defined, from the universal perspective of languages, as two-pair minimal segments of sound which in some languages can distinguish meanings. Phonemes, on the other hand, are defined from the perspective of a particular language and are sounds which in the same environment distinguish meaningfully different sound segments in that language (Lloyd, 1972: 48).

The terms etic and emic were later proposed for anthropology by Harris (1968, 1976, 1979) to separate the behavioural from the mental dimension of human conduct. Etic refers to material evidence of behaviour such as technical skills, and emic refers to non-material factors such as art, music, and literature etc., as well as to cultural dispositions and psychological attitudes towards behaviour.

For example, the behaviour 'eating' is etic while the 'eating manner' is emic: an English person must eat with the mouth closed, quietly; an Indian knows that the mouth should be open while a person is chewing; while an African knows that to show appreciation it is important to make noises with gusto (McLaren, 1998:15).

The emic approach has been adopted by anthropologists to connect and summarise different fragments of knowledge unrelated in a culture at a superficial level. They gain a deeper insight into behavioural patterns by seeing them as deriving from a single premise inherent in one particular culture and thence to be able to predict possible reactions (Northrop, 1964:16).

The aim of this innovation has been to devise public and non-intuitive techniques which would allow classification of the researcher's observations, according to the principles employed by the subject studied. It became a trend for anthropologists to employ the 'etic-emic' approach in re-examining their major assumptions in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Lloyd, 1972: 48, 49).

In the field of culture or object studies, the etic approach is based on there being a universal range of categories from which objects obtain their meanings, whilst the emic analysis is based on the argument that objects have intrinsic, implicational meanings arising from their background culture (Innis, 1986:112).

Eco (1979:66,ff) proposes that any object is a cultural unit since it is created or chosen by people of that culture to express their ideas and propositions about the world. Such units may be reshaped or recategorised to create new cultural units or to propose new codes.

The variety of possible meanings in objects, motifs or behaviour is almost unlimited, as is the variety of sounds which can be produced by the vocal apparatus. Each language, however, contains only a very small proportion of all possible sounds, and linguistics investigate reasons why certain sounds are selected and what relationships exist between all other sounds and one or more of the sounds chosen.

Like sounds in language, objects retain certain elements which persist throughout even the widely separated cultures and are combined into structures which are always diverse. For example, European and Chinese traditional paintings both involve colours, lines and perspectives of various aspects. However, the pigment employed, texture of the lines, principles of perspective and the materials drawn on are quite different between the two. An emic analysis helps to find these particular choices and the relationships between them, i.e. the 'emic units'.

Object motifs are, like phonemes, elements of meaning, and acquire meaning only if integrated into systems. 'Object systems', like 'phonemic systems', are built by the mind at the level of unconscious thought. The recurrence of certain themes in the material culture of a cultural group suggests that, in the case of objects as well as linguistics, the observable phenomena result from the action of laws which are general but implicit (Levi-Strauss, 1986:112).

For example, 'sculpture' is an 'etic' unit which exists in almost every culture, but whilst the Greeks had a natural sensibility to visible forms concentrated almost exclusively upon the naked human form approaching physical perfection, Chinese sculpture has developed through items for tombs. The emphasis was on the purpose as a tomb object, not the figure itself (Jiang, 1991:38-42). From

this viewpoint, Greek sculpture is descriptive while Chinese is functional. They are respectively Greek and Chinese 'emics'.

Two circumstances are different etically when instrumental measurements can show them to be so. Circumstances are different emically only when people within the system react to them differently. From an etic point of view, for instance, a picture of peonies is an artistic achievement to be enjoyed in terms of etic aesthetics, but, seen from the Chinese emic point of view, the same picture is a symbol of wealth and high position.

Berry (1980:11-12) summarised Pike's (1971:37-9) introduction to the etic-emic approaches and outlined the main distinctions between etic and emic methods:

Emic	Etic
Studying behaviour from within the system.	Studying behaviour from the position outside the system.
Examining only one culture.	Examining many cultures, comparing them.
Structure discovered by the analyst.	Structure created by the analyst.
Criteria are relative to internal characteristics.	Criteria are considered absolute or universal.

When using an etic approach, data are obtainable before analysis, with partial information, whilst an emic method requires a knowledge of the total system in order to appreciate any detectable significance.

### **3.4 The semiotic and emic approaches and their application to museum exhibitions**

This section defines the semiotic approach, and how it can be employed with an empathetic emic approach, to analyse museum exhibitions of a foreign culture. The assumptions and purpose, nature and procedures, and categories and efficacy of a semiotic analysis for this kind of study, are discussed.

Semiotics can be divided into the study of unintended and intended messages. The former is named by Mounin 'semiology of signification' and the latter 'semiology of communication'. Some semiotic studies were developed within the framework of Saussure's definition, 'a science that studies the life of signs within society', dealing with intended messages within purposeful and conventional communication systems, a denotative dimension (Mounin, 1985: 21, 24, 121).

Attention has also been paid to the role of the reader in producing meanings out of textual resources. Barthes was the first to be interested in this connotative dimension, which has led to the exploration of the hidden or unintended logic of signifying systems (Barthes, 1973; 1977; 1983; Lavers, 1982).

There is a principle trend in semiotics which was first proclaimed by Saussure and followed by Eco. Saussure (1983:15) said that semiotics, what he called semiology, would show what constitutes signs and what laws govern them. Eco (1979:6) suggested that there are areas of culture in which there is an underlying existence of codes, a sign system, by which continuous production of meaning can be generated.

A semiotic analysis examines the process of communication in a microscopic way; it analyses the inside structure of the process and observes how sign-vehicles acquire the value of sign-functions. In doing so, one makes an arbitrary and temporary separation of content and form, and focuses on the system of signs that makes up a text. It involves isolating the underlying set of laws, by

which the signs are combined into meanings, and their relationships with one another.

Semiotics research methods can be divided into two categories, the synchronic and diachronic. Saussure used 'synchronic' to mean analytical and 'diachronic' to mean historical (Berger, 1982: 23). The former leads to studying linguistics as coherent systems and the latter to the area of historical grammar (Greimas & Corutes, 1982: 77).

A synchronic study examines the relationships among elements of a sign system whereas a diachronic one investigates the whole sign system. If one studies a culture by synchronic analysis, for example, one would examine the codes within and/or between the systems at a particular period, i.e. a particular 'performance' of that culture. If by a diachronic analysis, one would then investigate a series of 'performances' of the system.

For example, in Chinese history, by studying the usage of Chinese writings through history one can distinguish changes of meaning, such, that at one time every capital city had the word 'peaceful' 安 attached. The word 'peaceful' in Chinese shows a woman under a roof implying a matriarchal society, and was lost from capital cities when the society became patriarchal. This is revealed in a diachronic analysis.

A synchronic approach, using the same example, demonstrates that in Chinese writing the 'surname' is made up of symbols illustrating a woman 女 and birth 生. All surnames in Chinese ancient history incorporated the symbol of woman 女. Connecting this to the example of names of capital cities showing a woman under a roof, one can infer that, formerly, this was a matriarchal culture.

The elements of a synchronic analysis are: simultaneous, static, paradigmatic, and of a diachronic analysis: successive, evolutionary, syntagmatic (Berger, 1982:24). Through a synchronic perspective, the relationships between elements of a sign system will show universally the same intrinsic and specific nature. Additionally, from the synchronic approach, one

can then develop the diachronic studies by which the whole sign system will be understood.

Moreover, due to its philosophy, the great emphasis of semiotics is on communication as a generator of meaning - i.e. how meaning is conveyed in communication. It deals with what signs are, and why sign-vehicles function as signs, and concentrates on analysing the structured set of relationships which enables a message to signify something. The approach examines the relationships between elements, which in various ways, create meaning (Fiske, 1994: 39-41).

To use the previous example, by analysing the Chinese writing system, it can be seen how signs of social structure are used, and how they obtained their present positions. Because Chinese society was ruled by women, the symbol of a woman dominated in relevant signs.

The semiotic approach seeks the conventions upon which communications are based and attempts to discover the underlying system of significant differences which makes such signs what they are (Hawkes, 1977:123-150).

One of the aims of a semiotic study is to understand the 'competence' of a sign system, and it will help to identify the rules which play a decisive role in generating meaning. It will hopefully identify the 'code' of the cross-cultural communication sign system, through its use of signs within that system not at a superficial level but at the level of the underlying codes.

Museum exhibitions are usually based on a group of displays in accordance with a theme (Burcaw, 1987: 115-6), they are the outcome of research, translated into sign-vehicles, organised and designed to convey ideas through the senses, primarily the visual (Kaplan, 1995:37). They can be regarded as a system of signs and the displayed items are the sign-vehicles.

The meanings attached by the visitor to the displays are not just casual phenomena. There must be a semiotic system of distinctions, categories, rules of combination, and a 'language' of this kind of communication. The resultant exhibition is a 'speech' of this language.

Museum exhibitions of other cultures like other types of communication, are systems of significations. They are the speeches of cross-cultural understanding. The parameters for possible or even successful cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions are not yet understood, but can be studied in exhibitions of this kind.

Museum exhibitions can be regarded as either 'connotative' or 'denotative'. Connotative sees museum exhibition as an art, and denotative as the communication of ideas. From the aspect of connotation, aesthetic ideas are emphasised rather than denotative meanings; for example, altered lighting producing altered impressions of the same object.

An exhibition of objects of a culture, under a semiotic examination, is no longer a group of displays, but message-carriers (form) of a sign system conveying meanings (content) related to the life of the culture displayed. A Qing dynasty jar in an exhibition of Chinese art, for example, is not simply a porcelain container, but a sign-vehicle within the sign system of Chinese art.

From the semiotic perspective, exhibition messages are produced by selecting and articulating signs operating at paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels simultaneously. In the case of museum exhibitions, the syntagmatic approach refers to the stories which are told in the gallery, whilst the paradigmatic concerns the meaning of the objects. By examining the performance, i.e. the visitor's interaction with the exhibition displays, of both levels, the semiotic approach helps to understand how messages are produced in a particular sign-system and the specific code of the cross-cultural communication.

Despite the wide range of exhibitions and visiting experiences, synchronic studies will reveal intrinsic similarities in their competence to communicate. It will examine the relationships between exhibitions of one type, or displays in one exhibition, to see how they construct messages. It is concerned with the transhistoric truth embedded in the system of exhibition under study. This kind of study also can assess how such significations are produced by the exhibition

organisers' or the visitors' selection and correlation of the exhibitions respectively.

By basing diachronic research on synchronic studies, the whole sign system of communication in exhibitions of another culture can be uncovered, showing the historical changes underlying them. For instance, in the past, exhibitions of another culture tended to emphasise the influence on the displayed culture by the host culture whereas today, museums try to promote understanding of the displayed culture itself.

As the underlying codes of exhibitions of another culture have not yet been understood, nor have their capacity to continuously generate cross-cultural signs been identified, applying a semiotics approach to reveal the semiotic capacity and nature of this kind of language, as this study does, is necessary.

Whilst analysing the sign system or the communication process of exhibitions of another culture, one can examine what kinds of signs or sign-functions there are, how they acquire their values, processes of sign-production and sign-interpretation; and the exercises and operations involved in these semiotic processes.

On the other hand, according to the discussion in 3.3, emic analysis can be expected to yield verifiable and undistorted knowledge of the implied intrinsic meaning of the culture studied, whether it be our own or a radically different one. An emic approach analysing a displayed culture is thus helpful for judging an insider's viewpoint of the culture, grasping the key messages of that culture, and also distinguishing non-emic units in the presentation.

An object is already a statement (perhaps of several sentences) of its own culture (for a single object may convey several pieces of information). In exhibitions of another culture, the number of images in one object is even more unlimited, as are the ways it can be displayed and its relationship with the visitor. Nevertheless, just as a linguistic statement must contain at least one phoneme, if the object is not the smallest unit of exhibition signification, it will consist of the smallest cultural units of the source culture and of the exhibition content.



In order to identify what is an emic unit, one must look first at the cultural (etic) units of the displayed culture, and then make a systematic comparison between them, seeking those which have the deepest significance in all areas of that culture. When contrasting the units, one must make an arbitrary and temporary separation between their content and form to clarify the relationships.

For example, taking one Chinese cultural unit 'ancestor worship', and comparing it with another, "bearing a male child is a duty of a Chinese wife"; after systematic comparisons, especially according to its purpose (Pike, 1954) "to maintain continuity of the family line" emerges as a significant unit common to most Chinese cultural units. Maintaining continuity is thus considered a Chinese emic unit.

Again, referring to 'ancestor worship', 'form' implies the behaviour level while 'content' implies the justification, for the worship which is 'remembering members of the family'. In this instance, past, present and even those yet to be born are considered to be family. Another example is, by observing the major etic events in a Chinese life such as festivals, ceremonies, and religious rituals; all of them involve, amongst many others, the idea of providing food and drink. One can then affirm that valuing eating and drinking is a Chinese emic unit.

An emic analysis will thus help to examine the implicit possible reasons influencing regular behaviour of members of a displayed culture, the relationships between their various types of behaviour, and also the objects produced by the members of that culture. This type of analysis is based on etic data which are then converted into an emic inventory.

However, cultural meanings, values, and concepts are not fixed, but are social variables, dynamic, potentially in flux, and subject to changes in historical conditions. Sometimes the connection may be tenuous, or the meanings may have become so remote as to obscure any historical relationship. As Guiraud (1992:27) suggests, the motivation of a sign is apt to be eliminated during its development in time.

A semiotic approach with an emic stance used in studying museum exhibitions of foreign cultures will thus help to identify the essential nature of the

signifying set; how sign vehicles become signs generating meanings; and those factors which affect the communication of emic message of the displayed culture. It will help in seeking out the 'code', the general laws, and in analysing the structural connections which underlie this kind of sign system. The empathetic emic stance can provide the insider's viewpoint.

In any particular social heritage, there is a code which is transmitted from one generation to the next; in the same way a certain family form, co-operative patterns, and technological skills are 'emic' parts of the culture of any society (Northrop, 1964:13). The primitive and irreducible character of the basic unit of a culture as we have defined it, is actually a direct result of the universal presence of experience for the members of that culture surviving in their mother lands. The Chinese 'emics', for instance, are the characteristic features of traditional Chinese life, Chinese ways of thought and behaviour, in short, the Chinese collective view of reality.

When studying cross-cultural communication, in order to ascertain what message from the source culture is reaching the visitor from different cultural background and by what means, an analysis of the source culture is necessary. Applying an emic approach to the analysis of a culture is an attempt to discover the pattern of that particular culture and how the elements of that pattern are interrelated, rather than an attempt to describe them with reference to a generalised classification derived in advance of the study (Pike, 1954: 10).

Furthermore, an emic approach cannot exclude the etic one as etic data can give tentative categories and provide the starting point of analysis. In such an analysis, the initial etic description is refined and ultimately replaced by a totally emic one (Pike, 1971:37-9).

To arrive at a structural law in a phonemic analysis, linguists analyse phonemes into 'distinctive features', which they can then group into one or more 'pairs of opposition'. Following this kind of analogous method, in the course of culture studies one might be tempted to break down the given culture analytically into its components.

Transferring the phonemic model to other areas raises issues which, although inherent in linguist analysis, are not crucial. Levi-Strauss suggests that it is not necessary literally to adhere to linguistic methods and that it is incorrect to equate terms from other study fields with linguistic phonemes from the viewpoint of their formal treatment (Levi-Strauss, 1986:114).

The application of the linguistic model to non-linguistic operations also led Pike (1954) to assert that seemingly continuous functioning stream is, like a sound stream, composed of units or experiential particles analogous to the phoneme. He also suggested that, whilst meaning is the defining characteristic for contrast in linguistic behaviour, 'purpose' would probably serve to contrast two units of behaviour.

Langer (1986:100) has a similar idea: "by generalising from linguistic symbolism to symbolism as such (visual arts, objects, etc), we are easily led to misconceive all other types, and overlook their most interesting features". We are then entitled, for methodological reasons, to treat independently the issues pertaining to each sign-system (such as music, dance, or culture). An attempt would thus consist of extending the method of structural linguistics while ignoring some of the requirements (Levi-Strauss, 1986:114).

For example, each object of a culture, like a language, consists of various elements which do not necessarily have an independent meaning. The areas of light and shade that constitute a pattern, for instance, have no significance by themselves and in isolation could be considered simply as blotches, yet they are faithful representations of elements composing the visual pattern. They do not represent, item for item, recognisable elements, but their light and shade, in various combinations, convey a recognisable total picture (Langer, 1986: 100-1).

The 'elements' that an object contains are not exactly the 'elements' contained in language. In verbal language, for example, words are considered as elements of first articulation, constructed by phonemes which are second articulation elements. Objects can be similarly analysed, but there are some signs which do not have secondary elements, such as colours, lines, shapes

and materials, even if recognised as units of expression. These have no intrinsic content, but contribute to the sign's meaning as a whole.

Fully aware of the problem that it is impossible to define the smallest independent sign and recognise its identity when the same unit is encountered in other contexts, Pike proposed 'spot' and 'class', two concepts which together serve as an analytic tool and avoid the need to identify minimal performing units.

The method of linguistic analysis is thus not directly applied to objects or patterns but broken down into minimal elements from which the meaning is produced. The place at which a substitution can occur is labelled a 'spot' and the set of items which can meaningfully be substituted in that 'spot' form the 'class' (Pike, 1971: 49). For example, the symbol for the spot of 'good luck' in Chinese society, its class (of meaningful substitutions) includes 'Two bats' (doubled good luck), 'Five bats in clouds' (harbingers of good luck), 'Eight immortals' (who bring good luck to people), etc.

In most instances, superficial appearances cannot explain the organisation of the emic or even the etic systems of a culture. For example, the etic manifestations of the Chinese symbols for 'peach', 'tortoise' and 'Southern Mountain' are quite different, but are recognised by all who grow up in Chinese society as symbols of long-life.

Nevertheless, the emic approach has its inadequacies and limitations. It is in nature relativistic, focusing on making statements based on cognitive factors alone and is not free from the researcher's imposition (Melas, 1989:147). How is a researcher to remedy such indeterminacy in the method?

The empathetic approach may give room for both subjective as well as objective mode. It draws symbolic meaning from extralinguistic entities, from non-verbal customs, and taboos and artefacts; it is the adoption of the subject's point of view and rests on the assumption that humans may feel and think in the same or very similar ways. It refers to the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes (Meals, 1989:142-3, 151).

Supporters of the empathetic approach, such as Dray (1964), argue that by drawing attention to the criterion of intelligibility or correctness to interpret cultural phenomena, it is enough to show that it follows rationally from an agent's thoughts. It is a form of internal explanations to cultural activities.

However, the greatest limitation of the empathetic approach is, again, its extreme relativism and the fact that it is actually not a methodological model at all. Bell (1986) indicates that empathetic approach is 'self-referential' theory, i.e. intuition. It is merely an analytical fashion, a means of generating unverified explanatory hypotheses, not subject to testing procedures similar to those of cognitive speculations reached through emic analysis (Meals, 1989:143, 147).

As Bell (1986) indicates, any method is used because of its appropriateness. Each approach has its strength and limitations and no matter which approach is employed, a certain degree of subjectivity, relativity and partiality is always involved. It follows that it is better to take account of their positive elements, to adapt and combine approaches to produce a pluralistic model of complementary integration.

What emerges is the idea of having the practical inference of emic approach with a modified, direct insider's empathetic viewpoint, i.e. an emic approach carried out by a native analyst. Instead of reliance on the emic reconstruction and empathetic assertion, the combined model commits to empathetic reconstruction and native assertions.

The basis for such an approach is, as Hofstede (1991:237) suggests that culture is 'the collective programming of the mind' (1984:21) or 'the software of the mind'. In the final analysis a culture is nothing but what is said or thought about it by those who share the categories with the subject culture - a native of that culture.

Only a native can say whether something is being done correctly and give a coherent and continuous picture of their conduct. However, culture is implicit, at least to the extent that usually a native cannot articulate the rules of intelligibility that they follow in conducting their daily life. The emic analysis can assist to reach beyond the judgements made by natives of a culture who have a

complete understanding of it in a practical sense, but do not necessarily have a sensible and consciously systematic knowledge of it.

To conclude, a framework which combines emic and empathetic approaches to formulate a parameter for analysing whether an interpretation is an internal understanding of a culture, meets the requirement of a reliable and convincing explanatory process, i.e. insider researchers employ an emic approach to analyse their own cultures.

By the nature of the emic plus empathetic approach, ideological, ethnocentric and gender biases can mostly be avoided in their application to the study of cross-cultural communication, although the approach was developed in Western societies and by males.

# **Chapter 4**

## **Hypothesis**

## 4.1 Key terms of semiotics for this study

There are several concepts involved in discussing the semiotic delineation and analysis of the communication processes which occur in museum exhibitions of another culture. These include various types of signs, different levels of interpretants, definitions of sign-function, pertinence, semantic and syntactic markers.

For semiotics, most human objects and activities are signs, but not of the same type. One of the major tasks of semiotics is to distinguish between different types of signs, since different signifying phenomena - compare a picture to a piece of music - have different strength or varying degrees of competence and need to be studied in different ways.

### ***Categorisation of signs***

Peirce (1960:1.372) categorised the structure of signs by distinguishing between three basic kinds of sign. They are the iconic, indexical and symbolic signs.

In an 'icon' there is an actual resemblance between signifier and signified. (Peirce, 1986:7,8) A portrait, for example, represents its subject less by an arbitrary convention than by resemblance. In an 'index' the relation between signifier and signified is causal: such as smoke meaning fire, since fire is generally the cause of smoke. A symbol is a sign where the connection with its signified is a matter of convention, agreement or rule e.g. a red line crossing a cigarette meaning 'non-smoking area' but not 'poor quality of cigarette', or 'cigarette is wanted'.

Signs can be divided into two main types according to whether the relation between signifier and signified is motivated or unmotivated. Motivation is a natural/conventional relation between the signifier and the signified (Kim, 1996:53; Fiske, 1994:52). A queen's picture standing for that queen is motivated. A cross 十 standing for 'completion' in Chinese writing is



unmotivated<sup>5</sup>. The relationship in unmotivated signification is more conventional and thus arbitrary.

Motivation can be understood as the degree to which the signified determines the signifier (Eco, 1976:190). The weaker the motivation the more constraining the convention. In excessive cases, convention alone is able to ensure the efficacy of a sign in which there is no perceptible relation between signifier and signified.

An iconic sign is motivated, a symbolic one is unmotivated, and an indexical sign is in between. The essential criterion for a sign is motivation, although historical evolution tends to obliterate that motivation. And to the extent that the original motivation is no longer perceived, the sign comes to function by virtue of convention alone. This is true of most signs in symbolic systems (Guiraud, 1992:26, 27). The cross 十 in Chinese writing was derived from the ancient counting system; a knot stands for 'completion', and the 'cross' was the picture of a knot.

Eco suggests that some signs do not refer to concrete objects or phenomena - the signified may well be an idea, concept, or process. They do not have a material existence, and are thus purely cultural, which Eco (1976:58; 62-3) refers to as the referential fallacy. This proposition points to the question of the referent of the sign.

### ***Peirce's theory of the interpretant***

Peirce (1960, 6.347) indicated that the sign is the immediate cause or determinant of the meaning. The factor affecting what is interpreted by the recipient is the interpretant. Peirce's models for generating meaning define the interpretant as the concept interpreting the sign in the mind of the user. A sign

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<sup>5</sup> The horizontal line points from East to West, the vertical, North to South hence representing completion" (Xu, 1994:89).

can stand for something different to different people only because the signified is affected by a different 'interpretant'.

The figure of a 'pomegranate' is a signifier which links to the signified 'abundance and fertility' through a Chinese cultural interpretant. There is no inherent reason why pomegranates should bring 'abundance and fertility' to people. However, in Chinese the pronunciation and character for 'seed' and 'children' are the same. As a ripe pomegranate is full of seeds, by the rules of homonymic transfer, so it is full of children. This is the interpretant which links the signifier, the figure of pomegranate, and the signified, the idea of abundance and fertility, in a Chinese mind.

For a sign to function, a second or perhaps more developed sign in the mind of the viewer is needed. The second sign is the interpretant of the first. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but as a framework of reference (Peirce 1986:5). For example, a pot of chrysanthemums can arouse the idea of a plant, a gift, a beautiful item, a symbol of long life, or just a pot of chrysanthemums in a viewer's mind. Any one of these can be an interpretant of a sign-function. However, if an item evokes no response whatsoever in a viewer's mind, then, for that viewer, the pot of chrysanthemums would not constitute a sign.

According to Peirce (1986:4-23) interpretants play a major role in the process of signification. He suggested that by analysing what the interpretants are, it is possible to gain insight into the sign. In order to understand the significations occurring in cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions, this study examines the interpretants in the visitor's mind which have been triggered by the displays.

Peirce (1960: 4.536; 8.315) distinguishes three levels of interpretants: the immediate, dynamic and final. The immediate interpretant is the interpretability of the sign. As in the example above, a pot of chrysanthemums can arouse an idea in the viewer's mind. This is the interpretability. In terms of semiotics, anything has the interpretability to be a sign.

The dynamic interpretant is 'the direct effect actually produced by a sign upon an interpreter' (Peirce, 1960: 4.536). To use the example above again, the

ideas of a plant, gift, beautiful item, symbol of long life, or a pot of chrysanthemums, are dynamic interpretants.

The final interpretant is that “which would finally be agreed as the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached” (Peirce, 1960: 8.184). It is the effect the sign would produce upon any mind when circumstances permit it to exercise its full effect. This final interpretant is actually concerned with an ideal. The interpretants present in any given instant in a person’s mind, whether signs or habits, do not constitute the full working out of a sign.

No dynamic interpretant is the perfect embodiment of the effects of a sign (Fitzgerald, 1966:79-80). That is to say, no one can grasp the full meaning of a sign. In order to facilitate this study, the way the exhibition organiser interprets the displays (by selection and arrangement) is regarded as the ‘final interpretant’ for that exhibition and the data collected by interviewing visitors are the final interpretants of the visitors to that visit.

It is asserted that only the dynamic interpretant has an effect on the interpreter (Fitzgerald, 1966:82). In successful cross-cultural communication, a sign will cause the dynamic interpretant relevant to the displayed culture to be triggered in a visitor’s mind. And it is this type of interpretant that the study mainly tries to understand, although other types are more or less relevant.

Although there are different types of signs, Eco (1976:49) points out that these are not signs but only sign-functions. When a person sees a sign-vehicle and there is a ‘mental event’ happening in their mind relating to that sign-vehicle, the sign is functioning.

For example, when visitors respond to a display and/or a label indicating, say, that an object is dated 2,000BC, by thinking that it is really remarkable and/or something else, the label is functioning. Otherwise, the display and/or label i.e. the sign-vehicle, will not have been taken as a sign and will remain a potential sign. The meaning produced by the sign-function, the response of ‘remarkable’ or whatever, is the signified. This kind of mental event can be triggered

unintentionally or transmitted intentionally by the sign-vehicle to communicate or express ideas.

In Eco's view, sign-function is either production or interpretation of meaning. For example, a ceramic rice bowl is only a utensil, but if someone thinks that it stands for 'diet', or 'ceramic art', it becomes a sign by this sign-function. In this sense, anything in an exhibition can be the sign of the function, telling the visitor its story.

Sign-vehicles function variously as icons, indexes, as symbols, or as semantic or syntactic markers. As a syntactic marker, for instance, a compass in the Chinese cultural code, may be linked with other items of 'Feng-shui', Chinese geomancy, whereas in the European cultural code, it could be linked with items connected with navigation.

The combination of a pair of fortune-telling sticks arranged with a bowl, an umbrella, and a pile of books, over a table, could be seen as a syntactical aberration, or a serious mistake in many display contexts, but the same items displayed on a shelf, as belongings of a particular person, would not. Such displays as these artefacts are not in themselves syntactic markers but only expressions of semantic markers which qualify or help to identify the character of their owner, or the activities of their user.

### ***Code and its relation to communication***

Code is vital to communication and has various definitions. It is both the system into which signs are organised and the process of choosing, distinguishing, and correlating things according to a given system (Fiske, 1994:64). Thus, these are the elements which determine the communicator's system, as well as those of the visitors, applied in the construction and interpretation of exhibition messages.

Any message must first be coded by the emitter and then decoded by the receiver. The codification is an agreement among the users of a sign system to recognise and observe a particular relationship between the signifier and the

signified. Such agreements are generally well developed and precise. Objective denotation is more precise than subjective connotation, and an explicit sign is more precise than an implicit one. The greater the imprecision of the convention, the more the value of the sign varies according to different users (Guiraud, 1992:25).

For example, traffic signs, such as lights or indications of one-way systems, are universally recognised, but less precise signals, such as flashing headlights, could be a warning of the following: the presence of a police car; something wrong with your car, or a suggestion for giving way. There can be wide variations. In Taiwan, for instance, to flash headlights at an oncoming car means 'Lookout - I'm coming!' but in England it means 'You first!'.

A signifier can refer to several signifieds, and a signified can be referred by several signifiers. The former cases are less precise than the latter. This is especially true when a code has a weak convention, highly developed iconic function and open signs. More signs are less precise than not, because there is not only one code but several superimposed and interlocking codes in any communication (Guiraud, 1992:27). An extreme case is when the two sides of a communication belong to different cultures that has different sets of codes.

### ***Pertinence***

'Pertinence' is at the root of the choices made in means of expression or communication in general. It is the standard for selecting signs, aiming at triggering anticipated responses on the one hand, and responding to the possible interpretation of observers on the other. Hence, pertinence is the point of view, the approach, the set of questions, or the general theoretical framework that guides observation or expression. It allows for the choice of the correct level at which any given structure must be scientifically described (Mounin, 1985:xv, 64).

The 'pertinent feature' is not a concrete physical feature, but an abstract form or type of expression which exists in the user's mind from a previous semiotic process. It attributes sense to given particular characteristics of an object. It is

this process of correspondence which assures the mental image of fish when somebody says the word 'fish' to an English speaker. Through two different systems of expression: linguistic (the words 'fish'); and iconic (the image of fish), the same abstract idea is recognised, and linked to reality. If one of the features is changed, say, the letter 'f' was changed to 'w', the meaning would become completely different.

### ***'Signification', 'Communication', 'Discourse' and their inter-relatedness***

Signification, in communication studies means either 'production of meaning' or 'meaning already produced' (Greimas, & Courtes, 1982: 298). It is the processes of assigning meaning to and deriving meaning from a sign-vehicle. Communication is the process of diffusing signifiers, to make signifiers available where signification is supposed to take place. Every communication process consists of a series of significations (Kim, 1996:2, 3, 84).

There has traditionally been a difference between discourse and communication. 'Discourse' often designates the process and product of social, historical and institutional formations (Greimas & Courtes, 1982:83). Meanings are produced by these forms of institutionalised discourse - the social process of making and reproducing sense(s) (O'Sullivan, 1983:73). Thus, 'discourse' is both a noun and a verb, referring both to the interactive process and the end result of communication.

To conclude, as Eco (1976:49) points out, 'the classical notion of sign dissolves into a highly complex network of changing relationships'. The main task of this study is to understand the changing relationship between signifiers and signifieds, caused by variations in the sender's or receiver's codes, and the implied codes embedded in the presentation through exhibitions of another culture.

## **4.2 The possible semiotic process of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions**

The analysis of the possible process for communication in museum exhibitions of another culture is based on semiotic models and related to such exhibitions. The internal structure, mechanisms and basic elements, some elementary models of the communication process are briefly interpreted. The processes of signification and sign-interpretation, and the initial ordering of signifying facts possibly occurring in the minds of visitors are described.

### ***Sign-vehicles***

Exhibitions of another culture normally comprise displays organised in a sequence designed to present the reality of the source culture instructionally and/or aesthetically. The displays usually contain artefacts, photographs, paintings, etc. Labels, graphics, and/or other display aids or techniques such as music, lights, sounds, and films are sometimes used to draw the attention of the visitors.

The design of the gallery: lighting, wall colour, spacing, and relationship between objects (juxtaposition of the display), the location of the display; the relationship between displays and labels, graphics, etc.; all form part of the intended communication of the source culture.

It is suggested by semioticians such as Eco (1976:9) that there cannot be communication without a system of signification. Therefore, from a semiotic point of view, every exhibition including cross-cultural ones, is actually a system of signification which uses different ways of constructing and arranging signs of the culture concerned to convince and move the visitor by providing an insight into the presented culture.

The objects, artefacts, photographs, paintings, - employed in exhibitions are the sign-vehicles or message-carriers, and can be termed fundamental - things representing other things (Eco, 1976:16). Labels, graphics, and other display aids or techniques are also sign-vehicles which help to impart the message

embedded in the displayed artefacts and can be termed subsidiary. What is of interest to the exhibition viewers is the signifieds of these sign-vehicles - the meaning the signification system produces.

### ***Two modes of sign-function***

Two modes of sign-function in communication are identified by Jakobson (1960) - the first, working at the distributional, syntagmatic level and referring to complementary or consequential functions which form the succession of facts, events, forms and concepts of the narration. The second works at the integrative level and contributes to the meaning of the whole story, as indices of cultural elements, of a specific atmosphere, etc. These elements attribute qualities more than functions to the segments of the narrative.

In exhibiting another culture, sign-vehicles are first selected from among many associated possibilities. For example, in an exhibition of contemporary Chinese brush painting, the paintings, and the material employed are selected from among all the accessible modern Chinese brush paintings. This selection is actually an interpretation by the exhibition organisers, based on certain criteria which they consider to represent contemporary Chinese brush painting.

Objects may be used by the exhibition organiser to express more than one aspect of their significance. For example, an ivory cup from a Han dynasty tomb can be used to demonstrate various concepts - a cup; burial item; provision for the afterlife; ivory carving; one of the finest ivory carvings in the Han dynasty; confirmation of the use of ivory in the Han dynasty; example of importing ivory in the Han dynasty; item from the X collection, a gift from Y to the museum, etc.

This continuum is the total reality within which one speaks of the world, its raw materials, ideas and thoughts (Peirce, 1960:1.171-172; 6.170). As it is impossible to cover the whole of the continuum, it must be shaped in limited forms (of expression and of content) in order to signify, speak about and communicate them. Every formalisation of an expression or of a content then necessarily becomes a reduction, an impoverishment of the continuum, of reality itself (Eco, 1976).



## ***Fragmentation***

Eco (1976) explains the selection and correlation of signs as a process of mapping selected pertinent features of content or of expression. When representing something, one must select some pertinent features of the content proposed and translate them into correspondingly pertinent features of an expression. Thus, one can only speak of fragments of reality through other fragments of it. This 'fragmentation' is the actual process of sign-production, through which one cannot refer back to the totality of the subject represented.

When organising an exhibition, such as 'contemporary Chinese paintings', the organiser may select the pertinent features of 'Chinese paintings': symbolic, using brush, water, ink etc. from a continuum including the following items: simplicity, spirituality, rhythmic vitality, the use of cotton or silk paper, disciplined control in employing traditional techniques, etc.

After selection, the cultural units are arranged in meaningful structures as paradigmatic and syntagmatic chains, according to various 'codes' such as the code of the objects selected and the code of the exhibition organisers. The selected sign-vehicles are just like words in a sentence, responsible for the construction of the speeches. The other subsidiary sign-vehicles such as labels, graphics, or audio / visual aids are equivalent to adjectives, adverbs, footnotes, illustrations, or even punctuation.

Although it may be adventurous to compare an object or display to words, an exhibition is a complex composition similar to that in which words are related to each other. In exhibitions, the cultural unit(s) may be represented by an individual object (corresponding to a 'word'), by a group of objects (corresponding to a 'sentence') or by a whole sequence of displays (corresponding to a 'paragraph' in the entire work), such as a ritual setting, an artisan's workshop, fulfilling a unique 'sign-function'. These complex signs correspond, in Eco's terms, to a 'cluster of meanings'.

According to Eco' (1979:157) theory, the process of sign-production for exhibitions of a foreign culture is based on a triple procedure: the shaping of the expression-continuum; the correlation of that shaped continuum with its possible content; and the connection of these signs to factual events, things or states in the cultural world concerned. Exhibition organisers arrange and map the cultural continuum of expressions and contents, and the features pertinent and relevant to the particular intention they choose to communicate. The organisers thus arrange a perceptual structure and create a semantic structure - the message which is expected to be perceived and understood by visitors (Eco, 1979:37).

Once the displays are arranged in an exhibition, they enter into a system of opposition and relationships with other semantic units in a signification and communication process, which could be called 'the exhibit system'. The cultural units, the sign-vehicles, will then develop a semantic entity (Eco, 1976:27). Both the fundamental and the subsidiary sign-vehicles are manifestation units and perform messages. The meaning of an exhibition exists contextually, governed by sets of similarities and oppositions. It is the aim of this study to find out by which and to what extent, the nature of the signifier, the patterns of displays and objects and the layout of the space, determines what is signified.

The physical structure of the expression is as a semantic or syntactic marker, depending on the semantic or syntactic level with which it is concerned. These markers may acquire a role in the sign's structure, according to the perspective, the semantic field in which the sign will be posited. The syntactic markers of an expression will imply its possible combinations in a string of signs, entailing other sign-units according to a given code and so help to define the sign's function.

For example, a bowl in a collection of ceramics at various stages of expertise might be syntactically presenting the development of pottery techniques, whilst with a set of plates, spoons, and cups, the same bowl might be demonstrating the arrangement of a dinner table. The same sign-vehicle in different syntactic systems will induce different denotations and connotations.

By means of sign-production, a display with an original determined function and conventional signification in its primary codes, forms an intrinsic semantic marker according to the semantic fields of the exhibition code, the museum code, and inevitably the curator's systems of signification. According to semiotic theory, even when the exhibition organiser consciously selects forms closest to the originally determined function and conventional signification of the culture which produced the objects, the action of selection will inherently have an influence.

In linguistic codes the syntactic markers of an expression (singular, masculine, verb, and adjective) determines its coded use. Syntactic codes determine not only the combinational possibilities of the signs in a text, but also their organisational possibilities in a given context. The selection and articulation of sign-vehicles works in the same way i.e. they operate in the fields both of internal (the sign itself) and external relationships (with other signs), and it is in this respect that their semiotic potential will be grasped by the visitor. These codes of internal and external relationships determine the combinational possibilities of sign-functions in a given context.

When the exhibition is opened to the public, the chain of signs which has been assembled by the exhibition organiser will be interpreted by the visitors using other procedures of selection and combination and their reaction may differ from the criteria of the communicators. They may select some other pertinent features of the expression and relate to a totally different content.

To use the previous example of the 'Han dynasty cup', the sign-vehicle may suggest different content-segments to different visitors, e.g. as a container, an artistic work, a precious antique, a museum object, or just 'another display'. The visitor's reaction to the exhibits may or may not be related to the proposed semantic and syntactic systems, although the effect of the displayed stimuli is normally expected to correspond to a foreseeable reaction or meaning that the exhibits are intended to elicit.

An exhibition when viewed from different perspectives, can generate different significations and meanings. Meaning can result from the way in which

elements in the exhibition are placed with respect to each other - e.g. comparing a display in the middle of a room to one placed in a far corner of a gallery. Meaning can also be affected by, for example, the space, lighting, colour of the walls, or the attitude of the attendants (Hodge & D'Souza, 1979:354).

Various integrated codes (and sub-codes) operate in an interactive and intersected way. Sign-production and sign-interpretation are based on the framework of reference of the individual concerned and reflect their different mental perspectives. Other factors that can influence interpretation include security measures, methods of cataloguing and reporting on collections, and conservation measures, none of which necessarily relate to the proposed semantic system.

To summarise, the exhibition's 'performance' stems from the mental effort of sign-production and sign-interpretation by exhibition organisers and visitors, and the communication actually consists of two systems of signification - the production of the exhibition and the interaction with the displays by visitors.

In essence, to choose and to associate imply a range of values, corresponding to ideal categories, conventionalised into social codes, i.e. a culture. In cross-cultural communication, the perspectives that influence choice and correlation vary greatly because of the separate cultural backgrounds of the displayers and visitors. Therefore, such communication involves double interpretation that of the communicator and of the visitor, and furthermore interpreting deals only with apparent reality because interpretations are mental constructions of the material 'continuum' as segmented, classified, understood and appropriated by the brain.

In cross-cultural communication cultural perspectives vary greatly and are therefore even more open to various usage and constructions selected by the emitters/interpreters.

In this study, the hypothesis proposes that the different cultural codes existing in cross-cultural communication account for interpretation deviating from the displayed object's message within its source culture. In order to

substantiate the hypothesis, it is proposed to analyse precisely how signs can convey meanings closest to their original intention, the extent of departure from the original signification can be uncovered, and a theory about the practices and laws which govern cross-cultural transcripts of exhibitions of this nature can be postulated.

The notion of failure has little meaning in semiotics (Fiske, 1982) because signification always occurs in one way or another. If a certain signification that was unintended by the sender occurs in the receiver, a communication researcher regards it as a failure while a semiotician regards it as an interesting phenomenon rendering opportunities to investigate what meanings the sign can evoke in the receiver.

Successful cross-culture communication must cause a signification in the visitor's mind that is analogous with the signification that would be caused in the source culture. If the desired signification does not occur to the visitor, then the cross-cultural communication can be judged a failure.

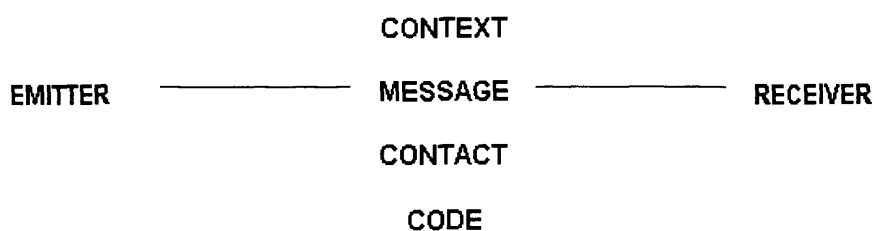
Various factors such as: the interpretant aroused in the visitor's mind, the context in which the sign is used, the frame of reference - the 'encyclopedia' in the visitor's mind, would be applied according to different situations and contexts. As which of these are the most important and why, is the focus of the subsequent chapters.

### 4.3 The intentions of this study

The aim of a cross-cultural museum exhibition of another culture is to show visitors how that culture sees its experiences. To discover whether an exhibition has achieved its aim, the insider's viewpoint and the visitor's perception of the exhibition must be uncovered.

#### ***Jakobson's six element theory in the generation of meaning in exhibitions***

Jakobson's six element theory of the communication process carefully considers the factors influencing the generation of meaning in any speech event. The six constituent factors are as follows:



**Figure 7: Jakobson's six elements of the communication process**

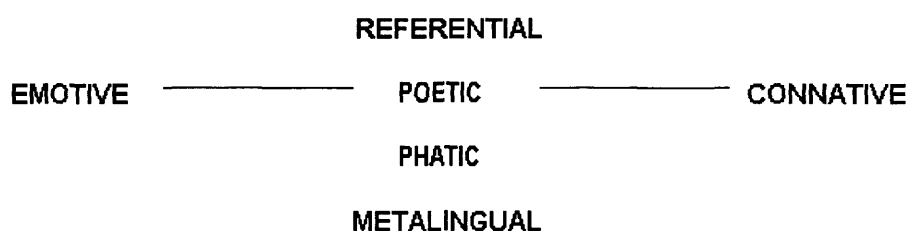
(from Jakobson, 1960:353)

In Jakobson's opinion, all communication consists of messages transmitted from an emitter to a receiver requiring a contact between them which must be formulated as a code and any message must refer to a context understood by both. The meaning of any expression is inextricably bound up with these basic elements.

With museum exhibitions, the emitters are the staff involved (curator, designer, registrar or other museum professional); the context is (the parts of) the culture displayed; the message is the displays themselves; the contact is (indirectly, between the museum emitters and the visitor), actually between the visitor and the displays; the code is the rules and the conventions of such exhibitions, and the receiver is the visitor.

The central point Jakobson makes is that the message does not and cannot supply all the meaning. The greater part derives from the context, the code and the means of contact and, for the message to make sense, the context must be understood by both parties. Meaning is not a stable, predetermined entity that passes from the emitter to the receiver.

There are other factors underlying the elementary functions of communication. From the above model, Jakobson suggests that each element gives rise to a different communication function. He also produced a structured model to explain the six functions (fig. 8). In the model, each function takes up the corresponding position in the model as the factor of the six constituents to which it refers.



**Figure 8: The Jakobson's model of communication functions**

(from Jakobson, 1960:357)

For an exhibition, the organiser is responsible for the 'emotive' functions, which involve, primarily, their attitudes toward the context, the source and are normally expressed through linguistic and design codes. The context, builds up the 'referential' functions of the communication and comprises the whole of what is said explicitly and implicitly. In museum exhibition, it shares mainly in the iconic code (the objects on display, or the absence of display) and the linguistic code (the labels, verbal information, etc).

The perspective of the communicator is the 'connative' function and is primarily designed to influence the behaviour of the receivers. It is principally expressed in the selection and combination of displays and encourages a preferred reading of the message.

The contact between the two sides of the communication process is described as the 'phatic' function and is mainly represented by the design or 'museographical' code although the subsidiary sign-vehicles of lighting, colours, smells or textures, spatial connotations and graphic codes (maps and diagrams) also contribute.

Messages stimulate the 'poetic' function that covers the ways in which they are formulated. The 'metalingual' function is both the use of sign-vehicles to describe and interpret the structure of the object and defines the meaning of any signs which might not otherwise be communicated.

To discover the conventions which underlie cross-cultural discourse, to ascertain the significance of an exhibition of foreign culture to its visitors, one must compare the intended and received messages. The codes and rules behind the changing of the message also need deeper analysis. Thus an examination of content and an analysis of the visitor's interpretation of the displays is required.

The structure of the source culture is the major factor in identifying the intended message. It inevitably involves the emotive, poetic, phatic and referential aspects - i.e. the meanings which museum communicators attach to their displays by (the emic units contained in) the artefacts and sets of objects for the source culture arranged in displays.

Although the study concentrates on the interaction between visitors and displays, all of Jakobson's six functions are closely related and thus need to be taken into account. Also, in terms of semiotics, this study involves both paradigmatic and syntagmatic considerations.

The paradigmatic consideration includes emic analysis of the source culture and the displayed objects to identify the paradigms of the intended message. The syntagmatic consideration analyses the arrangement of objects into an intelligible sequence - juxtaposition and layout - which consequently links the emic messages and build up the narratives of the exhibition.



This study describes and compares the intrinsic content of an object and its display, in terms of emic units, with the content transferred to the mind of a visitor from another culture to reveal the ways in which exhibition strategies can suggest certain kinds of readings.

Displays are thus analysed as words in paragraphs or sentences. In the same way that a word is not the minimum element and can be broken up into phonemes, lexemes, morphemes, etc., objects constituting a display can be analysed still further. In addition, as mentioned in 3.4, although an object is not the smallest unit of exhibition signification, since it may contain several informational elements, it is still the smallest individual item in an exhibition.

According to Peirce, much of what one can do in the analysis of making meaning is dependent upon the interpretant. He suggests, as mentioned in 4.1, that the interpretants of a sign-function determines the meaning. Peirce (1960: 5.475) writes: "the problem of what the 'meaning' of an intellectual concept is can only be solved by the study of the interpretants, or proper significate effects, of signs".

The interpretant is thus the essential reference in pursuing the emic message of an exhibition and its interpretation by the visitors, as it is what precisely evoked in the visitor's mind by the display. At the same time, more attention is given to the mechanisms by which visitors interpret the displayed culture.

Barthes (1967, 1973) identifies two orders of signification. The first order is denotation and the second order is defined on two levels: connotation and myth.

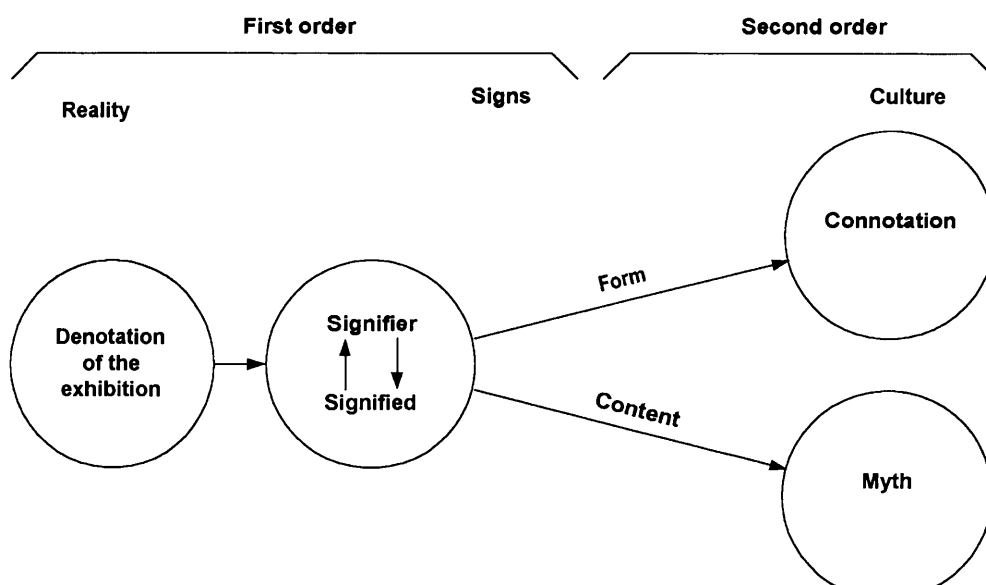
Denotation is concerned with the literal interpretation, allowing the sign to produce the meaning of what it represents. It indicates a simple, unambiguous, direct relationship between a sign and its referent, refers to common sense, i.e. the obvious meaning of the sign, within one culture. In this sense, 'maple' means only 'maple', or 'mapleness'.

Connotations and myth are subjective meanings the interpreters add to signs based on their own experiences. Within the two, connotation signifies 'expressive' values, it is the secondary-order signification of the signifier, while

myth signifies values associated with concepts, it is of the signified. Barthes maintains that myth is a chain of signifieds. More specifically, myth is created in two steps: the signifier activates several signifieds in the mind of the interpreter; and activated signifieds are formed syntagmatically into a string of signifieds (Kim, 1996).

In this sense, maples become more than just maples. A Chinese person, for instance, sees the 'designation of high rank' from the phonetic similarity between maple and appointment in the Chinese language. The idea of 'promotion' is connotation and the various stories about maples bringing successful careers to people are the 'myth'.

Fiske understands Barthes' two orders of signification to be as follows:



**Figure 9: Barthes' two orders of signification**

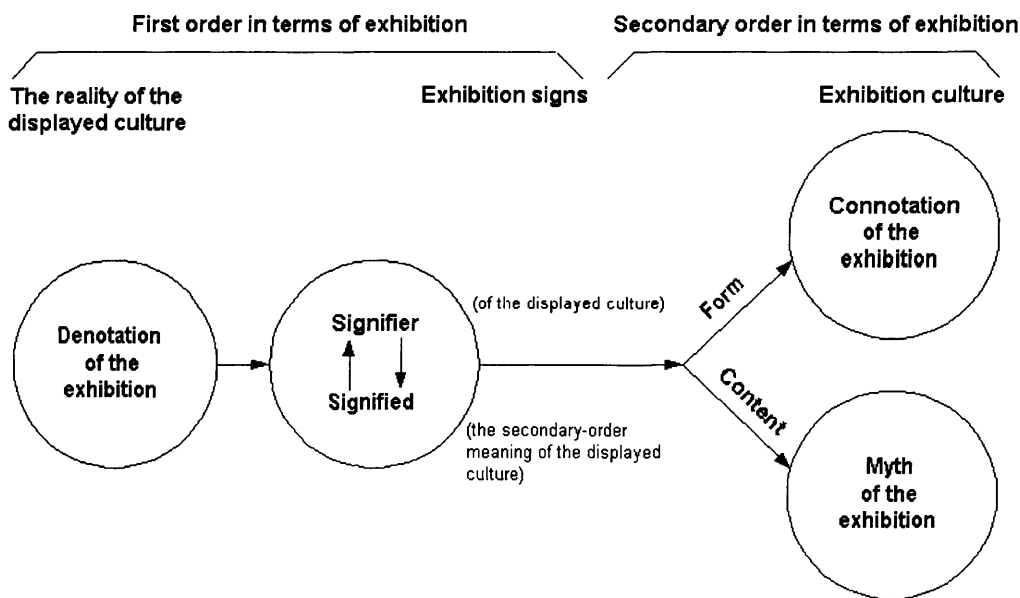
(from Fiske, 1994:88)

In the light of semiotics, a culture is a system of signs. The tangible level such as houses, transport, political organisations, belongs to the first-order signification of the sign-system. The latent part such as beliefs, norms and taboos, belongs to the secondary-order signification.

Consequently, the specific task for cross-cultural communication is to cause a signification, by displays, in the visitor's mind which accords with the signification of the same sign-vehicle, as occurs in the source culture. Also, by its nature, an exhibition of a culture 'denotes' the displayed culture - the secondary-order signification of the source culture. The denotation of exhibitions of another culture actually relies on the secondary-order meaning of the displayed culture.

For example, the denotative signification of a fish pattern in an exhibition of Chinese art is not a fish but 'a symbol of wealth and abundance'. In an exhibition of Buddhism a fish is one of the eight lucky emblems. Or, a fish might be presented in Christian catacomb paintings to signify Christ (Hall, 1994:25).

In an exhibition of one culture, the two orders of signification will be as follows (in which the denotation is the secondary-order of signification of the displayed culture):



**Figure 10: The two orders of signification within an exhibition of another culture**

Pressures arising from the plurality of contemporary post-colonial society are forcing museums to adopt more inclusive working practices and cultural representations. Nevertheless, even when the representation is satisfactory to

those being represented, the extent to which the visitor of another culture takes up the intended message remains to be seen.

As discussed in the first and second chapters, there are already many studies concerning secondary-order signification of exhibition performance. Cultural studies practitioners seek to decipher 'the codes of connotation, constructed over and above the denoted sign'. Most of their studies centre on an analysis of the issues concerning social and political power relationships which lie behind the organisation of the exhibition. This kind of study may neither provide pragmatic directions nor encourage the practical improvement of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions.

Furthermore, due to the time and scale limitation of this study, it is impossible to carry out comprehensive research which covers both the concerns of cultural studies and of cross-cultural communication, or all the issues of the latter. Instead of how and why exhibition organisers choose the objects on display and what the display is saying, this study is concerned with a sphere which has been neglected - the visitors' response to displays of another culture.

Since the focus is the intended message - the first-order signification of the exhibition sign-system - which is concerned solely with the denotation of the displays, the issues this study examines are as follows: how the stories and images of another culture, presented by exhibition organisers through the sign-vehicles, codes and conventions at their disposal, appeal to visitors; what strategies are more effective in promoting visitor identification with the displayed culture; what tactics are used, by the visitor, in selecting a combination of the displayed sign-vehicles to generate the interpretation of another culture.

Nevertheless, the whole of the exhibition's denotation is an interlocution between the displays, the narration itself, and the other narrative elements such as the design of the gallery. The crucial question concerning cross-cultural exhibition - how exhibition language generates positive cross-cultural speech, is a matter of the interlocution of the denoted text.

What the visitor takes up from the message of the source culture i.e. the meaning, the process through which the visitor does this, and the decoding

processes, are vital questions considered by this study. In order to understand the processes, and explore their potentialities, this study analyses the messages, sent by the emitter through the displays, and the perception and cognition in the visitor's mind, as well as the ways they are interpreted.

This study examines through what codes the emic units of the source culture within displays combine to achieve the communication with visitors of another culture. Consequently, both an analysis of visitor sign-interpretation and also of emic units within expression and content planes, the source culture and the displays is needed. Both sign-production and sign-interpretation must be studied at semantic and syntactic levels.

This study aims to discover the specific language, the 'competence', at the basis of this kind of communicative action and the codes and rules, the specific systems and structures and their signification in the communication processes e.g. how objects of a culture acquire value as 'sign-functions'; how effectively they perform those functions; and to what extent they are understood; what causes the interaction between objects of one culture and visitors of another and with what potential effects.

#### **4.4 The structure of the case study**

Compensating for restriction to a single case study due to time and scale limitations of this research, prudent consideration was given to the selection of an exhibition for this study. A small-scale survey was carried out and the selected location was the T.T.Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The gallery displaying Chinese objects and being located in a British environment, was chosen as a site where the cultural knowledge of the researcher could best investigate the impact of an exhibition across two vastly different cultures.

##### ***Introduction to the emic units of Chinese culture relating to the theme of the gallery***

The 'content' i.e. the source culture's relevant theme, was examined to single out the 'necessary and sufficient' distinguishing emic units to discover their referential function. This analysis of the referential functions of the signs and text of the exhibition related to the total context of the message. However, the emotive function was brought to light at the same time.

The empathetic emic approach was used to analyse the messages of the source culture by following the classifications and principles employed by that culture, since by finding the emic units and the relationships between them is to reveal the 'grammatical rules' of their use and the logical structure of the institutions which make up that culture. In addition, an empathetic position for the emic analysis was used to secure the insider's viewpoint for the internal explanations.

##### ***Analysis of the intended message at paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels***

An analysis of the message emitted by the source culture was carried out at the paradigmatic level by identifying the referential meaning - the emic units - of a pattern, a motif on an object, an object or a display. This is similar to the study of the 'word' in a sentence or a text, revealing the capacity of objects to

demonstrate the complex relationships of the various social codes and systems of meaning in source culture, and can be used to examine the communicative potential of the sign-vehicles in transmitting source culture in an exhibition setting. This will be discussed at section 5.3.

On the point of ascertaining the relationships between components of the exhibition and their production of cross-cultural messages, the exhibition was examined at syntagmatic level using the six functions model of Jakobson's theory of communication, but only as applied to first-order signification i.e. denotation and enclosed text.

Every text, although open to many possible readings, usually endorses certain specific readings, i.e. a 'closed' text. This closure, corresponding to the way the text is constructed to encourage certain meanings and to discard others is achieved either through the intended absence of other elements or through the closing and controlling the mode of the enunciation (Eco, 1979).

The fundamental element for a sign to be functioning in generating meaning is, in semiotics, taken as the 'interpretant' (Peirce, 1986:5). The key strategy in analysing the functions of the exhibition text is thus to examine the interpretants of the signs.

### ***Interviews***

Interview subjects can generate data which gives an authentic insight into people's experiences (Silverman 1993:91). In-depth interviews especially provide enough freedom for respondents to also direct the conversation and bring in other unexpected but relevant matter (Yin, 1994:84). Furthermore, the process of being interviewed may also be an enriching experience for the interviewee, who may obtain new insights and awareness into his or her visiting situation (Kvale, 1996:31).

In order to provide core information for the study of the interpreting process in visitors, and to discover the features of a museum exhibition which promote cross-cultural communication, in-depth interviews with visitors were carried out

to examine their individual reactions to, and interpretations of a cross-cultural exhibition.

Using the idea of an exhibition as a 'text' performed to the visitors, the in-depth interview enquired how signs of one culture were perceived and interpreted by visitors with different cultural codes. An open-ended questionnaire allowing visitors to explain their visiting experience from their own perspective and in their own words (Kvale, 1996:70) was devised to record the experiences and meanings of the interviewees' world.

Pilot studies prior to final data collection and articulation of a theoretical proposition can provide considerable insight into the basic issues being studied (Yin, 1994:75). Acquaintance with the content of an inquiry is not acquired solely through literature and theoretical studies. Actual presence in the interview environment simulates the situational requirement and thus renders a sense of how the interviewees will respond in this particular interview situation (Lindlof 1995:175-8). Several preliminary interviews were rehearsed in the Gallery, and numerous visits to the T.T.Tsui Gallery were made, before in-depth interviews were carried out.

### ***Coding and analysis of data***

The interviews were simultaneously recorded and transcribed, and then coded by reducing and categorising the data into paradigms to find out how the interviewees' selected interpretants. Analysing these interpretants - names used by the visitor to denote those signs and functions, the meaning ascribed to them - shows the change between the intended meaning of the signs and the different functions of the displayed objects in their original context. Such changes are governed by the code, rules and conventions in the cross-cultural communicative process, and so their examination can lead to their discovery.

In order to prepare an interpretative account of the analysis i.e. correlate them in a syntagmatic mode, the significant signs of the source culture (identified by emic analysis) and the emic units emitted in the exhibition (identified by syntagmatic analysis), were compared with the relationships



between the paradigmatic categories identified (by the coding process). This comparison revealed the semiotic properties and suppositions of the above paradigms.

To see whether visitors interpreted signs in the way they were emitted in the source culture and represented through the exhibition, logical propositions in the interviewee's statements were examined to clarify the conventions of cross-cultural communication, particularly as regards the juxtaposition and arrangement of displayed objects which influenced their interpretation, and to reveal the orienting and deviating circumstances affecting cross-cultural communication.

### ***Evaluation of the methods of this study***

The method chosen for this study and the study as a whole will be evaluated to see whether it provides an objective way for examining cross-cultural communication in exhibitions and, to examine the strengths and weaknesses of this study. Some suggestions have been made based on the result of the research. They are themes and ways of studying communication between visitors and a displayed foreign culture and possible ways of achieving the desired results and effects in organising exhibitions of another culture.

# **Chapter 5**

**Case study - An analysis of the  
displays at the T.T.Tsui Gallery**

## 5.1 The background of the case study

The study focuses principally on the T.T.Tsui Gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum which is intended to widen access to Chinese culture (Armstrong, 1991:9) and is one of the most successful exhibitions of this kind, but reference is also made to other similar exhibitions in Britain.

During February and April 1991, a brief survey based on random interviews with Chinese students in the UK was carried out to choose an appropriate instance for this study (Appendix 1). All the interviewees grew up in Chinese societies, e.g. Mainland China, Taiwan or Hong Kong, and regard themselves as Chinese. The main question was: "Which of the exhibitions you have visited in the UK do you think most faithfully presented Chinese culture?"

40.3% (67 out of 166) had visited more than three such exhibitions, of which 46% (31 out of 67) singled out the T.T.Tsui Gallery, and a further 20% (14 out of 67) the T.T.Tsui Gallery together with other exhibitions including those at the British Museum in London, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art in London, and the Chinese collection at Durham University (Appendix 1).

The Victoria and Albert Museum is in London, the capital city, and attracts some 1,200,000 visitors annually, predominantly British, but also from overseas. According to market research carried out by the Museum in 1996 and 1997, they were approximately 45% male and 55% female, 65% British and 35% from overseas (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1997); its exhibitions therefore have potential for the examination of cross-cultural communication.

The Victoria and Albert Museum came into being following the Great Exhibition of 1851 (Wilson, 1983:3) and has had a tradition of exhibiting other cultures. It houses a multitude of treasures from many cultures and periods of time (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1965:2) although it focuses on expounding the theory and practice of design to make it comprehensible to manufacturers, designers, and public alike (Goodwin, 1990: 9-49; Wilson, 1983:4).

Assembled during the development of Victorian imperialism (Barringer, 1998:11), the collections and representation of objects from India and South East Asia, China, and Japan, have been viewed by Shelton (1994) as a microcosm, an ordered portrayal of the world in miniature, and by Richards (1993) a three-dimensional imperial archive.

In Barringer's opinion, even the architecture of the Museum "served the orientalist function, described by Said (1995), of asserting an absolute difference between the Orient and the Occident, while collapsing differences within the category of 'Oriental'" (Barringer, 1998:16).

Since 1852, when some Chinese pieces were first collected, the Chinese collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum has been unrivalled. It includes bronzes, ceramics, jades, lacquer, ivory, wood, paintings, textiles, furniture, etc. At its beginning, these objects were regarded as part of the collection of ornamental art, with no special emphasis on their Chinese origins (Kerr, 1991:11).

The Far Eastern Section of the Museum, founded in 1970, has paid particular attention to the collection of twentieth century items. The extent of Chinese material has been enlarged to include the products of the period since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Kerr, 1991:250). Simultaneously, a vigorous programme of interpretative work has furthered the Section's role as a centre of research for East Asian material culture (Armstrong, 1991:9).

The Museum now houses one of the largest collections of modern Chinese craft and design, and, in many areas, has some of the best study resources outside China (Kerr, 1991:250; Armstrong, 1991:9). Nevertheless, it is considered that 'the tension between rival taxonomies - culture and history versus materials and techniques - persists in the Victoria and Albert Museum's displays to this day' (Barringer, 1998:27).

£1.25 million was given to the museum by Mr. T.T.Tsui in June, 1988 for the creation and promotion of a new Chinese gallery which involved refurbishing and redesigning the Chinese primary gallery (room 44, see figure 11), for furthering the interpretation of the existing Chinese collections. The T.T.Tsui Gallery has as its main aim the wider dissemination and appreciation of Chinese culture and is renowned for its success (Armstrong, 1991:9; Kerr, 1991:12). It is therefore fertile ground for cross-cultural communication research.

In organising the Gallery, not only has extensive research been carried out, but also the desires of the organisers to meet the expectations of their visitors has resulted in various consultative exercises.

Before refurbishment, there was comprehensive consultation with the Chinese community as well as other interest groups. The consultative process included a study (commissioned by the Museum through National Opinion Polls (NOP)), which investigated the responses to alternative techniques of presentation and explanation from several targeted groups outside the Museum; and presenting a questionnaire for people visiting the existing Chinese gallery conducted by the staff of the Far Eastern section (Kerr, 1991:2).

The findings from both researches were further discussed with invited groups including the original interviewees, colleagues in the museum and authorities in a number of fields (McManus, 1992:4). As a result of the consultations, the gallery was rearranged so as to interpret objects through their patterns of use (in their original culture) (Kerr, 1991:12).

The need for such preliminary research is now generally recognised by museum professionals (Belcher, 1991:23-33; Griggs, 1992; Dean, 1994:91-102; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994:74-83), provided that funds are available. In the case in question, it was made possible by the generous financial support from the donor, Mr. Tsui (McManus, 1992:4).

Guided by these surveys and the Museum's collections, the subjects have been structured to reflect six different aspects of the Chinese life style - burial; religious worship; everyday life; eating and drinking; life at court; and the connoisseurs' collections (figure 13). The main area of interest is 'how objects

were used in China'. Further information given about displayed objects includes the material of which they are made, their decoration, makers etc. and also, which objects were purchased, donated, or are still on loan (Kerr, 1991:21-6).

The main sign-vehicles in T.T.Tsui Gallery are a collection of Chinese artefacts (figure 12). These materials include porcelain, cloisonné, enamels, jade, silk, etc. dating from the Neolithic to the Twentieth Century. Using modern display concepts and techniques, the new installation shows Chinese arts through various media including video. The textual materials within this exhibition are titles, subtitles, introductory texts, group texts, individual labels, leaflets and handouts.

There are four access points to the gallery and an intending visitor normally use the one nearest to the main hall of the Museum where access is through two rows of display cases, one showing 'ruling' and the other 'eating and drinking'<sup>6</sup>. After entering, the visitor passes the 'eating and drinking' displays that reflect the priorities of Chinese life.

Although no world religion originated in China, Chinese life is very much influenced by devout belief, and it could be said that the numerous orthodoxies, ever present in the background, actually rule Chinese life (Wei, 1992:67-70; Zhao, 1992:905-906).

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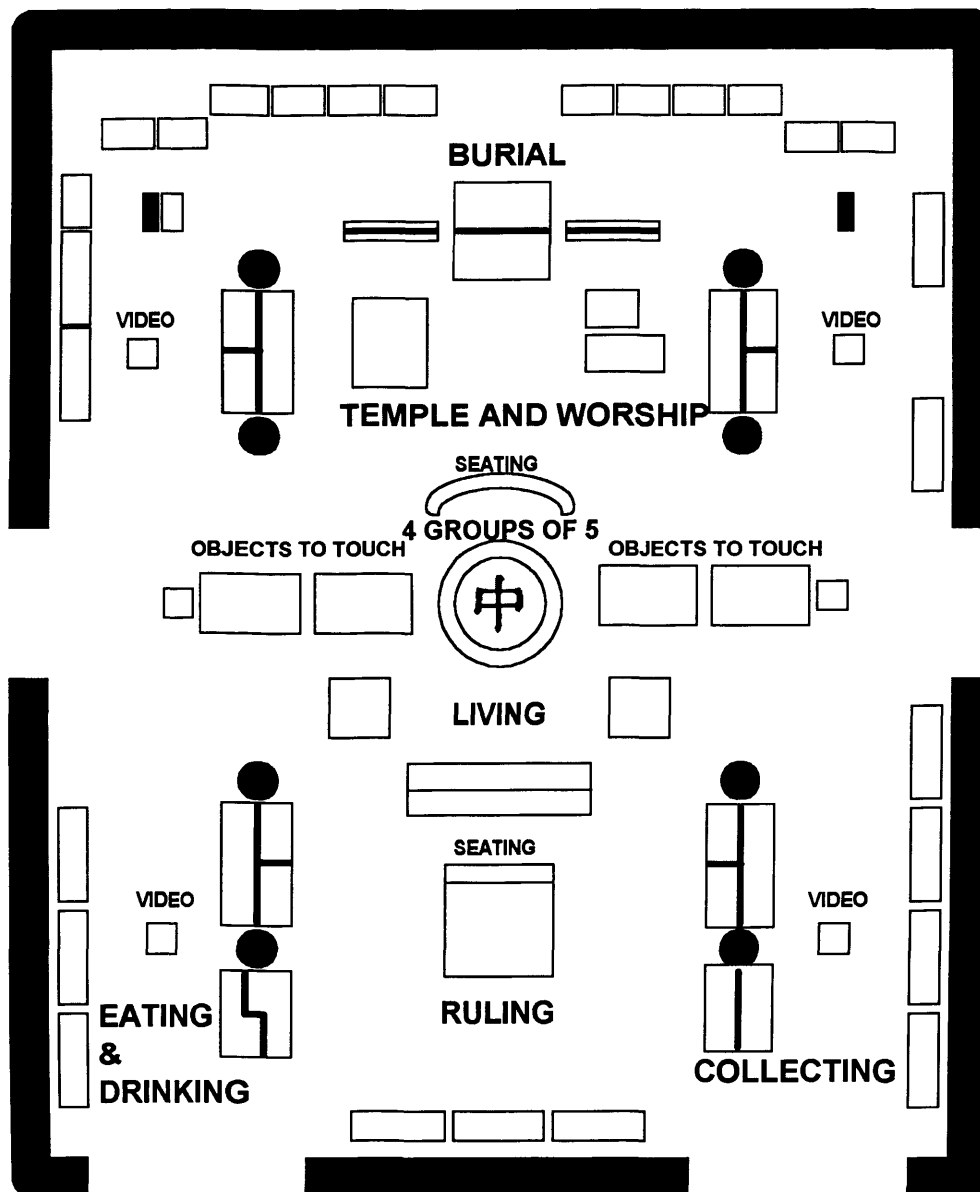
<sup>6</sup> In preliminary observation done by the researcher at T.T.Tsui Gallery, 30 visitors were asked at various times, firstly, why they visited this gallery and secondly, which entrance they used. Reasons for visiting, such as producing an art project, know Chinese art, simply visiting, are regarded as 'intended visiting'. Reasons such as 'came to visit the museum,' 'passing by when visiting another exhibition room', 'was attracted by the displays', are categorised as 'casual visiting'. Most intended visitors began at the entrance by the 'Ruling' and 'Eating and drinking' sections because it was the first entrance point they came across to on the way they came to the gallery. Casual visitors tended to enter the gallery at entrances adjacent to where they were previously visiting.



**Figure 11: Photograph facing rear half of T.T.Tsui Gallery**



**Figure 12: Photograph of artefacts on display within the gallery**



**Figure 13: The floor plan of the T.T.Tsui Gallery in Victory and Albert Museum**

It is also taboo for Chinese people to talk about death; instead they emphasise the actual entombment since this might secure a life after the present one (Lin, 1992:250-1; Lu, 1992:265; Wei, 1992:81). Placing the display of 'believing' and 'burial' at the back of the exhibition is in accordance with the Chinese attitude.



The arrangement of the gallery is based on the foregoing themes, some containing chronological sequences, but with no overall chronological framework.

'Eating and drinking' comprises items used for the consumption of food, tea and alcohol, from all periods of Chinese history. The pieces displayed to illustrate the theme of 'living' exemplify effects used in rich households of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

'Ruling' encompasses objects used at the Chinese Imperial Court. 'Collecting' starts with the sort of pieces collected by connoisseurs of the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The section then switches to the types of objects collected by Europeans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Two further display cabinets show what the Museum collected in the 90s, and the extent of the collection formed by the gallery's sponsor, Mr. T.T.Tsui. The displays in this area are changed from time to time.

The section on 'Temple and Worship' concentrates mainly on items used in association with Taoist and Buddhist worship and touches briefly on ancestor worship and Confucianism. The 'burial' part of the gallery, devoted to objects that were buried in tombs, follows a chronological sequence from the Neolithic period to the Ming dynasty.

In the middle of the gallery is an open area with two benches, and around it are four separate cases, representing four questions: What are these art objects made of? Where were they made, and by whom? What do the decorations on the objects mean? How did they arrive in the museum? (Kerr, 1991:21-6)

In a traditional exhibition of another culture, objects are organised by type, irrespective of context. For example, the Chinese bronzes in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge are arranged in dated order. Similar material, but with more informative contextual installations, is found elsewhere in the T.T.Tsui Gallery.

As to the written signs, the title panel, the main function of which is to identify the exhibit to inform people about its theme and attract their attention (Serrell,

1983:7), is a red board bearing the title, "T.T.Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art", written in Chinese characters. The subtitle 'Chinese Art comes alive' was in English and visitors can find it on the Museum leaflets.

Some text panels correspond to the themes of the exhibition and provide an instructional resource based on the exhibit. The introductory texts are divided into eating and drinking, living, ruling, temple and worship, burial, and collection; six panels each telling the visitor, briefly, the history and custom of the topic.

Labels in the Gallery differ from those traditionally used in anthropological or archaeological displays, which tend to identify specific objects by giving basic data such as names, dates, materials, and techniques. Instead, the relationships of the artefacts to their social and functional roles is the main theme of the text in this gallery, and written information, relating to legends and historical or social modes, which can enhance the success of textual communication (Dean, 1994:118), has been added. The historical context is stated both in the object labels and introductory panels. All the exhibits are labelled in English and Chinese.

In general, the labels refer to the topic of the exhibition, as prescribed by McManus (1989:183-4) who suggests that satisfactory written material for exhibitions always should; they are, as suggested by Screven (1992:209), interpretative thus encouraging visitors to read; they are, as McLean (1993:111-2) recommends, large enough to read while standing at a comfortable distance from them and close enough to the object they are describing.

Nevertheless, some of the labels give only minimal information, such as 'Three earthenware figures from a tomb retinue, 1500-1600, Ming dynasty'. Some of the information is split between labels, for example, the label for the figure of Lan-Caihe reads: "One of the 'Eight Immortals'" and another label, telling the story of the Eight Immortals, is elsewhere in the display. Some labels are at floor-level or above average eye-level and are too low or high for comfortable reading.

Informative leaflets, gallery guides, educational brochures, programmes, and catalogues are used to present information, which can enhance the visitor's

appreciation (Dean, 1994:115), are placed near the four entrances. Publications are also for sale in the museum shop.

There are graphics and pictures to illustrate the function of the displayed objects, and to provide the context needed to appreciate them (McLean,1993:109-110). Four video points with six short programmes - silent but subtitled - give a feeling of insight and relevance (Dean, 1994:134); explanatory diagrams and information set the display against the background of Chinese history; and there are two objects which visitors are invited to touch.

The Victoria and Albert Museum is founded with an educational mandate (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1965:2) and keeps the tradition as a national centre for education (Anderson, 1991:2). The activities held in the T.T.Tsui Gallery include regular guided tours for visitors and school groups, occasional workshops on Chinese calligraphy, and other cultural events. The education department of the Museum also holds programmes such as lectures or discussion forums concerning Chinese culture.

The whole gallery is designed to give as broad an image of China as possible. The dividing walls are the 'Forbidden City' colour - dark red - and a metal arch-frame, a Chinese architectural feature, unifies the perspectives of the gallery. Other features, like the red columns and the curving benches, are all typically Chinese. The design fulfils the function to unify exhibit elements and contribute to atmosphere (McLean, 1993:132).

The exhibition is arranged, from a Chinese visitor's point of view, very much according to their signification in their original context: those of their first and primary image in a Chinese setting. Nevertheless the radical, utilitarian approach of the Museum is still reflected in the T.T.Tsui Gallery.

The fact that this gallery was fully funded at the beginning facilitated the numerous improvements made possible by new communication technology, and, the Gallery is prominently situated near to the main entrance of the Museum, one of the most prestigious in the world. One may say that the Gallery, where much of the necessary research work was carried out, has extracted the maximum potential from the venture.

The Gallery opened in June 1991, and a visitor survey took place in December 1991 and January - February 1992. A questionnaire showed how visitors found out about the gallery, what they saw, what their opinion was of the exhibition, and their age, sex, and geographical location. The aim was to ascertain visitor's reactions and to pinpoint any possible adjustments to the exhibition (McManus, 1992).

The survey shows the degree of enjoyment, awareness of the themes, and the impact of the gallery, by tables of percentage figures and accompanied by explanations and comments from the researcher. The findings indicate that the exhibition has received a positive and enthusiastic response from the visiting public and the Chinese community, and 77% of visitors reported an increased awareness of Chinese art and history (McManus, 1992:47). The survey did not, however, reveal whether the visitors' awareness was from the Chinese perspective.

On the other hand, the Gallery has received some criticism. Hardie (1991:23-4) asserts that, for example, the Gallery misrepresents China's past as the timeless, unchanging, and exclusive China, forever self-sufficient. Clunas (1998:46-7), one of the curators involved in the planning of the Gallery, admits that the interpretation of Chinese objects by British scholars (including the T.T.Tsui Gallery) are those of the classic orientalist position as defined by Said, where 'the East' cannot represent itself, but must be revealed by the Western expert, who has penetrated its essential and unchanging characteristics. In light of this situation an examination of the T.T.Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art will be highly informative to the understanding of the cross-cultural communication process - an invaluable tool in addressing the issue of imperialism and representation.

Apart from the galleries mentioned in the overseas student survey (Appendix 1), other temporary Chinese exhibitions referred to in this thesis are: 'The Sacred Art of Tibet' (18 September - 13 December 1992, Royal Academy of Arts); 'Chinese Homes' which looked at the influence China and the Chinese have had in the past on British life and homes (4 February - 26 April, 1992, Geffrey Museum, London); the 'Mysteries of Ancient China' (13 September

1996 - 5 January 1997 at the British Museum); and 'The Cradle of Knowledge' (7 February - 8 June 1997, Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester).

Each of these had its own theme and distinctive presentation. For example, as opposed to the magnificent objects exhibited in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, the exhibition of 'Chinese Homes' utilised popular 'Chinoiserie' of the mid-18th century and contemporary everyday items; 'The Cradle of Knowledge' employed models and replicas; and the 'Mysteries of Ancient China' claimed the objects on display were being seen in Europe for the first time.

The works of art in 'The Sacred Art of Tibet' were arranged according to their subject-matter or the iconographic tradition of a monastic order. In 'The Cradle of Knowledge', a group of craftworkers demonstrated traditional Chinese skills such as printing, paper making, and silk weaving. When carrying out the informal interview, the interviewer spoke with visitors, who happened to be looking at the same display, in the manner that visitors would usually talk to each other. When in the gallery the researcher also briefly observed visitors' interaction with the gallery and its displays.

## 5.2 Emic units of Chinese culture and art

This section specifies and describes the emic units of Chinese culture as a whole whilst highlighting art, the theme of the T.T.Tsui Gallery. It attempts to explain a Chinese point of view, a Chinese way of considering life and art, and the cultural group for which the Chinese artists work. As identifying Chinese emic units was not the main objective, a number have thus been selected from the comprehensive collection compiled by Chinese scholars, it being impossible (and unnecessary) to list them all.

As this is an emic study, the Chinese - the insider's - viewpoint is the first consideration. However, since it is also a study of cross-cultural communication, quotes from British intellectuals who have studied Chinese culture and art are considered. Nevertheless, only quotes from intellectuals able to exemplify Chinese thought, as judged by the Chinese researcher taking an insider's empathetic approach, and as compared with Chinese scholars, are used.

In almost every human group, as a result of struggling to continue its existence, there are etic elements such as eating and drinking, clothing, living, communicating, transporting, ruling, believing, entertaining, etc., at the superficial level. At the philosophical level, there are two main elements - to fight with nature or to co-operate with it. British culture, being Western, tends to choose the former whilst the Chinese, an Eastern culture, opts for harmony and cooperation (Wu, 1989:202-210; Fang, 1991:92-99; Qian, 1991:21-45; Feng & Zhou, 1992:25-47; Xiang, 1993:63-4).

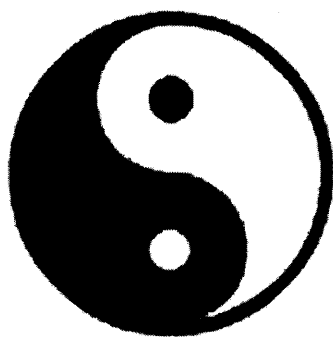
The earliest and most influential Chinese philosophical book, "I-ching", written about 1150B.C., says that 'Dao/Tao<sup>7</sup>', the fundamental rule of the universe, consists of two natural forces: yin (negative, female and dark) and

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<sup>7</sup> The name for the philosophy of Lao-zi has been transliterated into English as 'Taoism', although in Chinese it sounds closer to 'Daoism'. For this reason Daoism is used instead of Taoism in this study.

yang (positive, male and light). The two principles are not fighting each other, but co-existing in a precarious balance, which, if disturbed, would bring disaster.

The concept of 'Dao' normally represented by the 'Tai-ji' diagram (Fig. 12) which means 'the initial element of the universe', shows pairs in correlative opposition, an essential structure of Chinese culture where there is always complementation and balance. The universe is seen as a harmonious organism, all opposites are polar and thus unified.



**Figure 14: Tai-ji Diagram**

In consequence, the most deep-rooted desire of Chinese people is to pursue the compatibility of opposition, and their basic attitude towards life is to collaborate with nature. Harmony and balance is considered the most important criterion in making value judgements and this basic idea has had a tremendous influence on Chinese thought - in politics, science, and the arts, etc. The ultimate purpose of knowledge is to transcend the apparent contrasts and recognise the interconnectedness of all things and the underlying unity among them (Baynes, 1950:29; Cotterell & Morgan, 1975: 14-5; Wei, 1988:12-3; Chen, 1989:109; Fang, 1991; Samovar, & Porter, 1997:436).

Consequently, the Chinese consistently strive for concord and agreement, hence their collectivism (emphasising the value of the group), and the characteristic of attributing valuable meaning to the material world. All Chinese emic units are based on this central attitude and eight of which relevant to this study are discussed as follows:

### ***To maintain a good relationship with reality***

'Reality' is defined as 'heaven', 'earth', and 'man'. To Westerners, they would be 'supernatural', 'nature', and 'man'. Dependable relationships between man and 'heaven' and between man and 'earth' are achieved through acts of 'worship'; while 'morality', such as filial piety, ensuring respect and duty between men (Zhao, 1992:216-250; Wei, 1992; Yang, 1990:9-23). The writing of 'king' 王 in Chinese conveys the idea of linking together 'heaven', 'earth', and 'man' (Xu, 1994:9).

At an abstract level, to achieve a harmonious and balanced status of reality, i.e. to maintain a well-balanced relationship with every substance, Chinese culture attaches constructive meanings to almost anything in the material world. Otherwise, it tries to accept the situation. Chinese culture appreciates not only beautiful creations such as flowers and butterflies, but also unattractive creatures such as bats, cicadas, and toads. It also believes that prosperity always follows disaster, which are thus good signs. Chinese life is full of symbols in language, daily movements, objects, etc. (Zhuang, 1989; Qiao, 1993).

### ***Symbolism and expressionism in art***

This relationship produces, in Chinese art, a preference for symbolic versions of nature and expressionism. Almost everything, whether handsome or monstrous, can be a motif for a Chinese artisan to express auspicious thoughts. For example, the material Amber stands for courage; the shape of a bottle-gourd is a miniature replica of Heaven and Earth; the picture of a fish means affluence (Eberhard, 1988; Zhuang, 1989; Qiao, 1993).

Chinese art is described as a language on two levels: on the one it is a decorative language employed for aesthetic reasons, and on the other it is symbolic and full of meaning; usually it is both. This symbolic significance is expressed in the motifs, patterns, designs, strokes, and compositions of Chinese works of art from Neolithic antiquity to the recent past. Compared with



Western art, there is very little reflection of reality but, there are many more ideological motifs (Ridley, 1977: 5; Zhuang, 1989; Fang, 1991:219-225).

### ***Humanism***

Apart from symbolism, Chinese culture is also imbued with the spirit of humanism because of its desire to attribute affirmative significance to everything (Chen, 1989:1-20; Yu, 1992:51-6; Xiang, 1993:32-3). The Chinese interpretation of humanism is that life, as conceived by the Daoist as a concurrent force of creation, is all-pervasive in the universe, investing everything with superabundant vitality (Dao De Jing; Xiang, 1993:62).

The Chinese do not see Nature as Westerners do. Nature is often viewed scientifically in western cultures, but to Chinese it is an infinite realm wherein the universal flux of life energy is revealing itself and fulfilling everything with its intrinsic worth. Nor is there any gulf between Nature and human nature, they (landscapes and animals) are seen as of equal importance (Liu & Lee, 1987:30-35; Qian, 1991:89-92; Wei, 1992:49-54; Xiang, 1993:63,65-6).

In living in concord with creative Nature, Man realises the ideal of complying with the principle of comprehensive harmony. When man attains ideal perfection, he may become godlike and run a godly race in this world (Wei, 1992:73,92). The Western heroic aspect of virility is not to the Chinese taste - in Chinese art it is the heroism of Nature, and of Nature alone. Fairies and dream-creatures are pregnant with allusions (Prodan, 1966:21; Jiang, 1991:41-2).

The belief in the continuity of life in the universe and empathy with every form of life outside humanity are the emic units of Chinese culture. Hence, the choice of landscape as an independent feature was well established as was the choice of flowers and birds as motifs sharing equal significance with human figures (Ashton, 1935: x, xi; Jiang, 1991:41,83; Xiang, 1993:64,72).

In all Chinese art, whatever the material, there is extraordinary refinement of the senses. It is an art more contemplative than that of Europe, and actions and events contribute far less to its subject-matter (Jiang, 1991:105-122).

### ***Balance in time and space***

As the Chinese strive to maintain good relationships with the 'supernatural', 'nature', and 'man', the balance in nature, can be followed in terms of time and space. The former is evidenced by horoscopes and the latter by feng-shui, Chinese topography. These are two methods of promoting a balance of temporal and spatial harmony; consequently both are of great importance to Chinese life (Xiao, 1992:166-181; Wang, 1992:148-165).

The third plane of harmony and balance is social, its highest principle being maintaining harmony in interpersonal relationships, including the family, the community outside the family, and the supernatural - referring to ghosts, spirits and all the unknown (Wei, 1992:67-102; Zhao, 1992:220-253).

### ***Chinese beliefs***

The beliefs of the Chinese people are complicated but in general, their thinking about existence and the world around them crystallises in a search for harmony and balance (Ju, 1990:185-208; Koval, 1969:93).

In traditional beliefs, the world of deities and spirits and their relationships are mirrored in the world of men, (an indication of humanism). Just as there is an emperor or president in the human world, there is a 'Jade Emperor' in the supernatural world. There is a hierarchy of officials on earth, and a celestial hierarchy of officials in the supernatural world. People desire harmony in their relations with their fellow men, and also with ghosts and spirits. Offerings of food and drink essential for survival are made to propitiate the spirits and obtain their aid and protection.

The desire to maintain harmonious relations within the family and community extends to deceased family and community members, giving rise to ancestor and god worship, the meaning and symbolism of which resembles idolatry. The veneration of ancestral spirits is essentially bound up with Confucian ethical philosophy (Wei, 1992:84-5).

In ancient China, ancestor worship drew the family/clan together, and consolidated educational and political functions by reaffirming the clan ethos and maintaining social stability. It was normal to pray to ancestors for prosperity and protection from harm. Chinese collectivism, emphasising the value of the group, was formed by such practices and individuals were regarded as members of families.

As ancestor worship is the most widely accepted traditional Chinese creed and most Chinese gods were originally real people, if these Chinese beliefs are to be regarded as a religion, it would actually be one centred on ancestor worship (Yu & Wang, 1992:39-45).

### ***The family line***

As they aspire to reliable relationships between people, the Chinese always stress the advantage of the group rather than the individual. Each member of a family is an individual, but is not isolated. A wedding is as exciting for the families as for the bride and groom, as it brings a permanent new member to their intimate group (Mei, 1989:317; Wei, 1992:55-6).

Moreover, at the heart of Chinese religious beliefs is the continuation of life through the family line. Filial piety is another Chinese characteristic, deriving from the striving for harmonious relationships in a family. Great respect is paid to the older generation; parents are respected and regular visits are paid to the graves of ancestors (Lian, 1988:85-88).

It is said that “of three unfilial acts the worst is having no offspring” because the Chinese believe that there can only be care for a person after death (for eternity) if there are descendants to make the necessary offerings. People who leave no descendants are thus unfilial not only toward their parents but toward all their ancestors.

### ***Eating and drinking***

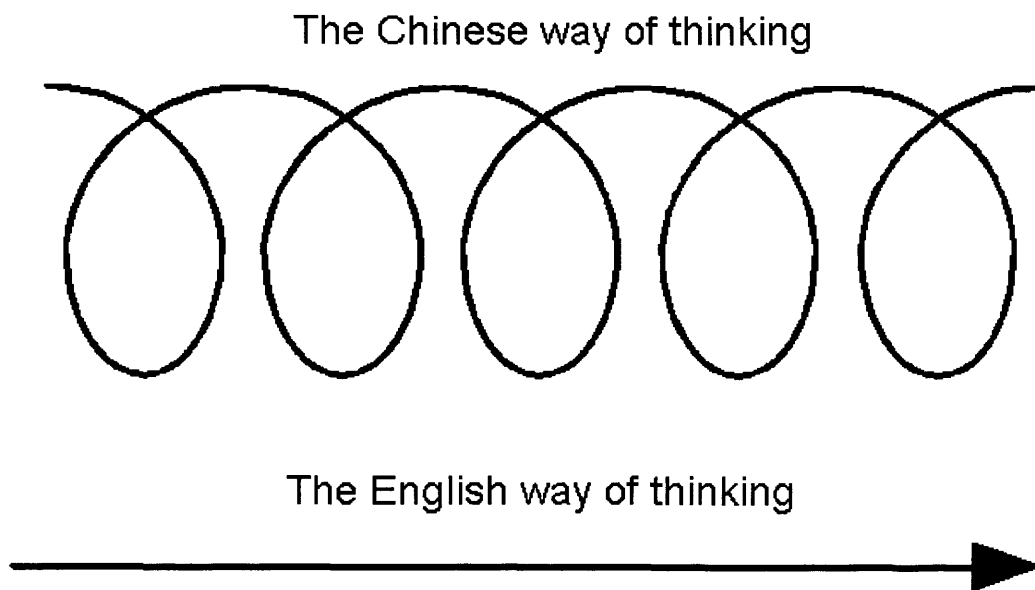
The Chinese value existence above all, and regard eating and drinking as essential in maintaining it. This is shown by the usual greeting of 'Have you eaten yet?' and the very common Chinese saying: 'Eating is the heaven of the people' ('Heaven' here implying the ruling class - the emperor in Chinese is 'the son of heaven'). To the people, the God is the one who provides food for them and the duty of an emperor is to see that his people have enough food. Even the symbol for the state is 'ding' - a cooking utensil with three legs.

The importance of food is confirmed by being frequently offered to guests, and it is also the most common offering in ancestor worship and religious rituals. Vessels for food are entombed with the deceased, for another life after death.

### ***The way of thinking***

The Eastern view emphasises perceiving and knowing things and events holistically and synthetically rather than, in the Western view, analytically (Qian, 1991:75-98; Feng & Zhou, 1992:79-89; Xiang, 1993:36-43; Samovar & Porter, 1997:436). The Chinese tend to look at things as a whole, unlike the Westerners who look at them in isolation. For example, Chinese medicine is based on maintaining the whole body in balance rather than concentrating solely on the symptoms of a disease (Feng & Zhuo, 1992:81-2; Zhu, 1994:7,9-12; Wang, 1994:44-49).

It is suggested that the Western way of thinking is linear whilst the Chinese way is indirect and circuitous (figure 15).



**Figure 15: The Chinese and English ways of thinking**

(Source: Kaplan, R. B., "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education", *Language Learning* 16(1970): nos. 1 and 2, p.15)

Cultures change all the time but their structures, and their tendencies, remain similar. Ancestor worship, Feng-shui, etc. are still practised in Chinese households/communities, although their formats have been modernised. In China, for example, where young people are now given more independence and parents ask their children for opinion, authority stays unchallenged with the elders. They continue respect for authority and hierarchy, a centralised bureaucracy, a strong state and stress on moral values, though western style economic development is welcomed there (Sun, 1991; Yu, 1992).

An ethnographic study in Hong Kong (Fong, 1993) provides an example of the common practice in which the Chinese employ puns that represent a positive idea to describe an unfortunate act and, psychologically, counteract bad luck<sup>8</sup>. This example illustrates not only two Chinese emic units: to strike a

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<sup>8</sup> When an object is shattered during the Chinese New Year holiday, the Chinese interpret the incident as bad luck. Through speech, the perceived bad luck is reversed to good luck. (Fong, 1993:211)

balance between oppositions and symbolism, but also that although at the end of the Twentieth Century, after Hong Kong had been colonised by Britain for a century, the Chinese there are still Chinese.

The emic units described, though only part of the whole Chinese emic structure, are probably enough for the following emic analysis of the intended messages to visitors to the T.T.Tsui Gallery.

To conclude, all these emic units are vital to Chinese art or, more specifically, their philosophies and ideas stem from the same source as their artistic ideas. Although the two systems were interdependent, that does not imply a one-to-one correlation.

In all texts there are some kind of systematic and interrelated oppositions. The most important found in all Chinese culture including art, is between surviving and avoiding disaster, although the negative aspect is seldom mentioned.

As the purpose of this emic analysis is to examine how visitors interpreted the intended messages in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, the units described, though only part of the Chinese emic structure, are sufficient. The analysis follows in the next section.

### 5.3 Emic analysis on objects in T.T.Tsui Gallery

Material culture as represented by objects, photographs, paintings, etc. has no smallest visible segment. It is a symbol with various constituent elements such as material, colour, shape, line, size, date, motif, use, technique, or historical interest. From these one can construct, according to the rules of their syntax, composites with various new meanings.

The notions of 'spot' and 'class', proposed by Pike and mentioned in 3.3, serve to facilitate emic analysis of material cultures, as long as the motif units (the colour, shape, material, etc. of objects) produce meaning, they can be regarded, metaphorically, as the 'words' of the objects and therefore minimal performing units.

This emic analysis, therefore, makes an arbitrary and temporary separation of content and form of the system of signs, in terms of spot or class. These will be analysed in respect of symbolism, humanism, balance in time and space, beliefs, the family line, eating and drinking, the way of thinking, and to maintain a good relationship with reality.

With regards to emic units in the language of Chinese art, symbolism is of first importance. Almost every object displayed in the T.T.Tsui Gallery is full of motifs carrying symbolic significance, sometimes with more than one symbolic meaning, conveyed not only by the decorative patterns but also by the nature of the materials, colours or shapes. Chinese characters, also, are commonly used as decorative symbols. Appreciating that symbolic presentation is the essence of Chinese art. A list of necessary examples of symbolism in the objects displayed in the T.T.Tsui Gallery is contained in Appendix 3. However, below are a few examples:

Bamboo is one of China's most important natural products and a common decorative motif. In the Gallery, there are several objects with a bamboo motif, such as a man's velvet robe with a repeat design of bamboo (and flower) sprays across its surface and a picnic box embellished with bamboo.

The inside (the 'heart') of bamboo is empty and, as emptiness suggests modesty, bamboo symbolises this. It is also evergreen and thus a symbol of long life. Fireworks used to be made from bamboo, which explodes with a loud bang and was supposed to ward off demons. With the departure of the demons, peace and contentment are supposed to enter, and so it is fitting that the Chinese words for 'bamboo' 竹 and 'to wish, pray' 祝 are phonetically the same.

The traditional use of symbolic motifs has continued in contemporary Chinese handicrafts. A 1952 plate has a mandarin duck with foliage in its beak as its central motif. As the birds live in pairs it is a natural symbol for marital happiness; and when mandarin ducks have a lotus blossom or fruit in their beaks, it is an expression of the wish that the marriage will be blessed with sons.

Another example is a porcelain plate dated 1952, one of the attempts to create a 'national' design idiom for the People's Republic, free of some of the connotations of the more recent imperial past. It is decorated in 'Tang' style, in under-glaze blue (symbolising heaven) and the main theme of the decoration is a phoenix which symbolises justice and peace.

Yellow is associated with earth and hence is looked upon very favourably in China, with its long agricultural history. It symbolises fame, progress and advancement and represents the Emperor who ruled the country on the earth - the Middle Kingdom, China. The mythical first ruler of China was thus named the Yellow Emperor. Yellow was adopted as the colour for the emperor. A person's death i.e. their return to the earth is referred to as a 'descent into the Yellow Sources'.

In the Gallery, a dress in a particular shade of yellow means that it was made for a member of the imperial family. A Tibetan mandala, a diagram of 'Womb Treasury World' was embroidered on yellow silk. The colour reflects the idea that the Mandala, the universal source, matrix or womb from which all things are produced, is actually the 'earth' which is mainly in yellow.

Jade has always been the favourite gemstone in China. It was an ancient custom to place a piece of jade in the mouth of a dead person in the hope of



preventing decomposition. It was believed that the purity of jade, if put in a tomb, could prevent demonic possession and save the corpse from decomposition. There are a jade horse's head and a jade blade in the burial section.

As mentioned in 5.2, the supreme god in Chinese popular religion is the Jade Emperor. A Daoist priest's silk robe is lavishly embroidered with nearly 350 Daoist figures, Immortals and higher gods, and a main figure of the Jade Emperor.

A Chinese favourite motif is the jade pond in the palace of the Western Royal Mother, to whose feast the Immortals come bringing their gifts. Pictures representing this auspicious event expresses the wish that the recipient may enjoy a long life and every happiness. In the Gallery, a pair of embroidered pictures shows the 'Royal Mother of the West' with fairy maids attending her.

Jade is bright but not showy (unlike gold, silver or diamonds); solid and firm but not as sharp and pointed as metals or diamonds which are the qualities of a gentleman. It is thus a symbol of a man of virtue.

Comparing the qualities of porcelain to the attributes of jade, one can conclude that porcelain objects are man-made versions of jade (Tian, 1994: 232-236). For example, Su Dong-po (AD 1036 - 1101), a Chinese poet and politician described renowned pieces of ceramics of his time as 'Colourful Ding wares carved out of polished red jade.'

Apart from motifs, colours or materials, shapes can often be employed to symbolise something and in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, there are plenty of examples. The oldest is a bronze vessel dated 1200-1100 BC, shaped like an owl, whose cry was said to resemble a spirit voice, and the bird was said to call away the soul.

There are others, such as an ox-shaped vessel symbolising spring, (oxes began working on the land in spring) or a gilt-bronze mirror stands in the form of a magic creature, called a xiniu 犀牛, symbolising a scholar, looking round at the moon represented by the mirror above a bank of clouds, symbols of good fortune and happiness.

Even two modern teapots (dated 1850-1900 and 1984) use shape as symbol. One resembles a mouth organ and the other a peach figure. The Chinese mouth organ is a wind instrument consisting of several bamboo pipes and its name 笙 sounds like the word meaning 'to rise in rank' 陞 and the word meaning 'to be born' 生. Peach is a fruit symbolising longevity.

In Chinese tradition, writing characters are believed to be extremely powerful and beautiful<sup>9</sup>. They are not only linguistic signs but also emblems for amulets, have always been used to ward off evil and to pray for whatever people wish, or to cure illnesses (Prodan, 1966:28; Zhuang, 1989:75-6; Qiao, 1993:258-262).

Also, calligraphy is regarded as comparable to painting in its ability to evoke emotion. It comprises, along with other forms such as painting and ceramics, the mainstream of China's art history. It is a major decorating theme for objects, including clothing and interior design. Door scrolls of poetic verses and wall stickers of auspicious words, are commonly seen in homes (Zhuang, 1989:75-6; Qiao, 1993:258-262).

Over 100 variants of the character 'shou' 壽 are used to denote longevity or immortality. They are seen on ceramics, textiles, medals and elsewhere. 'Shou' is often associated with other symbols of longevity such as the bat, crane, sacred fungus, pine, or tortoise. In the Gallery for instance, an embroidered silk hanging scroll of the Buddha is supported by a circle of shou characters; a woman's robe is embroidered all over with long life characters and, on a table frontal, there are also long life characters.

Humanism is also very important. As with symbolism, the Chinese version of humanism, that everything in the universe is brimming with vitality, is expressed in almost every item in the Gallery. A yellow porcelain pouring vessel has a

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<sup>9</sup> The legend about the invention of the characters is: 'Thousands of years after the creation of the world, a man called Cang-jie invented Chinese characters. Rice and wheat fell from the skies when this happened as a sign from heaven that humans would dominate and transform the natural order of the world'.

spout and a handle in the form of a mythical creature which brings the vessel to life. A ceramic tripod, whose form evokes the idea of an animal alive with vitality.

A Guan-di statue and a silk robe for such a statue also illustrate emic units of humanism in that most Chinese gods, such as Guan-di, were real people and their images were often dressed in real clothes. Woven into the robe are many of the symbols seen on emperors' yellow clothes of the same period, suggesting that Guan-di was considered their equal.

A third vital element is balance in time and space. Astrology and feng-shui (Chinese geomancy), are traditional methods of seeking harmony and balance in time and space. Various objects in the Gallery demonstrate such geomancy:

In a group of four porcelain ritual vessels, each vessel stands for one of the points of the compass - The Four Directions<sup>10</sup>, and would have been placed on one of the four altars situated around the Forbidden City, one facing each Direction; a pottery coffin has carved designs which include the names of the guardian spirits of The Four Directions; a jar for burial bears the Green Dragon of the East; whilst another carries figures of the sun and star gods.

All these indicate the emic units of pursuing a good relationship with nature by worshipping it through food offerings. To maintain the relationship, a lacquer box, used in one of the crucial pre-nuptial ceremonies, contained horoscopes which had been exchanged between the families of the bride and the groom. These astrological charts ensured that the couple's destinies were linked together.

Chinese beliefs generally held by most Chinese people are made up of a combination of humanism and a search for harmony and balance on the supernatural level. One example is the silk hanging embroidered with a diagram of the 'Womb Treasury World' mentioned in previous paragraphs. In the centre

of the diagram is the Buddha Vairocana, representing the sun, surrounded by Buddhas of the four cardinal points, with attendant Bodhisattvas. It stands for the idea of harmony expressed through the balance of the environment.

Statues of divinities such as the Buddha, Guanyin, Sakyamuni Buddha and the Louhan; temple items such as banners, canopies for Buddhist images, and altar vessels, a pair of ancestor portraits and a spirit tablet box are all manifestations of the worship of gods and ancestors. The statue of Guan-di also exemplifies the fact that most Chinese gods were originally real people, an idea which has its basis in the Chinese concept of human nature.

The emic unit of pursuing harmonious relationships through filial piety, lifelong duty towards one's parents, is exemplified in the Gallery by various objects. Such as a set of marble slabs of the Jin dynasty, on which are engraved stories often known in later periods as the 'Twenty four Exemplars of Filial Piety', a popular group of Confucian tales. This item also shows that support for Confucian values was important to ruling groups.

On the side of a vase is depicted a popular story of the love between scholar Zhang and an aristocratic girl, reflecting the traditional Chinese attitude towards marriage - that it is a matter for the two families, rather than the two individuals, since in the story the two lovers were thwarted by the family of the girl who arranged for her to marry somebody else.

Again, a small statue of Guanyin holding a baby boy is a reminder of the Chinese wife's duty to bear male children, and an embroidered wedding hanging with its theme of boys at play, stresses the idea of marriage being to ensure the continuation of the male line.

As the Chinese regard eating and drinking as the most vital parts of life, not only do the living need to be fed, the offerings made to gods, ancestors or their

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<sup>10</sup> The motif of the four directions continues to be used as protective decoration on buildings and tombs. They are made up of four figures: the Dark Warrior of the North (often represented by a snake twined around a tortoise), the Green Dragon of the East, the Vermilion Bird of the South, (Footnote continued at bottom of next page)

friends are also mainly food. In the Gallery, there are various eating utensils and drinking vessels, tomb containers for foodstuffs and alcohol, jars for offerings, and a gift-box for presenting food. A three-legged bronze cauldron, which is the symbol of the state, is also displayed in the eating and drinking section.

In China, one sees a general preference for curving and circular movement in decorative patterns. These curves and circles are regarded as an extension of the Tai-ji diagram - the yin yang. There is normally repetition, but it is not obtrusive, consisting usually of large elements connected naturally to the basic motifs without interruption (Watson, 1974:90; Lei, 1986:41-62; Chang, 1987:201-202). The spiral and rotary movements of decorative patterns reflect not only the Chinese philosophy of existing together in a delicate balance to pursue the compatibility of opposition, but also their way of thinking.

Overall, the objects displayed in the Gallery reflect the principle aspiration of Chinese people - to maintain harmony in their relationships with reality by expressing their recognition of and gratitude for everything, even the aesthetically hideous.

For example, the toad is popular and figures in many legends because, in a primarily agricultural society, its ability to predict weather changes is appreciated (Koval, 1969:24; Zhuang, 1989:5-6). A small figure of a toad in the Gallery indicates the Chinese habit of attaching constructive meanings even to the unattractive creatures of the world.

A further example is the bat, a common decorative theme (Qiao, 1993:92-94) which appears on (amongst other objects) a small porcelain dish with painted peaches and bats, an altar vase from a Daoist temple painted with Daoist deities, a deer, and a flying bat.

Generally speaking, any object can contain several emic units. For example, the robe for the Guan-di statue manifests symbolism, humanism, and the desire

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and the White Tiger of the West.

for a good relationship with the supernatural. The jade cup with handles in the form of a writhing dragon and a small boy, supposedly one of the Daoist immortals, demonstrates symbolism both in form and in material - jade, and the principle of employing curving and circular lines.

Another example is the wedding hanging on which is embroidered a boy riding down from the clouds mounted on a dragon, a symbol of power and strength; whilst, alongside him, another boy is in charge of a phoenix, a mythical creature representing the idea of a peaceful world - a dragon and a phoenix implying an excellent marriage. There are four more children, one of whom holds the musical instrument 'sheng' 笙 to symbolise 'to give birth of boys' and 'to be promoted in rank'. Another boy holds out a sceptre which embodies the idea that everything will go as you wish.

There are many Chinese cultural emics from all the aspects of Chinese culture mentioned above embedded in the objects displayed in the T.T.Tsui Gallery. They illustrate the symbolism and humanism in Chinese culture. They also demonstrate the Chinese perceptiveness of searching for balance in time and space, valuing the family line, maintaining a good relationship with reality as well as ancestor worship centred beliefs.

## 5.4 Syntagmatic analysis of the T.T.Tsui Gallery

This analysis identifies the preferred reading in the text of the T.T.Tsui Gallery by examining the sign-functions in the structures, the physical arrangements of the exhibition through to the denotative impact on the response of the analyst (who is a reader with a Chinese background). Both fundamental and subsidiary sign-vehicles are considered but only in their denoted aspect.

Some of the sign units have a 'cardinal function' and some a 'subsidiary function'. A cardinal function sets up, sustains, or closes an alternative consequential for the succession of the story and corresponds to an effect achieved by the sign-vehicle in the structure of the text. Between cardinal functions, there are 'subsidiary notations'. They qualify, complement, extend, summarise, accelerate, and sometimes misdirect the speech. They help to develop the environment or atmosphere of the text (Barthes, 1988:108-9).

In each of the six sections in the Gallery the cardinal functions are selected to disclose the message they denote. The subsidiary functions are mentioned briefly as necessary.

Headings and introductory statements are clearly one place to begin in determining the overall intention of a display. The leading functional unit of meaning in the whole exhibition is its title - 'The T.T.Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art'. The first part bears the name of the donor, 'T.T.Tsui'. The second part, Gallery of Chinese Art, declares the general theme of this gallery, the subject matter and the place whence it originated - art in China.

The declaration confirms what the exhibition is about and suggests to the visitor the nature and kind of items presented in the message: Chinese objects that illustrate Chinese art. To choose 'art' as a preferred reading is the main point of Chinese culture. From the Chinese point of view, the Universe is filled with the attributes of morality and art (Wei, 1988:269-271; Fang, 1991:21; Yuan, 1992:4-11).

In the middle of the gallery hangs a huge panel with the title of the Gallery in Chinese characters painted in Chinese red. It is presented as it would be in any Chinese Hall/ Courtyard. As Chinese characters can fulfil the 'sign-function' of 'standing for' Chinese art, it is typically Chinese to choose a linguistic rather than an iconic sign as a super-sign for an exhibition.

The essential 'narrative themes' (Eating and drinking, Ruling, Living, Believing, Burial, and Collecting) can be clearly perceived through the headings of each section. (They can also be seen on the floor plan, which is shown on two of the four entrances). Each of the six themes has a heading board and a panel. The heading boards being in Chinese imperial blue with the Chinese character for that topic in Chinese red make the gallery look even more like a Chinese courtyard. The panels are bilingual textual units in English and Chinese, recapitulating the basic pattern of that topic and offering a synopsis of the text.

The heading boards convey an appreciation of Chinese characters better than the title panels and other bilingual labels, since there are only two characters on each heading board, such as 茶 (tea), 酒 (alcohol). This fact and their proximity to their related objects thus having greater potential to signify more definitely the connection between the Chinese character and the topic of that display section.

In general, the more space and the fewer the items in a given space, the more important the item or display becomes (Hodge & D'Souza, 1979:254). In this gallery, glass cases predominate, their juxtaposition indicating that all displays are almost of equal importance. Some statues occupy more space only because of their size but in absolute terms there is the same space in front of every display.

There are four entrances and the story is constructed so that one can start from any point but the main formal entrance will usually be, as mentioned in 5.1, the one between the 'ruling' and the 'eating and drinking' sections. The 'Burial' section is at the back of the gallery, furthest from any entrance.

Although the 'Ruling' area is placed at the 'front' of the gallery, this 'main entrance' will probably lead the visitor to the 'Eating' area first indicating that in



Chinese culture, a leading influence on life would seem to be the ruling class, but in fact more emphasis is placed on eating and drinking. This composition also reflects the Chinese tradition of following the guidance of a ruler and that the duty of a leader is to take care of the lives of his people by ensuring a sustained supply of food.

In the ruling section, ritual items for worshipping, which are mostly utensils for food or drink, occupy a large proportion. Another group of vessels, including one for each of the four altars to the powers of the four directions, which were situated around the Forbidden City on the four points of the compass, implies the importance of pursuing a harmonious relationship with nature. A container for the spirit tablet depicts the quest of affinity with the supernatural as well as the worship of the deceased. Moreover, a gift - a pair of fans - given by the Qing emperor to his subordinate, demonstrates the search for friendships between men.

In the eating and drinking section, a row of showcases contains various vessels, bowls, teapots, cups, and jars. Opposite the showcases, a dining table and a chair are linked with furniture in the 'Living' section. This gives an introduction to everyday Chinese life at home and confirms that eating and drinking are prime priorities. A lacquered wooden box (for delivering food) on the dining table indicates that food is the most common present in Chinese society.

Some of the items in this section may actually have been made for a grave and this grouping demonstrates that the Chinese idea of providing refreshments for the spirits of the dead is the same, in principle, as providing for a living person. A three-legged cooking implement, displayed with other utensils, is a remarkable sign symbolising the Chinese notion that the state is an organisation of people sharing the food in one cauldron.

The 'Living' section introduces visitors to an arrangement of tables, chairs, storage chests, and beds representing Chinese interior schemes in the periods 1200 - 1900. Within the 'rooms', various other aspects of home life such as writing, dressing, and celebrating, are staged, again, through the objects

displayed and some illustrations such as a picture showing how curtains, pelmets and covers for quilts would be arranged for a frame bed in China.

This living section devotes much to the custom of marriage, which is regarded as 'the foundation of life' in Chinese philosophy. This notion dates back as early as 'The Commentaries of I-ching' which are attributed to Confucius. Items such as a wedding hanging and a horoscope box stress the idea of marriage as a contract between two families, an occasion for giving birth to sons and for ensuring the continuation of the male line.

The study, an area for males, is located between the reception area and the private apartments and a showcase containing accessories of female members, is located 'behind' the study. The male area has a desk, writing equipment, a personal seal, etc., whilst the female area has cosmetic items such as a cosmetic box and a mirror.

Most of the decoration of such items carries a hidden meaning relating to the idea of giving birth to sons. A small statue of Guan-yin, for example, holding a baby boy reflects the appeal to a supernatural power of a wife who bears male children. All of these echo the norm and value system rooted deep in Chinese minds, although in modern Chinese law males and female are equal.

A kang, a heated raised platform used for sitting as well as sleeping on in northern Chinese homes, introduced by a velvet sheet which would be spread over such a kang, shows different life-styles in China. Four showcases containing accessories such as hair ornaments and snuff bottles provide a link between living and collecting.

In the 'Collecting' section, the fashion for collecting in China, mainly during Ming, Qing dynasties and the early Republic of China, is briefly explained. One division is devoted to the crafting of fakes. The fashion of Western collectors for collecting Chinese objects is also suggested and a showcase narrates the later design styles in China. The objects are mainly utensils for food or worshipping, although they were made in principle as items for collecting.

This section demonstrates that in China, people have had a long history of collecting works of art such as calligraphy and brush painting. There is also a tradition of producing commodities as an artwork. Consequently, the demand for art works to be collected normally exceeded supply and all kinds of things were faked.

Subsidiary notations in this section are the displays on export trade in ceramics and how Chinese traditional collectors display or store their collections. A cabinet is shown as it might be used, a cup is on a stand - a standard display method in China; some paintings are 'stored' in the way they would have been in a Chinese collector's house and three scrolls are hung up to show how such paintings might have been placed on view.

In terms of the exporting of porcelain, the Chinese are very proud of the long history of the demand for Chinese porcelain abroad. It was regarded as not only having economic significance but also as promoting cross-cultural friendship. Nevertheless, in comparison to other porcelain works such as celadons, the blue and white porcelain, especially made for export were regarded as cheap and of low quality (Tao, 1987:225-280; He & Xue, 1987:73-5; Shen, 1989:204-211).

Introduced by a Buddha's head, over one metre high and resting on a high post (an attempt to display it in the way originally intended), the section on believing consists of several images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Sakyamuni, Guan-di, and Luo-han. There are also Buddhist banners, a canopy, an arrangement of Daoist temple items, such as an incense burner, pairs of candlesticks, and a set of ancestor portraits.

The religious items narrate the heart of Chinese beliefs from the early worship and veneration of natural phenomena to the flourishing of Daoism and Buddhism. Comparatively, ancestor worship which is the primary element of Chinese belief and still an essential practice in Chinese life, was displayed in an insignificant manner - just a pair of ancestor portraits in a showcase.

The Guan-di figure, together with linguistic signs, inform visitors that the aim of Daoism is to harmonise the inner spirit with nature, under obedience to

cosmic law. This is also reflected in the 'Ruling' section, at the level of emperor by a mandala and, at the level of people's lives, by the personal image of Guan-yin in the 'Living' section. The linguistic sign also indicates that Guan-di is a god who was originally a real person.

It is indicated through the displays in the 'Living' and 'Ruling' sections and also in this section, that formalised ancestor worship was celebrated at all levels of society, from the elaborate ceremonies at court down to the makeshift altars erected in people's homes. (Nowadays, photographs have replaced ancestor portraits).

Subsidiary notations in this section are, for example, the modern Mongol yurt depicted on a carved slab tells the story of the Jin dynasty. This was the state established by the Jurcen, a different ethnic group from the majority Han Chinese population, which ruled over much of northern China from 1115 to 1234.

The theme 'Burial' is shown by showcases, together with a reconstructed doorway to a tomb and two tomb slabs. In the showcases are funerary items, mainly vessels for food and alcohol. The iconic reading units act as 'indexical' signs of the social and political meaning of burial, the changing practices and ideas of the afterlife in early China.

The belief was that the dead became ancestors who had their needs, similar to those of the living. (For example, as well as vessels for food, tombs also contained items for alcohol so that the dead could continue to offer sacrifices to the gods and ancestors after death).

Long after death ancestors continued to be part of the family, and were cared for and propitiated. The linguistic signs confirm that much of the elaborate entombing was discontinued. Today, instead, paper replicas of goods needed in the afterlife are burnt at funerals. However, the thought that ancestors continue to be family members is still ingrained in Chinese thought. Great importance is still attached to how the dead are buried.

The set of tomb slabs shows a popular group of Confucian tales exemplifying the lifelong duty of people towards their parents. Support for the value system of Confucianism was always important to ruling groups, who were not themselves Han Chinese, as they sought to stress their legitimacy as holders of the Mandate of Heaven.

In total, the 'Believing' and 'Burial' sections demonstrate that burial, ancestor worship and religious worship are actually different facets of one idea: pursuing a harmonious relationship with man, Nature and the supernatural.

The symbolic quality of Chinese art and the pursuing of a long life by having sons and good relationships with others are repeatedly evident throughout the exhibition. They are subsidiary notations in every section.

The systematic and interrelated set of oppositions that can be elicited from the first-order signification of the T.T.Tsui Gallery, is between surviving and avoiding disaster but the negative aspect is, for the most part, unmentioned.

In schematising the story of this exhibition in diagrammatic form, the first unit of signification, 'eating and drinking' might be rewritten as 'essential needs of survival'. The second unit of signification, 'Living', was 'the way of survival'. The 'Ruling' section could be indexed as 'those who can have a moral duty to provide food for the public'. The 'Believing' concerns 'security' of surviving and the 'Collecting' of exquisite utensils illustrates aspirations 'surviving'. The 'Burial' of domestic utensils implies a sense of 'surviving in another world' and thus reflects the first signifying unit, where life is based on 'eating and drinking'.

It can be concluded that although there is a great reduction of the value of emic units (Appendix 5) and thus the total 'history' of Chinese art to arrive at the 'story' told by the exhibition, the story does include a network of Chinese art and culture viewed from various aspects, containing abundant Chinese emic units.

In terms of time scale, the displayed objects cover several thousand years ranging from Neolithic to the twentieth century. In modern Chinese society, for example, eating and drinking continues to be a most important event. Modern

Chinese women appear to have much more freedom or equality than before, but the fundamental duty for them still remains to bear male children.

On a deeper level, symbolism, humanism, and valuing eating and drinking, etc., are the fundamental principles underlying all forms of Chinese art and are evidenced by the objects displayed in the T.T.Tsui Gallery. However, in the linguistic signs (labels, captions), the description of the techniques of Chinese craftsmanship is strongly preferred over others.

Although the gallery is the programme of a universal taxonomy of the 'industrial arts' (which formed the explicit project of the South Kensington Museum, known after 1899 as the Victoria and Albert Museum) (Clunas, 1998:43), the arrangement of the Gallery plots the course of the Chinese history of art by the fragmentary clues embedded in the association of various images.

The association between displays is more or less Chinese coded reflecting their interpretation of reality. The complex interplay between themes of the exhibits matches the Chinese way of thinking as a whole. In every section, there are objects relating to eating and drinking, living, collecting, believing, and burial.

For example, the silk robe of Guan-di, decorated with many of the symbols which can be seen on emperors' yellow clothes in the Gallery, means that Guan-di was considered to be equal to a real emperor. The robe for the before-death (real) emperor, is placed in the front of the Gallery and the robe for the after-death emperor, Quan-di, at the back.

There are weak points in the denotation text of the T.T.Tsui Gallery. Firstly, most of the pieces shown came from the rich and socially successful. The Chinese have always been proud of being a multi-cultural society but the minorities in China are nevertheless, referred to far too briefly. Secondly, a Buddha's head, one of two objects visitors were invited to touch, is through Chinese convention, regarded as sacred and not to be touched by others. Thirdly, the story told is a step back in time, in accordance with Simpson's (1996:35) opinion that exhibitions normally portray a romantic and exotic, often nostalgic, image of another culture and fail to address contemporary issues. The text of the Gallery fails to make dynamic, modern living stand out (Clunas,

1998:47). Although several contemporary objects impart the message of modern China, the exhibition as a whole gives the impression that Chinese lifestyles persist, unaltered, as in the manner of their ancestors.

To conclude, the text of the T.T.Tsui Gallery is, denotatively, a slice of Chinese culture. The latent narrative causes innumerable variations in the text which are deliberately ignored here because it is nonessential to the purpose and scope of this study, i.e. to reveal the denotative forces that influence how the potential of signs is realised in a context of exhibiting another culture.

# **Chapter 6**

**Case study - An in-depth  
interview of visitors**



## 6.1 The questionnaire and the sample

The key considerations in planning an interview investigation comprise what (the subject matter to be investigated), why (the purpose of the study), and how (the different techniques of interviewing and analysing to obtain the relevant information) (Robert, 1994:3-9). The in-depth interview aims to discern the visitors' subjective interpretative processes. The focus is thus on spontaneous descriptions that can elicit the many differences and varieties of interpreting performance taking place specifically in the exhibition of another culture.

Therefore this interview is open-ended rather than having predetermined categories. Accordingly, a questionnaire with a certain degree of flexibility has been used to gather relevant information. Some of the questions ask visitors to evaluate but most request description.

For the interview, questions were sought which contributed to the theoretical concepts on which the interview was based, (and to the subsequent analysis), and which promoted positive reactions to keep the conversation flowing and to motivate the subjects to talk about their experiences and feeling, as it was essential to bring out the aspects which they found important (McCracken, 1988:34-5).

Efforts were made to deliberately exclude presumptions and thus making the interview accessible to untouched and unforeseen information in visitors' minds. For example, before the question: "Do you usually visit exhibitions in museums about one particular culture to help you to broaden your views about that culture" (with the implied assumption that the interviewee might do in this way), the interviewee will have already been asked if s/he usually visits exhibitions and the reasons for visiting (without suppositions of their reasons).

In considering the number of interviewers, if more than one interviewer was used, then a fixed questionnaire would be required for consistency to produce efficient and comprehensive results. However, if interviews were conducted by different interviewers using questions that only gave main directions, the interviews may be diverted into sub-directions. There is a greater opportunity

also, for the same interviewer to obtain a wider spread of reactions, if they were conducting interviews consecutively over a longer period of time as the pool of visitors will be more varied.

As to the qualification of the interviewer, apart from some dangers in a general study, such as a researcher's own personal, social or cultural biases, conducting surveys in cross-cultural situations provides a series of special data collection problems. The most important of which is what cultural background the interviewer should have.

By using a virtually unconstrained interview questionnaire, the interview will depend on the interviewer, their sensitivity toward, and their knowledge of the interview topic (Kvale, 1996:35). Thus an interviewer with no background of Chinese culture nor of museum exhibition culture may have difficulties obtaining descriptions of nuances perceived by the interviewees, and in particular with probing more intensively into the significance of the Chinese culture.

On the other hand, if the interviewer is a Chinese person, who is familiar with the culture on display, the interviewees will probably be reluctant to admit either a negative point of view concerning, or their lack of knowledge about Chinese culture. Nevertheless, this problem can be avoided through an introductory outline of the purpose of the survey.

This interviewer should have an awareness of Chinese culture, and certain knowledge of museum exhibition technique. Since this survey focuses on communication between British visitors and the display of Chinese objects, a Chinese researcher interviewing British visitors would satisfy the parameters of the survey. In the event, having decided to conduct the interviews myself, the interview enterprise itself was thus also a cross-cultural experience. This actually formed a distinctive feature of this cross-cultural survey.

The sample size is normally a compromise between obtaining a representative sample and the resources available for a study. It is not possible to make statistical generalisations or to obtain a variety of interpreting behaviour with too small a sample, while penetrating interpretations of the interview are impossible with too large a sample (Kvale, 1996:92, 102).

Larger samples of respondents are necessary to understand the behaviour of larger groups, but it is difficult to collect sufficient data with time-consuming qualitative interviews. In seeking to examine the unwritten law behind people's behaviour, a small number of respondents usually give more satisfactory pictures (Patton, 1990:186; Erlandson, 1993:82-5; Alasuutari, 1995:8-11; 152-155).

Quantitatively, each interview can yield a large number of comments from single individuals. Qualitatively, single interviews make it possible to examine in detail the relationship of a specific behaviour to its context (Silverman, 1997: 99-144). The data needed for this survey is the consistent and recurrent interpreting exercises in the visitors' mind. It is obviously more appropriate when carrying out intensive case studies to use a small sample of interviewees.

Therefore it was decided reasonable to obtain the target information by focusing on a few intensive interviews. Owing to the constraints of time and resources available for the investigation, as well as the type of interview, it was decided that at least 12 interviewees were needed. In order to validate the survey a pool of potential interviewees was chosen by: excluding Chinese visitors; selecting visitors from the local (British) culture - the majority grouping. Thereafter, simple random sampling from the pool produced the necessary mix of age, sex, etc.

The preliminary interviews (4.4) helped to improve the interview and recording techniques, to control the interview time scale, and to verify and modify the questions. For example, a question in the interview plan (Appendix 2) "In your opinion, would you say that this exhibition was successful in providing you with a good general picture of Chinese arts?" obtained only limited and superficial information such as "Yes, it is really good". This question was then altered and split as, "How many times have you visited this Gallery and why?"; "What do you think about this exhibition?"; and "Has your visit to this exhibition made you understand more about Chinese culture?" (Appendix 4).

Both the emic analysis of the displayed objects and the syntagmatic analysis of the exhibition of T.T.Tsui Gallery contributed to the form of the questionnaire.

For example, deliberately mentioning one of the hands-on objects, a sculpture of a Buddha's head, uniquely attempted to establish whether there are any special effects, positive or negative, when the principle of a display is contrary to the customs of the source culture.

The preliminary interviews indicated that, because of the length of the interview procedure, only one interview per working day was possible. Therefore it was decided that 12 interviewees could be sampled over 12 non-consecutive days, thus covering both weekdays and weekends, and possible holidays. This scheme was not only intended to provide a wide range of visitor samples, but also to allow time for the interviewer to digest the information provided as the interviewing proceeded in order to improve the coding process (6.2). If, by the ninth or tenth interview, more new and unique points of view, or information requiring further data collection had still been appearing, additional interviews might have been conducted.

The revised final version of the interview questionnaire (Appendix 4) commences by informing the potential interviewee about the overall purpose of the investigation, the main features of the design, and the possible time required - approximately an hour. To secure their voluntary participation in the interview, the potential interviewee is guaranteed the right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

As an inducement as well as acknowledging of the co-operation of the interviewee, the interviewer offers to answer, to the best of her knowledge, any questions concerning Chinese culture posed by the interviewee after the interview.

Having been apprised of the questionnaire format, some relevant background information about the interviewee is then collected. Since culture greatly influences but does not explain all behaviour, the potential interviewee's socio-economic status was ascertained. Apart from age, an elementary reference, the focus is the factors of cultural background and knowledge.

Because it is frequently the case that self-reports of specialist interest are more informative as aids in appreciating the visitor's outlook, the question

seeking to establish if interviewees have any specialist knowledge of the materials or subject matter of the exhibition is preferred over asking for their educational qualifications.

In the questionnaire, there are two types of questions: diachronic, concerning the interviewee's responses to other exhibitions of other cultures thus helping to form an overview of the performance pattern and forming the first part of the questionnaire; and synchronic, assessing the core information as to what, why, and how the interviewee conceived the message embedded in the displays in the present visit and forming the main body of the questionnaire since the synchronic category is the focus of this study.

There are six questions in the diachronic category. Questions 1 - 4 inquire about the frequency of visits to this gallery as well as to other exhibitions of other cultures in addition to the motivation for and expectations of these visits. Questions 17 and 21 in trying to elicit the visiting attributes in broad terms, summarise preceding questions and offer a second opportunity for the interviewees to recapitulate on their interpreting experience and thus make the data a more accurate record of their reactions.

Every sign-function operates at two levels, paradigmatic and syntagmatic; but it is actually impossible to segregate any sign-function and assign it solely to one or the other. However, despite the interconnectedness of the two levels greater clarity was achieved by directing questions 8, 10, 12, 16, and 20 at the paradigmatic level whilst questions 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, and 19 were operating at the syntagmatic level. Questions 9, 14, 18 and 21 onwards, gathered information at both levels.

No matter which question is focusing on which level, all of these types of question relate to Chinese emic units. Question 6 and Question 11 cover the same topic, the outline of a Chinese life. The former remains in the presentation plane, the latter is an extension of the former. Question 13 is another all-encompassing inquiry referring especially to the Chinese people.

Questions 10 and 12 try to assess the extent to which the interviewee takes up the message of the individual displays and also whether this is affected by

their perception of the framework of the displayed culture, i.e. to disclose the paradigmatic competence of the display. Particularly, question 10 gauges the existing knowledge confirmed by the display while 12 relates to new awareness.

Questions 9, 14, and 16 are different approaches intended to reveal both the competence and performance of the cross-cultural language. Equally, these questions can also elicit information about the impact of the cross-cultural communication method. For example, if the reason for liking the display is connected to the intended theme of the exhibit, then it suggests that the method has been successful.

From another angle, questions 19 and 20 attempt to disclose the interpreting scheme of the interviewee by asking them how they would rearrange a display and the whole exhibition, i.e. at paradigmatic and syntagmatic levels respectively.

By using labels and displays illustrating certain Chinese myths, folk tales and legends and asking question 23, four points can be established: the competence of the symbolic signs; whether it is an effective approach to relate the meaning of symbols by identifying their source; the label reading practices of the interviewee; whether labels are a good way to convey myths, folk tales, and legends.

A particular attempt has been made to ascertain the visitor's use of the labelling - traditional methods - (Question 17) and also their reaction to the impact of hands-on and interactive displays - more modern methods - (Question 24) in a cross-cultural setting. The researcher's preliminary observations and interviews indicated that close attention was paid to all of the display aids.

Questions 21, 22, and 24 (ii) marked important aspects like social status, political power, ideologies, ethics, and taboos intending here to determine the capacity of these highly coded signs. Questions 25, 26, and 27 were intended to reveal the operational activities of the signs bearing emic units in other ways. Question 25 offered the interviewees an active role while 26 presented a passive stance. 27 examined the performance of the emic signs, assessing the level of understanding. Differing from 25 and 27, Question 26 queries what and

how, emic or etic, messages are perceived without the indication of any emic units.

All questions consist of 'what', 'why' and 'how' facets in order to elicit information at a deeper level to obtain qualitative data. Most of the questions were presented so that the interviewer proposes a query with a definite principle but ambiguous expression in order to leave a space for interviewees to form their own opinions, without imposing any directions.

There are a few filter questions, such as Questions 7, 17, and 23. Determining which branch will be followed depends on the answer to the main question, allowing a gathering of comprehensive information. Some hints were drafted in advance for some questions where interviewees might have needed a clue. Questions 12 and 22 exhibit this type of format; however, it is only in the event of the interviewee being unable to present an opinion that the clue would be given.

After expressing appreciation and thanking the respondents for their willingness and patience in participating, the interviewees were then invited to ask questions either about Chinese culture or the interview itself. Quite a few questions were raised by the displays (Appendix 6).

The actual sample itself consisted of twelve visitors to the T.T.Tsui Gallery who were selected for interview as they left the gallery. Since there are four possible exit points from this gallery, the survey conductor stood at four exits in turn, at different times, during the summer of 1993 for the preliminary survey, and April and May 1994 for the formal interviews, which were carried out over a one and half month period, on all days of the week (excluding Mondays - a half day at the museum) and included the late May bank holiday.

The interview was scheduled to start at midday, which gave the visitor at least one hour or two to see the exhibition. Also an allowance was made for the possibility of lengthy discussions. It was found from the preliminary interviews that visitors tended to lunch around 1:00 p.m., and also that if they accepted the interview they did not mind postponing their lunches.

The interviewee was selected by inviting the first visitor leaving the gallery after midday to be interviewed. Four of the potential interviewees initially said: "I have no / very little idea about this", or "I haven't formed any opinions yet". After the researcher had explained: "Any answer that you give will be important, even your reason for not being impressed", and given a brief outline of the purpose of the survey, it was found that the respondents were more willing to give data.

Some other visitors when asked to be interviewed, first said that they had not looked at the exhibition carefully enough, or they were in a hurry and unable to be interviewed. After the explanation, two of them returned to the gallery and accepted the interview. Asked why they did not look at the exhibition carefully, they said they could not understand the objects and felt remote from them. They were first time casual visitors to this gallery. They had had no previous interest or knowledge of Chinese art. However, after the interview, these two interviewees felt that the exhibition was actually quite interesting and they would like to come again.

After the invitation, the first question was: "Would you describe your cultural background as British?" If the answer from the possible interviewee indicated they were British, the interview was continued. Otherwise it was stopped with thanks and another respondent selected. Each time, this procedure was repeated so that the interviewee was randomly drawn from a population sample of visitors with a British cultural background.

Having been selected, the interviewee was led to a bench in the Gallery in an area where visitors can congregate. Companions were respectfully asked to browse in the exhibition while they waited for the interviewee (some of them went for lunch).

The sample was not well distributed throughout the age ranges (Appendix 8). The under-representation of young visitors under sixteen occurred because very few were found visiting this gallery. The majorities visiting this gallery were



adults<sup>11</sup>. More than one third of the sample (5 out of 12) visited alone, and one fourth of the respondents were members of a study group (3 out of 12), especially those who were under twenty. Slightly more females than males were interviewed (7:5). This matched the demographic characteristics that were carried out in previous studies conducted by this gallery<sup>12</sup>.

After the presentation of the questionnaire and the sample of the in-depth interview, the coding of data is described in the next section.

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<sup>11</sup> The visitor survey of the Tsui Gallery, mentioned in 5.1, shows that the majority of the visitors are adults.

<sup>12</sup> The visitor survey mentioned above also shows that 62% of the sample was female and 38% was male.

## **6.2 The data coding of the in-depth interview**

The analysis of the interview involves processes such as collecting, recording, transcribing, and analysing the data. In this section, the methods of these proceedings are described.

One approach to presenting data of qualitative research is to present quotations from interviews that display the range and variety of views on each question within a report that presents a synthesis, overview and interpretations (Hakim, 1987:34). Alternatively the data can be presented fully, rather than categorised or typologised which would result in only parts of the story being told (Charmaz, 1995:60; Lindlof, 1995:253-270).

However, because of the purpose of this study - to discover the interpreting pattern of the visitors, providing highly edited and condensed transcripts of each interview with the researcher's analysis and overview of the results, is more appropriate (Hakim, 1987:34). Also, on account of the scale of the thesis, only an outline of the data gathered can be demonstrated here. Even in the appendix, the amount of data is limited to just a small part but essential to the whole.

The in-depth interview relies on note-taking using a notebook computer (4.1). Concurrent with note-taking, the interview was immediately transcribed as written text for the subsequent analysis. Before every interview, the interviewer set up a new document with the interview guide-questionnaire (6.1) which was followed during the interview and introduced the notes in the appropriate places.

When question 20 was reached, both interviewer and interviewee needed to approach the display which was central to the question. Since there was no available seating, the recording consequently continued by hand-written notes.

At the beginning of every interview, the potential interviewees were apprised of the purposes of the study and informed of their rights to remain anonymous and review the transcript. The interviewees were then encouraged to describe as precisely as possible what they experienced and felt, and how they responded to the displays.

All interviews were recorded at the same time and transcribed verbatim apart from eliminating habitual words such as 'you know', 'well', or repetitions; self-corrections, however, remarks after the interview were added as comments and additional data. All notes were printed out the same day, after each interview.

The interviews produced about 30,000 words of transcripts. The researcher then carried out a systematic analysis of the interview material. The first step was to codify the transcription of the interviews and to prepare standardised material for analysis.

The coding of the elaborate information collected from the in-depth interview into data, primarily entailed editing the complexity of the material and putting it into fewer, simpler categories. The coding firstly separated the material into elements using a single word or phrase to label these elements (Coffey, 1996:32-35), thereby dividing the interview data into many relevant analytic factors. Key words were used to indicate elements of interpreting practices. The word or phrase that illustrates a factor is determined by the essential characteristics of the element and presented as simply as possible.

For example, the interview material of one respondent was segregated and underlined as "I /come to this gallery almost every two months/... The /objects here are so remarkable/. I /can't afford to have any of them/, but I can come to see them /as many times as I like/. The /more you come, the more you like it/ because every time you will /find something new/ from it. ... I like anything /Oriental/ especially /Chinese/. They are so /rich/, I mean their /colour/, their /shape/ and their /symbolic meaning".

At this stage, the coding procedure is mainly probing the elements, the meaning units in terms of the specific purpose of the study. According to the objectives of this study, the coding focuses on details representing the various interpreting performances and factors which influence it.

The principal inquiry for identifying the elements was: "How was the visitor's interpretation accomplished?" The themes of the elements were addressed by posing such questions as: "What does this statement reveal about the visitor's interpreting?" At the first phase of attributing these elements, the selections

were drawn from previous literature studies and site observation. For example, for the comment from a visitor: "You seemed to be in the cave of a thousand Buddhas in China", the key words here were "contextualisation" and "previous knowledge".

The above is the paradigmatic analysis, examining units chosen by interviewees to form their interpretation (syntagm). In the light of semiotics, paradigms come within the area of language and are generally shared among members of a culture (Fiske, 1994:57-8). Based on these paradigms one can then reveal the language of the visitors (4.1).

When editing the data into more compact categories, the factors extracted were at all times compared with each other and with previously coded units, in the same and different categories. For example, a typical visitor comment was:

"I was /fascinated by the courageous decision of the museum to offer 'touch objects'. That made the visit different from the usual one. It was more stimulating. We do not normally have the chance to touch a Chinese object like this/".

On comparison with preceding data, key words such as 'innovative display technique' were identified and a new category 'the sense of touch' was added.

A further instance was, comparing and contrasting "I was fascinated by the magnificent objects: They are fabulous." And "The impact was tremendous, especially when I looked at the Guan-yin.", the same element 'effect of object' was assigned to both of these statements.

The original phrases such as 'magnificent' and 'fabulous' were retained under the paradigmatic category of 'effect of object' as its sub-categories. The Guan-yin mentioned by the latter was also counted as one of the most impressive displays. At a later stage, these subcategories together with other similar elements were merged into another paradigmatic category as 'real object' (as opposed to models or replicas).

In addition to the comparison between coding elements, the discrepancies between two responses were also compared in order to understand the strength or weakness of the communication. For example, two comments about labels "There is too much to read" and "The information is insufficient" are contrasted and the pertinent fact is thus deduced as 'adequate but concise information on labels is required'.

The consistent comparison and contrasting lead to the development of each paradigmatic category. Such identification of similarities and differences among the elements enables the researcher to refine the factors and arrange them into groups of categories (Robert, 1995:74-85; Miles & Huberman, 1994:50-89). For example, two preliminary categories 'not too much for one visit' and 'too much to see' were then merged as one paradigm, the need of 'time' for perceiving the displays. The researcher then applied these emergent categories to analyse further information.

In most cases, one statement describes various paradigmatic categories. For example, a number of visitors' responded to the question "why do you visit exhibitions of other cultures" by saying "The significance of being in the presence of the objects of that culture such as the statue of Buddha", or a similar comment. The coding for this is 'emotional interpretant', 'effect of object', and 'statue of Buddha'.

The categories with which the above statement associates are, firstly, the way the visitor interprets the visiting experience is emotional and aesthetic rather than understanding the displayed culture. Secondly, from this statement, one can deduce that the display of an extraordinary object is one of the reasons for visiting the exhibition. Thirdly, since the statue of Buddha was mentioned, it was coded under the category of impressive display. Furthermore, because most of the displayed objects singled out by interviewees as impressive displays are large size artefacts, the size of object was considered a communicative element.

The interview notes were thus coded according to the schemes which emerged from the action of sorting the data without imposing an external system. Here are some examples of the more developed coding manual:

Effect of objects.	I was so /overwhelmed by the <u>grandeur</u>	02.0104
Arrangement of the gallery.	<u>of the Chinese objects</u> /. They are absolutely marvellous. I like the / <u>arrangement</u> /, (I mean) the gallery; the way they put the objects together. It makes the / <u>gallery</u> more modern in	02.0105
Modern display.	<u>style</u> /; <u>lively</u> , /not as dull as those old	02.0106
Chinese style.	fashioned ones/. Also, /the <u>Chinese style of design</u> in this gallery.	02.0107

(Note: the words in brackets were actually omitted when taking notes); right column is a reference number for the underlined word or phrase.

Effect of objects. Nowhere else.	It was definitely exciting because you can't /see so <u>many</u> splendid <u>Chinese objects elsewhere</u> /. Just / <u>looking at</u> these <u>objects</u> makes the visit extremely worthwhile/. There was / <u>sufficient information</u> for what I needed/. You	06.0023 06.0024
Sufficient (quantity) information.	<u>can't expect too much from just one visit</u> /.	06.0025
Not too much for one visit.		06.0026
Colourful.	I was extremely /absorbed by this gallery/. It was so / <u>colourful</u> /, made you	06.0027
Chinese atmosphere.	/ <u>feel</u> that you were somewhere <u>in China</u> /. ... /The <u>impact</u> was tremendous,	06.0028
Effect of object.	especially when I <u>looked at the Guan-</u>	06.0029

Guan-yin.	<u>yin</u> /. ... The only problem was that /there was <u>too much to see</u> /.	06.0030
Too much to see.		06.0031
Better to relate to modern China.	It is very /different from the impression you get from the T.V. programmes/ 'Beyond the Clouds' (a documentary about China). I would /like to see something <u>related to modern China</u> /. Of course you can't compare an exhibition in a museum to T.V. documentaries. ... I	06.0032
More information about Chinese writing.	was quite / <u>interested in</u> those Chinese <u>writing scripts</u> /. I would / <u>like to know</u> <u>what they mean</u> /, although /you can	06.0033
More /deeper information	<u>figure out</u> that this has something to do	06.0034
Insight./ Deciphering	with drinking and eating and that has a <u>connection</u> with burial/.	06.0035

The examples above present the condensation of the extracts from the interview notes. The elements, the 'meaning units' of the interviewee's responses are marked in the left-hand column, the interview notes are given in the middle column, and the numerating of the meaning units are located in the right-hand column. All the interviews were tabled separately in order to get a sense of the whole.

For this interview analysis, priority was given to precise descriptions and a search for essential patterns behind the descriptions. The coding tried to cover both factual and structural aspects. Attention was paid to the explicit descriptions as well as to the implicit message. To use the above example, the category 'effect of object' is an explicit message and the 'size of the displayed object' is an implicit one.

In order to find out the patterns and relationships among factors, the identified categories were examined to ascertain whether they were related to other forms

and there were linkages between the categories. There were also checks to determine whether or not the factor in question was part of a large sequence in the interpreting process, and where possibly it did not fit in.

For example, by considering why the categories of emotional and aesthetic interpretation occurred and by comparing with other factors such as describing the ritual items as art works, another category that 'visitors interpret the display according to their own cultural code rather than the code of the displayed culture' was formed.

By coding as well as refining concepts discovered or brought into the study by the coding, not only did the key words used for coding become more precisely defined and the connections between categories become more developed, but the originally hidden factors were also revealed. The categories of paradigms increased until no new factors were found and the paradigmatic categories of the interview were then complete (Appendix 9). The paradigms obtained from the coding thus led to further qualitative differentiation of interpreting behaviours.

While marking the ascertained factors expressing the essential, non-redundant themes of the interview were grouped into different categories of paradigm and were treated in the order of frequency of occurrence, under a heading, such as:

Category	Headings
The effectual communicative factors	Effect of objects (6) Layout of the exhibition (4) Display style (3) Gallery design (2)
Visitors' expectations	Sufficient information (7) Chinese atmosphere (5) Relate to modern China (3)
Comments on the information the exhibition provided	Boundless information, always something new to be found (4) Superficial information (3)



	Too much information (3)
	Sufficient information (2)

(Note: the number in brackets stands for the occurrence frequency of the element at some point during the coding process).

Multiple interactions of quantitative and qualitative approaches thus took place during the analyses of the interviews. The frequency of the paradigms was registered as a reference to the recurrence of the interpreting action. The more frequently a form of interpreting was confirmed the more certain the categorisation would be.

As mentioned above, the earlier category was kept under the merged new category as its sub-categories, every category was thus divided into several subcategories. To cite two instances: (1) the sub-categories of the effect of objects were: the authenticity (being a real Chinese object), size, colour, and mode of expression of the objects (2) the sub-categories of the supplementary information visitors expected were: Chinese writing, modern China, ethnic groups, and social laws such as taboos, or table manners.

The next step was to define and specify the semiotic properties and suppositions of these paradigms. The data from the interview material was analysed within their categories in a paradigmatic manner to identify their attributes in terms of semiotics.

For example, the semiotic designation 'deciphering' was related to the category of interpreting behaviour 'guessing' and 'inventional interpretation' was ascribed to the interpretation which was very different from the intended message. All the data classified by the coding were then registered in separate inventories according to different semiotic significances.

These identified paradigms were then conflated in a syntagmatic manner to form a descriptive statement of the analysis. I.e. by integrating properties of these categories and the comparison of categories. At this stage, how these paradigmatic categories were related in a larger configuration began to appear.

For example, in comparing the data of first time visitors to the data of experienced visitors, based on the inventory of Jakobson's six functions of communication; it was found that the connative function was the most active one, and by the increasing of visiting experience, the referential and the metalingual functions became more efficient. The analysis thus summarised the varied interview responses into a more coherent pattern.

This analysis reconstructed the interview data in a meaningful and comprehensible fashion in terms of the visitors' ways of interpretation; the coding scheme which corresponded to categories that counted for the purpose of this study was thus gradually developed from theoretical research as well as site observation of the case study; the predominant influence, however, came from the data coding process. That is, as Kvale (1996:195) describes, in finding out the categories, the encoder establishes the coding by the discovered categories.

In other words, the paradigms for interpreting the displays were 'discovered' by the coding of the interview data, and the coding was determined by the 'found' paradigms. This kind of dialectical repetition is at the same time a kind of periodic reliability checking and helps to cut down the number of possible coding errors which is needed since the researcher is engaged in theorising based on semiotic suppositions, presenting the facts of the interviews in the form of explanation by semiotics.

### 6.3 The quantitative data of the in-depth interview

This section presents the most important element of quantitative data of the in-depth interview principally, but not strictly, according to the sequence of the questionnaire.

The ratio of adult visitors to younger visitors - aged 20 or under - is five to one (Appendix 8). This percentage (16.67%) of younger visitors is close to the figure of 14% obtained with a much larger entry sample of visitors to this gallery, (5.1) - part of the programme of evaluation of the T.T.Tsui Gallery<sup>13</sup>.

Also, according to observations at similar exhibitions by the researcher, it is evident that far more adults than young people visit this type of exhibition. When the younger interviewees (who were visiting because of a school art project) were asked if they would come to see the exhibition voluntarily, they said that it was very unlikely.

Three quarters of the sample (9 out of 12) claimed that they had some knowledge of Chinese culture before they visited the Gallery (Appendix 10). The three claims of specialist knowledge were reported as academic or professional, having visited China, or having a personal interest in a particular topic. The percentage is higher than the previous survey carried out by the gallery<sup>14</sup> for which the question was focused on the interest / knowledge of the objects in the exhibition rather than as broad as the Chinese culture as a whole.

More than half of interviewees repeated their visit to this gallery and other exhibitions of similar interests (Appendix 11). All of them admitted that "the more you visit, the more you want to go again".

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<sup>13</sup> According to this survey, the age range of visitors are: 61+ 9%; 51-60 7%; 41-50 17%; 31-40 18%; 21-30 34%; 15-20 14% (McManus, 1992:Table 1) Accordingly, the percentage of younger visitors (15-20) is 14%.

<sup>14</sup> According to this survey, around a third of visitors reported a special interest in, or knowledge of, the objects in the exhibition (McManus, 1992:18).

Ten interviewees came specifically for this exhibition. Others were passing by or waiting for friends. There were many more intentional than casual visitors. Their main purposes for visiting were: viewing Chinese objects; appreciating Chinese arts; or currently working on projects about Chinese or general art design (Appendix 11).

The fundamental motivation for the interviewees to visit either this Gallery or other exhibitions of foreign cultures is to see the objects of that culture. Even the two interviewees who are casual visitors to the T.T.Tsui Gallery said that if they chose to go to see an exhibition of other cultures, they would like to see artefacts relevant to the culture concerned.

Seven interviewees recognised this kind of exhibition as a convenient way of becoming acquainted with the culture presented and gradually felt that the culture, previously alien, becomes discernible and therefore acceptable. Consequently they gained enjoyment from knowing more about that culture.

Nine interviewees visited one or more exhibitions of other cultures during the previous year (Appendix 11). They all affirmed that they found their visits favourable and beneficial and almost all the justification for this was, again, that they saw objects which were interesting and unusual whilst at the same time feeling they had become much more informed about the displayed culture.

Interviewees had different impressions of the exhibition as a whole. They described it separately as peaceful, historical, spiritual, religious, immense, or about a great civilisation. All of them were in total agreement that this gallery was very 'Chinese'. However, one interviewee said: "I enjoyed being in a Chinese gallery with a tranquil atmosphere although I know the life in China is usually 'busy'", an impression obtained from films and T.V. programmes.

More than half of the respondents (7 out of 12) commented that the arrangement of the gallery is somehow 'a bit here and there', "They usually have a chronological order", implying that to them the information was displayed in a fragmented way.

One quarter of the sample (3 out of 12) regarded the theme of the exhibition as being about Chinese ways of life. Almost all (10 out of 12) considered the Gallery to have an appealing, modern design. They thought that both the displays and the design of the gallery contributed to the pleasant atmosphere.

It is interesting that 5 out of 12 interviewees mentioned the benches in the Gallery saying, "There is so much to see in the Gallery, you do need a place to sit down". One interviewee commented, "I like to stay in this gallery, because there are benches where I can sit and enjoy the beautiful objects."

After visiting the T.T.Tsui Gallery, more than half of the interviewees (7 out of 12) felt that, in addition to their original knowledge, this exhibition increased their understanding of Chinese culture. They attributed this to the "diverse combination of objects from different dynasties, different aspects" (sic), and acknowledged the contribution made by labels and graphic signs.

11 out of 12 interviewees would have liked the exhibition to indicate by labels the significance of the objects from a Chinese point of view. Two thirds of the sample suggested that "It would be nice if the exhibition had more items related to today's Chinese life".

One third of the interviewees reported that deeper personal knowledge would have enabled them to better understand Chinese culture. Nevertheless, they preferred to enjoy the display itself rather than reading books. One of them expressed, "After seeing the displays, I wanted to find out more about the objects by reading books; but, when reading books, I keep thinking that I really would like to see the object again".

None of the interviewees felt that they had been made more distant from, or confused about the Chinese culture. Some visitors to the T.T.Tsui Gallery and other similar type exhibitions complained that the information on the labels was not helpful to them. 3 out of 12 interviewees felt that they did not want to pay attention to at least two-thirds of the labels because the vocabulary and sentence structures were too complicated, particularly when 'there were some Chinese words'.

All of the interviewees said they only recognised the objects as being Chinese because they were displayed in a Chinese gallery. After having acquired that knowledge they would be able to recognise the object even outside the museum context.

The objects chosen by more than half of the sample as being significant to the Chinese were religious statues in the 'Believing' section. Actually, every one of their choices of a significant object was related to worshipping (Appendix 12). 7 out of 12 interviewees claimed that they understood religion to be the most important aspect in Chinese life and that the Gallery echoed this attitude. The number of religious objects on display, the location of the believing section - in the 'heart' of the gallery, and the emphasis given to arrangement of the display all 'reinforced' the idea already in their minds.

They also thought that they could assess the importance of the objects, i.e., the bigger the object, the more precious the material it was made from and the more elaborate the technique involved in producing it, the more important the object. Another clue is the way the object is displayed (Appendix 12).

8 out of 12 respondents described Chinese as 'hard workers' and 'inscrutable people.' One mentioned, "You don't normally show your opinions or feelings, do you?" Other common impressions of Chinese people included 'conservative', 'spiritual,' 'skilful', and 'a race with a long history stretching back to the earliest civilisations'.

9 out of 12 said that they tried to look at 'everything in the gallery'. The majority chose shape or colour of objects as attributes most likely to attract their attention. For example, comments such as: "the bronze vessel in the shape of a goose is fascinating just for its shape alone" and "this kind of shape is uncommon in European artworks"; an emerald green object on the top of the shelf was mentioned on an account of its fascinating colour and shape; also the figures in the burial section drew comments like "so real, its natural simplicity". A young person, who visited the gallery because of an art and design project said, "The exhibition has made me think that I must go to China".

The displays also prompted a variety of questions about either Chinese art or culture such as “do you have modern art, like abstract painting, in China?” (Appendix 6).

10 out of 12 respondents named more than one display as their favourite. Displays from the ‘Believing’ section were most often mentioned (Appendix 12). Within them, the statues of Guan-yin and Guan-di were considered the most imposing objects. Guan-yin was considered by the interviewees to be a delicate artistic work. The facial expression, gilt-wood material and knee patterns on Guan-di attracted their attention. A respondent mentioned it was “quite striking and look[ed] powerful”.

The ‘fake’ display was also nominated by 9 out of 12 interviewees as an appealing and interesting exhibit. They pointed out that “Normally, museums don’t tell you that their collections are fakes!”

Interviewees chose a silk robe as a captivating display for its exquisite material and pattern. Parallel instances are frequently found in other similar settings. The most regularly heard responses from the visitors to the Museum of Oriental Art in Durham University are commendatory words: gorgeous, splendid, delicate, etc.

There was always a possibility that when interviewees were asked for their favourite display, they would choose exhibits which they could see from the interview location. In this case, the interview was carried out in the middle of the gallery, the Believing section at the interviewee’s back. Some of the interviewees named their chosen displays without looking at the exhibits again. Therefore, the location of the interview did not seem to introduce bias.

As to the general visiting pattern (Appendix 13), 10 out of 12 interviewees normally follow the suggested visiting route for their first visit to a gallery, but if the route was not obvious they let the displays lead them. The other two relied on their interests to define their visiting route even in their first visit. All of the interviewees followed their own interests after their second visit to a gallery.

When they view a display, they normally observe the displayed objects first. If they are to a certain extent familiar with the type of object, they will simply enjoy the viewing of the display both sensorially and psychologically, aesthetically and intellectually. One interviewee said, "The most enjoyable experience is that I already know something about the object and achieved in finding out something new during the visit".

In trying to discover something new, interviewees compared objects with something they had seen before and speculated as to whether they were right. They compared it with similar displays in the same gallery or made a 'guess' according to the way the item was displayed. Reading the label is the last thing they do, and do only when confirming their observation or obtaining more information. A typical comment was "You understand more about Chinese art through the object, but you know more about the object through the label".

When coming across an item that interviewees were interested in but not familiar with, they would again, observe, compare, and speculate first and then read subsidiary signs such as labels, illustrations, or introductory panels. If these subsidiary signs did not satisfactorily provide the information they were seeking, they would have liked to ask someone with the relevant knowledge or exchange ideas with someone available there.

7 out of 12 interviewees felt that, "If you were looking for more in-depth information then there was not enough on the labels". One third of them benefited from labels very much but said, "You can only read some of them at each visit, because you want to enjoy viewing the objects. Otherwise, you can read a book about Chinese art at home". One sixth of the sample complained, "There are too many to read".

10 out of 12 interviewees indicated that some of the labels gave an insight into the object, but some gave superficial factors such as the name or material. For example, a label for a dish runs: "Gold dish with chased lotus design. About 950 - 1100 Song dynasty". An interviewee criticised that "it was obvious that the dish was made of gold and that the pattern was lotus", but that 'Song dynasty' meant nothing to him. All he could say about the dish was that it was "beautiful



to look at". However, after the symbolic meaning of the lotus was explained, the interviewee agreed that the object became more interesting.

Seven found that the illustrations gave them a clear idea about how the displayed objects were used in their native context. From the informal interview given by the researcher in 'The Sacred Art of Tibet', every interviewee mentioned that the introductory panels on the background of Buddhist religious art helped them to appreciate Tibetan art and religion.

9 out of 12 interviewees said, if they did not get the 'answer' at the time then, after the visit, they would just forget it. "Sometimes you think that you want to find it out, but you just never do it!" Sometimes, however, they would unexpectedly stumble across the 'answer' - one which satisfied them but not necessarily one coming from a Chinese viewpoint.

10 out of 12 respondents thought the museum had done a marvellous job in presenting the exhibition both innovatively and professionally. However, there were some opinions such as "I believe the museum has other outstanding collections of Chinese art that are not presently on display. I would like them to change the displays regularly, say, every year".

There were some suggestions about the display, such as "I would expect an Emperor's robe to be displayed with his jewellery, weapons, and the picture of his enormous palace, to exhibit his power and the conquest of other countries".

11 out of 12 interviewees were interested in seeing both traditional and modern artefacts of a foreign culture. They thought that they had acquired more knowledge about history, beliefs, and techniques of Chinese art but learned nothing more about modern Chinese life. The interviewees (Appendix 7) frequently sought information about the modern life of a foreign culture.

When asked what symbols of status, power, and ideologies in China the visitor had seen in the exhibition, 7 out of 12 respondents thought that the Chinese believe in an after life. Four respondents, in referring to the ruling class, thought that even in modern China there was still lack of democracy. Half of the respondents said that all the Chinese objects seemed to be full of symbolic

meaning that they would like to know about. Two thought that the exhibition was about wealthy Chinese people and queried “What about the life of ordinary people?”

Five interviewees noticed that there were some labels vaguely telling historical/mystical stories that they would have liked to have been told. After suggesting to interviewees who had not noticed this kind of information that they read it, 4 out of 7 then said that it helped them to understand more about Chinese culture. The rest (3) thought that the stories were strange.

It is of interest that both interactive and hands-on objects were rarely mentioned first. After being asked, every single interviewee said that they had seen the video, had touched the objects, enjoyed it and got some information from them. “The video told me about different aspects of Chinese life”. One interviewee even said “how wonderful it would be if all the display could be handled”.

“It is a marvellous idea to show detailed inspection of the ceramics and textiles/embroidery with the video. You can't see it from just looking at the objects with your own eyes”. 7 out of 12 interviewees indicated that they would have liked the video programme to give further information. “It was very informative. However, it was too short and the programmes were limited”, i.e. not enough topics or categories were covered.

Having being told that, in China, the head is regarded as sacred and, consequently, not to be touched by others, almost every one of the interviewees who had touched the sculpture of Buddha's head (with only one exception) felt sorry that they had touched the head. They would have preferred the museum display to give an indication of that taboo.

Common motifs or themes of Chinese culture identified by interviewees in the Gallery were dragons, willows, blue and white (ceramics), the colour red, supernatural and religious themes such as Buddhism, nature worshipping, and astrology (Appendix 14). 9 of the 12 interviewees felt the ideas derived from the displayed object itself. Others gained the impression from displays and labels.

No one had noticed the figure of the toad because “Its colour and shape isn’t very attractive, and it is quite small”. Three quarters of them showed polite interest when its meaning was explained by the interviewer. All interviewees admitted that the ‘ruyi’ had no significance for them at all, although some of them had noticed its intricate crafting and agreed on its beauty, even after having read the label which indicated it was a backscratcher and that its name meant ‘[You can have] whatever you want’. A quarter of the sample showed great interest in the meaning of both toad and ruyi, but they thought that the labelling was not sufficient to make the meaning attainable to those with different culture backgrounds (Appendix 6).

In addition, while the interviewer was conducting the case study in the gallery, visitors kept asking, “What do those Chinese characters in the heading panels mean” and were also keen to know how they were constructed.

## 6.4 Findings of the in-depth interview

In analysing the interviews, major findings are that exhibitions of another culture attract competent visitors; artefacts of the source culture provide motivation for visits; large and exotic items attract more attention; and that the messages received were mostly superficial and etc. A more detailed description follows.

Most interviewees were knowledgeable about Chinese culture; they had intensive interest in the materials or the subject of the exhibition (Appendix 10) indicating that exhibitions of other cultures often draw visitors with a certain interest in that specific subject matter.

According to the case study carried out in T.T.Tsui Gallery and other related visitor studies, visitors who go to exhibitions of foreign cultures can be divided into casual, first time intended, less experienced, and experienced visitors. The intended and experienced visitors tend to be the majority and only 2 out of 12 were casual visitors in this case study (Appendix 11).

The finding that more than half of interviewees repeated their visit to the T.T.Tsui Gallery and other exhibitions of similar interests demonstrates a feature of cross-cultural communication - a high frequency of repeat visiting. This fact together with the significant percentage of intentional visitors reflects the visitors' subconscious presuppositions of the communicative act centres on cross-cultural understanding (Appendix 11).

Consequently, the competence and expectation of visitors to an exhibition of another culture may both be considered as averagely 'high' and that a text like the T.T.Tsui Gallery appeals to the competent visitors. Nevertheless, one might conclude that it is the unfamiliar stimuli in this kind of exhibition that drives off most of the potential visitors and that improvement needs to be made in order to attract people not yet interested in the culture presented.

For the first time visitors and those not familiar with the displayed culture, such an exhibition is merely a random collection of things. They are mostly

engaged in familiarising themselves with both the exhibition environment and the displayed objects on a superficial level. This is confirmed by the fact that most of the interviewees felt that the T.T.Tsui Gallery was “a bit here and there”, even though it had been analysed by a Chinese researcher to be a miniature reflection of Chinese culture (5.3).

On the other hand, it is intelligible, although maybe not from the Chinese viewpoint, to experienced visitors. They are accustomed to this type of exhibition and are, more or less, knowledgeable about the displayed culture. They feel easy and comfortable in contemplating the displays and perceiving the messages.

The principal motivation for the majority of visitors to visit an exhibition of foreign cultures is to see the artefacts of the source culture - the ‘rare things’. This matches Treinen’s (1993:86-93) comment that the majority of museum visitors are driven not by an interest in the subject, let alone by the desire to learn or educate themselves, but rather by curiosity and a pressing desire for diversion. Only a small percentage comes for an intensive or scholarly experience.

Some of the intended first time or less experienced visitors come to exhibitions of another culture because they are curious about the exhibits and expect there to be exotic items. Also because of their specific interest and motivation, the experienced visitors are attracted by the presence of unusual objects. The informal interviews (5.1) from visitors to the ‘Mysteries of Ancient China’ (British Museum, 1996), were mainly attracted by ‘new discoveries from the early dynasties’.

The impetus of observing the objects of a culture leads to the consequent result - discerning the culture in the aspect of the theme of the exhibition. Data collected from this interview shows that all of the interviewees feel they had gained a greater or lesser degree of understanding about the displayed culture by visiting, and the reason was, that the exhibition contained ‘real’ things. However, whether this was from the viewpoint of the source culture or not, is another question and is discussed in the next chapter.

Compared to other message carriers, such as photos or models, the artefact was the most convincing medium of the source culture. Interviewees feel that they learnt more from looking at the 'real' objects than from simply reading books or viewing photos or films. When they saw a displayed replica or model, their typical response was "when the original item is unavailable, a replica or model is fine". This is a strong indication of the communicative power that using artefacts of the source culture gives an exhibition.

The force of the exhibition theme and the displayed objects limit the range of interpretants which may be suggested to the visitor. It is interesting to see that, visitors to the 'Cradle of Knowledge' exhibition at Birmingham and Manchester tended to think that the Chinese are clever people. Visitors to the 'Chinese Homes' exhibition at Geffery Museum, saw that the Chinese value their families the most; whilst visitors to the T.T.Tsui Gallery considered religion to be the most important.

Even though most meanings of the source culture embedded in the objects displayed in the T.T.Tsui Gallery were eliminated (Appendix 5), they were still identified as Chinese objects because they were in a Chinese gallery. To the visitor, even an unknown object depicts 'a strange *Chinese* item'. Therefore, the primary sign-function of the displays in the exhibition of another culture is thus that of an intrinsic 'semantic marker' i.e. 'objects of the displayed culture'. The displayed objects are recognised mainly because of their significance as objects of a specified culture. They are no longer just items themselves, but representative of their culture.

Visitors trusted the information provided by the museum and relied heavily on their authority. "It says so in the label, therefore it must be so". This is a common expression from interviewees. This might not only be due to the fact that the visitors are not familiar with the source culture, but mainly due to the traditional authentic role of museums: "They (museum people) are all experts".

Visitors acknowledged the displayed objects as indications of the source culture but their conclusions were mostly severed from the original meaning. Their comments on common motifs and objects reflected interest in the

artefacts as artefacts without relating to the significance in the original cultural context (Appendix 14).

Symbols are an integral part of the implicational meaning of any culture due to their extensive capacity for marking associations among concepts, beliefs, values, and other institutions, and especially so for Chinese culture, where symbolism is prevalent. However, their referential function is mostly lost in cross-cultural circumstances. It seems that the majority of symbolic signs of the source culture retreat into iconic signs. Sometimes, though, a symbolic sign became an indexical sign. Some of the interviewees knew that most of the patterns/motifs had a symbolic meaning but did not know what it was. At worst, a symbolic sign may remain as a potential stimulus not yet functioning.

It was witnessed in all cases that interviewees with a greater knowledge of the displayed culture interacted more with the displays (and vice-versa). Interviewees interacted more with objects which fascinated them or which they found strange, and they made instantaneous inferences about the meanings of the objects before they try to find out from labels or other available sources in the display setting. When the instantaneous inference is insufficient or of no interest to the visitors, they turn away from the display.

When the displayed objects are very different from objects of the visitor's own culture, they either lose interest or give an aberrant interpretation unwittingly (Appendix 15). The most evident example is the figure of a toad in the collecting section of the T.T.Tsui Gallery. It is a symbol of wishing for wealth and a very common object in Chinese households. Nevertheless, none of the interviewees noticed the display and after it was pointed out they either showed no interest or were surprised that the Chinese like such hideous creatures.

It was found that visitors see the etic units whereas most of the emic units inlaid in sign-vehicles, such as symbolic meaning were vanished. Even for the most experienced visitor, the fruitful but fragmentary emic clues implied did not orchestrate an initially coherent meaning. Additionally, a set of displays attracts more attention from visitors than a single sign-vehicle, there is no guarantee

that they will achieve a more effective 'sign-function' and generate a 'cluster of meanings'.

A brief introduction of the content of the exhibition, such as a panel of 'The Sacred Art of Tibet' introducing the background of the religious art of Buddhism, are found supportive. Nevertheless, the panel listing the Chinese chronology in the T.T.Tsui Gallery was considered of negative effect. What visitors required was more informative insight rather than mere facts.

An aesthetic sign is a powerful marker for cross-cultural communication and its signification is based on the visitors' code. The qualities of objects which appeal to visitors are, firstly the attractive appearance and secondly, the unusual image. Compared to Chinese visitors, British visitors tend to prefer simple colours and forms, more expressionistic objects or patterns, and objects which portray struggles and revolution. These actually have less Chinese emic units. The dominance of the aesthetic sign-functions is also evidenced by how the presentation impacts on visitors. Many interviewees showed interest in the 'Fake!' display, reflecting the attraction an unfamiliar display of familiar artefacts holds.

The size of the sign-vehicle is also an effective factor. The majority of significant objects and favourite displays chosen by the interviewees are big in size (Appendix 12). However, the statue of Luohan is almost the same size as the statue of Guan-yin next to it, and it was never mentioned. When the interviewer asked what was the impression received from the statue, for example, one of the responses was "Oh, that Buddha with big ears is interesting". The aesthetic sign-function is more effective than the dimensional.

On the other hand, interviewees tend to ignore the potential signs which are single small-scale sign units with a code dissimilar to theirs. For example, none of the interviewees noticed the bat pattern which symbolises good luck and happiness and appears on almost every single Chinese utensil. It is especially interesting that even when the interviewer pointed to an object with a repeated bat pattern and asked what the interviewees saw, none of them noticed the bats.



The message visitors took up were mostly at iconic level but not the intangible content. They see the etic units and ignore the emic units. Nonetheless, exhibitions of a foreign culture provide a convenient and comfortable opportunity for visitors to familiarise themselves with the atmosphere of the displayed culture through the objects of that culture, although merely at their semantic level.

The interpretation code of the visitors is their cultural background. Using an example mentioned in 6.3, an interviewee suggested that the Emperor's robe should be displayed with his jewellery and weapons. However, in terms of Chinese emic units, a display about the ruling class would be, just like in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, an exhibit about how he maintained good relationships with the supernatural, nature, and his subject.

For an exhibition, intentionally or unintentionally, the accepted stereotypes of a foreign culture perpetuated a sentimental attitude rather than promoted understanding and therefore reinforced these stereotypes. To the interviewees in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, the most important aspect of Chinese life is religion. However, for many Chinese, eating and drinking is more important. To a Chinese visitor, the displays in the T.T.Tsui Gallery clearly evidence this, as the objects contained in all six sections are predominantly utensils for eating and drinking. (6.1)

Additionally, cross-cultural communication was heavily accomplished by the assistance of subsidiary sign-vehicles, especially linguistic signs. Interviewees found that illustrations and diagrams were helpful for providing contextual information and videos were more interesting because they go beyond the static and limited space of the exhibition room. However, linguistic signs, either in auditory or written form, are found to be the most intelligible.

Labels sometimes give information that arouses more queries. For example, a label with the title of 'Dragon' referring to a ceramic vase with a dragon pattern runs: "Dragons are often linked with emperors of China, and shown on many things made for them, like this 15th century vase. But many dragon legends connected with fertility and rain were known by ordinary people. An object with

a dragon on it may refer to one of these stories instead". Two comments from interviewees ran: "Why are dragons often linked with emperors?" also, "How does the dragon legend connect with fertility and rain?"

Some of the information provided in the label makes no sense to the interviewees, for example, the legendary figure Lui Hai and his toad companion are "Supreme beings who bring wealth to people". However, the label only states 'Lui Hai and a toad' and thus says nothing.

Interviewees regarded visits as active information gathering, which they prefer to passive information gathering such as reading a book, observing photographs, or watching films. They feel that there is a lot of information in an exhibition, but they require something deeper. 'It would be nice to relate more to background information about the objects in terms of Chinese culture' is a common comment.

It was shown that after seeing the displays visitors wanted to find out more than what they had originally wanted to know (Appendix 6 & 7). This indicates the inspiring and informative impact of the displays. It was evidenced that the information the visitors wanted to know the most was the value system of the source culture.

The fact that the benches in the T.T.Tsui Gallery were mentioned frequently by the interviewees is probably because the interview was carried out sitting on one of them. However, there is still an indication that one of the attractions is an environment (created by things such as benches) where the visitors feel comfortable. If the visitor is not free from environment-related stress, they are unlikely to benefit from the visit and probably will not return (Edson & Dean, 1994:185-6).

To conclude, the theme of the exhibition, authoritative position of museums, visitor's knowledge of the source culture, aesthetic quality and presentation of the displays, physical appearance of the exhibited object, and the information contained in labels are all influential factors of cross-cultural communication. Amongst others, the most attractive sign-vehicles are the unusual and authentic

artefacts. However, referential functions connecting them to the source culture are often missing and messages conveyed are purely at the iconic level.

Exhibitions of another culture have immense potential for cross-cultural communication and further development is required to enhance the effect and include visitors who are not yet responsive to this kind of exhibition. The analysis of the findings and the required developments are discussed in the following two chapters.

# **Chapter 7**

**The features of cross-cultural  
communication in museum  
exhibitions**

## 7.1 The visitors' code of sign-interpretation

The response of visitors to a cross-cultural exhibition, in terms of semiotics, and the approaches they use when incorporating the signifiers and signifieds can be defined as follows: deciphering; reacting to the material level of the display, based on the reference of the visitor's cultural background; and conforming to the display context.

As Jakobson points (1960:33) out, semioticians start as decipherers and finish as normal decoders of a message. The work of deciphering implies a complex inferential process. For first-time or less experienced visitors, if a display is new or not previously coded in their sign system, they are not able to decode or read the exhibition but are deciphering it.

For example, in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, an interviewee was fascinated by the fierce facial expression of Guan-di. Due to the placing of Guan-di behind a Guan-yin statue, the interviewee thought Guan-yin was a virtuous god and Guan-di was a wicked fairy figure. However, the interviewee was still baffled by the brutal expression of the statue even when he had read the label and realised that Guan-di was a dependable and revered god.

In this kind of situation, the visitor observes the display and its context, and tries tentatively, to link the signifier (the facial expression of the Guan-di), to characteristics like ferocious, ruthless, or fierce, which are the interpretants aroused by the signifier with reference to the visitor's mental encyclopedia. The visitor develops the further interpretants which connect these characteristics; ferocious, ruthless fierce, with the idea of 'powerful spirit' - because Guan-di was placed amongst statues of Buddha.

When deciphering, the visitor's experience is somehow disorganised, confused, biased, and incomplete. First-time or less experienced visitors will eventually become decoders if the exhibition inspires them to make an effort and provide them with appropriate information. Otherwise, they will lose interest and turn away or keep their inventive interpretation and not actually understand

the displayed culture. Neither of these are the preferred consequences of an exhibition of foreign cultures.

Although it takes a considerable amount of time, the task of deciphering allows visitors to familiarise themselves with the system of rules and conventions which govern the manifestation of cross-cultural sign-functions, enabling them to identify pertinent features of the displayed culture. They do this mainly by the repetition of a previously unknown or unrecognised feature. By examining pertinent features through the artefact's shape, material, colour and by comparing them against known features of that culture, (otherwise the visitor's own culture), and the available information in the gallery, a meaning for the display is thus defined.

At the first stage of decoding a foreign sign which refers to phenomena not previously existing in the visitor's mental encyclopedia, referential deficiency although pointing to a common concrete object in the source culture, either decodes the sign according to the visitor's 'invention' or causes sign-function to cease.

Both experienced and first-time visitors normally first respond to the physical appearance, size and setting of the sign-vehicles. It is the quality (according to the visitor's code) of the colour, form, shape, material, textures, and the expression of the displayed object which invites the visitors' attention, not the significance of the object in the source culture. This confirms that in objects of another culture there is, a 'sort of irreducible aesthetic information', fundamentally different from 'semantic information' (Eco, 1979:267).

With respect to aesthetic information, visitors are attracted by novelty that either deepens with understanding or fades into indifference. Interest is encouraged predominantly by the visual effect of the displays, or the subsidiary sign-vehicles such as the large printed rubric label with the word 'Fake!' in the 'Collecting' section of the T. T. Tsui Gallery.

When visitors make a mental effort to pursue further message of the display, they will notice the core meaning of these objects provided potential pertinent signs are there e.g. labels on site.

The unusual presentation of a display, using the same example of the 'fakes' in the T. T. Tsui Gallery, creates an aesthetic or a poetic effect which leads visitors to reconsider the usually accepted 'coded relationships' and to explore the multiple possibilities of the new correlations (Eco, 1979: 264) by creating different relationships and unexpected correlations. If, on the other hand, there is no initial surprise of pleasure on viewing a display, first-time or less experienced visitors have no further motivation to consolidate and deepen the experience.

As Eco proposes, in order to interpret a sign, one has to consider the conditions of a given message (1979:129). When visitors try to understand a display, they analyse the attributes and circumstances of the sign-vehicles. They examine the shape, material, and colour, of the displayed object to try to identify their significations. They normally work on a further segmentation of the continuum and gain a more basic form of the expression. Within the segments, visitors search for the pertinent features of the object to compare them with known attributes of the source culture.

When there is a deficiency of reference, visitors ponder and correlate the superficially relevant traits of the display by imposing their own culture onto them. By looking at the sign-vehicles, the expressions of the displayed culture, without immediately available information, visitors respond to them merely by referring to their own memory store and perform an innovative process of sign-interpretation.

When scrutinising the features of the displayed object, experienced visitors are aware of their own classification and wonder what the classifications denominated by the culture on display are. This kind of action is analogous to the anthropologists' approach towards the culture they are studying and it is the initial step of discerning a new classification by comparing it with their already established classification.

The visitor assigns elements of meaning to the sign-vehicle, and interpretation is usually based on those elements assigned to it. Using the example of the Guan-di statue, the interrelationship of facial expression and

location produces the significance of the display. Again, without immediate information to enclose the text, visitors 'see' the 'hidden' properties of displays according to their code rather than the code of the source culture.

Visitors' reactions can be divided into two categories, a primary-reaction and a supplementary-reaction. In a primary-reaction, visitors focus their attention on the external appearance of the objects. There is thus a great reduction in the content of the message. For example, the representation of peonies is regarded as a representation of beautiful flowers; their symbolic meaning of wealth and the legends concerning them are missing. On first seeing an unfamiliar sign of another culture, visitors always respond with a primary-reaction.

A supplementary-reaction sees signs as having a meaning, a deeper structure, which is obscured at the stage of primary reaction. The supplementary-reaction normally needs assistance from subsidiary signifiers such as accompanying labels. Using the example of the sign 'pine tree', the primary-reaction to this sign, the interpretant is 'Chinese species Pine tree'. When the visitor looks at the label and understands that it is a symbol of 'longevity' for the Chinese, the supplementary-reaction is then triggered.

In order to grasp the significance of the unfamiliar sign-vehicle which they confront, visitors commonly try to elaborate ideas with the first logical interpretants of the phenomena that suggest them. The example of interpreting the statue of Guan-di is evidence of this: the consideration that 'Guan-di must be a bad god because of the fierce facial expression and the location at the back of the benevolent Guan-yin' is the logical interpretant.

This effort of elaborating ideas is a process of recollection and correlation. Visitors make distinctions and apply categories in order to settle for those elements which can bear a representational function, a sign-function. The choice is based on the context of the sign-vehicle, the display, and the previous experience of the visitor. However, when the display fails to stimulate attention of the visitors, they will, in Eco's (1979: 252) words, refuse to collaborate and consequently the conventions based on the codes and rules of cross-cultural communication refuse to become established.



The work of correlation is found, by the case study, to be accomplished by video, illustrations, or simple charts rather than written labels or captions. For example, in the exhibition of 'The Cradle of Knowledge' where the diagram of Chinese chronology compared with that of the West was found to be welcome and useful to the visitors. However, in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, the six subdivisions of the exhibition and their introductory panels giving the key patterns of eating, drinking, or burials, did not achieve their intended function. This is due to the uninspiring nature of the written signs and the length of the text on the panels.

In the process of interpreting, the theme of the exhibition, systems of categorisation and classification, the name given to these objects, all determine the formulation of the interpretant arising in the visitor's mind. For example, 'Ding', 'Cooking utensil', or 'symbol of the state' can all be applied to one and the same object. The first two are the name and the function of the object in its native culture. There are obvious facts and thus direct the visitors' interpretation to the etic plane. The third is the meaning of the item in the source culture. It is this insight which can draw the visitors' attention to the emic aspect.

In an ostensive mode of communication, the presentation of the sensory concrete signs (the appearance of the Ding), their articulation in the syntagmatical chain of the exhibition (with Dings of different eras, various cooking utensils, or with some other items symbolising state or Royal family) or their organisation in paradigmatic structures (with other types of Chinese tripods, Royal court objects, or bronze items), conclude the sign-function. Visitors start with an etic approach and proceed to the emic domain.

Visitors employ various techniques of decoding and these can be categorised as: undercoding, overcoding, and extracoding.

The term 'undercoding' has been used by Eco (1976:135, 138) to refer to rough or imprecise coding. It is due to continuous exposure to pre-fabricated strings of messages that the decoder attempts to interpret although they may not be completely conscious of the rules of decoding. Through this 'exposure', the decoder gradually establishes that a particular sign has a meaning in its

original context. It is a way of grasping macro-units before understanding single units and their regulating codes.

Visitors usually find some forms of sign strange to them. Each time the form of sign occurs, visitors observe the situation in which it arises. Gradually they develop a theory about the meaning of the signification in its 'strange community'. With each new observation, their theory is modified or confirmed until they are confident to claim that they know what it means.

This is reflected by Eco's (1979:136) comment that when interpreting unknown circumstances or codes, a process of undercoding occurs. Since visitors normally seek to confirm their tentative assumptions about the meaning of the displayed sign-vehicles, the activity of undercoding is introduced.

The term 'overcoding' refers to the process of decoding messages by attributing more analytic subcodes to a known code. It builds on undercoding and occurs whenever the receiver makes a connection between different features of a message to infer a meaning which is not present in either element. The effect of a message is commonly more than the sum of its parts, as one meaning is overlaid by another. In other words, it is an approach to decoding a message by first finding out the rules (Eco, 1979:136; 138-9).

Visitors usually try to make links between different aspects of the displays, as well as between the message and any previous ones received. They tend to retain images of the displayed culture mentally and combine them within a reconstructed framework which normally relates to the context and their previous images of the source culture, resulting in a modification, between convention and innovation, of the image of the culture concerned. When there is a simplified signifier, visitors interpret it by overcoding.

Acknowledging a segment and thus inferring its group is an overcoding strategy used by visitors. For instance, from the few writing implements displayed on a desk, visitors ascertain the coding category of Chinese penmanship. Similarly, some foil belt plaques become identifiable because they are displayed alongside a jade buckle which is readily recognisable by a non-

Chinese viewer. In fact, the concepts of the displayed culture as a whole are formed by a process of successive consolidation.

Ideally, overcoding is an appropriate tactic for interpreting displays of another culture. Yet the final interpretant is presented neither in the display nor in the context. It requires the creative act of overcoding. However, such an effect only happens when a visitor is particularly interested in the display, and it rarely results from a single or small number of visiting experiences.

Extra-coding is a mixture of overcoding and undercoding (Eco, 1979:140). It is the essential facet of cross-cultural communicative activities and accounts for the discursive competence of the interpretation such as common sense inferring and intuitive guessing. When visitors are interested in a display, they scrutinise the sign-vehicles they come across to see if there is more to them than meets the eye. Visitors respond according to their varying competences, disambiguate or overambiguate, by frequently confronting and adjusting their codes and designating temporary, extensive, incoherent, and sometimes disconnected interpretations to the display.

This is well reflected by Eco (1976:129) when he comments that the activity of text interpretation implies a continuous process of extra-coding. He points out that the text interpreter (i.e. the visitor in this case) 'must constantly challenge the existing codes and elaborate interpretative hypotheses in a more tentative, comprehensive and prospective form of codification'. Extracoding is thus the most routine process of cross-cultural communication.

Apart from the above ways of decoding, it is aberrant decoding which most frequently occurs in cross-cultural communication (Appendix 9). The phrase 'aberrant decoding' implies that the message has an intended meaning which some people, through peculiarities of their background, may fail to grasp (Eco, 1979:141). The connections between dragons and devils, between bats and ugly creatures, the interpretation of Guan-di as a bad god, etc. are all aberrant decoding. Also, the neglect of emic units such as the image of a toad, the symbolic meaning of a peony, are other examples of aberrant decoding. Some of the aberrant decodings are the result of overcoding. This is because

overcoding demands an imaginative accomplishment to generate the interpretation, as discussed above.

When there is deficiency of reference, visitors form a revelation rather than a recognition according to two or more impressions and memories of the same classification. The applications of those 'wicked' creatures, i.e. dragon, bat and toad leads to the query: "Why do Chinese adore those depraved creatures?" However, these are again based on the visitor's mental encyclopedia. For example, the number of displayed utensils does not lead to the conclusion that "eating is the most important aspect in a Chinese life".

It is noteworthy that among the visitors' conventions is the tendency to search for familiar objects and the preference to acquire new experience. Along the same line, building up a concept by part-whole relations is the most integral element of the visitor's language. One may say that every perception acquired from visiting is constructed by the integration of separate interpretations. Moreover, the visitors' comprehension of the exhibited reality comes from something more than the integration of its stories - that of its structure. Also, any exhibition is the part-whole relation to the culture it concerned, this is the same for any sign in the exhibition.

Concepts of the displayed culture are also formed by a succession of consolidations and can be developed in one or several visits to different exhibitions. In the T.T.Tsui Gallery, for example, the label for a porcelain dish with a decoration of five peaches and bats indicates the pattern "suggesting long life and happiness". After having read several labels of this direction, the conclusion of symbolism in Chinese art can then be suggested first and assumed later.

A considerable extension of assimilation is achieved by reintegrating compatibly dissonant impressions with one's perception (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975:22-45). At a later stage, due to the development of this kind of ability, the visitor can easily detect the clues of the displayed culture which conflict the visitor's background. The detected clues are then amalgamated with and absorbed into the total concept of the displayed culture in the visitor's mind.

Observing time and visit frequency are other aspects of visitors' interpreting behaviour. When visitors are interested in one display, or a display attracts the attention of visitors, or when visitors want to comprehend the inner- or micro-structure of the material elements, they take their time in viewing it. As to the frequency of visiting, the more the visitors visit one gallery or these kinds of gallery the more they become familiar with the sign-vehicles of the culture on display. The sign-function is thus more active.

Visitors develop their codes of judgements through the mental activities they gradually master to go beyond existing criteria and adopt a flexible stance that allows them to respond to qualities of the displayed culture which are different from their existing value system. The 'competence' of cross-cultural communication is expanding during their 'performance', the interaction between the visitor and display. The visitor's cross-cultural communication 'language' evolves along with their 'speech'. When a visitor's mind is better equipped for the visiting experience, i.e. their mental encyclopedia has been developed to a cross-cultural status, they are able to constantly connect individual experiences and form an understanding of the displayed culture.

Visitors mostly implement the above approaches jointly. For example, when the facial expression and the use of colours of the Buddha statue aroused a multitude of responses, the visitor reads the label and is thus referred to the historical background of the signification. Also, they might link the Buddha with the Guan-di statue as well as the ancestors' portraits displayed next to it.

In brief, this section describes the way visitors interpret the displayed culture. In Eco's (1979:273) words, this is a procedure of hypothesising, confronting, rejecting and accepting correlations, judgements of appurtenance and extraneity until the signifier has been allocated, and only then will visitors have comprehended the signified. Visitors' approaches change from etics to emics as long as their interaction with the displays is continued.

## **7.2 The features of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions**

As a result of the textual analysis and in-depth interviews conducted in the T.T.Tsui Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum, also the informal interviews in other similar exhibitions mentioned in 5.1, certain features of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions were observed and are described in this section.

### ***Artefacts as an essential element***

What motivates most visitors to visit an exhibition of foreign cultures is the opportunity of seeing artefacts of the displayed culture (Appendix 11). The objects, the materialised cultural units with different contents of the culture presented, are thus essential elements of cross-cultural language.

As discussed in Chapter 6, most visitors are first interested in the sign-vehicles - the artefacts of the displayed culture, whereas the intended signifieds of its original culture are of little or even no interest to them. Whenever they acknowledge a deep meaning of the display, their interest is aroused and they are encouraged to acquire more knowledge of the significance of the displayed culture.

Semiotically, the displayed objects perform sign-functions as they stand for all the other objects of the source culture to which they refer but are not present in the galleries. Although visitors are interested in the displayed objects, they unwittingly take the displayed objects as the first and immediate references of their source culture. The displayed objects are not simply regarded by visitors as illustrating themselves.

The primary sign-function of the displayed objects is that of being 'objects of that culture'. They act as signs of signs of their native culture. This is based on the recognition of their originality and significance as objects of a specific culture in the context of the exhibition. In this sense, what is not there is confirmed and justified by what is there (Eco, 1976: 231). The displayed objects

would normally act as indices, referring to their meaning in the source culture. Their sign-function is hence framed as cross-cultural, and their denotative and connotative aspects are circumscribed by the culture in focus.

Nevertheless, these presented cultural units mostly lose the value they have in their native culture and their relationship with the 'absent' units in the message through being perceived through a different value system. So that a plum blossom pattern is no longer a symbolic sign of appraising the virtue of courage, but to a British visitor, an iconic sign of pretty flowers on a Chinese vase. The inner structures and related contents of the objects are destroyed by the different code that the visitor uses. The original message in the medium is usually in danger of being misinterpreted.

As semantic markers, the displayed cultural units are iconic signs of many others to which they refer and function solely on the expression plane, referring to their materiality rather than their content. They are linked in their physical substance based on the visitor's code and hardly influenced by the code of the source culture. When the displayed objects noticeably differ from those familiar to the visitors - and this is frequently the case in exhibitions of another culture - they are not even necessarily 'indexes' or 'indices' of the original meaning nor even of the functions which they have performed in their native cultural code.

For example, an ivory figure of Guan-yin holding a baby boy is just a nice small statue for most of the interviewees. As a result, after the visit to T.T.Tsui Gallery, some visitors might recognise similar forms of the Guan-yin in other places, but not discern the Chinese meaning of them.

The 'function' in an exhibition of a culture is 'powerfully functional' to the native visitor, but is 'powerfully indicial' to the non-native visitors. (It does not mean that the exhibition is purely 'functional' or 'indicial' to its different visitors, but that one kind of function generally predominates or is more apparent in the discourse).

In terms of size, objects can be classified as large-scale and small-scale. According to Eco (1979: 217), there are 'single stimuli' and 'global textual units'. The former is analogous to a sentence or a phrase such as a vase, cup, or plate.

The latter is a text such as a painting, sculpture, a whole setting, or group of objects. As discussed in 6.4, visitors tend to notice and respond to large-scale and global units earlier and to a greater degree than to small-scale units and single stimuli. However, there is no guarantee of a more effective sign-function from a large-scale and global textual sign-vehicle.

All the interviewees in the T.T.Tsui Gallery noticed the large Guan-yin statue in the 'Believing' section, but none were aware of the small Guan-yin in the 'Living' section, although one interviewee indicated that he is always fond of Guan-yin because of the tranquil expression on Guan-yin's face. This interpretation is, again, at the etic and aesthetic level. Although the visitor may not necessarily understand or get the full message of the global units, they respond to them, which is the beginning of understanding.

### ***The strength of contextualisation***

The meaning of an unknown foreign expression is largely determined by the exhibition context. Through the contextually structured displays, visitors recognise the abstract content of the displayed culture by linking these expressions with another representation of their previous experience. That is, when the cultural units are employed as syntactic markers, the placement of the sign-vehicles together with other items will determine their indexical function. For example, in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, the box displayed with a set of cutlery on a dinner table is already defined by the context as a food box without the support of the accompanying label. By the context of the display and the subsidiary signs, the destroyed structure of the sign-vehicles is more or less restored.

What sign-functions denote are determined by the interpretant suggested by sign-vehicles and their display contexts. When there is no background or relevant information provided in the context, the interpretation of the visitors return to their own cultural code and draw on it entirely - the connative function. This is the common reason for the occurrence of aberrant decoding.

When visitors come across sign-vehicles which puzzle them, they refer back firstly to the subsidiary sign-vehicles such as the graphic or written signs, of



which labels are the most frequently used. However, if there are any graphic signs such as diagrams or drawings, visitors prefer to check with them rather than labels.

Visitors use subsidiary signs as indicators for constructing the image of the displayed culture, but rarely take note of them before looking at displayed objects; they would rather appreciate the display. Only when they wish to acquire more objective information or when they are particularly interested in a previously unknown sign-vehicle is the visitor likely to consult the subsidiary sign.

Within the subsidiary signs, the capacity of the linguistic sign for carrying conceptual information is evidently crucial in the case of cross-cultural communication where the objects belong to another culture while the linguistic signs are of the same culture. This is especially so when symbolic procedures, such as ritual or ceremonial patterns, by which values of the displayed culture are collectively expressed and affirmed, are mainly understood through the information provided by the accompanying linguistic signs.

Prior experience enhances relevance. When interpreting the displayed objects of a foreign culture without being able to find further reference from subsidiary signs, visitors refer to their own experiences or culture. For example, the label for a wedding dress indicates that it is decorated with 'double happiness' characters. For the visitor who has previous knowledge of Chinese characters the symbol itself will disclose the denotation.

When visitors have no prior experience, "We have so and so which are similar to this" or "We do not have such things" are typically frequent responses in their minds. Especially when there is some connection between two cultures, the visitors' motivation to observe the object is enhanced. The area of overlap of the culture concerned and the visitor's own signification system is thus an essential foundation for cross-cultural communication.

In cross-cultural communication, there is a high density of ambiguity which is regarded by Eco (1976:263) as a mode of violating the rules of the code, to different degrees. This is due to the dissimilar codes between displayed and

visitors' cultures and leads to different 'connotations' for the expressions and messages.

The significance of ambiguity, according to Eco (1976:263), is that it functions as an introduction to the aesthetic experience: "When, instead of producing pure disorder, it focuses my attention and urges me to an interpretative effort (while at the same time suggesting how to set about decoding) it incites me towards the discovery of an unexpected flexibility in the language with which I am dealing".

The way visitors react to objects of a foreign culture is similar to the interpretation of works of art. The emotion which is fully aesthetic was rated highest, and knowledge the lowest (Appendix 12). For example, the Guan-yin statue in T.T.Tsui Gallery is attractive not because the Buddhisattva is a benevolent and thus popular religious figure, but because of its peaceful facial expression and graceful gestures.

From Jakobson's (1976) point of view, any communication is a field of probabilities and a great number of ambiguities. The communication relies on the interpreters to form their responses and must be resolved through a process of choice and decision-making. The experience of visiting an exhibition of another culture is a process of selection and combination from the probabilities and ambiguities.

When visitors respond to the sign-vehicle, the immediate interpretant is retrieved in their minds. This mental image bears, in most cases, the pertinent features of the sign-vehicle in the visitors' own cultural code (Appendix 12, 14, 15). This is because the immediate interpretant is evoked by the expression plane but not the content plane of the sign-vehicle.

It is sometimes the case that objects on display are sign-vehicles of a range of different meanings according to the visitors' codes and they simultaneously connote many different interpretants, which may not necessarily be the meaning in the displayed culture. At this point, it is by the impact of the exhibition theme, these immediate signs limit the range of interpretants which otherwise may be suggested to the visitor.

When the displayed culture, or one of the displays is not previously coded in the visitor's sign system, the work of sign-interpretation is of deciphering rather than recognition. In such cases, the semantic markers, or pertinent features selected as significant in a display unit, are mainly those which inspired by the display context and corresponding to the cultural units are concluded by the visitors' code. They tend to detect those which have been used by the museum emitter. It is this task of deciphering which is a parallel task of communication (Jakobson, 1960:33) that gradually lead visitors to establish the system of rules and conventions of cross-cultural communication.

The repetition of sign-vehicles that belong to a same category, no matter whether they are in one or various exhibitions, tend to catch the visitor's attention; for example some typical objects such as blue and white ceramics in Chinese exhibitions. With each observation, the visitors make and modify their tentative assumptions toward the emic unit based on the display context and subsidiary signs. Nevertheless, there is a great possibility of misinterpreting or even building up the stereotype due to lacking appropriate information.

When there is an outline of the intricate system such as the chronological diagram of the ancient world inventions in 'The Cradle of Knowledge' exhibition, or the introductory panel of 'The Sacred Art of Tibet', providing connection between constituents of the displays, visitors tend to draw on this 'framework' as a ground for interpretation. The individual pieces of information given by the exhibition are thus likely to be put together by the visitor to form an integrated perception of that culture from the aspects presented.

Symbols which are embedded with condensed meaning of the source culture have greater communication potential. However, symbolic values of the displayed sign-vehicles are at especially high risk of vanishing (Appendix 5). Symbols that are emotional (historically) and highly motivated signs in their original cultures, normally become iconic, logical and entirely unmotivated signs in the visitor's code. The loss of their communicative ability occurs because the connection between these types of signifiers and their contents is missing from the visitor's code.

The emotive function which arises from the attitude of the emitters towards the message is forceful in influencing the interpretation of the visitors. It stems from the traditional authentic role of the museum and is chiefly expressed by proposing a 'preferred reading' of the displayed culture through classification and contextualisation.

Due to the 'exotic' factor of the exhibition, phatic function in the museum cross-cultural communication process considerably influences the senses of the visitors, working efficiently to constantly propose the idea and relevance of what is being said, and the magnificence and significance of the message, to make accessible what would otherwise be bizarre and incomprehensible. It is mainly activated through display techniques such as contextualisation or design codes by devices such as a special and separate showcase for one single object suggesting its importance in the source culture, or informing visitors how to handle an artefact as natives do.

The connative function, which defines the relation between the message and the receiver, has taken on immense importance because of the referential content of the message which although a salient influence, normally renders meaning to that of the visitor. The connative function rates remarkably high especially for the first-time visitor.

As further visits increase the visitors' experiences, the referential and metalingual functions become stronger. The referential function is predominantly performed by the iconic code - objects of the culture concerned and the linguistic code - whether in headings, labels, or audiotapes. It is also supported by the arrangement of the exhibition as well as display techniques such as interactive videos.

The metalinguistic function of messages, identifying the code that is being used in the signifying process, is normally the weakpoint of exhibitions of another culture due to the differences existing between the codes of the visitors and the displayed culture. The codes which govern the structure and content of the exhibition have not yet been well developed and usually not made explicit by the exhibition organisers.

## **Conclusion**

As described above, the visitor's interpretation of foreign sign-vehicles is an experience more comparable to an aesthetic than to a scientific or rational one. The meaning of the display is mostly determined by the interpretants to which the visitor can refer. The communication is more connotative than denotative and the sign-interpretation is initially more of 'sign-invention'. Cross-cultural exhibitions are, in Eco's (1979) terms, 'open texts' because of the richness of their content. The experience is of a semi-novel entity, blending various aspects of the displays with that of the visitor.

The possibility of distorting the perspective of the source culture normally changes during a constructive visiting experience and determines the consequent later selection and combination, i.e. the greater the knowledge of the culture concerned, the less the likelihood of interaction ending, and vice-versa. The more background knowledge and visiting experience the visitor has, the less possibility misunderstanding will occur.

Successful communication produces, firstly: existing visitor codes that are still central, but gradually open to partial modifications; secondly: a relationship between a visitor's cultural background and past experience, and the current dialogue with the display that is continually undergoing adjustment; thirdly: a novel division of discourse imperceptibly installed between the visitor and the displayed culture. Again, the above reflects what Eco (1979:273) suggests.

The outcome of cross-cultural communication is engendered by the communicative capacity of the display as well as the powers of the visitor's interpretation. The meaning generated by the visitor is occasioned by the selection and articulation of signs according to the visitor's mental encyclopedia and by referring to both the exhibition's intentions and the display context. This re-shaping of the cultural continuum of the signs, is due less to the original cultural segmentations than to that of the visitors.

One can thus conclude that, an exhibition of another culture such as the T.T.Tsui Gallery is chiefly signifying the subjective connotation rather than the more precise objective denotation; signifying predominantly implicit rather than

explicit signs that are more definite; primarily unconscious signs rather than conscious signs (Guiraud, 1992:25). Also, the action of interpretation relies on the available interpretants in the exhibition context and on the semiotic competence of the interpreters.

Code-switching has also been found to be a feature of cross-cultural communication. However, this fundamental feature is discussed in detail in Chapter 8. The following section presents some thoughts on making the potential indication in an exhibition of another culture more effective.

### **7.3 The pertinence of defining the interpretant in sign-production at the paradigmatic level**

Peirce (1960) suggested that a sign is useful only because of its intended effect on interpretants and that the sign, through which the interpretant is determined, must be produced by having a relationship to interpretant. Based on Peirce's theory and in accordance with the case study, this section discusses the pertinence of providing an interpretant.

From Peirce's (1960: 2.228) definition, a sign is "something which stands to somebody for something, in some respect or capacity...", it is clear that 'capacity' and 'respect' will define the interpretant of the sign-vehicle and that when these are properly managed, the pertinent interpretant will be assured.

According to the case study, both sign-vehicles and their relationships are perceived by the visitors' senses in correspondence with the reference being suggested by the way the sign-vehicle is used. Factors influencing the capacity of cross-cultural communication to determine an interpretant are discussed below.

#### ***The employment of sign-vehicles***

As discussed in 7.1 and 7.2, the metaphysics of presence together with that of originality, are the basic axes of the system of signification in cross-cultural communications. One of the factors which causes museum settings to have a strong influence on the way visitors perceive and understand things is the medium employed, i.e. the 'real objects'.

The objects' primary function is itself, a role that no language-born thought can replace (Langer, 1986:100). There are potential signs of idea, time, emotion, and history, in the object. They are a kind of crystallised reflection of the thought of the culture within which they have been produced (Eco 1979: 45).

These objects are semantic markers which comprise the primary tangible accessories of a culture. They "are already charged with cultural signification"

(Eco, 1979:2) and function as key 'interpretants' which combine with the norms, rites, history, arts, and language of the cultural group portrayed in the exhibition and, so, form the foundation of the story of the exhibition.

The object thus has a formal value as a sign-vehicle. In museum exhibitions of other cultures, it has a significative aspect open to further segmentation and, as a competent and pertinent feature of the expression plane.

In order to reveal the perspectives of the exhibited culture, it is essential that objects displayed are able to demonstrate the abstract ideas and complex philosophical reasoning of the source culture. The exhibition relies on objects to reflect emic units in aspects of custom, philosophy, and dominant ideology.

Objects where both physical material and content may possess intrinsic interest, are more influential in cross-cultural communication. One example is a dark blue jar in the Ruling section of the T.T.Tsui Gallery, used for holding food offerings. Before visitors became aware of its role in rituals worshipping the cosmic powers of Heaven, they were fascinated by its enchanting appearance.

Visitors respond more to global units (e.g. a dining table with cutlery) than a single stimulus (e.g. a pair of chopsticks). However, once they respond to a single object they tend to understand it better than global units. This is because, as Eco (1979:217) indicates, single objects are units which can be grammatically isolated. While the macro-units have a significant function, they cannot, however, be decoded in isolated 'grammatical units'. These macro-units usually correspond to what the author calls 'fuzzy-concepts'; an intersection of concepts, images and ideas that come to the viewers' mind which must be read as a text.

Utilising small-scale sign-vehicles and enlarging them, or, segmenting the global units, by subsidiary signs such as illustrations, and labels as well as display mode such as light, video can be the solutions to promote the communication.

The case study has revealed that apart from the aesthetic quality of the object, another factor for attracting visitor's attention is its rarity (Appendix 12).



Some of the visitors anticipate 'typical objects' of the displayed culture, such as totems for primitive populations, mummies for Egyptians, ceramics for Chinese exhibitions. However, most visitors prefer to view something they have not seen before. For example, as indicated in 4.4, the 'New archaeological discoveries in China' in the 'Mysteries of Ancient China' exhibition at the British Museum, attracted very many visitors.

In the museum world, whether three dimensional objects can be replaced by models, replicas, or even fakes is one of the issues challenging the traditional codes of museum operations - the qualities of 'authenticity' and 'originality' attributed to museum objects. The legal restrictions of fakes are not the concern of this study; only the employment of models and replicas is discussed here.

In semiotics, an object may be replicated without losing any of its 'sign-values'; provided that it presents each nuance of the material texture and form of the original with maximum fidelity. Technically, models or replicas, presenting aspects of the original, help to exhibit those objects which by virtue of size, mass, or mobility could not otherwise be displayed. Models are able to stimulate visitors' interest in the originals. For example, quite a few objects in the exhibition 'China - The Cradle of the Knowledge' were replicas. After seeing the models of buildings in the exhibition, visitors wanted to see the originals.

What is evidenced by the case study and reflected by Lowenthal (1985:291, 293, 301) is that no matter how faithful in form, replicas and models inevitably depart from their prototypes in ambience. They may afford an equivalent experience of a specific culture as the originals, but they definitely lack their history of felt relationships. After seeing the replicas or models, visitors still hope to experience the originals.

One might thus argue that communication of a culture using replicas is unable to afford as much of a true historical experience as when using originals. Or at least both the replicas' and models' resemblance to and their differences from their originals affect visitors' perception of the originals and thereby the source culture. It is nevertheless a different experience.

Due to a specific link between symbolic signifier and its signified - the extended and continuous remembrance of the object, symbolic signs contain richer information of a culture than iconic and indexical signs (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975:71-2). The motif of a dragon, for example, is of great significance to Chinese viewers since numerous dragon legends have been passed on for generations; there is even a saying which describes Chinese people as the descendants of dragons.

When a symbolic sign-vehicle of the source culture is displayed, as a physical entity, its signification should come from the sign-function attached to the object. For example, to display a spirit tablet of ancestors or deities, the interest is derived not from the crafting of the item but from the attitude of remembrance or reverence.

As observed in the case study, symbolic signs are more difficult for visitors to interpret. How and why a symbolic meaning is attached to a pattern in the source culture needs to be properly explained by adjacent devices of subsidiary sign-vehicles. When approaching symbolic signs, reading the illustration, diagram, label or listening to the audiotape, the referent of the words temporarily takes the place of the sign, as a transforming procedure. Amongst various subsidiary sign-vehicles, audiotapes in the visitor's language are probably the easiest way of offering the clearest reference.

### ***An enclosed text***

When exhibiting a culture, there are numerous possibilities for visitors to interpret the displays, including the possibility of aberrant decoding. In Eco's (1976:140) words, the message of an exhibition is a "vast, if not indeterminate probabilistic matrix".

In terms of Eco's (1979) definition of 'open' and 'closed' texts, the exhibition of another culture is by its nature an open text which allows the reading of text in its 'multiaccentuality'. It has a capacity to signify more than one meaning, depending on the circumstances of its use and interpretation by different individuals or social groups (O'Sullivan, 1994:144).

According to its purpose, to provide a context for visitors to discern another way of life, a cross-cultural communication should be a closed text in which one reading of certain aspects of the source culture is strongly preferred over others. The 'preferred reading' is the reality of the displayed culture. Such a closed text can cut down the deficiency of an open text from the already difficult cross-cultural communication.

A preferred reading can narrow down the 'probabilistic matrix' and limit the endless potentiality and increase the efficiency of communication. The exhibition theme can initially restrict visitors' imagination, and define the formulation of interpretants. That is, restricting the text to a network of messages concerning the specific aspects of the displayed culture permits the correlation of different expressive substance with the same content.

It is thus necessary to focus the emic aspects (of the source culture) to direct every constituent sign to a highlight point to formulate the communication, to assure the interpretant aroused will centre on the theme of the exhibition. For example, the T.T.Tsui Gallery concentrates on art, and consequently the exhibition designer needs to make sure that all the displays suggest the emic features of Chinese art such as symbolism.

A sign is composed of various elementary units. The presence or absence of these units, and the way in which they are articulated in an expression will determine their resultant location in a given semantic field. According to the axis relative to which the sign is considered, some of these features will be pertinent while others will not.

Different perspectives of a display correspond to different interpretants of the sign. The semantic connection of sign is validated by consigning constituents to a highlighted meaning. For example, a lacquer plate with fish decoration of the Han dynasty can be directed to: the symbolic meaning of the fish; the function of the plate during that period; the material or technique of lacquer painting handicrafts.

When visitors attempt to decode and reconstruct the message, using the clues carried by the sign-vehicles, the task is better facilitated as the number

and delineation of indications increase. This can be done, when producing sign-vehicles, by giving more definite indications of the focused theme.

At the semantic level, the above method will steer the attention of visitors towards highlighted elements of sign-vehicles of which there were originally countless options; and at the syntactic level, to all sign-vehicles in the exhibition, which were initially discordant in the visitor's mind, thus creating a unified meaning.

Eco (1979:268) suggests that within the basic matter of signs, "there is a further space in which sub-forms and sub-systems can be isolated' and then be 'systematically submitted to further segmentation". This further 'segmentation of the continuum' will force visitors to reconsider their interpretative system as a whole, in order to explore the possibilities of interpretation.

For example, the label accompanying the robe displayed in the Ruling section of the T.T.Tsui Gallery, states that the colour yellow indicated that this robe is especially for the royal family. This prompts the question of why yellow for the royal family? (Appendix 6) After the explanation that the colour yellow stands for the earth, visitors then start to look for yellow in other items considering it a reference for interpretation.

As visitors regularly try to confirm their uncertain assumptions about individual signs, it is helpful to provide interpretants which will facilitate the linking between separate messages as well as between the message and previous ones received. Providing an outline of the intricate system of the exhibition content enables visitors to draw connections between the constituents of the displays to form a ground for coherent interpretation.

As Eco (1979:227) points out, in any case of ostensive communication, a preceding or presupposed discourse is needed in order to stipulate the pertinence level. A logical mechanism of abstraction and recognition will make possible the identification of the pertinent features of the ostensive sign, according to a given code and level of pertinence, in order to determine the meaning and way in which the sign is used. An outline of the theme of the

exhibition given in an introductory caption or in the form of a charter or diagram, can qualify as an immediate preceding or presupposed discourse.

Additional interpretants introduced by inducing the framework of the intended messages, such as a summary of features of Chinese art for the T.T.Tsui Gallery, could be especially helpful in tackling the frequent occurrence of 'aberrant decoding' in cross-cultural situations. This should be based on requisite stress given to elements of the exhibition more at the relation level than at the content level.

The mandate for museum communicators is thus to extract and elucidate from observable statements, the concealed logic that produced them. Visitors will respond to this 'complementary' transaction and there will be a greater chance that the communication will be effective and productive. Of course, this involves a higher risk of the source culture being misinterpreted by museum communicators.

### ***In accordance with the visitors' code***

When the visitors are allocating signifiers, they associate them with both, what they have observed in the exhibition context, and previous knowledge and experience in their minds. In this sense, for an intended message to be transmitted, there must be sufficient elements in common on both sides of communication.

In an exhibition of another culture, the two parties involved (the displayed culture and the visitors) are likely to have very different frames of reference. The interpretations by the visitors and the intended message are only similar when there are shared experiences (Szalay, 1981:133-46).

The exhibition emitters have to be able to draw upon semantic assumptions similar to those of the visitors in order to convey a certain meaning. In doing so, exhibition organisers must recognise the pertinent features differentiating one occurrence of an object from its other possible occurrences for the visitor according to given codes.

For example, if one wants to display Chinese traditional paintings, it is better to exhibit landscapes along with pictures of their local landscapes which inspired the artist. Explanatory devices such as illustrations or labels should demonstrate the Chinese tradition of having a 'story-line' in painting. In that way, the Chinese perspectives seen by Westerners as 'having no perspective' will thus be clearly illustrated.

As defined in Chapter 4, the 'interpretant' is the capacity of the code to explicate its own parts by providing more detailed identifications of the constituent elements and in turn, afford clarification of the sign-system. The aberrant decoding caused by the 'noise' resulting from 'obscurity' of the message can also be reduced when the sign-system is clearer.

This explication can be done in an exhibition mainly through paraphrasing. The paraphrase at the paradigmatic level is a group of objects bearing the same emic clue in support of each other, whereas at the syntagmatic level, it is a group of objects forming a reconstructed display.

For example, grouping ritual objects which are actually food containers for different occasions such as god or ancestor worshipping, and entombing, can testify the Chinese emic unit of valuing eating and drinking. Or, as mentioned in 7.1, the arrangement of some writing implements on a desk, illustrate the practice of Chinese writing.

Since the interpretant is the means by which the interpreter reads the sign, or is the effect the sign produces in the interpreter, to provide ground for generating the intended interpretant is to suggest a passage by the design of the display which invites the expected image to come into the visitor's mind. As long as sufficient pertinent interpretants are provided, extracoding will help to illuminate the distinction between one's own culture and the displayed culture. Contrariwise, it sometimes hampers the interpretation of the culture by misleading.

To conclude, the exploration of the many and different interpretants of the signs of a displayed culture and the challenging of visitors' previous established codes and rules are ways to expand the minds of visitors and to provoke

different attitudes in relation to the signs of a culture. Both knowing the targeted or potential visitors' codes and providing additional indicators to direct the visitors' attention to the emic messages are essential tasks for exhibition message emitters in producing effective sign-vehicles.

By specifying the interpretants, there will be a loss of potential meanings to display. However, the loss is minor compared with that incurred by focusing visitors' attention upon the material level of the object only.

## **7.4 The pertinence of sign-production at the syntagmatic level**

There is no fixed model on which exhibition organisers may base the creation and elaboration of cross-cultural texts. There are only pertinent features that they need to incorporate in signs when organising exhibitions of another culture. The task of organising and mapping the pertinent and relevant features they choose to communicate on the cultural continuum is discussed as follows.

### ***The pertinence at semantic and syntactic levels***

In general, only when signs are used to construct meaningful chains, arranged in 'syntagms' in the building of exhibition messages, will their semiotic potential be realised and thus possibly function productively in the interpretation constructed by the visitor. For example, there would be a large discrepancy in semiotic competence between a collection of elephant tusks laid neatly on a display shelf and the same tusks scattered in a reconstructed ancient sacrificial pit.

This is especially true in the cross-cultural setting where the sign, functioning as a semantic marker, is frequently obliterated by the different code of the visitor and thus only occurs at the syntagmatic level. For instance, a fragment of the Xiping stone, on both sides of which are inscribed the principal texts of Confucianism, has no significance at all for the viewer who does not recognise any Chinese writing.

The syntax of the exhibition as a whole is highly significant in aiding cross-cultural communication and requires a large number of sign-functions to be determined before the meaning of the syntax become clear. The same fragment of the Xiping stone canon together with a Shen ding (a kind of tripod) with a long inscription inside the inner wall of the body and a set of long bamboo strips inscribed with the text of The Book of Ceremonial form a sign unit of Chinese ancient ways of writing and thus secure the semantic value of the stone fragment.



### ***The pertinence of using subsidiary sign-vehicles***

As discussed in 4.2, subsidiary sign-vehicles, such as labels, graphics, or lights, provide more specific indications and fill the gaps between the functions evoked by primary sign-vehicles. They are catalysts in evoking supplementary reaction of visitors in appreciating the signified, obscured during the primary-reaction, either by elucidating or extending the signification of the signs.

By supplying some particular and definite descriptions, by means of secondary sign-vehicles, of the intended content component missing in the sign-vehicle of the display, the faculty of the cross-cultural competence will be greatly increased. Using the example of the elephant tusks on the display shelf, a picture of the excavated sacrificial pit can serve to bridge the gap and connect to the intended signified, i.e. the referential function of a sign is defined in the first immediate encounters (object itself) with accompanied secondary sign-vehicles.

The secondary sign-vehicles are dependent upon extracoding but are also assured by their universality and thereby suitability. They are therefore ideal and necessary display aids for cross-cultural communications. They yield the 'phatic' as well as 'connotative' functions in Jakobson's categorisation of communicative functions; they sustain the contact between the displays and the visitors; they suggest a point of view for the visitor's attitude toward the message.

Symbolic agenda such as ritual or ceremonial systems representing the values of a society, are better illustrated by concrete semantic markers - objects, with the support of subsidiary sign-vehicles. Linguistic subsidiary signs in the visitors' language are good at fulfilling the emotive function (of the source culture) as well as phatic function (of the exhibition). Graphic devices such as maps and diagrams are useful in making the audience appreciate the structure and context of the exhibition theme.

### ***The pertinence of the display context***

The context and previous experience are simultaneously referred to when visitors interpret the sign-vehicle. Museum communicators display the culture which is detached from its setting, the sign-function is somehow determined by the reference or the interpretant suggested by the context. As Eco (1979: 110) points out: "The same whale, in the context of Disneyland, or of a fairy tale, will acquire a totally different semantic structure". The context is thus one of the major factors the communicator can manipulate; it also serves to ascertain the intended significance of a sign.

Encoding contexts or circumstances by giving them an artificial context imitating the original, in the hope of inducing certain specific denotations original properties of an emic unit present, is difficult, but necessary if visitors are to grasp the meaning of the people who live in that culture. The contextual approach is an effective display notion for defining implicational meaning by providing indications of the intended message through the exhibition environment. It equips the display with circumstances that point to its background information.

A culture is formed in its environment, and its emic units are implicational in nature, relating to the ways in which its component institutions presuppose and imply each other. Consequently, the most effective means of presenting a culture is achieved by emphasising and displaying it through the referential function of the context. It is evident through the case study that visitors recognise the abstract content of the displayed culture mainly through the display context rather than the expressive abilities of objects themselves.

The above recognition is possible because the displayed object has the pertinent features in the material system which correspond to those of the source culture, and which visitors recognise because they are further informed by the additional intended interpretants provided in the exhibition environment.

The 'context' includes the location and setting of the objects displayed, such as in display cases; in use as hands-on object; or in a reconstructed setting; the relationship between displays. The circumstantial position of a given item, for

example, inside a special showcase, at the entrance of the exhibition, strongly lit, or arranged together with another item or group of items, will denote and connote particular semantic 'values': the most important in the source culture, a model type, specifically related to another given item, and so on.

### ***The pertinence of redundancy***

Redundancy is that which is highly predictable or conventional in a message. The opposite of it is entropy, a message with low predictability and high information. Because of its predictability, redundancy is useful in helping to increase the accuracy of decoding. It is most relevant when the prime aim of the message is communicating information (Shannon & Weaver, 1949:22-26, 112; O'Sullivan, 1986:84-5,194-6). A degree of redundancy is thus essential in cross-cultural communication whose purpose is to present the viewpoint of the source culture.

Structuring a message to repeat patterns, as exemplified in television commercials, is one way of decreasing entropy and increasing redundancy to gain maximum impact (Fiske, 1990:10-11). Another way is, to use a shared pattern or convention and therefore constructing a predictable signification.

However, whether redundancy is working to strengthen the cross-cultural communication or reinforce stereotypes of the source culture in the visitor's mind, needs careful examination. Exhibition organisers should concern themselves both with the emics of the source culture and what message the potential/targeted visitors might obtain from the redundancy.

### ***The pertinence of emotive function***

The emotive function is implied in the arrangement of the exhibition but mainly expressed through the linguistic code and occasionally with evaluative and qualifying comments such as "this sturdy and beautiful figure", "this expensive and important work". Visitors normally give but a cursory glance to these words preferring rather to appreciate the display. They are likely to read

the labels only when they are baffled by the display or wish to get more information. Objective information is thus more pertinent than judgmental words.

Nevertheless, objective descriptions do not in themselves help visitors to understand other cultures. Descriptions merely inform the visitor how skilful or not the authors of the descriptions are at presenting information, and then only if the visitor is patient enough to read the text. The greatest benefit occurs when the information provides the background against which understanding is being developed.

If the object is merely presented as a work of fine art, visitors commonly tend to use aesthetics as a criterion for understanding. This kind of practice results in an aesthetic text which is open to multiple senses and releases a code change as well as producing a highly original instance of sign-function. The informational quality of the aesthetic message is 'a vast range, if not indeterminate probabilistic matrix' which allows various 'optional results' (Eco, 1979:141). Such a text is not suitable for the purpose of cross-cultural communication in which the message concerns a set of conventions appertaining to a particular group.

### ***The pertinence of repetition***

Exhibitions of another culture usually present unfamiliar images and confront the perceptual norm in the visitors' culture. Consequently, for first-time or less frequent visitors, the majority of strange images are in intense competition; many of them eventually gaining acceptance, resulting in a satisfying cross-cultural communication.

As appreciation and assimilation are not instantaneous processes, 'time' is an essential factor when absorbing new ideas (Eco, 1979:265). Just looking at the display for some time can increase the possibilities of a visitor perceiving the information and observing the deep or micro-structure of the medium; and of discerning the provided interpretants such as the information in the label or other display aids. Unhurried observation can also open up the potentiality of recognising pertinent elements by a further segmentation of the continuum.

People appreciate their own culture through a vast range of sources and experiences both in time and space. Similarly, the greater the amount of information and environments to which the visitors have access, the greater the possibility of them comprehending the culture concerned. Therefore the frequency of perceiving is another important consideration.

Any culture as a whole is constituted from its parts and their organisation. By increasing the variety of emics intentionally conveyed through one or more exhibition/s the greater would be the understanding of the broader concepts of the source culture.

As mentioned in 7.2, the occurrence of repeated and systematic features in displays leads visitors to identify emic units of the source culture, and allows recognition of the same emic unit in other situations. When repeatedly posited, the features of the different culture may give rise to the established and accepted code of the visitors, to a new accepted type of expression and content.

Also, the better we get to know other people, the more we come to regard them as we regard ourselves (Bochner, 1982). The repetition will increase the probability that visitors will assign acceptable meanings to sign-vehicles. Repetition is thus an important pertinent criterion of sign-production.

In applying Saussure's (1974:16) thoughts to museum exhibitions, one could say that the systematic exhibition of a specific culture can build up the language of the communication, in a way no single exhibition can make it. Cross-cultural communication is gradually accustomed by the majority of visitors who initially accept it with difficulty.

### ***The pertinence of norm and novelty***

By being put on display as part of an exhibition, objects are endowed with a primary meaning, such as Chinese art or the sacred art of Tibet and become the 'semantic units' arranged to construct messages of Chinese or Tibetan religious art. The 'metaphysics of presence' of the source culture, mentioned in 7.3, establishes the basic axes of the system of signification.

The connative function, which defines the relation between the message and the visitor, is obviously crucial to the effectiveness of the communication. This can be influenced by the emotive (which is the relationship between the emitter and the message) and phatic function (the contact between the display and the visitor).

When organising an exhibition, communicators need to convey the relevant, and suggest the attitude towards, the information. For example, directing the visitor's attention towards the emic units of the displayed culture. This can be accomplished using secondary sign-vehicles and repetitive displays, such as pictures to demonstrate how Chinese people place their ancestor tablets.

The 'representative objects' can stimulate certain reactions or confirm what is already known, but do not necessarily communicate the contents (Eco, 1979: 267). For example, a typical response to the display of Chinese ceramics is "no wonder ceramics are called China". The contents a cross-cultural communication seeks to confirm, namely that the norms and ideologies of the displayed culture are conveyed by the objects. For example, the fact that the Chinese particularly favour ceramics for the following reasons: they are regarded as man-made jade; and thus like jade, they are a symbol of gentlemen; and thought to be able to ward off evil.

An unusual presentation, which upsets the normal and usual accepted codes, is called 'violation of the norms' by Eco (1979:264). This strategy of using an unexpected way to present something which visitors may have seen and recognised is employed in an innovative manner in the T.T.Tsui Gallery when displaying some handicrafts by pointing out that they are actually fake.

Eco (1979:263-4) suggests that the violation of the norm is the 'device of making it strange' and will only reach the level of an aesthetic achievement as was shown to be true by the case study. The shock effect of breaking certain rules forces the visitors to reconsider the organisation of the content and somehow changes the content of the display. Thus it "increases the difficulty and the duration of perception" and "as if one were seeing it for the first time" it

provokes questions. Its effect is 'not to bring closer to our understanding of the meaning it conveys, but to create a particular perception of the object'.

A sculptured head in the T.T.Tsui Gallery is one of the two displayed objects which visitors are invited to touch. However, in Chinese societies touching a head, formerly a taboo as it was believed to bring misfortune upon the person touched, is now generally considered impolite. Consequently, a Chinese visitor to the Gallery would almost certainly refuse the invitation whereas a non-Chinese visitor would probably touch and appreciate the texture of the sculpture without being aware of the Chinese feeling mentioned above.

In this case, the message of Chinese culture did not get through. If a visitor, by chance, were to get the same feeling as a Chinese visitor (almost an impossibility), it would defeat the aim of cross-cultural communication. In an ideal situation, when a visitor touched the head, they would feel what a Chinese person would feel in the same situation. This is however extremely difficult to achieve.

Prompting visitors' understanding and maintaining their interest are related. It is vital that the visitors' first impression should be that of pleasure and discovery. Often the interests can be furthered by the attainment of increasing awareness of the displayed culture's perception.

Visitors would then have further motivation to consolidate and deepen their experience. Nevertheless, a first-time visit, although pleasurable, may in fact be superficial. Alternatively, visitors may be encumbered with 'prejudices and preconceptions', and therefore unlikely to encounter a display in a state of mind allowing them to experience new reactions.

Since cross-cultural exhibitions are open texts, if museums want their exhibitions of a foreign culture accepted by those who have not yet become visitors of this type of exhibition, it is recommendable to deliberately produce a 'closed text'. Eco (1979:188) points out that if the stimulus is able to direct attention toward certain aspects of the suggested content the correlation is then posited and this could create a new convention. Therefore, it is crucial to arrange the exhibition so that it can generate a visiting experience which goes

beyond novelty and deepens understanding but does not fade into indifference. This can be increasingly assured by providing a greater insight and appreciation of the displayed culture.



# **Chapter 8**

**Code-switching in cross-cultural  
communication in museum  
exhibitions**

## **8.1 Code-switching in cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions**

'Code', crucial to communication processes, is a system by which signs are organised and recognised; governed by rules which are accepted by the community using it (Fiske, 1994: 64). It is a set of directions used by that community to choose, distinguish, and correlate signs. When the codification is not sufficiently developed, especially in the communication between two cultures, the transition of one code to another is required; a process referred to as 'code-switching' (Jakobson & Halle, 1962:501-3).

The basic constituents of cross-cultural communication processes in exhibitions of foreign cultures, as evidenced by the case study, include various codes and sub-codes which may be categorised, simply but effectively, into four interrelated main classes: the code of the culture concerned; the signification systems which determine the museum communicator's systems; the media used and the museum/gallery environment which define the display code; the visitors' code which is applied in the construction and interpretation of exhibition messages.

The code of the source culture involves the codes of the culture as a whole, of the object of that culture, of the topic concerned, etc. The display code can be subdivided into paradigmatic, syntagmatic, design codes, etc. The communicator's and the visitors' codes can also be sub-categorised into their cultural background and individual's experience although incompletely.

To use the example of the T.T.Tsui Gallery, the displayed sign-vehicles, before being selected and arranged by the exhibition organisers, were governed by the codes of Chinese culture within which they were produced. Once they had been collected by museums outside China, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, they were inevitably constrained by the codes of the then local and museum environments (Pagani, 1998:28-40; Clunas, 1998:41-49).

It is also important to consider the codes of the exhibition organisers since they will still be influenced by their own codes, although they try to assemble

and present exhibits in correspondence with the native culture. Thus the final presentation of the exhibit is not only governed by the codes of the displayed culture, but the organisers, local and museums' codes.

The principles of these processes are, in Jakobson's (1960) view, first, of selection of signs from a whole repertory of knowledge and memory, in this case, a repertory of Chinese art history based on synonymous and antonymous sign-units, and their capacity of 'substitution' (for example, a 'yellow gown' for a 'ruling class') inside the given code. Another principle is that of combination in sequences or meaningful chains, based on a relationship of context, syntax and association in the given message.

Both principles are, inescapably, influenced by the codes of the museum and the organisers; nevertheless the visitors may or may not respond to the displayed sign-vehicles. The content-unit, if there is any, which coincides with the sign-vehicle in the mind of the visitor is ruled by the code of the visitor's cultural background.

This prompts the selection process; all the qualities of the sign-units, and their capacity of 'substitution' (for example, the question asked by an interviewee: why not jewellery and crown for an emperor?) are based on the visitor's (British) code. Consequently, British and Chinese visitors would attach different interpretations to the messages inherent in Chinese art.

This demonstrates that the signs comprehended by visitors in a cross-cultural setting require many transitions, from one code to another, which will not determine the meaning of the signs, but will help generate a certain range of interpretations. Without proper transactions between codes, the communication will be impeded, or cease, or result in misunderstanding.

Generally in communication processes, there are already various types of code shifting e.g. from one medium to another, from one semantic field to another. In museum exhibitions of a foreign culture, the different types of code-switching involved are even more complicated. Only the most common types of code-switching: from the code of the object to that of the culture and vice versa; from paradigmatic to syntagmatic code; from semantic to syntactic markers;

from the code of display to the code of the visitor; from the etic to the emic code or vice versa; and the changing of the visitor's code, are discussed below.

### ***Code-switching between objects and culture***

In the exhibition of another culture, although the primary sign-vehicles are predominantly the objects of the culture concerned, the representation as a whole is actually the lifestyle of that culture in respect of the exhibition theme but simply an exhibition of the objects.

Beyond the objects, it is expected that a message of the displayed culture will be confirmed. For example, in an exhibition of Egyptian mummies the focus of interest is not on the preserved bodies but on entombment methods and the concept of the afterlife in ancient Egypt. There is a code-switch from the displayed object to the concealed message of the source culture, from the concrete physical entity to the abstract idea behind. This is actually a transition from the code of the sub-group to that of the whole system.

However, before an exhibition is staged, one major code-switching is from the message of the culture concerned to the sign-vehicles produced within the same culture. Messages such as religion, social structure, ideology of the specific culture, are the 'meanings behind'; they are invisible in themselves and need to be converted into tangible sign-vehicles. For an exhibition of Chinese beliefs, for example, the philosophies of Daoism, teachings of Confucius, or the doctrine of Buddhism need to be translated into displays linking these ideas to concrete images and items selected as exhibition material.

### ***Code-switching between paradigmatic and syntagmatic***

In every communication mechanism, each sign normally participates in several different paradigmatic patterns or systems simultaneously, a complexity greatly compounded by the syntagmatic chains of association in which signs are placed. Similarly, each display in the exhibition assumes various roles in paradigmatic norms and, linked by a whole set of formal structures to other displays in the syntagmatic chain, its meaning is thus always the result of

several different determinants acting together, and the product of code-switching.

For example, a food container can be perceived as a burial item, or earthenware, or a new archaeological discovery in the code of material. The same object displayed in an exhibition such as the T.T.Tsui Gallery is observed, in the code of the source culture, i.e. Chinese, as a signifier of the custom of offering food containers to the deceased to provide for their needs in the afterlife and thus maintain a good relationship with the dead.

### ***Code-switching between semantic and syntactic markers***

In mono-cultural communication, the semantic system can determine the structuralisation of the syntactic system and influence responses in the behavioural system. For example, a compass displayed with other Feng-shui items is easily recognised by a Chinese visitor. In a cross-cultural setting, without a process of code-switching, the display would be a puzzle to a viewer who is unfamiliar with Chinese geomancy.

To visitors, lacking the assistance of code-switchings, an exhibition of another culture, if not a puzzle, is merely a hoard of clues. They discern constituents of individual displays but construct misinterpretations. This is because the internal network of positions and oppositions of sign-vehicles in their original code are destroyed by the different code held by the visitor.

Having lost the basis - the inner structures of individual signs in a cross-cultural setting, the relationships between sign-vehicles such as the compass and the display context in the semantic field proposed by the museum emitters, i.e. the idea of Chinese geomancy, cannot be constructed unless there is active involvement of code transition.

### ***Code-switching between display code and visitor's code***

The great mobility of cross-cultural semantic space between different cultures makes codes change constantly and, most likely, noticeably. Eco suggests that

it imposes simultaneously “the necessity of a continuous extra-coding” (Eco, 1979:129) on the activity of interpretation. The extra-coding here is, actually, one aspect of code-switching.

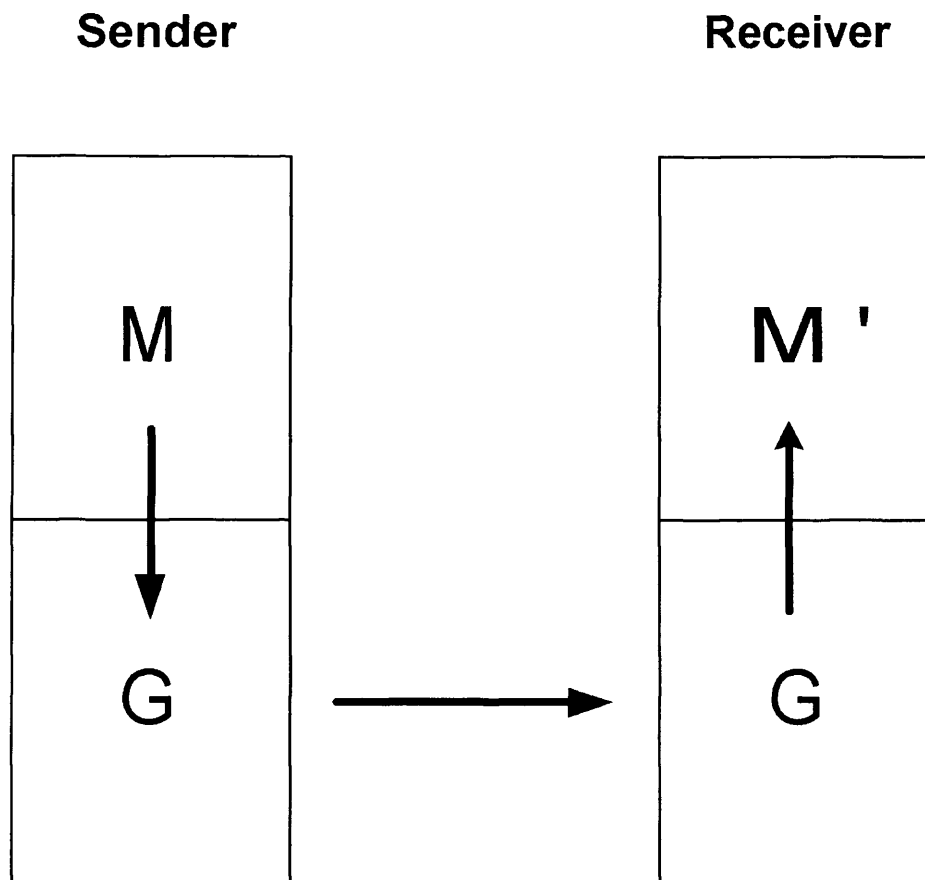
Sometimes two cultures employ the same sign-vehicle to express completely separate communicative intentions; in other words there are shared figures with non-shared meanings. For example, in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, a bronze vessel in the shape of an owl was generally associated with wisdom, intelligence, and knowledge by British visitors. Within the Chinese code, an owl’s cry was said to resemble a spirit voice, and believed to be one which called the soul away from the body.

This kind of occurrence is illustrated by Bochner as follows, where the sign-vehicle G, has meaning M in one culture and meaning M1 in the other, and where M is not the same as M1.

<b>Culture 1:</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>→</b>	<b>M</b>
<b>Culture 2:</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>→</b>	<b>M1</b>
	<b>M</b>	<b>≠</b>	<b>M1</b>

**Figure 16: Same sign-vehicle with different meaning in different culture**

Bochner also represents the process of encoding and decoding structurally as follows:



**Figure 17: The structure of the process of cross-cultural encoding and decoding**

(Bochner, S., ed., 1982:88, *Cultures in Contact, studies in cross-cultural interaction*, Oxford: Pergamon Press Ltd.)

When members of culture 1 see the sign-vehicle G of culture 2, they will draw their customary inference, and the message M becomes message M' which could be a modified M1 or a constructed M; this is the way that misunderstandings happen.

### ***Code-switching between emic and etic***

Sometimes a physical entity is connected emically with a content which is incompatible with etic aesthetics or logic. For instance, toads and bats signify 'fortune' which is quite incompatible with their appearance in British culture and visitors could be unaware of such a meaning when merely viewing the image. In

these cases, for a positive cross-cultural communication, there must be code-switching between the encoding and decoding.

The most complicated type of code-switching occurs when switching from one culture to another. One observation arising from this study is that the visitors' version of the exhibited culture is mainly based on their own personal store of knowledge, while the sign-function - what it denotes - is somehow determined by the reference or interpretant suggested by the sign-vehicle in a context. The way in which the codes of displayed sign-vehicles are converted thus crucially determines the sign's function.

The greater the imprecision of the convention, the more the value of the sign varies according to different users (Guiraud, 1992:25). Owing to their separate codes, the values of the signs and the type of sign, in both the source and visitor's culture may vary to a considerable degree.

For example, the title panel 徐展堂中國藝術館 which means 'T.T.Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art' defines the theme of the gallery precisely to a visitor who reads Chinese characters. It is a linguistic sign, a design sign, and an iconic sign that normally activates an emotional interpretant in a Chinese visitor. However, the title panel merely serves as a design sign, an indexical sign to visitors who cannot read Chinese characters. Whatever the interpretant inspires, if anything, is intellectual (Appendix 5).

The work of sign-function may successively and continuously destroy and restructure social and historical realities, sometimes giving birth to new ones. In the case of cross-cultural communication, this process is even more complicated, but it is this changing that makes cross-cultural communication possible.

### ***Code-switching of the visitor's mind***

The process of change from deciphering to comprehending is comparable to Eco's (1979: 158) comment that: some events happen independently of the prevailing social code. The structure of these prevailing codes may be upset by



innovatory propositions, by the production of new sign-events and new cultural units. These new cultural units may eventually modify the previous codes and pre-established semantic fields as soon as they are introduced into the social competence.

For instance, in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, a label with the title 'Bats and Peaches' marks a dish with the design of five bats and peaches: "The Chinese word for 'bat' and the word for 'happiness' are both pronounced 'Fu'. Peaches represent fruit of long life. On this early 18th century dish, five bats and peaches mean "Five fold happiness on your birthday". Visitors noticing this label realise that the Chinese do not neglect ugly creatures but look at things more symbolically. After noticing the bat pattern, a visitor 'discovers' that it is a common scene in Chinese material culture.

By exploring the many and different interpretants of signs in cross-cultural language, visitors gradually challenge their own previously established codes and rules. They then rearrange their established classifications into 'innovative', i.e. cross-cultural, categories closer to those of the original culture.

For example once visitors, having become aware of the symbolism in Chinese art, see a Chinese object with decorative motifs or of a particular shape, they tend to ponder what the motif or the shape symbolises. This redefinition of the reality of another culture through successive interpretants - the continuous restructuring of the image of the culture concerned - is the basis of cross-cultural communication.

Eco (1976:252) labels a similar process, 'moderate invention'. Visitors perceive the structure of the source culture by reconstituting the original precept; a reconstitution made possible by a series of adjustments establishing the correlation between the source culture and the visitor's culture codes. The continuum of the source culture evolves into a 'new continuum' and offers the visitor a starting point for new sign-functions and interpretants.

## 8.2 The needs and issues of code-switching

In this section, the challenge of strengthening an exhibition's communicative potential by working on code-switching is contemplated.

The message - the reality of the displayed culture - in an exhibition of foreign cultures exists behind the surface of the display. The sensory evidence making up the stimulus value of displayed objects merely provides superficial information. The physical appearance of the display sometimes only invites direct responses, but does nothing to communicate the intended contents (7.1).

The norm, the ideology, the beliefs of a culture are invisible and are collectively the 'meaning behind' which will need to be converted to a tangible sign-vehicle. The philosophies of Confucius or Daoism which are invisible ideologies, for example, would be difficult to translate into a tangible sign-vehicle without being properly linked to concrete ideas and images.

The expected effect from each display is dependent upon several different determinants, codes and sub-codes, acting together. Within these various codes and sub-codes, it is the primary code of the culture - the implied connections between all the sub-codes, that most visitors usually fail to grasp. Taking a pair of green-face statues (assistants to the Judge of Hell) in the Hotung Gallery at the British Museum as an example, according to their position with other temple statues and their accompanying labels, visitors assume they are part of the composition in a Chinese temple. However, they will not understand what are regarded as virtues and vices (by the Judge of Hell) in Chinese culture.

In the expression system of exhibitions of foreign cultures, semantic markers and their interpretants rely mainly on an organised and structured system of the source culture. However, interpretation is based on organised and structured perceptions of the visitor. Both of them construct and deconstruct the exhibition's discourse, leading to the meanings of cross-cultural texts and messages.

Within the theme of the exhibition, the decision of which context a sign is framed by, (in the case of a Buddha statue possible contexts could be the carving skill, material, religious meaning or its history) depends on the visitor's awareness of the semantic fields and possible axes of the cultural system to which the sign belongs, or in which context the visitor wants to classify the sign. Visitors are always checking the messages they receive against that which is reasonable within the contexts, which itself is determined by their experience of the code, context, and type of message and thus, in tossing the objects from one code to another, they determine the meaning.

Some signifiers are 'insufficient' for cross-cultural communication. In Peirce's (1986:5) words, they suggest a particular interpretant, in their original code, which would not be in the mind of a person from another culture. For example, the Chinese character for 'vase' is phonetically identical with 'peace' and has acquired the symbolic meaning of 'peace'. In other languages this will not be so and the signifier 'vase' cannot produce the interpretant 'peace'.

In the case of cross-cultural communication, such as an exhibition of Chinese culture held outside China, it may not be possible to fully explain Chinese sign-vehicles as it would be difficult to show enough background. In China itself, the local visitor would have such a background to assist understanding but elsewhere such sign-vehicles will be interpreted through the visitors' own codes and the manner in which they and other sign-vehicles are displayed.

An example occurs in the 'Ruling' section in the T.T.Tsui Gallery where, beside the robes for the royal family, visitors expect to see a crown or something equivalent, but not utensils. In British code, a crown is a metaphor of the king. However, in Chinese code, the essential duty for an emperor is to ensure that his people have sufficient food, hence the utensils in the display.

As mentioned in 7.2, the displayed objects are possible sign-vehicles of a range of different meanings depending on the visitors' various codes, which do not necessarily include the code of the displayed culture. The material aspects and features of the expression plane of an object can carry semantic and syntactic markers that might correspond to and determine the positioning of the

sign-vehicle in the visitor's semantic field but on different semantic axes to those of the intended message.

For example, in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, a small yellow vessel with several deer patterns on its body, prompted the question, "Do you have Father Christmas and his reindeer in China?" in the visitor's mind. For the Chinese, the exact phonetic equivalence of deer to good income, is the reason why deer symbolises wealth.

There is no guarantee for the occurrence of code-switching, but it is evidenced by the case study that providing grounds for the effect of code-switching is a significant requirement in the process of cross-cultural communication and thus a crucial task for museum exhibition organisers.

For visitors, the experience of deciphering exhibitions of unfamiliar cultures is initially one of apprehension, mixed feelings, bafflement, and confusion. Those first obstructing indicators gradually form an amalgam which lays the foundation to determine one's direction around the displayed culture. When visitors are deciphering, there is a high rate of resulting in ambiguities or aberrant decoding.

Instead of producing pure disorder, according to Eco (1976:263), ambiguity is an interpretative effort. It is an unexpected flexibility of competence. Nevertheless, in the case of cross-cultural communication, one of the main tasks for exhibition organisers is thus to cut down the ambiguity which is inherently high. This can be achieved by encouraging code-switching.

Due to difficulties of code-switching, aberrant decoding is the most regular incident occurring in cross-cultural exhibitions (7.1). It is the 'noise' resulting from the interaction of the source culture's and visitors' unshared codes which normally causes 'aberrant decodings' (Appendix 16) - a violation of the sender's intentions. This takes place whenever the code used by the receiver, differs markedly from that of the sender. This is because, as Eco (1979:141) indicates, "sometimes the addressee's entire system of cultural units (as well as the concrete circumstances in which he lives) propose an interpretation that the sender would never have foreseen".

When sender and receiver are from cultures separated by time, distance, religion or ideology, aberrant decoding is an almost inevitable consequence. It thus occurs frequently when visitors interpret displays of foreign cultures, due to the obvious existence of cultural differences.

Quite often, elements of displays in exhibitions of another culture do not conform to what visitors are accustomed to expect; and are new and puzzling to them. This novelty and the fact that this type of communication is still in a rudimentary stage, leads to aberrant decoding, as visitors apply their own codes to the intended message and interpret it in diverse ways. Indeed, Eco's (1976:141-2) opinion was that the gulf between those who generate texts and those who read them almost inevitably causes aberrant decoding.

This is also evidenced by the observation in the case study that the interpretation visitors make, is actually a range of probabilities linking the information from the displays with their own previously acquired knowledge. It is 'usual' for visitors to generate all sorts of 'aberrant decodings' in exhibitions of another culture.

Concerning aberrant decoding, Eco (1976) suggests that because of such unpredictable decoding, texts are read at only one of their content levels, while the other levels (equally legitimate) remain in the background. This implies that the solution for this issue is to make visitors aware of those relevant emic units, which are part of 'the other content' and otherwise 'remain in the background'.

Eco (1976:155) suggests that according to the competence of emitters, it is possible for them, by adjusting the codes, to disambiguate and consequently form the messages they intend to convey. He also recommends the way to accommodate code-switching, which is to present the missing part of the determinant, to specify the unknown code:

"Faced with uncoded circumstances and complex contexts, the interpreter is obliged to accept that the message does not rely on previous codes yet, nevertheless, it must be understandable; if it is so, non-explicit conventions must exist; if not yet in existence, then they need to exist (or be posited). Their apparent absence postulates their necessity" (Eco, 1979: 129).

The essential problem, resident in any language system translating content into concrete expressions, is the potential for the duplication of signs. Some sign-vehicles may be replicated an infinite number of times without losing any of their 'sign-values', but when the translation is between two cultures or media, the capability for equating the sign is drastically reduced. From a linguistic point of view, when an attempt to translate into English the Chinese phrase 熱鬧 're nao', which has positive connotations in Chinese culture, the literal translation best approximates the word 'busy', which tends to have negative connotations.

As concluded above, cross-cultural communication is actually a series of code-switching operations; the code transition is not necessary an autonomous system. Organising exhibitions of a foreign culture is mainly a work of translation. The various types of transformation of the intended message from the culture concerned to the display, can be divided into two main categories: the translations between cultures and between media. As indicated in the above paragraph, both are by their nature incompetent.

As evidenced in the case study (Appendix 5) and discussed in 6.4 and 7.2, the corpus of linguist signs of the visitor's language is the most stable and intelligible medium. Nevertheless, the work of transforming content from another culture to the expressions of the visitor's language still comes across issues of transliteration.

According to early Daoist texts, the rhinoceros is an animal of good omen. It is also the emblem of a 'sound' character that a good scholar ought to be, and thus a symbol associated with the scholar. A rhinoceros has only one horn and thus gives the impression of paying full attention to its goal, hence like a scholar concentrating on their studies.

The words 'xiniu' and 'rhinoceros' stand for the same biological animal. However, they are quite different in terms of Chinese and Western cultures respectively. Once the auspicious motif simply becomes 'rhinoceros', its legendary stimulus meaning is lost and the connection between its Chinese content and expression is thus missing.

The label for a mirror stand displayed in the T.T.Tsui Gallery runs: “In the form of a magic creature called xiniu, looking back over his shoulder at the moon in clouds. The crescent moon acts as a mirror-holder”. Visitors could not understand why it is a magic creature and ‘xiniu’ tells them no further information.

Also, each of the Chinese ancient vessel types has a name, none of them readily translatable into English. For example, ‘ding’ 鼎, ‘dou’ 豆, or ‘bian’ 簋, are meaningful to Chinese both in vocal and visual form. Once these names have been translated into Pinyin, or Weber’s phonetic symbols, the original meaning no longer exists in the linguistic signs (Kerr, 1991:152).

Another problem is exemplified in the T.T.Tsui Gallery where a man’s garment represents the fashion at the beginning of the twentieth century. The clothes traditionally worn by well-to-do Chinese are referred to as ‘gowns’ or ‘robes’ in English. The term is misleading as, in English, it suggests informal attire worn around the house for relaxation. The long garments shown in this gallery would not necessarily have been worn in this way; they typify daywear of their class and respective times (Kerr, 1991:130).

In addition, the emic units which carry the significance of the source culture, are joined together by a performance of time and space which is much richer than any action required for linking a display to its meaning. It is thus impossible, without loss of meaning, to specify explicitly all the relationships between the emic units in an object or culture.

Concluding, code-switching plays an essential role in cross-cultural communications since the semiotic system of cross-cultural interaction is a complex interplay of codes of different cultures as well as of various media. Additionally, reception of the displayed culture depends heavily on the degree of proper conversion between the original cultural code and the visitors’ code.

### **8.3 The pertinence of code-switching between cultures**

The most dramatic code-switching occurring during the process of a cross-cultural communication, is the shifting from the source culture to that of the visitor. There are several directions an exhibition organiser can take to enable the visitor to simulate the cognitive process of the original cultural context.

#### ***The reality of the displayed culture***

Museum professionals have often remarked that the display must reveal reality. 'Reality' here has at least two definitions. Firstly, it is the reality of the culture concerned and not that of the exhibition organiser or visitor. Secondly, it is the reality (that the relevant cultural group observed) expressed by their customs, philosophy, material cultures and their way of expression. Material culture is only one component which can reflect these ideas of the reality of the displayed culture. The objects themselves are not the reality.

Adopting Eco's recommendation to present the missing part of the determinant, by specifying the unknown, is the principal way of contributing to the impact of code-switching. As mentioned in 4.3, an exhibition of another culture relies on, in Barthes' (1973; 1977) words, the second order meaning of the displayed culture, which is invisible or unrevealed in the displayed object. This implies that it is necessary to specify the norms, customs, beliefs, philosophy, or ideology which produced the displayed object.

The differing value systems of the culture concerned are essential for understanding the cultural differences (1.2). The case study also demonstrates that the information visitors to an exhibition of another culture expect to identify, is principally the value system of that culture (Appendix 7). Since this value system is made up of various emic units, the hierarchy and position of emic units in the culture and the presence and absences of these emic units in a signifying chain are all significative for comprehending both the emic units and the culture. Nevertheless, in cross-cultural communication, absent sign units in



the system of the displayed culture cannot assist the visitors in understanding the presence of sign units.

Culture experiences constant surface change, but its deep structure persists (2.1; 2.3). It is also a string of systematic significance and can be understood according to the structure of that culture (Sandbacka, 1987:9). Correspondingly, there are elements which when seen separately, are seemingly disparate but which can nevertheless, owing to their basic structure, consolidate and become a coherent significant unit. Superficial contradictions within one or even two cultures, can be resolved by discerning the latent structure which reveals the correspondences of supposed differences.

For example, a comparison of the symbolic statuary on both English and Chinese tombstones would reveal at first sight, quite a startling difference. The British statuary features predominantly angelic figures, which exhibit solicitude and compassion, whereas Chinese tombstones feature threatening and aggressive mythical creatures. However, Western visitors to a church readily accept that the hideous features portrayed on gargoyles ward off evil spirits. Thus, when the British brings this aspect of their culture into the interpretation of Chinese culture, s/he realises that the minatory grimaces of both the gargoyles and the Chinese sculptures of lokapala perform the same apotropaic function - to ward off evil spirits.

Therefore, both the British (direct) and Chinese (indirect) symbolisms command reverence and respect for the departed. One might justly assert that, although apparently diametrically opposed, they actually perform the same function.

To discourage aberrant decoding, it is necessary to make explicit the emic meaning (7.3). This can be done by providing an outline of the structure of the displayed culture, as an impetus and foundation for code-switching, to support the visitors in unifying the disparate messages. By making explicit the latent structure of the displayed culture as a reference for code-switching, the sign-production steers toward a view of the culture as a coherent system. At the same time, the reality of the displayed culture is revealed.

### ***Shared code between two cultures***

Only when visitors have discerned the various aspects of the displayed culture, realised that they are functionally interrelated, will they approach a better understanding and appreciate the displayed culture as an integrated whole. The detected clues are thus amalgamated with the total concept of the displayed culture in the visitor's mind.

The presentation would be incomplete unless it showed how the individual emic unit was related to all the others and was consistent with the whole cultural complex. Communicating any emic unit of the displayed culture thus inevitably demands that its interrelationships with others be indicated. When the interconnections and the interplay with other cultural units are viewed together, then the single part is able to take on its full significance.

Visitors would like more information (6.3) but feel that there is too much to absorb. One possible solution would be to provide a 'code' for them to use in the transformation of their own etic concepts into the intended message. Recognising the underlying meanings will help them to understand the displayed culture.

The task of exhibition organisers is thus to select the sign-vehicles available to carry the code of the source culture and arrange them so that the displays do not lose their original meaning.

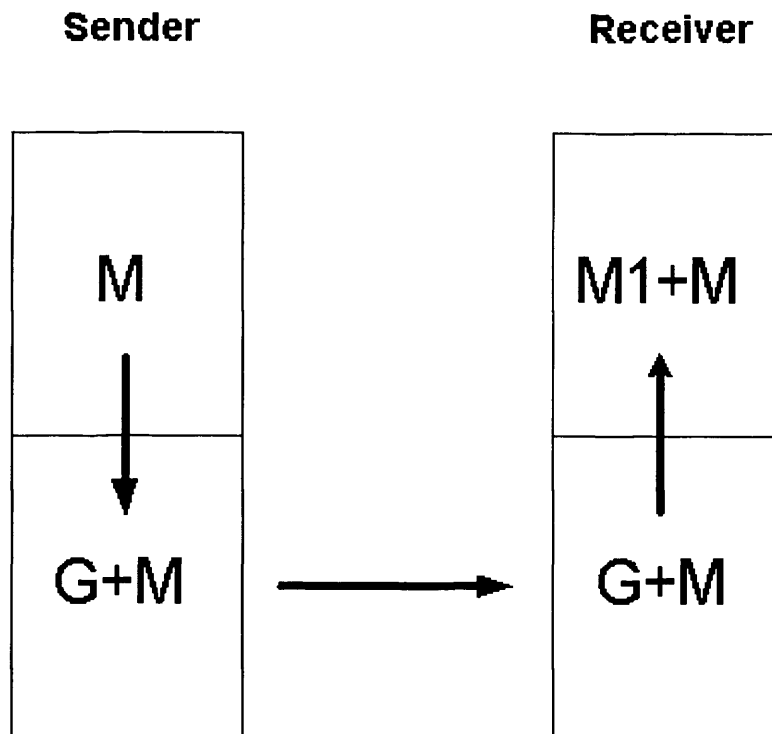
Due to the differences in their environmental and cultural situations, people perceive reality in different ways. People in various cultures can all be pleased, concerned, annoyed, or embarrassed, but are provoked by different things as they perceive situations according to separate sets of premises - their emic units. Even though all cultures share similar structural components - etic units (Brown, 1963:78-9), trying to integrate the language of displayed objects and the visitors' convention carries the risk of reducing the display to a meaningless aggregate of sign-vehicles.

There are sign-vehicles which are superficially similar to each other but are different latently. For example, in both British and Chinese artefacts, peonies

are popular motifs. Their British meaning is identical with that of the external figure represented, beautiful, but not 'wealthy' as in the Chinese meaning. Thus it is likely that visitors are unaware of the Chinese idea when viewing the presentation of this kind of sign. They especially need the assistance afforded by code-switching.

When dealing with shared sign-vehicles which have unshared meanings, the customary inference of the displayed culture should be drawn so that, apart from the meaning of the sign-vehicles in the visitors' background culture, the meaning in the displayed culture will be perceived. The process of encoding and decoding, based on Bochner's diagram (8.1), will structurally become as follows:

- M            =    Message from displayed culture A
- G            =    A sign-vehicle which has meaning M in culture A and meaning  
                     M1 in the visitor's culture
- G + M       =    The sign-vehicle afforded by indication of the meaning in  
                     culture A



**Figure 18: The encoding and decoding of a shared sign-vehicle which has unshared meaning**

(Bochner, S., ed., 1982:88, *Cultures in Contact, studies in cross-cultural interaction*, Oxford: Pergamon Press Ltd.)

When a visitor of culture 1 sees the sign-vehicle G of the displayed culture at the same time as the code of the displayed culture, the visitor will draw the inference both of his own and the displayed culture, and the message M becomes message M and M1. This is the mode in which cross-cultural communication occurs.

With each new observation, the visitor's concept of a displayed cultural unit is modified or confirmed (7.2). The repeated and systematic features of the displayed objects make possible the recognition of emic units from different sign-vehicles and then leads visitors to acknowledge, albeit partially, properties of the displayed culture. When repeatedly posited, these formerly unfamiliar features give rise to an established and accepted code which is a recognised way of seeing the reality prompted by the displayed cultural group.

One of the primary problems inherent in code-switching between two cultures is that the value of the sign will change greatly from one type to another, such as a symbolic sign becoming an iconic or indexical sign, or a motivated to an unmotivated sign. With their extensive capacity for marking associations among concepts, beliefs, values, customs and other institutions, symbols are an integral part of the implicational meaning of any culture and thus the most complicated and significant signs for cross-cultural communication.

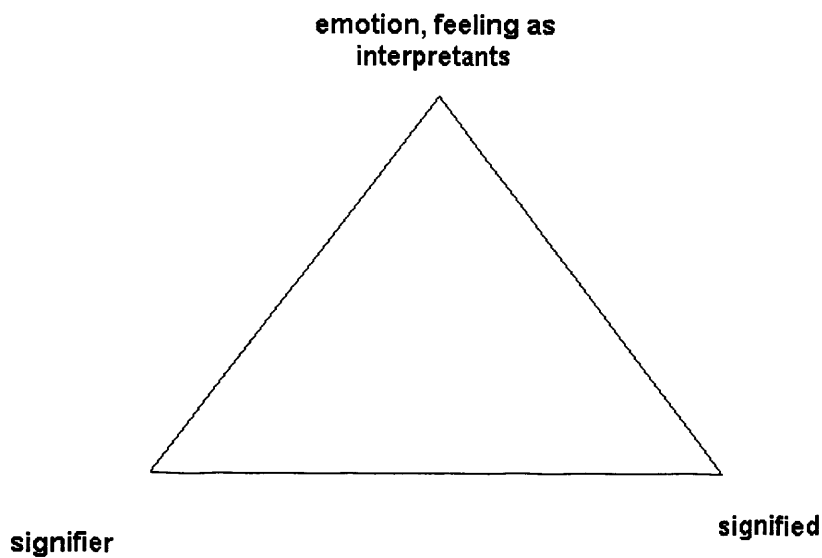
As a rule, symbols can lose their competence when interpreted according to their physical form. Reducing an object or a display to its superficial factors runs the risk of extinguishing the connection linking it to its integrated meaning in the original context, and they become fragments of the original meaning. Similarly, a symbol can lose its force when assuming an indicative function.

### ***Pertinent strategies***

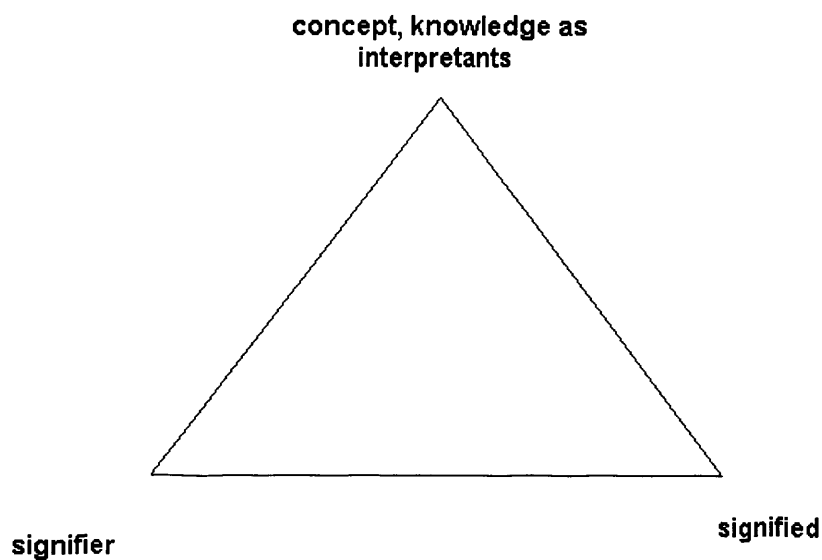
Indication and symbolisation are opposite types of signifying. The relationships of their sign-vehicles and their signified - the locations of their intrinsic interest - are dissimilar to each other. In indications, the constituent signs tend to integrate into a signified; the signifier never submits itself to the signified. By contrast, symbolisation is not merely settled by an amalgamation of constituent signs directed from the signifier to the signified, but also settled by submitting extended recollections and backgrounds.

The different relationship between the signifier and signified of indication and symbolisation can be pictured as follows:

**a. Symbolisation:**



**b. Indication:**



**Figure 19: Different relationship of symbolisation and indication**

In symbolisation, the signified gets more attention than the signifying object. For example, to Chinese people, the signifying of 'bringer of sons' receives more recognition than the charm of the lily itself. The signifier in symbolisation, in contrast to the signifier in indication, is of interest to viewers only because of its symbolic connection with the signified. What bears upon a pattern of a lily,

for example, bears upon its meaning; and in so doing, is the integration of the viewer's interpretant with the pattern.

To indicate the meaning of Chinese culture by displays, for example, is antithetical to a symbolic presentation. To exhibit Chinese culture is to associate some concept or knowledge with objects, while to symbolise it, is to associate some feelings with some objects. Every symbolisation actually starts from indication. It is then by repetition that this association becomes a symbol. Symbolisation is thus perceived through recognising meaning by indication. Similarly, unmotivated signification can be converted to motivated.

In the case that a displayed image is signifying a meaning discordant with its external image in the visitors' code, e.g. a symbolic sign, the discordance can be redressed by providing display aid indications such as labels. The distinction between metaphor and metonymy of the source culture which is normally destroyed by the different codes of the visitors can also be restored by providing further information for converting the code.

In its original cultural context, the referent of a symbol already takes the place of the sign in an immutable and fixed role, based on the assumption that the meaning of a sign-vehicle is linked to its corresponding object (Eco, 1979:58, ff). The grounds for the restraint and the standing-for relationship, with respect to the recognition of these kinds of signs, is located not in their semiotic potential or quality, but in the circumstantial and contextual presuppositions in time and space. These presuppositions are lost in the exhibition setting.

Therefore, when tackling the symbolic or unmotivated signs, proper indications to modify the visitors' semantic integration are a possible strategy. The referent will be the pertinent ground for the recognition of these kinds of signs. It would be constructive if the display media could provide circumstantial and contextual presuppositions in the time and space of the sign.

There are two kinds of visitor reactions (7.1). Accordingly, one can divide a signifier into two structures - a primary-sign and a developed sign. The sign for 'cloud', for example, when the visitor first sees the cloud pattern on an object, is a primary-sign and may be merely signifying 'beautiful, natural phenomena'.

However, when the visitor understands, through supplementary sign-vehicles, that it is a symbol of 'good fortune and happiness' because it is a heavenly gift brought by the rain, the signifier 'cloud' becomes a developed-sign, and links to the abstract concept of 'plenty' and 'nourishing' in the visitor's mind.

The unshared codes between the source culture's and visitors' can be avoided or clarified when the visitors are familiar with the semiotic system of museum language and, even better, the language of the displayed culture. Redundancy, as discussed in 7.4, also helps to overcome deficiencies resulting from unacceptable levels of noise in the communication channel (Fiske, 1994:11).

The effective conveying of messages, stems from the co-ordination and synchronisation of the source cultures', the visitors' and the displayed codes. Whether the message is conveyed effectively depends on its codification and socialisation, even if the information conveyed is condensed by the latter process (Guiraud, 1992:14). Therefore, some observable information can be replaced by legends, fables, and tales of the source culture relevant to the displayed object.

In most sign-systems, the code comprises not merely message carriers and syntagmatic relationships; but also the capacity to define its own meaning by employing paraphrases which can more explicitly designate the underlying semantic features. Therefore, a cross-cultural exhibition should not only consist of displays, message carriers, arrangements of displays, and syntagmatic relationships; it is important to help visitors interpret the display by employing paraphrases such as arranging different sign-vehicles with similar underlying semantic features - in other words, displaying the same emic units in a different manner.

Another way of assisting the code-switching process is by supporting the interpretant to which the visitors are accustomed. In every case of recognition, there is a presupposition based on previous experiences or on coded systems of knowledge or belief. When coming across something which, at the time, is absent from the visitor's mental repertoire, some further information, provided in



the context of the communication, will function to augment the newly coded system.

Visitors can only interpret displays by their own codes and rules, and need clues from the museum to understand the original code and therefore appreciate the intended message. Understanding the displayed culture involves becoming perceptually familiar with its cultural emics and codes. This form of learning, like all others, proceeds from the known to the unknown (Piaget, 1970). In this instance the 'known' would refer to the visitors' own preferred method of taking up information, and the 'unknown', to the target culture's preferred mode of presenting material (Robinson, 1988:23).

Based on Eco's idea, to translate a sign from culture A to one from culture B with a similar signified, one must select the pertinent features of the signified A, and reproduce them through another form of expression, keeping the same perceptual structure to support the correlation of the two signs. One could say that they possess the same perceptual sense but not physical support (Eco, 1976: 48-54).

Misunderstandings have a simple property of mismatch between intended and inferred meanings; they tend to occur when there are no reasonable grounds for the visitor to draw an alternative conclusion. However, empathy normally leads to understanding (Bochner, 1982:86). Only when the visitor has discerned the code of the displayed culture, i.e. another way of seeing the world, will empathy then develop.

Understanding becomes possible when the indigenous culture group's way of perceiving their reality has been transmitted by displays to the visitor. One may then conclude that it is the responsibility of the communicators to arrange the sign-vehicles which can bring into play both the signifiers of the visitors and the signification of denotation of the source culture.

## 8.4 The pertinence of code-switching between media

To shorten the visitor's voyage of assimilation or to ensure the influence of the display, observant thought of the pertinence of code-switching is important to museum communicators.

In eliciting a particular reaction, the semiotic competence - the objects displayed in an exhibition of another culture and together with other displaying devices - will define the possible effect of the displayed stimuli (4.2).

A whole range of communicative display devices has an important role, with regard to code-switching, owing to the demands of providing the missing part of the displayed message. As media, the effect of these devices is different from each other and from objects of the culture concerned. They have the potential to make up the deficit of the displayed object.

When arranging an exhibition of a foreign culture, the central considerations are: feasibility and availability, which objects to display and what display devices are preferred for promoting the semiotic competence by code-switching. These can be considered in several aspects which are discussed respectively as follows:

### ***From philosophical idea to sign-vehicle***

In terms of content, objects all have a philosophical essence of the culture in which they are produced. There are only differences in degree and proportion. Some of the objects are large scale sign-vehicles embracing a deeper, richer, or wider range of metaphysical substance while some are single stimuli which are simpler, plainer, or more obvious.

An example of the former is a bronze tube, dated 1200-1000 BC, carved as a figure representing an imaginary being with a crowned human-like head which was inserted into the upper part of a bronze sacred tree. The tree as a whole is possibly the focus of an act of worship or part of the depiction of an imaginary or spiritual landscape. This is the big scale object accommodating a number of

cultural units. A jade disc of a similar age is a much smaller scale of cultural units and therefore an example of the latter. It has a long history in China, can be seen in many exhibitions, and is still a customary item in contemporary Chinese art markets. The shape of the disc is traditionally believed to be representative of heaven (Rawson, 1996:76, 83).

With reference to scale, according to the case study, visitors are initially more responsive to global units than single stimuli (7.2). This is because the macro-units, being richer, are more interesting and being deeper, arouse more curiosity. However, once they respond to single objects, they are inclined to understand them better than global units (Eco, 1976). Macro-units usually correspond to what Lakof (1972) calls 'fuzzy-concepts' and quoted by Eco (1976:82-3; 256-7), an intersection of concepts, images and ideas, since visitors must read the bulk of signs as a text in order to understand them. In addition, if the type of object matches the message, its strength will be correspondingly increased.

### ***Employment of subsidiary sign-vehicles***

Translating a philosophical idea into material culture needs the use of supplementary sign-vehicles and display techniques such as labels, graphics, charts and illustrations, etc. to compensate for the loss of meaning - the inevitable consequence of the transcription. Simultaneously, the application of the secondary sign-vehicles and display techniques can help visitors to discern the source culture of the displays.

Without supplementary sign-vehicles and display techniques to fill the gap and thus direct the visitor's attention to the intended meaning, in the transposition of a philosophical idea to an object, the semantic unit is frequently destroyed. The attention is switched from its meaning - the signified emic units - to the object signifier, of which it is the meaning.

The deer motif epitomises high rank and affluence in Chinese culture. When attention is paid to the physical appearance of the deer, the significance of wealth is lost. An easily shattered semantic unit can be advantageously

complemented by an explicit explanation of relationship and thus turning the visitor's interest from signifier to the intended signified.

Some exhibitions of foreign cultures have superficially described displays, focusing on the age to which the object belongs or the form it takes. This kind of exhibition is not exhibiting a culture, but exhibiting objects of a culture.

### ***The effectiveness of written signs***

The most convenient and conventional method of directing visitors' attention from the physical appearance of the displayed object to the message within the sign-vehicle, is the use of written signs such as introduction boards, captions, and labels. It is well recognised that a museum message must have linguistic expression (McManus, 1987b:53). Also, according to the case study, linguistic signs lose less of their meaning than do symbolic and iconic ones (Appendix 5).

Words can be used to narrow the range, or delimit parts of the connotation. They help to fix the set of signifieds to counter the confusion of uncertain signs (Barthes, 1977:25-7). Without any linguistic signs, an inlaid bronze vessel may be interpreted by visitors as 'a typical Chinese vessel', 'part of a Royal collection', 'a museum piece', 'an expensive item', 'looks like a container', 'unusual colour', 'a looted item', 'gorgeous!', 'funny decoration', 'another vessel', or 'What is this?'.

Nevertheless, with the label, the inlaid bronze vessel may be described as 'Late Qing dynasty, 16th-17th century', 'the inlay is anachronistic', or as the evidence of 'a search for antiquities and the revival of past forms'. The sign-function of the displayed vessel is thus weakened but framed by the authority of museological taxonomies and the influence of the written signs in exhibition context.

The displayed culture's perception of the world is the core theme of cross-cultural communication (2.1). Rather than allowing objects to speak for themselves, it is better to convey this kind of conceptual knowledge by linguistic signs such as labels, captions, or introductions. For example, from the slab

presenting the stories of the 'Twenty-four Exemplars of Filial Piety', or the ancestor portrait, visitors can appreciate the skill of stone carving, the arrangement of the engraved pictures or the expression of the sculpted figures. However, without linguistic sign-vehicles, the visitor will be unable to fully appreciate the attitude of Chinese people towards their parents, since linguistic signs are more stable than artefacts, which are more open.

### ***A preferred reading***

Secondary sign-vehicles can direct the visitors' reading and is what Hall (1973) has called 'a preferred reading'. It closes off potentially misleading meanings of a display and guides visitors to a meaning related to its original context.

As a consequence of this code-switching, primarily from the visitors, to a code which has been imposed by the exhibition organisers, the quality of expressions or sign-vehicles is changed into that of displayed contents. From being objects, these items are changed into subjects, which like proper names, refer only to a unique entity making them sufficiently able to convey the specific emic unit. To use the above example, the slab is then definitely a representation of the Chinese value of filial piety. Possibilities of the slab being a looted item or a new design in Tang dynasty, etc. are thus reduced.

### ***The pertinence of written signs***

Parsons (1965:134) suggested that the declarative form of written signs is "a somewhat more dependable method of visual communication, in that all information is overtly expressed". Compared with other communication media, words of the visitors' native language enable people to communicate information, feelings and ideas more explicitly and definitely. Lighting or spacing, for example, can interpret objects in terms of value or aesthetics, but cannot unfold the concept, history, or knowledge connected with objects in the way that words do.

This points to a valid reason for the need for written signs to express information, knowledge and concepts rather than visual, aesthetic, obvious facts and judgmental comments. The essential task of written signs in a cross-cultural exhibition is to convey codes and conventions of the exhibited culture, so that emic units in objects are understandable to visitors. In a cultural exhibit, labels should not be used to interpret objects, but are responsible for conveying the perspectives of the culture illustrated by objects.

Written signs in the visitors' language have a further privilege - they exist within the visitor's cultural code. Nevertheless, those that are too long cannot maintain the interest of the visitor. They therefore should be kept as brief as possible, and integrated with other display techniques such as audio tapes or video films in the visitor's native language, which are more appealing and thus more effective.

An example is the linguistic sign for a Ruyi Guan (jar), a large porcelain work displayed in the 'Ruling' section at the T.T.Tsui Gallery, which associated the object to Pu yi - the last Emperor - one of the most powerful and dramatic figures of the Qing empire, and linked it with the film 'The Last Emperor', successfully conveying a cluster of messages.

### ***Other two dimensional sign-vehicles***

Some other two dimensional sign-vehicles such as diagrams, maps, illustrations, have different strengths. For example, both a panel with written signs, and a picture introducing what kilns were and how people made earthenware in ancient China, provide a ground for code-switching between times (ancient and modern) and spaces (East and West), the former is better in conveying the 'how' and the latter the 'what'.

Further forms of secondary sign-vehicles also have different advantages in providing a basis for code-switching. Apart from lighting and spacing, sounds and odours which are rarely employed, can also assist code-transaction by adding other sense dimensions.

### ***Paraphrasing the medium***

The faculty of paraphrasing in terms of the content of the display was discussed in 8.3. Here the consideration is centred on the expression plane, i.e. the medium. In the T.T.Tsui Gallery, the emic unit of maintaining a good relationship with reality is illustrated by various displays in its six sections. However, it was represented only by the objects of the displayed culture. The effect would be greatly increased if this emic unit were rendered through various sign-vehicles such as maps or diagrams.

Choosing which media to use as grounds for code-switching requires accompanying the object with other categories of sign-vehicle determined by the type of message. If the message concerns the location of emic units in time or space, a map, chart, or diagram would be appropriate. If the message is about ideology, abstract concept written or audible sign-vehicles in the visitor's language are the best. For example, the emic unit of maintaining good relationships is an invisible ideology which can best be paraphrased either in the written or audible form in the visitor's language.

### ***The media of time***

Time is an important factor for the success of cross-cultural communication (7.4). It is also a crucial 'medium' for the work of code-switching. This is because, in applying the anthropologist's contention to the process of exhibition communication, the internal models visitors use to construct a world of perceived displays are largely acquired by learning and largely cultural. What they see is mainly what they have learned to see through cultural experience (Keesing, 1981:82).

Perception does not mediate interpretation behaviour directly from current sensory information, but invariably via internal models of reality, i.e. one's existing code (Gregory 1969:239). In this sense, to make the message of another culture becomes a part of the visitor's past experience or internal model is the best approach of code transition - to do this, 'time' is the essential medium.

The visitors' culture also changes constantly. However, the change takes place in time and thus the almost imperceptible changes are gradually appreciated. Compared with this, exhibitions of another culture usually bring 'strange images' that challenge the so-far accepted norm in visitors' minds and expect visitors to accept them within the limited visiting time. For code-switching, one of the crucial factors is thus 'time', the frequency of visiting or the reappearance of displays with similar messages. From the repetition of certain particular features, visitors then expand that code in their minds.

### ***Knowledge as a medium***

The internal network of positions and oppositions of a sign's structure in its original cultural context in an exhibition of another culture, should be the basis for situating it in the given semantic field, distinguishing it from other signs in the same system, and placing it on different possible axes of pertinence. This allows the comparison of the sign's structure to the visitor's code and provides a standpoint for code-switching.

For visitors who are not familiar with the displayed culture, the semiotic potential of the exhibition relies on the effectiveness of code-switching (7.3). According to the case study, a greater knowledge of the displayed culture will result in a lower probability of ending interaction with the display. Therefore, providing immediate knowledge of the displayed culture is one of the necessary requirements for successful code-switching.

To conclude, it is true that individual visitors' interpretations of the same display will vary and may even entirely contradict each other. However, when the process of interpretation on the visitors part is stimulated by the same kind of operations, i.e. a basis for code-switching projected by the emitters, and although they may still have a different response, it is possible for most visitors to sense the emic message of the displayed culture.

It is thus crucial, when communicating with other cultures, that great care is taken to provide opportunities for harmonising the operating codes of the culture and the visitor. The exhibition thus takes visitors out of the contrasting existence



of the life of that culture into something beyond, and, drawing from the reservoir of the visitor's previous experiences, forms an enclosed entity which is more accessible to them.

# **Chapter 9**

## **Suggestions and recommendations**

## 9.1 Evaluation of the method of this study

In social sciences, major research strategies can be classified into five categories: experiments, surveys, archival analysis, histories, and case studies. Each can be used for qualitative and quantitative research. Factors determining the strategies for a study are the type of question; the degree of control over behavioural events by the investigators; and the extent of attention to contemporary as opposed to historical events. If the questions, are 'how' and 'why', require no control over behavioural events, and relate to contemporary events, a case study is favoured over dealing with frequencies or incidence, especially when relevant behaviours cannot be manipulated (Yin, 1994:1, 3-9) which is why, a case study seemed indicated.

Carrying out experiments might suit exhibition preparation or the testing of a hypothesis, and analysis of records or an exploratory survey although suitable and helpful to this study; previous studies have been too lengthy to consider for doctoral research. A multiple-case study could have provided comparative examples of cross-cultural communication, but time and scale only allowed for one example - i.e. between two cultures.

The case study had three sections that asked the following questions: Can emic analysis help to classify the message of the displayed objects? Can the form of the exhibition enable the displayed objects to convey the emic units? How do visitors see a culture by way of the displayed objects? In essence, the first two questions were carried out in order to understand the third.

This case study examined the objects and displays at the T.T.Tsui Gallery, how their relationships affected their emic message, and how visitors responded, in order to assess the intensity of the communication. Emic analysis with an empathetic stance, syntagmatic analysis, in-depth interview, and qualitative analysis of the interview data comprised the methodology.

In this integrated approach, there is no distinction between the source culture and the researcher's. The emic approach becomes a feasible way of organising the researcher's own cultural experience and results in a combination of

investigatory and participatory understanding of the culture dealt with. The approach was both objective and internal and helpful in revealing the emic signification of the subject culture.

The explicated emic units measured emic messages in the displayed objects and the exhibition and how they were received by visitors. Analysing the content of the sign-vehicles, the emic approach, though partially arbitrary, helped to identify the emic units of the source culture. Later when analysing interviews, the emic approach also helped identify what emic/etic message was taken up by the visitors, and how. Had an etic approach been used, cross-cultural communication would have been treated in the same way as mono-cultural and any information received would have appeared to be positive.

Analysing the cardinal and complementary functions of the exhibition communication showed how and what emic units contributed to the whole exhibition. Consequently, the 'preferred readings' of the message was clarified and whether the visitors' perception of the text agreed with the theme intended was revealed.

Analysing the emic units of the display, the exhibition narration, the structure of signs and their relation to their context, formed the foundation for the in-depth interviews both for devising the questionnaire and comparing the data to reveal the codes and elements needed to transfer cross-cultural messages, together with the laws and formulae describing how such signs combine into relevant messages.

It is suggested that: unless ascertaining the behaviour of large groups, smaller samples are preferred for qualitative interviews; field observation normally produces more valid results than questioning individuals on people's behaviour and environmental reactions; and that in order to elicit the implicit meanings, tacit understandings, and accepted assumptions of a group or culture, participant observation and field studies plus informal interviews may be most effective (Kvale, 1996:104).

Participant-observation in museums where visitors are usually present only for a few hours or so does not give the researcher an opportunity to get to know

much about their views. Interview techniques are clearly useful in filling these gaps. Since the information the study wanted to gather was the more elusive part of visitor's experience in the gallery, open-ended techniques were obviously more suitable (Macdonald, 1993:78).

Furthermore, the style of interview finally selected was more suitable for focusing on individual visitors because the data needed was the communication between the individual visitor and the exhibition and not between visitors, although this might also be inspired by the exhibition. Individual interviews were thus preferred.

Group interviews such as 'focus group' (Morgan, 1988) were considered for this study, but the estimated costs both in terms of time and expenditure were too high. Also, the group interaction could have reduced the interviewer's control of the interview situation and resulted in a relatively disorganised collection of data, making difficult the systematic analysis of the intermingling responses.

The study was concerned with visitors' mental process in responding to displays (not the time taken) and how implicit meanings and tacit understandings were perceived. As processes of the mind, they are not accessible or verifiable, and are not visible to an observer. Individual in-depth interviews asking about these, plus observation were more effective than large samples surveying behaviour or other aspects (Sudman & Bradburn, 1982:17).

Since the sample should reflect the pattern of visitors, both single and accompanied visitors were suitable as interviewees, whilst anticipating that an interviewee drawn from a group might not answer questions with their own personal view but rather the collective view of the group. When choosing the interviewee, whether they were single or accompanied was thus not a consideration in the selection process.

Interviews were semi-structured, i.e. neither open dialogue nor fully structured questionnaire. They used guide questions on the chosen theme, to make interviewees think carefully about their visit by allowing them to use their own language, and to make distinctions not determined by pre-set formats.

Sudman and Bradburn (1982:19) suggest that unsatisfactory replies for interviews can arise from incorrect or incomplete memory, untrustful statements, faulty communication, and lack of relevant knowledge.

The first category was minimised by interviewing soon after the visit so that aspects overlooked by all interviewees were deemed unlikely to be relevant. As the interviewer was Chinese, those interviewed might have been reluctant to comment negatively on Chinese culture or to admit ignorance. By using a friendly approach and reiterating the purpose of the study, interviewees were persuaded to help. During the interview, questions were fully explained, and unclear answers were clarified. Other than the visiting experience, no specific knowledge was needed.

There are some more details worth mentioning; when the interviewee gave very abbreviated answer such as 'Not bad', a more specific question followed and was normally able to invite an explicit account. However, the majority of the information was collected by the use of the prompt question 'why' and also, projective questions like "If you were to rearrange the gallery..." In brief, the open-ended questions allow interviewees to set the agenda.

Methods of recording interviews for documentation and later analysis normally include audiotape recording, videotape recording, and note-taking (Kvale, 1996:160). Initially, the plan was to utilise audio-tapes, the most common method of recording interviews today. It is suggested that if working with a reasonably reliable tape recorder, the interviewer can concentrate on the topic and dynamics of the interview. Also the technique of audiotaping ensures that each and every interview is unquestionably a verbatim record. The words and their tone, the paralanguage, are recorded in a permanent form that can be returned to repeatedly for listening and appraisal (Kvale, 1996:160, 209).

At the beginning of the preliminary survey, the interviewees agreed to being taped after they were informed of the purposes of the study and of their rights to remain anonymous and review the transcript. However, it was found that, even after a period of time, the interviewee still could not relax and seemed to be constantly aware of the tape recorder. Although the tape-recorder was left

running quietly in the interviewer's hand, once its use was terminated, it was obvious that interviewees relaxed and participated more freely.

There are disadvantages to note-taking by hand. It is time consuming and, unless the researcher is professionally trained, rather awkward and a little impolite, for the interviewer to keep her head down to take notes whilst conversing with the interviewee. A notebook computer was employed to replace the approaches of tape-recording and handwriting. The interviewer could then produce the notes without needing to look at the keyboard.

It was found that, if conducted properly, taking notes during the interview did not reduce its efficiency, but enhanced it by helping to clarify the descriptions together with the interviewee. For example, instead of hesitating to ask a mumbling interviewee to speak up, this cross-cultural interview was especially well suited to employing opening remarks such as "My English is not too good, may I confirm this point with you? ; Did I get your point precisely?": a situation much more comfortable for both interviewee and interviewer. It also helped to check and re-check the reliability of the notes with the interviewee as well as to cut down the interviewer's inevitable interpretations.

Furthermore, the interview was immediately transcribed as the written text for subsequent analysis. It was also a convenient way for the interviewee to review the transcript. As to the computer note-taking method, it was found to be particularly well suited for employing guided questions for in-depth interviews.

The value of qualitative research is in doubt if researchers impose their own unjustified definitions on what has been observed. A determined and conscious effort was made to avoid any presumption before all the data had been collected and coded. It was inevitable that there would be a certain amount of preliminary analysis whilst editing the data. The researcher carefully checked her own presuppositions and hypotheses whilst interviewing, and ensured that no presumptions were made before the data was completed.

Although the interviewer guided the discussion enough to focus on the topic of interest, the depth interview provided sufficient autonomy for respondents to also influence the conversation, by bringing in all sorts of matters that had a bearing on

the main subject. One of the strengths of this kind of qualitative research is the validity of the data obtained: interviewees are interviewed in the way for the results to be taken as true, correct, complete and believable reports of their views and experiences.

Coding categories were not determined in advance but developed whilst coding to allow for the categorisation of any unexpected information. The transcripts were read through repeatedly and the researcher was able to identify the visitors' key reactions and how they interpreted the displays. This helped to decide what the presentation meant, and to recognise individuals' specific responses and understand exactly their way of interpreting a foreign culture.

The data translation, coding, analysing, conceptualising, and theorising all proceed simultaneously, in a continuous cyclic operation throughout the interview, albeit at different rates of development.

At the early stages of collecting information, the researcher also engaged in tentative analysis and theorisation. At this point, the analysis focused on uncovering possible way of interpreting and factors influencing those ways. Gradually, the analytical hypotheses helped to identify themes in visitors' statements more quickly both in later interviews and coding, increasing their validity and making them more reliable. Later, as the collection of information was nearing completion, the research became concentrated on the analysis of the material, in connection to ideas derived from semiotic theories, or that had emerged during interview.

This interview was designed to allow for ambiguous and contradictory answers, and when the results were checked for reliability by examining the consistency, the more or less standard manner of interpretation set the pattern for the interview data. The result was that contradictions only appeared at the superficial level of the statement - not at the structural level. Most discrepancies were actually consequences of the interviewee's politeness. Taking the analytical measure, there was a high degree of consistency. The coding method adopted reduced errors and provided a periodic check on reliability including



that of the interviewer (Kvale, 1996:208), although some small influences from her own culture background were unavoidable.

A common criticism of in-depth interviews is that the findings are not generalisable because there are too few interviewees to be representative, even if great care is taken to choose a fair cross-section of subjects for the study (Hakim, 1987:27). However, this study is only an initial attempt to reveal the interpreting function operating in visitors' minds and to develop a method for this kind of research. It could be achieved by only a few samples but lengthy, intensive interviews. If future implications were emerging, more interviews would have been arranged, but the twelve yielded valuable material and was a manageable number to obtain such penetrating explications.

The difference in cultures between the interviewer and interviewees, cognitively and emotionally, did not necessarily cause mistakes, but rather inspired additional outcomes of the qualitative interview. This enhanced the visiting experience, and an exchange of knowledge arose from personal contact - itself an example of cross-cultural communication at a foreign exhibition.

The semiotic approach with an emic and empathetic stance facilitated the identification of factors influencing visitor interpretations. This qualitative analysis helped to show how such attitudes, motivations and behaviours were integrated, more or less coherently and consciously to make sense of the exhibition. The case study took as the subject one selected example of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions, and brought out the strengths of experimental research within natural settings.

The pluralistic method allowed the researcher and the culture studied to literally, share a common experience in a material culture and value system. It was an approach that involved both deliberation and penetration. It was an inductive reconstruction of the culture in question through evidence elicited from the material, history, and archives, as well as the researcher's native intuitive interpretation.

In sum, since semiotics provides a perspective from which to take a fresh look at familiar phenomena and interpret them anew (Kim, 1996:2), the

integrated approach offers a framework for examining the complicated communication process between cultures. Its evidenced as interpretative and flexible, therefore helping to see the process from a positive and emic standpoint, and aiding exhibition organisers in overcoming cultural differences. In addition, as Miles (1993:30) advocates that visitor studies should use terminology in a simple and clear way, this study tried to simplify and unify the terminology of the semiotic theories used.

## **9.2 Evaluation of the study and recommendations for the further study**

This study confirmed the hypothesis that in the absence of a clear indication of the code of the displayed culture, visitors would make an interpretation based upon their own cultural code. In confirming the hypothesis, this study revealed features essential to the communication of a specific foreign culture through a case study, for which the T.T.Tsui Gallery was an appropriate choice of site. The location of the museum, the collection, the modern design, and display technique of the Gallery, all make it one of the most successful exhibitions of Chinese culture in the UK which consequently attracts a great number of visitors, providing a reliable base for data collection.

In view of the findings of this study, there seems little doubt that galleries could achieve more effective communication of ideas by greater appreciation of the powerful influence of foreign visitors' own cultural codes.

In addition, as Barringer and Flynn (1998:1) indicate, the Victoria and Albert Museum is a formidable colonial institution. By interviewing in the Museum, the case study can include the possible influence of imperialism on cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, through being, in Kaplan's (1995:41) words, one of those special historic, scientific, social and cultural institutions that arose in the western world - the Museum's role is also part of the cross-cultural communicative process.

The emic analysis of the displayed objects disclosed the potential message and the syntagmatic analysis of the exhibition revealed the preferred 'interpretants' used to encode messages in the T.T.Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art by a Chinese observer. Together, these provided a basis for the later examination of the communication process when compared with data collected from the in-depth interviews.

To obtain an impartial account of how visitors interpreted the display of a foreign culture, the interviewer used an open-ended questionnaire. Every question implicitly referred to the purposes of the study, so justifying the reason

it was asked. Each question, from a different angle, revealed procedures the visitor employed in responding to the display and elicited information that the research required. This proved that the questions were significant and apposite for the study. The open-ended question was also confirmed as productive and effective.

The interview opened with necessary questions such as the frequency of, the motivation for and the expectations from, these visits. Questions requiring more deliberation, such as asking the interviewee to imaginatively rearrange a display and the whole exhibition, were given in the middle of the interview. Towards the end, more straightforward questions, such as did the interviewee spend time with the video or hands-on objects, were asked.

Since the format of the questionnaire required a lengthy interview, duplicate and repetitive questions commonly used for reliability were deliberately avoided. To increase the validity and reliability of the interview (Sudman, & Bradburn, 1982:208), there was an intentional segregation of the questions and a reordering of their logical sequence to obtain associated information.

The preliminary on-site interviews pre-tested the questions to see how respondents comprehended them. After verifying how much salient information the interviews extracted, modifications to the questionnaire were made and its validity enhanced. In addition, interview skills required for this study improved through practice in the preliminary interviews. Also, the process of formatting the questionnaires helped to further clarify the research questions.

Both in designing the questionnaire and in conducting and analysing the interview, the researcher studiously avoided presumptions. Apart from the four factors influencing inaccurate responses mentioned previously (9.1), there is another possibility - the deliberate or motivated non-reporting of a respondent wishing to terminate the interview early. Again, this did not happen in the study. After the respondents had committed themselves to the interview, they were enthusiastic in continuing.

For this kind of intensive interview, establishing an atmosphere in which the subject feels comfortable enough to talk about their experiences and feelings is

essential. It was found during this study, that in a museum setting, a positive contact is easily established with a friendly start and maintained by asking interesting questions. All of this was possible because the visit itself was a leisure activity and the topic concerned the visitor's reactions and responses to the displays. In addition, the interview being held in the gallery, made any wanted referential evidence immediately accessible.

In this study, the questions as well as the atmosphere of the interview allowed and encouraged interviewees to give their opinions fully and frankly (with commendable detail). The interview questions elicited, satisfactorily, the information sought by the study.

A visit was unusual in that the interview encouraged the interviewee to view the exhibition more deeply. Most interviewees mentioned that they had enjoyed talking with an attentive listener, i.e. the interviewer, and one whose background culture was the displayed culture. They felt that rarely was another person interested in and sought to understand their experiences. They also indicated that during the interview, they sometimes obtained new insights into the culture displayed. The general consensus is that the interviewees appreciated the interview for noticeably enhancing their visiting experience.

The final part of the interview was a 'question and answer' follow-up which proved to be of great value. In it, the interviewer was able to discuss any aberrant decodings made and could pursue in greater depth the significance of displays that had particularly interested the interviewee. The success of this follow-up however sometimes proved to be awkward - on almost all occasions there was not enough time to go through all the queries and observations that were of such mutual benefit. The success was the interchange of ideas and points of view; the disappointment was the constraint of time.

It is suggested that no interview should last longer than half an hour. However, it is also argued that many survey researchers have, with little difficulty, conducted interviews of an hour to an hour and a half, and that interviews of two or three hours have also been successful (Sudman, & Bradburn, 1982:227). This kind of success was evidenced again in the in-depth

interviews of this study, reason being the significance of the interview topic to the respondent.

The interviewer took notes and returned to the interviewee to obtain an immediate confirmation or rejection of what had been said. Because the data pursued was rather more contemplative than the instinctive response of the interviewee, the manner of note-taking made interviewees give re-evaluations of their answer: the pertinent information the study required. It can be concluded from the above that utilising the notebook computer to record and then transcribe the interview had more advantages than disadvantages.

The semiotic analysis adopted in this study helped to examine how, when observed with different cultural codes, the visitors' perceived meanings were at variance with the meaning of signs inherent in objects of the culture in question. This kind of analysis also revealed the influence of the juxtaposition of the objects (the paradigmatic level), and the layout of the display (the syntagmatic chain). In brief, careful semiotic scrutiny served to disclose the conventions peculiar to cross-cultural communication.

After comparison of the message embedded in displayed objects, the intended message in the exhibition, and the message the visitor obtained, the speech of cross-cultural communication was revealed. By analysing the interaction between visitors and displays, this study discovered the rules which underlie this type of discourse, and consequently considered what is needed to make cross-cultural communication more effective.

The mechanism, even though provisional, of the visitor's interpreting function was identified by examining each phase of the communicative process with semiotic concepts and models of communication. The semiotic system of differentiation, and the practices of selection and combination particularly repeated in cross-cultural communication by visitors were thus identified.

The study proved that visitors to a cross-cultural exhibition actually went through a complicated process of choosing and correlating the cultural units of the display based on their own 'competence' - what allows them to interpret texts and messages. Whether deciphering or reading, if there was no immediate

reference suggested, the visitors' own cultural backgrounds determined their selection and combination of signs in the exhibition's performance.

Studies of behaviour or facts generally refer to events or acts outside the individual and, in principle, are verifiable by an observer, but attitudes or psychological states exist in the minds of individuals and are directly accessible only to themselves. They are not verifiable by external observers (Sudman, & Bradburn, 1982:17).

A value that would be agreed on by several external observers observing the same event is an intuitive indication for behavioural research but, in the case of attitudes, this intuitive indication is not appropriate. Instead, the consistency of the data collected during the study is an indication of its validity (Sudman, & Bradburn, 1982:17). The open-ended questions obtained instinctive descriptions of the visitors' normally hidden interpreting experiences, which tallied convincingly with their observed behaviour.

Although, this study was predominantly a qualitative research, the in-depth interviews, the phases of data collection and analysis, and the reporting of results, all involved the interaction of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Since the approach and techniques employed produced the necessary data to facilitate effective critical analysis of the way in which museum exhibitions communicate with visitors, the study increases awareness of the communicative power of such exhibitions, and to the nature of the sign-functions in this context.

Although reference has been made to a few other galleries, the in-depth interviews were limited to one gallery only (albeit the most suitable available to the researcher), it was therefore impossible to uncover as much information as would be obtained from comparison with other similar studies.

This initiatory study tried to explore as many parallel aspects as possible. Nevertheless, not all of the functions in the process of communication could be investigated in depth. If more emphasis were given to observing all the sign-functions e.g. Jakobson's six communicative functions, we would better understand this type of communication.

Although previous visiting experience was a factor influencing the interpreting pattern, this study did not fully distinguish between regular goers, first-time visitors, adults, young persons, teenagers, single or accompanied, with friends or family. In order to maximise the reliability of the findings, all interviews were conducted at the T.T.Tsui Gallery. No attempt is made to interview non-visitors or lapsed visitors to find out why this kind of exhibition had failed to reach them.

The study had to be limited to exhibitions of Chinese culture because time did not permit the studying of other cross-cultural exhibitions. Nevertheless, because the interest lies in the emic structure, it would not matter if the exhibition concerned an old civilisation or a modern society, the emic approach employed by a native researcher, in terms of methods and methodologies, would be helpful in assessing exhibitions of other cultures and organising future exhibitions. Equally, the technique is useful for exhibition organisers of both large and small exhibitions irrespective of time-span whether temporary or permanent.

It is hoped that further studies will be undertaken systematically to deepen understanding of this kind of communication and offer more comprehensive guidelines for museum curators and exhibition organisers.

### ***Paradigmatic researches***

The research range could be widened to include other media initiating further research: to compare the effect on cross-cultural communication of museum exhibitions with that of films, books or visits abroad; to discover any variations in interpretation made by visitors when receiving messages from media other than exhibitions.

Kaplan (1995:41, 53) suggests that the location of exhibitions forms part of the communication process, and that viewers are more likely to accept messages in a museum context. It would be interesting to investigate whether Kaplan's view holds when applied to other media as regards cross-cultural communication, and also to consider the cumulative effect of very different contexts - cities, museums, architectural settings, installations and audiences.



## ***Syntagmatic studies***

Apart from paradigmatic researches, there are syntagmatic studies, for example, testing the results of this study against any future studies, to verify and make known the generality of visitors' interpretation methods.

This study concentrates on the interpreting process in visitors' minds using a synchronic study to see how they select and correlate the signs of objects to build up images of the displayed culture. More such synchronic studies could clarify the mental processes in greater detail leading to greater understanding. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to have a subsequent diachronic study comparing the single performance (synchronic) with changes in performances over time (diachronic).

Confidence in the overall findings might have been increased by looking at small scale exhibitions (small in comparison with exhibitions such as the T.T.Tsui Gallery) as well as examining various cultures (different codes and the specific pertinence to display them) to see if there were similarities between the communication of different foreign cultures. It would be even more interesting to compare differences between presenting non-western cultures in a western environment and presenting western cultures to non-western viewers.

It is one of the main propositions of semiotics that the meaning of an element in a work is measured by the possibility of its integration inside the work's own system. The interpretation of a study may vary according to individual researchers and their ideological frameworks. This study, however justifiable and pertinent, is no more than an interpretation. It will be reinforced by carrying out further similar analyses. The significance of this study, inside a broader system of these kinds of study, would thus depend on its relationships relative to all the many works produced on the same lines and to other similar studies in a comparable period and social system.

Also, emic analysis is a means by which museum communicators ascertain that they have inferred the intended message of the source culture. A study focusing on this aspect i.e. to confirm that this can be achieved by emic analysis, to examine its usefulness, or to reveal an improved usage, would be beneficial.

This study found that the main motivation for most visitors to exhibitions of another culture was to see original objects. One of the concerns of the museum world is the use of models and replicas to replace the original objects (7.3), an issue only considered briefly in this study. The use of original objects where feasible, as opposed to replicas or models, is a topic for further study using either an experimental or survey strategy, to compare in detail their respective effectiveness in cross-cultural communication.

The technique of display determines the forms of exhibitions and installations. Labels and layouts, display cases, and the utilising of interactive devices all play an essential part in influencing a visitor's perception and comprehension of another culture. Also valuable are semiotic studies exploring how different modes of producing sign-function between cultures facilitates communication.

Further research could investigate in greater detail different experiences of various types of visitors (as mentioned in previous paragraph); or conduct interviews with those who do or do not visit exhibitions of foreign cultures, to discover their motivation for visiting or otherwise. Researchers could also seek in detail what makes museum visiting compelling for some people and not for others, identifying their respective needs and expectations. For these studies, demographic, interpretative or ethnomethodological methods are required.

Other studies could centre upon gender relations as represented in exhibitions of foreign cultures, e.g. from a feminist stance. As mentioned in Chapter 1, museums in the past organised and presented results of scientific, technical or historical researches with a discernible tendency to the male viewpoint (Kaplan, 1995:37).

When the presentation of the masculine and feminine roles in exhibitions of another culture is established, there will be a much wider viewpoint and many more varied approaches for organising this kind of exhibition. For example, introducing the issue of gender through the medium of such exhibitions could be accorded critical examination.

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All topics mentioned above, in semiotic terms, study the speeches of the language of exhibiting other cultures. Using understanding gained from them, museum personnel can design exhibitions that will more effectively present emic aspects of other cultures and enhance visitors' interactive attainment. Museums can then 'perform' improved 'speeches' and reinforce the 'language' of the other culture rather than colonise it using their own language. Naturally, the above suggestions for other research topics do not exhaust all possibilities.

This study, by revealing how visitors interpret the presentation of the source culture, provides an effective approach to the analysis and understanding of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions; it also demonstrates how semiotic analysis with an empathetic emic approach can assist researchers in analysing exhibitions of other cultures.

The knowledge gained enables museum workers to define the pertinence for organising exhibitions and thus enhance future cross-cultural visiting experiences.

To conclude, this study as a whole was carried out in a cross-cultural environment by cross-cultural communication. The study itself was a cross-cultural performance and proved to be an activity supportive of exhibition communication.

### **9.3 Suggestions and recommendations for exhibiting another culture**

One of the problems inherent in exhibiting a foreign culture is that of selecting emic information and of presenting it in a brief, accessible and optimal format, most importantly, enabling visitors to take up the information from an insider's viewpoint. The findings of this study reveal that certain types of signs and their functions have greater significance than others do. There are criteria the exhibition organiser can follow to increase its communicative effect. Practical suggestions based on the above criteria are given below.

Foremost, it is certain that the exhibiting of other cultures benefits from displays that communicate something other than chronology and visual interest. Therefore, greater efforts could be made to provide more insight into the displays.

Modern communication theory proposes that, in general, an increase in 'information' leads to a decrease in 'communication' (Fiske, 1994:10). This does not apply to exhibitions of another culture owing to their unique communication process - where signs are presented in a discourse to convey the way the source culture sees the reality, rather than facilitate a 'dialogue' between cultures. Thus one may argue that more information implies more cross-cultural communication, and therefore more an effective relaying of message.

According to this study, the avoidance of explication severely limits the capacity of the exhibition to present the culture concerned. Since the visitor needs to be encouraged to acquire further knowledge and a better idea of the insight of the displayed culture, this aim should be presented as a desirable and enjoyable achievement. Cross-cultural exhibitions must, in Kaplan's words, 'make their ideas known directly, in the exhibition gallery, through means available and useful to it' (Kaplan, 1995:54-5). Therefore, extracting those implicit connections out of a range of other possibilities, is one of the major tasks for museum communicators (Chapter 7).

There are four types of orientation which affect visitors: geographical, intellectual, conceptual and psychological (Belcher, 1991:99-100). Of these, the intellectual orientation, which is concerned with preparing the mind for the breakthrough from the known to the unknown, is especially important in cross-cultural settings. Understanding a culture means knowing how the people of that culture see reality. Their symbolic procedure can be better understood if symbols of their culture are properly interpreted, especially in company with objects, thereby introducing something new or abstract through familiar, recognisable facts (Edson & Dean, 1994:180).

For example, if one wants to display Chinese traditional medicine, it is better to illustrate its principle of Yin and Yang along with concept of sun and moon by which the artists were inspired. The Chinese perspectives which were seen by some Westerners as 'mysterious' will be clearly illustrated.

The conceptual orientation deals not so much with displayed objects, as with ideas which the exhibition is trying to convey and their organisation. This type of orientation is particularly appropriate for cross-cultural communication if the communicator is to ensure that visitors discern and appreciate the code of the exhibition. It can cut down the frustration aroused by the unfamiliarity with the source culture. For the visitor, an understanding of this aspect may well be vital in facilitating a comprehension of the whole. This can be done by supplying an outline of the culture.

A guide to the content of the exhibition as a whole is greatly appreciated by visitors (Hardie, 1991: 23-24). From the case study, it can be seen that the displayed culture is more discernible if its objects are treated as having relationships within a system. Therefore, to make the culture understandable to visitors, museum organisers must make the system of the specific material culture obvious. An introduction setting forth the exhibition concept and explaining its contents i.e. the source culture, is thus essential.

Exhibitions of another culture are more successful when the culture, the people's viewpoint of the world, is prominent along side the theme (art, technology,

etc.) and when visitors are informed through the written form, about the displayed culture.

There is always too much to express in an exhibition of a foreign culture (2.4). The representation of objects of one particular culture in exhibitions is normally a limited expression of a complex system of relationships in which the object is a mere contributing component. There are various functions, values and uses, according to various perspectives, which correspond to different interpretants of the sign.

Different cultures are thus better displayed according to their emic units. An emic approach, as illustrated in this study, can provide a set of parameters or guidelines with which one can limit the message to the emic structure and thus increase the possibilities of assuring exchange in museum exhibitions. By adopting such an approach, first and foremost the outsider-bias can be avoided. Secondly, the emic units of the culture concerned can be singled out, and thirdly, those units which might be etically identical but emically different in two cultures can be recognised.

Triandis (1975) pointed out that the outsider-bias towards cultural attributes has general implications for misunderstandings. When staging an exhibition of a foreign culture, an emic analysis of the culture concerned, carried out by a native researcher uncovers the pertinent message and its arrangement, and thereby concurs with the rules used by the people of the culture observed.

Alternatively, exhibition organisers can, as has already been done, consult the people of the source culture and invite them to participate in loaning objects, setting up displays as well as sharing their ideas, native experience and knowledge. The quality of these approaches can be assured through an emic analysis.

The emic analysis for organising or evaluating an exhibition of another culture need not attempt to uncover the cultures' whole system, but its structure in terms of the theme of the exhibition. This is to help the selection and arrangement of objects for display, and the design of the exhibition.

According to interviews conducted during the case study, visitors are interested in the value system of the displayed culture. Every society has a system of values - a set of interrelated ideas, concepts, and practices to which strong sentiments are collectively attached. It is also shown in the studies of cross-cultural communication (2.2) that the principle of values in the understanding between cultures is fundamental and affirmed so that this value system is of some importance to the group concerned.

Apart from their value system, Kluckhohn (1949: 356, 358) writing as a cultural anthropologist, affirmed that there are no organised groups of human beings without their own philosophy. If their behavioural facts are to be correctly understood, their philosophy must also be known. This statement is also proved by the case study since specifying the emic units, of which lay philosophy, and of the displayed culture is an effective influence in making the culture understandable to visitors. The determination of whose interpretation of the philosophy of the culture concerned is most faithful, complete and should be followed is a problem which can be lessened by an empathetic emic approach.

All the intended messages - philosophy and value system, are better crystallised around a skeletal pattern or sequence of conceptual relations from which the communication will be developed. Under these circumstances, the message is ordered into, in the content plane, a cohesive set of relations according to the code of the source culture, and arranged, in the expression plane, according to the visitor's code of interpretation, so that the visitor is given an adequate environment i.e. sufficient information, enough codes to enable them to operate more or less autonomously, and from the standpoint of the displayed culture.

Another solution to conveying a vast amount of information, lies in the display technique of presenting the culture in easily digestible portions (Edson & Dean, 1994:180). Usually, even emic units alone are already too much to exhibit. Especially when they are large-scale sign-vehicles to which the visitor response can be defined by suggesting a preferred reading.



Another crucial point in selecting content, is that exhibitions of another culture should relate to the cultures' modern life, and highlight, if any, fundamental differences between its traditional and contemporary lifestyles to emphasise the cultures' continuity.

Although visitors are initially impressed by differences between their and the displayed cultures, communication ceases if there are no further references with which they can explore the displayed culture. It is thus advantageous for such exhibition to start with 'strange' displays and then proceed to the commonalties of what the displayed and the visitor's cultures share in terms of experience, knowledge, and values.

Another strategy is to begin with what the displayed and the visitor's cultures have in common, not at the surface level, but in a deeper perception. Every culture is the outcome of common human striving and thus however bizarre the external appearance may be, the same general needs and instincts operate among every culture. By directing visitors to approach the display culture after departing from a shared perspective, visitors could find that their own culture is considerably more similar to the displayed culture than they had originally envisaged.

It is thus worthwhile for exhibition organisers to identify experiences which the displayed culture shares with targeted visitors, and use this common pool of ideas to provide equivalents for any themes that go beyond these limits. Also, when providing a common ground, it is useful to express the emic units of the displayed culture through an etic grid, since it lies beneath the surface of all cultures and identifies features common to all. In this way the emic unit can be organised to make sense to visitors of different cultural backgrounds.

The museum visitor needs to know and be told more than once what the exhibit is about. It is the responsibility of exhibition organisers to highlight the emic unit of the source culture through effective presentation thereby accumulating the visitors' 'vocabulary' of the displayed culture and cross-cultural communication.

The recurrence of emic units can be portrayed, either by repeating in one exhibition along different displays, or by producing more exhibitions of one culture. In addition, museum communicators can utilise modern display techniques along with more interesting traditional displays to encourage repeated visits to the exhibition. For example, small units of different style living rooms with a phone that rings for them to pick up.

Exhibitions could be designed by following the path a visitor would take (Appendix 13). This would make the exhibitions more 'user (visitor) friendly'. For example, display objects without fixed labels and when the visitor presses a button, the information s/he wants to find out will then appear, either by written or audio-video form.

Apart from tempting visitors to spend more time looking at display, museums need to offer a comfortable space in the gallery for visitors to contemplate and reflect. This has the potential to make visitors 'take their time' and thus allow them to render a further segmentation of the continuum and further the prospect of perceiving the displayed culture (Eco, 1979: 165).

The exhibition presentation, from typology, chronological development and technology, has now come to the notion of context. It was indicated that 'in-context' approaches exert strong cognitive control over the objects on display (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1991:386-443; Grimes 1990). That situational displays have the effect of transporting visitors into a realm of experience of the displayed culture is evidenced by the case study of the T.T.Tsui Gallery. The sense of their own culture (or the barrier arising from a different cultural background) tends to dissolve in this kind of circumstance. A satisfactory explanation of an emic point through its background in a proper context is definitely preferable to an explanation by labels.

Nevertheless, when suggesting a contextual way of displaying objects of other cultures, one must not lose sight of the fact that this type of information is also partial and that context itself is a product of interpretation. Also, the complicated nature of cross-cultural signs requires a more complex analysis of

their temporal context. Thorough research with an emic approach focused on the culture concerned could reduce such obstacles.

Applying the technique of the commutation test, which involves changing a sign-vehicle in the display system, and examining the system to see if any changes in denotation and sign-functions have resulted (Fiske, 1994:109), can also help in choosing sign-vehicles and their context. It is done by distinguishing the changing of the meaning between different ways of display to identify significant differences or distinctive features within a paradigm or syntagm. The observation of change can be made imaginatively. Nevertheless, a small scale of evaluation is more convincing.

Objects of a foreign culture are rich and varied message-carriers, and imbue the exhibition of the source culture with the quality of distinctive cross-cultural communication. It is noticeable however, that deeper information is more easily ascertained when language (compared with sounds, odours or graphics) functions as a transmitter of communication (Fawcett, 1984:46).

Written information such as introduction boards, captions and labels in cross-cultural exhibitions thus require a greater level of interest to invite being read; the message length should be kept as short as possible, but adequately give pertinent information.

The principle to be observed is that the written text should be descriptive and analytical, should not pass judgements, but give more insight into the displayed culture. Also, as suggested by Sorsby and Horne (1980:157-8), a reading level of not more than 15 years should be the aim.

Labels containing obvious factors such as the material and colour of the object are redundant. The donor's name may also be entirely irrelevant in a cross-cultural context. If it is necessary to name the donor, as in the T.T.Tsui Gallery, then a list can be displayed elsewhere in the gallery. It is favourable to indicate legend, symbolism, custom in labels and single out key words by

enlarged letters to catch the visitors' attention. When related information is split between labels<sup>15</sup>, it is preferable for each label to suggest visitors refer to the other label.

Detailed information on exhibits is mostly required by visitors who have individual interests. Information sheets can help visitors identify objects in which they are interested, while giving pertinent information concerning displays. Such sheets can be provided at low cost. Also, it is worthwhile to imitate what Alpers (1991:31) suggests, that to avoid the distractions of labels, the exhibition's story can be told in a setting separated from the objects themselves.

Abundant relevant in-depth information of the displayed culture can be elicited by supplementary sign-vehicles such as diagrams, maps, photographs, models, and interactive technology. These are universal and thus helpful in bringing maximum clarity to the material message, and consequently providing a satisfying interpretant impact. Scene-setting pictures and the amplification of some particular materials or skills, such as decorations on objects, are beneficial devices in conveying otherwise obscured information and thus promoting interest.

If it is possible to have a video, its content should be relevant to firstly the exhibition, and secondly, aspects which are difficult for a museum to exhibit. For example, images of modern China for exhibitions about China. Alternatively, videos can demonstrate techniques or usage of displayed objects, for instance, table manners of the displayed culture. Videos can also identify the original environments of objects.

The inclusion of a range of hands-on objects would definitely communicate a clearer picture and different aspects of the displayed culture. If the originals were not suitable for handling, models or other similar mass produced objects

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<sup>15</sup> As the story of the Eight Immortals is separated and presented on two labels in different sections of the T.T.Tsui Gallery.

coming from contemporary society of the culture concerned, could be supplied (Birmingham Museum, 1993:139).

It is necessary to display the language of the displayed culture by bilingual labels since language and culture can be viewed as two possibly intertwined semiotic systems. Especially so are the proper names of ethnographic items which are best translated both phonetically and paraphrased in the language of the visitors alongside the original name in its native language.

It is an undisputed fact that no matter how clever or apt a person may be in exploiting learning factors; the visitor's cultural background will affect all perceptions. This thus requires exhibition organisers to anticipate and recognise the potential visitors' intentions, attitudes, and perspective in perception and background knowledge as being significant in the planning of a successful exhibition, an effective and productive communication (Edson & Dean, 1994:179).

Obviously, conventional cross-cultural communication in museums is mostly suitable for adults, who are already interested in extending their cultural horizons. It could be argued that this kind of text would only be accessible to the audience for whom cross-cultural communication is valued. However, if museums wish to target the general public, especially those who are not fully aware of cross-cultural communication, a more easily understood text is needed.

Furthermore, most exhibitions of cultures are not yet based on the idea of culture as a process. Exhibitions continue to create displays which are just static aggregates of objects from a culture in a contextually appropriate relationship to each other. However, if it is agreed that culture is more a process of interaction with the material world, then how can a static display ever hope to approach an adequate cross-cultural experience? If process implies action, surely exhibitions, where visitors were led to interact with objects in a way that led them to arrive at an active understanding of the cultural appropriate manner, would be a successful instance of cross-cultural communication. Perhaps lessons can be learnt from interactive science galleries such as the Earth Gallery in the Natural History Museum in London.

# **Chapter 10**

## **The Value of the Study**

Prior to this study, it had been observed that in the development of the global village and in the post colonial era, positive communication on equal terms between peoples of different cultures is required. As places where treasures of many cultures are accumulated, and are represented through displays, museums are traditionally equipped to promote understanding between cultures. However, until now, research has not focused on this specific function of museums.

Concentrating on a few central questions was deemed the most beneficial approach since this research comes at the initial stage of investigation into cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions (1.2). It aimed to understand how visitors interpret displays of other cultures, a crucial issue for this kind of communication (2.4). Consequently, this study produced useful information which can be applied to explain similar instances.

In order to identify key variables determining positive cross-cultural communication, this study makes a careful analysis of the interaction between visitors and displays in cross-cultural exhibitions. It has answered the following questions: how visitors assign meaning to the configurations of the displayed culture; and what factors influence this kind of exercise.

Based on the experience of museum visitor studies and suggestions of scholars in this field, this study paid full attention to the needs, expectations, and experiences of visitors in exhibitions of another culture. The interest of the social context of museum visits and visitors' previous experiences, were both taken into account.

As a direct consequence, the codes normally hidden beneath visitors' behaviour, and the mental operations performed in an exhibition of another culture have, for the first time and the most part, been revealed. This study thus contributes to the foundations of a system that is significant and useful in the understanding cross-cultural communication in exhibitions of another culture.

By semiotic analysis of visitors' way of interpreting the displayed culture, such practices have been made explicit. The extent of the museum's semiotic capacity for cross-cultural speeches has also been revealed. It is not the signs

or the processes, but the pertinence, codes and structures of their signification that are laid open. The study also brought to light elements essential for the transformation of messages in a cross-cultural setting.

The analysis isolated the underlying set of laws by which signs are combined into relevant messages about the displayed culture, and thus leads to a better understanding of formulae of cross-cultural texts. It reached a deeper awareness of museum exhibition 'competence' for cross-cultural communication, a better understanding of mechanisms of these semiotic processes and ways of evaluating communication effects.

The results from this single case study can be used to explain particular methods of interpretation and applied to other exhibitions aiming to improve cross-cultural communication. Indeed, the approach used was specifically evolved with this aim in view, and is especially useful in the post-colonial era as it reveals the pitfalls involved in interpreting the displayed culture through the visitors' own culture.

The analysis revealed how sign-vehicles gain their communicative strength in a cross-cultural environment, and identified solutions to concerns such as: How and when exhibition organisers can use the signs, codes and strategies to make them appealing to visitors, and to present not just stories and images of the displayed culture, but its ways of seeing reality. What signs are in visitors' anticipation, demand or desire, and what strategies can be used in the selection and combination of these signs to promote the visitors' identification with the discourse and to limit the meaning-potential of the texts.

The opinions collected by the interviews have provided significant new knowledge about visits to exhibitions of another culture. The resulting knowledge can thus be used by museum organisers to enhance future visiting experiences in cross-cultural settings.

This study also serves as a pioneering attempt in the consideration of an empathetic emic approach for organising and evaluating exhibitions of other cultures. It has demonstrated how this kind of approach can help tackle the



issue of exhibiting another culture through identifying its emic units and the interaction between visitors and displays.

It was shown by the case study that utilising a combined approach to observe exhibitions of another culture can solve the problem of validity of the message embedded in the displayed objects.

The study of communication between the displayed Chinese culture and the British visitors could be regarded as the ultimate analysis of cross-cultural exhibition communication, as Sarbaugh (1984) indicates, cross-cultural research is the furthest test of a theory because the greater the range of contexts examined, the greater the potential for the subject in general. And, Gudykunst and Kim suggest, cross-cultural research is most likely to uncover universals of human communication (Gudykunst, 1985; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984).

On the other hand, without testing theories in cross-cultural settings, with all the difficulties involved, one is eventually going to be left with an ethnocentric social science, which as Asante and Gudykunst (1989:470) indicate, is temporally, spatially, and most importantly, culturally bound.

A need for better communication between cultures still exists. Museums as venues for preserving and presenting cultures are increasingly accepting their responsibility to encourage cross-cultural contact. Research defining and assisting improvements in this category of communicative faculty has increased, but ones such as this study, carried out from the perspective of visitors using semiotics are still insufficient.

One of the key advantages of building cross-cultural communication theory through exhibition and visitor response analyses, is the centrality of the 'exhibition - visitor dialectic'. This study not only increases understanding of cross-cultural communication in museum exhibitions, but also contributes to 'consumer studies' by understanding 'consumers' - visitors to the exhibitions - that improve museums' ability to display another culture effectively.

Since the completion of the research for this study, there has been a growing awareness of the need to study the process of communication between the exhibition and the visitor - an area now termed 'Consumption Studies'. One of a series of conferences organised by Pearce and Fyfe of Leicester and Keele Universities respectively was on this subject, held at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool and in Leicester University started in 1998 and is on going.

This study also has some additional contributions:

Most studies of cross-cultural communication, and of exhibitions of another culture, are carried out in Western countries and from the Western point of view (1.2). This study is researched by a Chinese with an empathetic emic approach.

Clunas (1998:43-4) indicates that there is a deficiency of information concerning the display of Chinese material in British museums as to what was shown where, when, and what juxtapositions were made, which objects were privileged by particularly prominent positioning, and what was said about them on labels. He also suggests that the selection and interpretation of Chinese objects in institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum influences how they are viewed as expressions of national and imperial identity.

Even though when the British left Hong Kong on 1 July 1997, and a phase in the history of colonialism concluded, speculations about China are nevertheless still stereotyped; the predisposition for Chinese art objects, for example, continues unabated with the 'Orientalists' viewpoint to be still prevalent (Clunas, 1998:41-51). In view of the above, this study can serve to encourage the display of Chinese material from the insider's point of view.

Barringer emphasises the significance of the interaction between buildings, objects and texts and suggests that the Victoria and Albert Museum occupied a central location in the symbolic geographies of the British capital, the nation and the empire (Barringer, in Barringer, T. & Flynn, T., 1998:27). This study thus contributes to an understanding of what an imperial institution such as Victoria and Albert Museum does/can do about cross-cultural communication in the post-colonial age.

To conclude, from the aspect of semiotics with emic and empathetic stance, on the ground of museum discourses of cultural value and modes of representation, this study takes part in and contributes to the shaping of the global village. It does this in terms of understanding the fundamental structure of visitor's responses to the displayed foreign culture by which cross-cultural discourses are constantly occurring.

This study was able to observe and understand the cross-cultural communication occurring in the context of exhibitions of another culture, and contributes to the improvement of their performances by providing some guidelines. This study also illustrated an effective approach for accomplishing such an analysis and has contributed both to the understanding of the visitors' way of interpreting and to studies of this type of communication.

Since it covered a very wide range of relevant circumstances, this study of cross-cultural communication can perhaps reveal some aspects relating to exhibition communication in general.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: The survey for selecting a major case for this study

February and April 1991: Chinese overseas students' meetings in London and Leicester for Chinese New Year and an Easter Holiday Trip to Scotland, organised by the Chinese overseas students society in the UK.

The purpose of the survey was to gather and assess different opinions in order to choose a particular Chinese exhibition for the major case study and was conducted by means of an open-ended questionnaire.

### 1. Interview questionnaire

Age	Under 20	20+	40+	60+
1. How long have you lived in a Chinese society? Where?				
2. How long have you been living in the UK? Where?				
3. How many Chinese exhibitions in the UK have you visited? What are they?				
4. Which exhibition that you have visited in the UK, do you think has most faithfully presented Chinese culture?				

### 2. The sample

The sample consists of 166 Chinese overseas students and their families who attended either the New Year Meeting or the Easter Holiday trip. (The person who attended both two occasions was interviewed only once.)

#### (a) Age

Age	Number of interviewees
Under 20	34

20+	106
40+	21
60+	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>166</b>

***(b) Geographical origin***

<b>Geographical origin</b>	<b>Number of interviewees</b>
Taiwan	112
Mainland China	43
Hong Kong	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>166</b>

***(c) Residence place of interviewee***

<b>Residence place</b>	<b>Number of interviewees</b>
Aberdeen	3
Birmingham	12
Bristol	5
Cambridge	9
Cardiff	6
Cranfield	8
Dundee	3
Durham	5

Edinburgh	7
Leeds	12
Leicester	14
Liverpool	6
London	22
Manchester	7
Newcastle	4
Northampton	3
Nottingham	9
Oxford	7
Sheffield	9
Sunderland	4
Swansea	3
Warwick	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>166</b>

### 3 Results

#### (a) Totals

<b>Number of Chinese exhibition visited</b>	<b>Number of interviewees</b>	<b>%</b>
3 or 3+	67	40.3
3-	62	37.3
0	37	22.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>99.9</b>

***(b) The nomination of the 67 interviewees who had visited 3+ Chinese exhibitions in the UK***

<b>Suggested exhibition</b>	<b>Number of nominations</b>
T.T.Tsui Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum	47
Oriental Gallery in the British Museum	31
Chinese Gallery in Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art	5
Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.	5
Ashmolean Museum in Oxford	3
Gulbenkian Museum of Oriental Art and Archaeology at Durham University	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>93</b>

(Note: Some interviewee nominated more than one exhibition).

***(c) The nomination of the 62 interviewees who had visited less than 3 Chinese exhibitions in the UK***

<b>Suggested exhibition</b>	<b>Number of nominations</b>
T.T.Tsui Gallery at the Victoria and Albert Museum	14
Oriental Gallery in British Museum	14
Ashmolean Museum in Oxford	4
Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.	3
Gulbenkian Museum of Oriental Art and Archaeology at Durham University	3
N/A	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>

(Note: Some interviewee nominated more than one exhibition).



## Appendix 2: The Initial Interview Questionnaire

### A. Background information

1. Nationality, age, level of education, occupation.
2. Some general questions.
  - a. How many times have you visited this Gallery?
  - b. Why are you visiting this Gallery?
  - c. Would you consider yourself to be very knowledgeable about Chinese culture?

*If yes,*

Could you please give me an example?

In addition to this particular exhibition, what other access do you have to information regarding Chinese culture? (Chinese friends, pen friends, pure academic interest, same academic/s cultural interest as Chinese people (either in England or China/Taiwan).)

- d. Do you usually go to Chinese exhibitions? (How often did you visit a similar exhibition last year?)
- e. Do you usually read the display labels?

*If yes,*

What information do you expect such labels to provide you with?

*If no,*

Why? (prefer enjoy objects themselves, to read labels is tiring, etc.)

## B. Specific information

1. In your opinion, would you say that this exhibition was successful in providing you with a good general picture of Chinese arts?
2. Do you think that, after seeing this exhibition, what information has proved most important on this visit?
3. Has anything in particular disappointed you? What did you expect?
4. Was there anything in particular that provided you with information about China?

*If something particular is mentioned,*

In what way did you get this information? (from labels? or the objects themselves? Were you reasonably well informed prior to your visit to this exhibition?)

*If nothing is mentioned,*

What went wrong?

Why wasn't it successful?

Was the available information superfluous, inadequate, vague, or supplementary?

5. Within this gallery, which objects, in your opinion, have always been significant for the Chinese? For what reason do you think this?
6. What kind of expectations did you have before you visited the Gallery?
7. If this gallery is going to be rearranged, in what way do you think you can get more insight about the Chinese way?
8. (selecting one or two object/s in this gallery which have a specifically 'Chinese' cultural-theme).

When you look at this object, what do you notice? Why?

What kind of feeling do you experience? Why?

What does this pattern/motifs stand for, in your opinion?

## Appendix 3: Examples of symbolism in the objects in the T. T. Tsui Gallery

(There are others but these are the most common.)

Motif/Pattern	Symbolic Meaning	Displayed Objects: Which has the motif / pattern
Bats	Good Luck. Happiness.	A robe. A vessel. A table frontal. A picnic box.
Bamboo	Modesty. Long-life.	A man's garment. A picnic box.
Birds	Protector of graves and corpses. The direction of South.	Two burial pieces. A dish. A kettle.
Cloud	Good fortune. Peace. Happiness.	A mirror. A jar.
Cranes	Good fortune. Peace. Happiness.	A mirror. A jade jar.
Daoism / Taoism deities	Long life.	An altar vessel. A jade cup.
Dates	Soon give birth to sons.	Toggles.
Deer	Wealth.	A vessel. A snuff bottle.
Ding (Tripod cauldron)	The symbol of state.	A Ding. An incense burner in the shape of a Ding.
Dragon	The symbol of the Chinese themselves.	The handle of a weapon. A pair of carpets. A jade and metal belt buckle. A wedding hanging. The handle of a

		vessel. The pelmet of a table frontal. A folding armchair. A box. The handle of a jade cup. The legs of a table. A jade jar. A cup of rhinoceros horn. A porcelain bowl.
Fish	Abundance. Affluence. Wealth.	An alcohol jar.
Fu Xing riding a deer	Happiness Wealth.	An altar vessel.
Goose	Marriage bless.	A jade box. A vessel.
Jade	Preventing demonic possession. Saving the corpse from decomposition.	A jade horse's head. A jade blades.
Lotus	Rebirth in Paradise.	A gold dish. An alcohol jar. A canopy. A table frontal. A piece of velvet.
Mandarin Duck	Marriage blessing. Marital happiness.	A lacquer plate.
Mouth organ	To rise in rank. To give birth.	A wedding hanging. A teapot.
Owl	Call away the soul.	A wine container.
Ox	Spring.	A vessel. An ox figure.
Peach	Longevity.	A screen.
Pear	Longevity.	A teapot.

Peony	Wealth.	A robe. A jar. A lantern. A porcelain. A jar.
Pine tree	Longevity. Steadfastness.	A screen. A vase.
Plum blossom	The five gods of good luck.	A man's garment. A jar. A porcelain.
Royal Mother of the West	The god of well-wishing and long-life.	A screen A pair of pictures.
Qilin	Delivering babies to families. Kindness.	A pair of ancestor portraits.
Rhinoceros	A scholar.	A mirror stand.
The Chinese character for long life	Longevity. Immortality.	A table frontal
Yellow	Earth. The Emperor.	A yellow vessel. A yellow dress.
Yin-Yang	The Universe.	An incense burner.

## Appendix 4: The Questionnaire for the visitors in the T.T.Tsui Gallery

A. (Making a start)	
"I am doing a survey about the responses of British visitors to the Chinese exhibition. Could you please participate and help me by answering a few questions?"	
B. (Introducing myself as the interviewer, explain the research, how the information is going to be used, the approximate time required.)	
"Would you describe your life style, past and present, to be British?"	
(Stressing confidentiality)	
"The information you give me will be confidential."	
(Making an offer)	
"After the interview, I would like to answer, to the best of my knowledge, any question that you wish to ask concerning Chinese culture.)	
C. (Background information: age, knowledge of Chinese culture)	
1. "Would you mind telling me your age?"	
(Show age ranges)	Under 16
	16-20
	21-40
	41-60
	60+
2. "Do you consider yourself to be knowledgeable about Chinese culture?"	
(If yes,)	
i. "Could you please give an example?"	
ii. "Apart from this particular exhibition, what other access do you have to information regarding Chinese culture? (Chinese friends, pen friends, pure academic interest, same academic/s cultural interests as Chinese people, either in England or China/Taiwan)".	

D. Questionnaire
1. How many times have you visited this Gallery and why?
2. Do you usually go to museum exhibitions and why? What kind of exhibitions are you particularly interested in?
3. Do you usually go to exhibitions of other cultures and why? How often did you visit an exhibition of this kind last year and why?
4. Do you usually use exhibitions in museums about one particular culture to help you to broaden your views about that culture and why?  (If yes,) Do you usually find them helpful and in what way?
5. What do you think about this exhibition?
6. Having been around the exhibition, what do you think is the main theme? How did you discover it?
7. Do you think that this exhibition has helped you to broaden your views about Chinese culture?  (If yes,) In what aspect and in what way?  (If no,) In what way do you think the exhibition could inform you more?
8. Is there anything that has made you more distant or confused about Chinese culture? In what way? (Please give examples).
9. Has anything in particular disappointed you? In what way? What did you expect (from the point mentioned)?
10. Within this gallery, which objects, in your opinion, have more significance



<p>than others for the Chinese? Way do you think so?</p>
<p>11. According to the exhibition, can you tell me the most important aspect in a life of a Chinese person?</p> <p>Did you find this out from the exhibition? In what way?</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Did you know this before and was it confirmed by this gallery? By what mean?</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Did you know something different before and what is your changed view by visiting this gallery? In what way?</p>
<p>12. Was there anything in particular that provided you with information about China that you had not known before?</p> <p>(If something particular is mentioned)</p> <p>In what way did you get this information? (from labels? or the objects themselves? etc.)</p>
<p>13. How do the Chinese see themselves? (What are the commonest features they use to describe themselves as a distinctive people?)</p> <p>Did you find this out from the exhibition? In what way?</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Did you know it before?</p>
<p>14. Apart from your specific interest, what did you look at in this gallery simply because you were here? Was this your own choice or were you motivated by the exhibition?</p> <p>If so, in what way?</p>
<p>15. Has the exhibition raised questions about Chinese art or culture which had not occurred to you before?</p>

(If yes, 'For what reason? In what way?')
16. What was your favourite exhibit? For what reason?
17. Could you please describe your general approach when you visit exhibitions of other cultures such as this one?
(If nothing particular has been mentioned:)
'Do you usually read the display labels, captions, use a layout map, etc.?'
(If yes,)
'What information do you expect them (the item specified) to provide?'
(If no,)
For what reason?
18. Is there anything different in this gallery which made your visit rewarding?
What was it? For what reason?
19. If this gallery were to be rearranged, in what way do you think you could get more from the exhibition?
20. Please choose one display and tell me if you were to rearrange the display, how would you do it?
21. In general, what aspects are you interested in when you want to know more about a culture?
'Regarding these aspects, what did you see in this gallery and what did you not? Could you please give examples?'
22. In this exhibition, which symbols of status, power, and ideology in Chinese society did you see? (such as special clothing or personal adornment, and religious or patriotic artefacts, e.g. shrines, statues or portraits; or

pattern/motives).
23. Did you notice any common myths, folk tales or legends of Chinese culture referred to in this gallery?  (If yes,) 'Did they make sense to you? In what way?
24. (In so far as the interactive and hands-on objects have not been mentioned,)  i. What did you think of the video?  ii. Did you touch any objects in this gallery?  If no, why not?  If yes, could you please describe the experience?  If you knew that in China, the head is regarded as sacred and, consequently, not to be touched by others, would you still have touched that object? What would you have felt if you had known what you know now?
25. Can you identify any common motifs or themes of Chinese culture from the displays in this gallery? Please indicate why and how you recognise them as such?
26. (Selecting one or two object/s in the gallery, which contain prominent Chinese emic units and which have not been pointed out by previous questions.)  When you look at this object, what do you notice? What comes to your mind now? For what reason?
What in your opinion does this object/pattern/motive suggest to Chinese people? (colours/shapes, dark/light, words/symbols, underlying meaning, etc.)  Would you consider this to be a Chinese object if seen somewhere else? For what reason?
27. Finally, I am going to read you some of the common meanings of Chinese

symbols, could you tell me which pattern presents these meanings by pointing to objects displayed in this gallery?

happiness; long-life; etc. (Interviewer chose symbols which the interviewee could easily find in nearby displays and which had not been mentioned in previous questions)

When the interviewee give a 'Chinese interpretation' to the symbol,

Did you find it from this visit?

#### E. Closing statement

Thank you very much. You have been very helpful. Are there any questions that you would like to ask me? I hope that you enjoy the remainder of your visit to the Museum.

## Appendix 5: A comparison of interpretants and values of some sign-vehicles in the T.T.Tsui Gallery

This appendix illustrates:

1. the reduced value of emic units (inherent in objects) when taken from their source culture to be displayed.
2. various interpretants of the same sign-vehicle.
3. the capacity of different types of sign-vehicle.
4. various values of the same sign-vehicle in Chinese or British codes.
5. One example is given of several types of sign-vehicle.

(Note: iconic signs include objects, patterns on objects, colours, materials, and shapes of objects, etc.)

### 1. Various interpretants of sign-vehicles displayed in the T.T.Tsui Gallery

<b>Type of the sign / Sign-vehicle</b>	<b>Interpretants used in the source culture</b>  (analysed by the researcher)	<b>Interpretants used by the Gallery</b>  (analysed by the researcher)	<b>Interpretants used by the visitor</b>  (by interviewing visitors)
Design sign / Title panel in Chinese characters	The topic of the Gallery. A Chinese Hall.	The topic of the Gallery. A Chinese Gallery.	Might be the title of the Gallery.
Linguistic sign / Introductory panel to the eating and drinking section (in English and Chinese)	A brief introduction to eating and drinking customs.	A brief introduction to eating and drinking customs.	An introduction to eating and drinking customs.

Linguistic sign for an iconic sign / A label on a porcelain altar vase (in English and Chinese)	<p>Porcelain altar vase, decorated under the glaze, with the mark of the reign of Jiajing (1522-1566), Ming dynasty. The neck of the vase has holes in it to support flowers, feathers or other decorative items used on altars.</p> <p>Auspicious patterns such as cloud, thunder, lotus, plantain leaves, etc. and their symbolic meanings.</p>	Porcelain altar vase, decorated under the glaze, with the mark of the reign of Jiajing (1522-1566), Ming dynasty. The neck of the vase has holes in it to support flowers, feathers or other decorative items used on altars.	Vase, Chinese, ceramic, oriental style, lovely, antique.
Pictorial sign / A picture of banquet scene	How dining tables were arranged at an ancient banquet; the similarities and differences between an ancient banquet and a modern banquet.	Illustrating how tables were arranged at an ancient Chinese banquet.	How tables were arranged at banquets in China.
Iconic sign / A bronze Ding (three-legged caldron) with cicada and Tao-tie patterns.	The symbol of the state. Bronze cooking vessel. Symbolic meanings of the cicada and the Tao-tie patterns.	A three-legged bronze cauldron, for eating and cooking.	A typical old Chinese bronze object (for eating and drinking).
Iconic sign / Patterns of the Chinese character for long life, bat, peony, and chrysanthemum	Symbolic meanings of the character for long life, bat, peony, and chrysanthemum	Patterns of the character for long life, bat, peony, and flower.	Patterns of peony and chrysanthemum. Nice flowers.

on a robe			
Iconic sign (material) / A jade object	Symbolic meaning of jade. Various legends and stories about jade.	A jade object.	Precious stone. Pleasant colour. Fine texture. Excellent carving skill.
Iconic sign (shape) / A teapot in the shape of a Chinese mouth organ.	Symbol of rising in rank and giving birth.	Teapot in form of the musical instrument, Sheng Yixing ware, Qing dynasty, about 1850-1900.	Interesting / unique shape.

It can be seen from the above that there is less loss of meaning from linguistic and pictorial sign-vehicles than from iconic and symbolic ones, where most of their symbolic meanings are lost.

## ***2. The different values of signs and their interpretants in Chinese or British codes***

<b>Sign-vehicle</b>	<b>In Chinese code</b>	<b>In British code</b>
The title panel in Chinese characters	Linguistic sign Design sign Iconic sign Emotional interpretant	Stimuli Design sign Indexical sign Intellectual interpretant Logical interpretant Aesthetical interpretant
Linguistic signs in English and Chinese - headings / sub-heading boards / labels	Linguistic sign Design sign Iconic sign Emotional interpretant	Indexical linguistic sign Design sign Indexical sign Intellectual interpretant
Pictorial sign	Design sign	Design sign

	Iconic sign Emotional interpretant	Indexical sign Intellectual interpretant
Ding	Iconic sign Symbolic sign Emotional interpretant	Iconic sign Indexical sign Intellectual interpretant Logical interpretant Aesthetical interpretant
Jade	Symbolic sign Emotional interpretant	Iconic sign Intellectual interpretant Aesthetical interpretant
A teapot in the shape of a Chinese mouth organ.	Iconic sign Symbolic sign Emotional interpretant	Iconic sign Intellectual interpretant Aesthetical interpretant



## **Appendix 6: The questions aroused by the displays to the visitors**

The questions which were raised by interviewees in response to the displays in the T.T.Tsui Gallery are listed as follows in order of frequency of incidence; questions which were raised by labels are listed separately to illustrate the differences between the two.

Some of them were the answer to the question 'Has the exhibition raised questions about Chinese art or culture which had not occurred to you before?'; however, some of them were mentioned during the interviews.

### ***1. The questions aroused by the displays of the T.T.Tsui Gallery to the visitors***

1. Is religion a free matter now? Does religion still play an important role in Chinese life?
2. What are the differences between Taoism / Daoism and Buddhism? Is it easy to identify immediately which religious group a person belongs to? (e.g. any special clothing or physical indicators such as hair style?)
3. What minority religious groups are there in China?
4. What is the emphasis placed on ancestor worship, and on the after-life in modern China?
5. What are the crucial taboos in Chinese society with regard to contact between superiors and subordinates, between people of the same gender, and different genders. What are the principles?
6. Is class membership an important aspect in Chinese society?
7. In general, to what extent do the modern Chinese accept a hierarchical order in which they have their place? (e.g. filial piety, automatic obedience and respect for parental authority.) Or is negotiation of rights now acceptable?

8. What are the gender issues in modern China? What roles do women play and what is suggested as normal for women?
9. What are the norms of hospitality and entertainment? What value is attached to a sense of humour in Chinese society?
10. How is Chinese writing constructed?
11. What are the table manners in Chinese society? What constitutes polite practice in the way the implements (chopsticks, etc.) are used?
12. What are the customary styles of eating? What is the significance of these customs?
13. What was the clothing for humble people? What is the fashion in modern China? Are traditional clothing still accepted?
14. What does this (a motif) symbolising? (by pointing to a particular motif on an object)
15. Do Chinese still believe in another life?
16. Is there any modern art such as abstract painting in China?
17. What does a Chinese book look like?
18. What do these displays really mean to Chinese people?
19. (a jar with the motif of deer) Do you have Father Christmas and his reindeer this sort of idea in China?

**2. The questions aroused further by the labels of the T.T.Tsui Gallery to the visitors**

1. Why is yellow used for imperial family? What do the twelve symbols stand for?
2. Why dragons are linked with emperors? How the dragon connected with fertility and rain?

3. (The label for a mirror stand runs: 'In the form of a magic creature called xiniu, looking back over his shoulder at the moon in clouds. The crescent moon acts as a mirror-holder'.) Why a rhinoceros is a magic creature and what is xiniu?

## **Appendix 7: The information of a displayed culture that visitors want to know**

The information of a displayed foreign culture that interviewees of the T.T.Tsui Gallery wanted to know are listed as follows in order of frequency of incidence:

1. What is the life like there in general?
2. What do they do for living?
3. What religions do the people follow? What is/are the doctrine of that/those religion(s)?
4. What is the value system they follow in terms of moral?
5. What do they have for their diet? What are the traditional ways of dining?
6. If the exhibition is about their past, what is the modern version of them?
7. What do they do for their leisure?
8. What are the taboos in their society?
9. Are there any minorities? What is their life like?
10. Do they have hierarchical system such as caste in their society?
11. What are the gender issues in that society?

## Appendix 8: Descriptions of the sample of the visitor interview

### 1 Age

(N=12)

Age	Number of interviewees	%
16 & 16-	0	0
17 - 20	2	20
21 - 40	3	25
41 - 60	5	41.6
60+	2	16.6

The ratio of adult visitors (20 & 20+) to younger visitors (20-)

Age	Number of interviewees	%
20 & 20+	10	80
20-	2	20
The ratio of adult visitors to younger visitors		16.67

## 2. Sex

Sex	Number of interviewee	%
Female	7	58
Male	5	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>

## 3. The social grouping to which the interviewee belonged

Grouping	Number of interviewee	%
Accompanied	6	50
Single	5	42
Study group	3	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>

## Appendix 9: The completed categories of the coding scheme

### 1. The effectual communicative factors

Categories	Sub-categories	Description
Effect of objects (196)	Authenticity (84)  Physical appearance (61)  Unusual (26) Familiar (25)	Originality (38) Three dimensional object (35) The first and immediate referents of the source culture (11)  Size (33) Mode of expression as a whole (including shape, colour, texture) (19) Shape (4) Colour (3) Texture (2)
Effect of the gallery (126)	(Objects) Being in the gallery (39)  The theme of the exhibition (33)  Environment of the gallery (30)	Chinese art (18) Art (9) Chinese culture (6)  Comfortable (18) Easy to find out (9) Not too crowded (3)

	Style of the gallery (27)	Pleasant (9) Modern (8) Lively (6) Chinese (4)
Background knowledge (108)	Already known (52)  Interested (37)  Studying (19)	
Considerable Information provided by the gallery (89)	About the symbolic meaning (35)  Relate to the society (33)  Relate to the modern China (21)	
Time (60)	Need time to digest the information (39)       Frequency of visits (21)	Would like to spend more time on the visit (29) Actually spent as long time as they can (10)   Would like to visit frequently (14) Actually frequently visit (7)
Display mode (58)	Contextualisation (22)  Hands-on (19)  With illustrations (12)  With diagrams / charts (3)  Hi-Tec (video-audio devices) (2)	
Arrangement of displays (41)	Relationship with other displays (32)  Space around the display (9)	



Display style (32)	Attractive (23)	
	Pleasant (9)	

Note: The number in the bracket indicates the time of the occurrence of mentioning.

## 2. Visitors' expectations

Interviewees' expectations	Number of mentions
Authentic objects	84
Sufficient information	57
Relate to modern China	33
Information about taboos	18
Information about social laws in China	14
Gallery with Chinese atmosphere	5
Information about ethnic groups in China	4

Note: The number in the bracket indicates the time of the occurrence of mentioning.

## 3. Motivation for visiting (Appendix 11)

## 4. Comments on the information

Comments on the information	Number of mentions
Boundless information	17
Something new to be found	11
Too much information	7
Sufficient information	5
Superficial information	4

## 5. Sign-functions

Categories	Description	Number of occurrences
Index	Objects as indices referring to the source culture	172
Iconic	Icons as stimuli	235
	Symbolic signs of the source culture retreat to icons	97
	Icons of one of its phases in time	82
	Icons of other objects in the visitor's culture on the expression plane	77
	Icons of other objects in the source culture on the expression plane	35
	Icons of other objects in the source culture on the content plane	5
Pseudo - symbol	Symbolic meaning not understood	34
	Symbolic meaning according to visitor's cultural code	11

Categories	Number of occurrences
Semantic marker in visitors' code	194
Syntactic marker in visitors' code	105
Semantic marker in source culture	58
Syntactic marker in source culture	37

## 6. Jakobson's theory of communication functions:

Categories	Sub-categories	Number of occurrences
Connative function		136
Phatic function	Arrangement of the displays	75
	Direction signs	9
Emotive function	What on display	53
	Arrangement of the displays	18
Referential function	Information provided by the exhibition	31
	Visitor's experience of the source culture	23
	Information from the source culture	14
Metalingual function		56

## 7. Ways of comprehending

Categories	Number of occurrences
Deciphering	73
Opinionative	58
Intellectual	41
Communicative	23
Emotional	6

## 8. Ways of decoding

Categories	Number of occurrences
Aberrant decoding	94
Overcoding	47
Undercoding	41
Extracoding	36

## 9. Codes and sub-codes

Categories	Sub-categories	Further categories	Number of occurrence /mentioning
Visitors' own cultural code	Aesthetic code		135
	Cognitive code	Aesthetic code	34
		Iconic code of the objects on display	23
Linguistic code	Captions / Introductory panels		32
	Labels		28
	Information sheets		6
Iconic code of the objects on display	Aesthetic code		11
	Cognitive code		26
Design code	Display code		54
	Layout of exhibition		37

	Design of the gallery		28
The code of cross-cultural combination	Compare between codes		29
	Based on both codes of two cultures		26
The code of the source culture	Cognitive code	Iconic code of the objects on display	25
		Social code of the source culture	21

## Appendix 10: The interests background of interviewees

This appendix illustrates the self-reported interests background of the interviewees of the case study. The three areas of their specialist knowledge or interests about the displayed culture were (1) academic / professional (2) having visited China (3) having a personal interest in a particular topic.

### 1. Levels of specialist knowledge / interest

#### *(a). The self-reported interests background*

Description of the interest background	Number of interviewees
No idea about Chinese culture or art	1
Had know very little but just started to study Chinese art for their art projects	2
Had some interests and knowledge of Chinese culture and/or having visited China	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

#### *(b). The levels of their reported interests and knowledge*

Level of reported interests and knowledge	Number of interviewees
Considerable level	1
Certain level	2
Partial level	5
Limited level	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>

## 2. Details of interests:

Description	Number of interviewees
Museum educator	1
Teacher of children from a multicultural background	1
Photographer, fashion design, art and design, history and art student	5
Had visited China / Hong Kong	2
Teaching Tai-chi	1
Learning Chinese calligraphy	1
Has interest in religious sculptures	1
Personal interest in ceramics	4
Amateur interest in embroidery	1
Have Chinese friends/neighbours	3
Interested in knowing Chinese culture in general	9
No interest or knowledge	3

(Each person may have more than one interest, making the total figure of the list more than twelve).

## Appendix 11: Visiting pattern of the interviewees

### 1. Frequency of visiting

*(a). This table shows the frequency at which interviewees visit the Gallery:*

Number of visit	Number of interviewee	%
5	1	0.9
4	2	16.6
3	3	25
2	3	25
1	3	25

*(b). This table shows the frequency at which interviewees repeat their visits to other exhibitions of similar interest last year.*

Number of visit	Number of interviewee	%
3+.	3	25
3	2	16.6
2	2	16.6
1	2	16.6
0	3	25



## 2. Main purposes for visiting the Gallery

*(a). 10 out of 12 came to the exhibition on purpose:*

Category	Number of Interviewee	%
Intended visitor	10	75
Casual visitor	2	25

*(b). The intention of visit:*

Description	Number of interviewee
Enjoying displays of Chinese artefacts	9
Appreciating Chinese arts	4
Increasing knowledge about Chinese arts	3
Working on projects about Chinese art design	2

(Note: Each person may have more than one purpose, making the total figure of the list more than ten).

### 3. Motivations for visiting other similar exhibitions

#### (a). *The willingness of visit:*

Description	Number of interviewees
Would like to visit exhibitions only if it is convenient or necessary (such as school trips or doing projects)	3
Would like to visit exhibitions which interested them	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>

#### (b). *The intention of visit:*

(i) The answer to the questions: 'why do you visit this gallery' 'why do you go to exhibitions of other cultures'

Description	Number of interviewees	%
To see objects not seen elsewhere	4	44
To see the displayed objects	2	22
Curiosity	2	22
Interest	1	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>99</b>

(ii) Voluntarily mentioned during the interview

Description	Number of mentioning	%
To see objects not seen elsewhere	47	35.6

To see the object of the display culture	42	31.8
Interest	25	18.9
Curiosity	18	13.6
<b>Total</b>	132	99.9

#### 4. Types of favourite exhibitions

Description	Number of interviewees
Exhibiting something interesting and unusual	6
Exhibitions which is interesting and informative	2
Exhibitions which is interesting	1
<b>Total</b>	9

## Appendix 12: The significant and favourite objects chosen by the interviewees

### 1. The significant objects for the Chinese chosen by the interviewees

The object	Frequency of being suggested	The size of the object	The reason for choosing
The wood carved statue of Bodhisattva Guanyin	9	Height 114.2cm	The size, the intricacy of the object. Religious object. The frequency be seen of this type of items among Chinese artefacts. The way it is displayed.
Head of the Buddha in bronze	8	Height 108cm	The size, the intricacy of the object. Religious object. The way it is displayed.
The Sakyamuni Buddha in gilt bronze	7	Height 93cm	The material, the intricacy of the object. Religious object. The frequency be seen of this type of items among Chinese artefacts.
The Bodhisattva Guanyin in gilt bronze	7	Height 28.5cm	The material, the intricacy of the object. Religious object. The frequency be seen of this type of items among Chinese artefacts.
The statue of Guan-di	6	Height 120cm	The size, the intricacy of the object. Religious object.
The ancestor's portraits	5	183.5cm X 112cm	Religious object. Already known.
Objects for worshipping	3	various sizes	The intricacy of the object. Religious object. The frequency be seen of this type

			of items among Chinese artefacts.
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(The number indicates the frequency the object being suggested. Each interviewee has chosen more than one display).

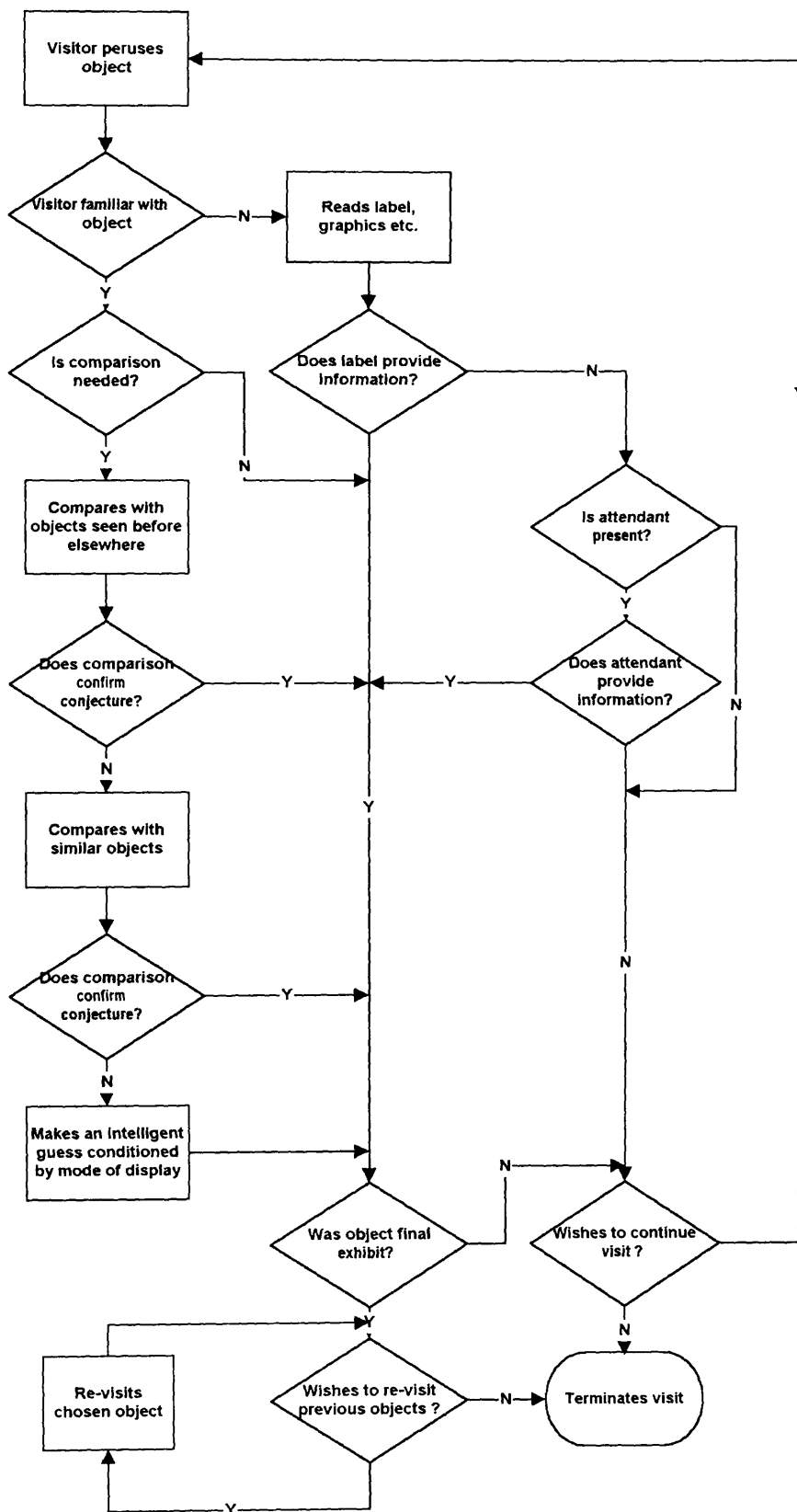
## 2. The visitor's favourite displays of T.T.Tsui Gallery

The object	Frequency of being mentioned	The size of the object	The category of the object	The reason for choosing
The wood carved statue of Bodhisattva Guanyin	11	Height 114.2cm	Religious	Aesthetic quality
The Sakyamuni Buddha in gilt bronze	10	Height 93cm	Religious	Aesthetic quality
The Bodhisattva Guanyin in gilt bronze	9	Height 28.5cm	Religious	Aesthetic quality
The statue of Guan-di	9	Height 120cm	Religious	Idiosyncratic quality
Ceramics in blue and white in general	9	Various size	Utensil	Aesthetic quality
'Fake' display	9	Various size	Utensil	New way of presenting
Head of the Buddha in bronze	8	Height 108cm	Religious	Aesthetic quality
Ceramics in general	6	Various size	Utensil	Aesthetic quality
Hands-on displays	5	Various size	Religious, Utensil	Aesthetic quality

displays			Utensil	quality
Silk robes	4	Approx. 140cm X 150cm	Textile	Aesthetic quality
Figures of horses from tombs	2	Approx. 74cm	Ritual	Aesthetic quality
Ancestor portraits	2	183.5cm X 112cm	Religious	Rarely seen
Figures of human being from tombs	1	Approx. 30-50cm	Ritual	Aesthetic quality
A bronze vessel in the form of a goose	1	Height 16.5cm	Utensil	Aesthetic quality
Jade horse's head	1	Height 14cm	Ritual	Aesthetic quality
Silver cups	1	Approx. 5-7cm	Utensil	Aesthetic quality
Bed	1	Height 206cm	Furniture	interesting, rarely seen

(The number indicates the frequency the display being mentioned. Each interviewee nominated more than one display).

## Appendix 13: General Pattern in interpreting displays of another culture



The chart above shows the visitors' patterns of interpreting which were identified after analysing the data resulting from the interviews in T.T.Tsui Gallery.



## Appendix 14: The common motifs / themes of Chinese culture identified by interviewees from the displays

Motifs/themes	Why	How
Religious themes	Frequently seen	By objects and labels
Supernatural and nature worshipping	Frequently seen	By objects and labels
Blue and white (ceramics)	Frequently seen	By objects
Dragon	Frequently seen	By objects
Flowers	Frequently seen	By objects
Willows	Frequently seen	By objects
Horoscope	Impression	By objects
Red colour	Impression	By the design of the gallery.

(This is in the order of frequency the motif/theme being suggested. Each interviewee has identified more than one motifs/themes).

It can be seen from the above that the decision made by interviewees are based on their own code.

## Appendix 15: Examples of interviewees' interpretants of the emic units

*1. Whilst the researcher pointed to a displayed object, the interviewee was asked: 'When you look at this object, what do you notice? What comes to your mind now? For what reason?'*

Displayed Object	Emic Units	What interviewee noticed	Interviewee's interpretant
A robe with the Chinese character for long life, bat, peony, and chrysanthemum Patterns	Symbolism. Symbolic meaning of those patterns such as long life, happiness, wealth, etc, Expectation of a woman's life.	An embroidered silk robe with patterns of flowers.	Gorgeous material and fine needle work. Delicate design.
A robe with bamboo and plum blossom patterns.	Symbolism. Symbolic meanings of bamboo and plum blossom. Expectation of a man's virtue.	A velvet robe with flower patterns.	Nice material. Warm. Similar to women's robe.
A figure of a toad	Symbolism. Attaching good meaning to unattractive creatures to pursue a good relationship with nature. A very common symbol, of wishing for wealthy.	A toad with unattractive bearing.	Unattractive.
A Ruyi (backscratcher) with cicada, bat, peach,	Symbolism. Symbolic meanings of cicada, bat,	A Chinese object with unknown function. / A	Delicate. Exquisite carvings.

pomegranate, etc. patterns.	peach, pomegranate, etc.	Chinese backscratcher.	
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**2. 'What in your opinion does this object/motive/pattern suggest to Chinese people? (colours/shapes, dark/light, words/symbols, underlying meaning, etc.)**

Displayed Object /motif /pattern	Emic Units	What interpretant interviewees choose
Bamboo	Maintaining good relationships (5.2).  Symbolism (Appendix 3)  Humanism (5.2)	at ease with nature; strong; hungry; furniture; light; dark, menacing; oriental; dry, stiff; oriental; strength, earth; light, feathery; simple; beautiful; seems artistic.
Bat	Maintaining good relationships (5.2).  Symbolism (Appendix 3)  Humanism (5.2)	small; free; dark, depressing, dismal; darkness; hidden; uncomfortable; quick, lively; night fears; flight, air; small; hideous, wicked.
Dragon	Maintaining good relationships (5.2).  Symbolism (Appendix 3)  Humanism (5.2)	awe-inspired, fear, fire, power, strong, fierce, scared; powerful; energy; fierce, bright.
Fish	Maintaining good relationships (5.2).  Symbolism	graceful; calm; cool; peace; happy, well fed; released; cold, wet; peace; fluid; water, touch, cold

	(Appendix 3) Humanism (5.2)	
Owl	Maintaining good relationships (5.2).  Symbolism (Appendix 3)  Humanism (5.2)	wise; knowledge; natural
Peony	Maintaining good relationships (5.2).  Symbolism (Appendix 3)  Humanism (5.2)	admire the beauty; pearl; peaceful; beautiful; sweetness, open, free; colourful, shape is restful; life; opening

**3. 'I am going to read you some of the common meanings of Chinese symbols, could you tell me which pattern presents these meanings by pointing to objects displayed in this gallery?'**

Meanings of Chinese symbols	The motif bearing the meaning of the displayed objects	Object / motif /pattern chose by interviewees	The Chinese meaning of the chosen object / motif / pattern
Happiness	Bats  cloud  cranes  Fu xing	A picture of a banquet  Pictures of fairy persons  A vase  Peony  Fish	Good relationship  Long-life  Peaceful  Wealth  Affluence

Long-life	Bamboo Daoism deities Eight Immortals Fungus The Chinese character of long life Peach Pear Pine tree Royal Mother of the West	Quan-yin Tomb figures Buddha Antiques Pictures Bronze items	Children Afterlife Blessing (Individual item has different meaning)
Peaceful	Vase Cloud Crane	Quan-yin Buddha Tomb figures Pictures Bed	
The symbol of state / ruling	Tripod cauldrons An incense burner in the shape of a Ding	Imperial throne Dragon robe for an emperor	Emperor Emperor
The symbol of the Chinese themselves	dragon	(don't know)	

## Appendix 16: Examples of aberrant coding occurring in the visitor's interpretation

(There are others but these are the most common).

Sign-vehicle	Emic units of the source culture	Message decoded by the visitor
Food and drinks container in Burial section	Value food and drinks as essential for surviving.	Surely Chinese they must believe that there is another life otherwise the deceased couldn't have food after they died.
A robe with the Chinese character for long life, bat, peony, and chrysanthemum Patterns	Symbolism. Symbolic meaning of those patterns such as long life, happiness, wealth, etc.,	Gorgeous material. Fine needlework. Delicate design.
A figure of a toad	God of wealth. Wishing for wealthy.	Unattractive. Ugly. Hideous.
A statue of Guan-di	Symbolism. Gods were real people.	Typical Oriental wood sculpture. Wicked fairy figure.
A jar with the motif of deer	Symbolism. The symbolic meaning of a deer: Good income, riches.	Father Christmas and his reindeers.

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