



Defining Chinese and China-related cultural heritage in Europe: a conceptual scheme



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction and rationale.....	3
1.1	Flows – good to think with.....	4
1.2	Defining China and its heritage.....	6
2	Flows through cultural heritage items: the scheme.....	10
2.1	The flow of objects.....	10
2.2	The flow of ideas and practices (knowledge).....	12
2.3	The flow of people.....	15
3	Further readings.....	16

1 Introduction and rationale

This document was realized in the framework of [PAGODE – Europeana China](#) project, to serve as a guidance in understanding the context of the project’s focus and theme: Chinese heritage in Europe, as depicted by a variety of cultural heritage items in the holdings of European cultural institutions such as museums, libraries and photographic archives.



This attempt to delineate Chinese and China-related cultural heritage in Europe sets out from the widely accepted position that deciding what is heritage is an inherently political action: recognizing something as heritage accords significance to it, it brings attention and promises preservation. It is an act of inclusion, yet at the same time it is also – deliberately or not, a tool of exclusion. As a boundary-drawing process, heritage is always an interpretation of the past from the position of the present and is thus inevitably bound up with the questions of power. They may relate to issues of gender, class, ethnicity, nationalism, imperialism, colonialism. The more culturally and socially diverse the societies are, the more convoluted the arguments may be of what counts as heritage and whose heritage it is. In politically conflicting situations, subsuming the past of one community into that of another may be viewed as an act of domination and appropriation. Therefore, any endeavour to define heritage must proceed with caution, taking into account the particular circumstances and potential effects of the definition’s use.

For PAGODE – Europeana China, developing a working set of criteria to judge which cultural heritage items may be considered as “China-related” is fundamental to the curated content selection in the project that is meaningful in itself as well as in terms of user engagement via digital tools. Additionally, understanding the conceptual definitions that drive the selection of content, supports a meaningful description of the objects in light of developing rich and effective metadata that help search and retrieval of the objects across digital repositories. Overarching aim of the selection and curation is to ensure that the cultural heritage materials collected and presented in the project generate rich user experiences.

This particular attempt to define what might be understood as Chinese or China-related cultural heritage in Europe has thus been undertaken in the early project period, by addressing the specific needs and taking into consideration the questions arising from the already digitised or soon to be digitised material of the partner and associate partner institutions.

1.1 Flows – good to think with

To avoid some of the pitfalls indicated above, our starting position is to approach Europe and China not as two clearly bounded, discrete, separate entities, but as a space of diverse interactions and rich exchange throughout history. We use the well-established anthropological notion of flows to underline the connections and circulations between the two regions. Based on what is “on the move”, we address the Europe-China space through three main types of flows: (1) of objects, (2) of ideas and practices (knowledge) and (3) of people.

The flow of objects is probably most self-evident, as objects from China find themselves in European museums and galleries, libraries and archives and are the very thing to be digitized within this project. The routes of the objects to their current locations have been varied and the mapping of networks that enabled this movement (e.g. Silk Road, diplomatic and religious missions, art dealers and collectors), too, must be considered a part of this broadly envisaged understanding of Chinese and China-related cultural heritage in Europe.

Many objects were brought to Europe by Europeans who travelled to China either for brief visits or longer stays. The most prominent groups include missionaries, traders, diplomatic and military personnel and adventurers. However, the flow of people was not merely unidirectional. At least since the Roman period/Han dynasty, Chinese have been making their way to Europe, many settling here permanently over the last century, forming communities whose material and nonmaterial culture is both a part of Europe and a part of China. Also, the European colonial expansion turned some long-existing overseas Chinese communities into inhabitants of Western

empires, while at the same time instigating new waves of labour migration to Europe and other parts of the world. Anything that documents the lives of individuals and communities in the Europe-China space and offers a reflection on this intercultural connection also comes under the purview of this project.

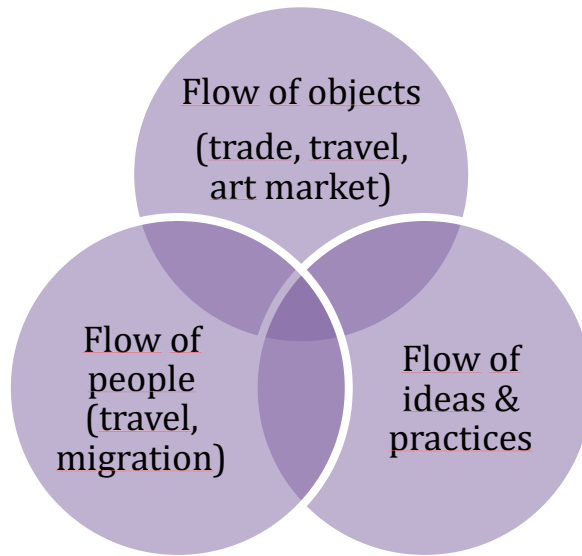


Fig. 1: The three flows of interactions and exchange between China and Europe

Both objects and people have been a vehicle for yet a third kind of exchange, that of ideas and practices (knowledge) – philosophical, aesthetic, bodily, culinary, technical to name a few. Sometimes it is the knowledge itself that encourages the travel of people or objects such as the work-study programme in the first decades of the 20th century which brought many thousand Chinese, including later prominent intellectuals and leaders to France and Belgium. This flow also allows for the inclusion of immovable heritage through rich textual, and audio/visual documentation of gardens, architectural and urban design, archaeological excavation sites etc.

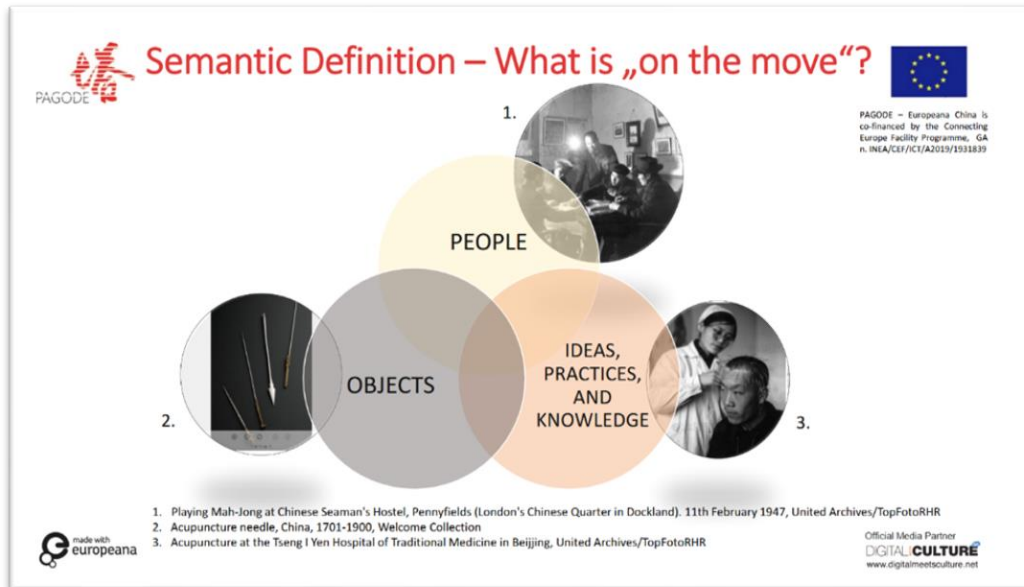


Fig. 2: Traditional Chinese Medicine as the interlacing of the three flows (presentation slide)

The three flows are often inextricably intertwined - think of a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine who migrates to Europe to open his practice, bringing with him his books and his equipment as well as a new conception of body and mind, illness and cure. Nevertheless, it is useful to keep the three flows analytically distinct in order to foster a broader, more imaginative and more inclusive understanding of what constitutes Chinese or China-related cultural heritage in Europe.

1.2 Defining China and its heritage

Europe and China, of course, are not simple, self-evident geographical regions. They are entities with complex histories of waning and waxing political and cultural borders, with contested definitions of who belongs and who not. Furthermore, the current understandings may differ significantly from those of the past, the past on which we are now imposing the label of heritage. For the purpose of this project, Europe is defined by the scope of countries of content providers

to Europeana. In historical terms, it also encompasses colonies of those countries. On the other hand, China is defined in terms of the territories of all dynasties/states that identified themselves as Chinese and were acknowledged or recognized as legitimate government in the traditional Chinese historiography.

In line with the above, any object produced in a place that was part of China at the time of its production can be considered at least partly Chinese regardless who it was made by or whether it was intended for local consumption or for export.¹ Moreover, it is still necessary to distinguish for e.g. between the porcelain manufactured for use in China from that produced to be sold abroad, or between the silk robe made locally to be worn by a Chinese courtier and a European dress made from a piece of silk woven in China. We therefore propose a distinction between “Chinese heritage” and “China-related” heritage, which is particularly salient in the analysis of objects.

Objects of “Chinese” heritage are those that were made in China, primarily from Chinese materials with Chinese technology, at least partly based on Chinese designs or aesthetic principles. Both types of ceramics mentioned above are thus included in this category. Objects that were made in China as (semi-)products and were processed elsewhere, such as the piece of silk fabric, however, are construed as “China-related” heritage. This “China-related” category is limited to pre-1978, i.e. before the period of the opening up of the People’s Republic of China and the subsequent move of large swaths of global industrial production there.

Objects, designs, and ideas and practices that were inspired by those in China represent another subcategory of “China-related” heritage. Chinoiserie with its imitation of Chinese motifs and techniques in art, architecture and design is the most prominent example of such heritage, but Leibniz’ philosophy, fusion kitchen or contemporary fashion designs are equally construed as China-related heritage in Europe.

In addition to the territorially based demarcation, “Chinese” further indicates anything written in Chinese language and/or script. In the context of this project texts or books that are written entirely or partly in Chinese language/characters (e.g. dictionaries) may be considered as Chinese heritage, no matter who authored them or where they were produced. Furthermore, Chinese cultural heritage in Europe includes translations of Chinese literary and non-fiction writing into European languages, but by analogy it can be broadened to include such translations into any other language. Books on any aspect of Chinese society and culture, written in foreign languages fall under China-related heritage.

¹ There are some exceptions to this definition with regard to minorities, on which more below.

In terms of people, defining “Chinese” is an extremely complicated and politically sensitive subject. In European languages, there tends to be no distinction between “Chinese” that connotes belonging to the political unit, i.e. the Chinese state(s) in all their historically diverse iterations, and “Chinese” denoting an ethnic group or a people that is defined by Chinese language and certain cultural practices.² The two cannot be considered congruent and by equating them we impose one particular narrative on a very contested past. Contemporary China is ethnically remarkably diverse, as were its predecessors. Some of the groups which make up 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities in China today have historically formed large independent states, exerting political, economic, cultural influence in the larger Asian region. Others formed smaller political entities whose fortunes ebbed and flowed. Their relations with respective Chinese states were diverse, changing over time. Some of the groups consider themselves exclusively a part of China, others maintain strong emotional and political links with other countries. For the reasons outlined above, in this project the notion of Chinese people (as opposed to the people(s) of China) is limited to the majority ethnic group, including individuals and communities residing outside China as a result of either historical or recent migration. The notion of Chinese culture is limited to the practices of Han and of sinicized non-Han rulers and other inhabitants of China.

In line with the arguments presented above, we argue for one caveat in the definition of Chinese objects. Although produced within the borders of China, objects that were made by one of the non-Han groups for their own consumption are excluded from this working definition of Chinese. For e.g. Tibetan religious objects produced and used in Tibet are not to be included in this project, but the same types of objects used in the Tibetan Buddhist temples associated with the Manchu court are considered as Chinese cultural heritage. Similarly, the texts produced by minorities in their languages and scripts where the content is not a translation of a Chinese text or a discussion on Chinese society and culture (such as Naxi texts of Dongba religious tradition in Leiden University Libraries) are not to be included at this stage. The only exceptions are Mongol texts from the Yuan dynasty and Manchu texts from the Qing dynasty when the respective groups served as dynastic rulers of China and have been recognized as such in Chinese historiography.

To sum up, the definition of Chinese and China-related heritage elaborated above and presented in a more schematic manner below, is an attempt at historically and socially sensitive understanding of rich material and ideational exchanges between Europe and China, highlighting transcultural dimensions, mutual influences and transformations. Our deliberations on the complex nature of what is Chinese further show how fraught with danger of imposition, appropriation, and exclusion un-reflected use of such denotations may be. Throughout the

² The latter group is usually referred to as Han, a group which has its own very complex history of ethnogenesis and self-identification.

development of this definition, we tried to strike a balance between the desire to include the wonderful, even extraordinary material held in our partners' and associated partners' institutions and a more cautious approach dictated by the insights of contemporary scholarship on heritage. Our initial arguments were refined in response to the partners' queries and it is important to stress once again that this definition was primarily devised for the PAGODE – Europeana China project. Nevertheless, it is our hope that others may find it a useful in considering their own material.

2 Flows through cultural heritage items: the scheme

The following list of types of things that may be considered as the material and immaterial Chinese/China related cultural heritage in Europe is by no means exhaustive. The scheme and the examples provided here are intended as a basic identification guideline or a prompt for discovering this rich and diverse heritage.

2.1 The flow of objects

Cultural heritage items representing:		
CHINESE OBJECTS	CHINA-RELATED OBJECTS	DOCUMENTATION OF NETWORKS THAT ENABLE THE FLOW OF OBJECTS

Chinese objects

1. made in China (= location was part of the Chinese state at the time of object's production) with Chinese materials, technology, and design, for consumption at home or abroad
2. made by Chinese (= Han) overseas, including in Europe and European colonies (incl. Hong Kong under British rule)

In practice, this includes anything from Hong Kong and pre-1949 Taiwan. It excludes Tibetan, Uyghur and other non-Han objects if they were used only by the non-Han, but it includes non-Han production when used by the state (court, officials etc.) and the Han, or, in the case of texts, if they are official documents, translations of Chinese texts or discussions about China.

Photographs from non-Han regions of China can be included if they are construed as European imaginings of China (cf. flow of ideas).

Such as:

- Different types of vessels (made of different material, particularly ceramic, porcelain, bronze vessels, other metal work vessels, cloisonné, jade)

- Textile, clothing and footwear (different types of fabric samples, formal and informal imperial robes, hats, mandarin rank badges, sleeve bands, pendants, pouches, shoes, socks and accessories, purse set, suit of armour)
- Calligraphy, paintings and graphics (banner, paravan/screen, hanging scroll, handscroll, album, fan)
- Sculptures and architectural components (from caves, temples, palaces, gardens, roofs)
- Furniture
- Musical instruments and theatre objects
- Personal care objects (fans, snuff bottles, opium pipes)
- Games and toys (majiang, xiangqi - Chinese chess)
- Weapons and armours
- Official insignia (seals, flags, coat-of-arms, medals, awards, etc.)
- Numismatics
- Books and other printed material (albums, postcards, letters etc.)
- Photographs
- Different types of scientific and technological instruments, tools and machines, also for manufacturing the objects above (astronomical objects, abacus, scales)
- Ritual objects
- Cooking equipment and appliances
- Communication objects and electronics (Chinese brands of mobile phones, cameras, computers, electronic dictionaries etc.)
- Transportation objects
- Mixed Chinese-European or other Chinese-foreign style objects for foreign consumption: export ceramics, souvenirs (photo albums, paintings, embroideries etc.)

China-related objects

- (Semi-)products produced in China to be processed abroad
- Limited to pre-1978 period

Such as:

- clothes produced from China-made textiles

Documentation of networks that enable the flow of objects (cf. flow of people)

Any visual and or/written material, including maps, letters, receipts, inventory books, ledgers, diaries, etc. that documents the networks established across time.

Such as:

- Silk road

- Trading companies
- Missionary networks
- Art dealers and collectors
- GLAM curators
- World exhibitions
- Diplomatic gifts

2.2 The flow of ideas and practices (knowledge)

Cultural heritage items representing:		
ART, ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE DESIGN	PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS, SOCIAL THEORY (CF. RELIGION)	LITERATURE
MUSIC, FILM & THEATRE	BODY-MIND	FOOD
FASHION	RELIGION, RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND FESTIVALS	SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
EUROPEAN IMAGINING OF CHINA		

This flow is manifested in material and nonmaterial culture, it comprises objects, textual and audio/video records pertaining to objects, people, immovable sites, practices etc. It includes Western images of China in a broader sense, including things not Chinese if they were considered as Chinese (e.g. a photo of Japanese castle identified as a Chinese pagoda).

China is a source of many inventions, but if these have become so domesticated that China no longer serves as a reference point of any significance, the items may not be considered for this project (e.g. German noodle commercials).

Art, architecture and landscape design

Such as:

- Chinese art objects (cf. flow of objects)
- Chinoiserie - art and architecture inspired by Chinese aesthetics and objects (e.g. Chinese rooms, gardens)
- Chinese aesthetics in European modern art and architectural movements
- Chinatowns
- Art and architectural forms and techniques (e.g. pagoda)
- Spatial practices (e.g. fengshui)

Philosophy, politics, social theory (cf. religion)

Such as:

- European philosophy inspired by Chinese thought (e.g. enlightenment philosophy)
- Marxism
- Work-study movement
- Theosophy

Literature

Such as:

- Chinese fiction and poetry
- Western fiction and poetry inspired by (images of) China
- Any fiction that reflects the intercultural experience between Europe-China

Music, Film & Theatre

Such as:

- Chinese musical instruments and theatre objects (cf. flow of objects)
- Music inspired by Chinese music or thought (cf. Chinoiserie)
- Chinese puppets
- Recordings of Chinese oral traditions
- Popular culture revolving around martial art films

Body-mind

Such as:

- Bodily practices (e.g. qigong, tai chi, kung fu, various forms of meditation)
- Traditional Chinese medicine (TMC): writings of and on TMC, documentation on practitioners (Chinese and non-Chinese) of the TMC in Europe

Food

Such as:

- Tea culture, other alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages
- Chinese food, its adaptation and fusion (incl. cook shows, cookbooks)

- Chinese restaurants in Europe (cf. flow of people, interior design etc.)
- Kitchen utensils and appliances (incl. Western brands of rice cookers)
- Noodles - in more narrow terms of “origin stories” and noodles that still bear some mark of “China”

Fashion

Such as:

- Traditional Chinese clothes, shoes, accessories, fabric samples (cf. flow of objects)
- China-inspired European fashion design

Religion, religious practices and festivals

Such as:

- Chinese Buddhism (e.g. books, temples in China & Europe, meditation practices)
- Various life cycle and year-cycle celebrations (e. g. Spring festival/Chinese New Year, Dragon Boat races)
- Texts and practices related to various religious traditions, both native Chinese as well as “imported”
- Missions and missionaries (e.g. Christian in China, Buddhist in Europe)

Science and technology

Such as:

- Objects related to science and technology (cf. flow of objects, architecture, food preparation)
- Famous and less famous inventions, the knowledge of their use
- Treatises and textbooks, correspondence related to the flow of such knowledge (e.g. missionaries’ letters)
- Cartography
- Handicrafts forms and techniques
- Knowledge of nature and environment (e.g. fengshui, water management)

European imagining of China

Includes representations that are not in fact of China and Chinese but are/were once considered as such.

Such us:

- Through the arts (see other categories in the flow of ideas and practices)
- Through photography, film
- Through popular culture

2.3 The flow of people

Cultural heritage items representing:	
EUROPEANS WHO HAD VISITED CHINA OR SETTLED THERE FOR VARYING LENGTHS OF TIME	CHINESE WHO VISITED EUROPE OR SETTLED HERE FOR VARIOUS LENGTHS OF TIME

Europeans who had visited China or settled there for varying lengths of time

Includes objects they have brought with them/sent from China, various official documents related to their life and work in China (e.g. residence permits, student cards), their private correspondence and personal documentation (e.g. letters, postcards, diaries, videos, emails), their publications or texts intended for publication (travelogues, media reports, fictional writing), photographs (e.g. taken by them, made to their order, photo collections brought back by them), artwork produced in China/inspired by China, technical and other designs created during their stay in China or based upon Chinese knowledge, things related to community life, especially in concessions.

Such as:

- Missionaries (e.g. Jesuits, Franciscans, Salesians)
- Diplomats, military
- Travelers/ adventurers/ explorers
- Researchers/ experts
- Traders/ entrepreneurs
- Journalists
- Refugees/ exiles (e.g. Jews in Shanghai)
- Students, activists (e.g. language students, Maoists)

Chinese who visited Europe or settled here for various lengths of time

Includes objects brought upon their arrival, objects and practices used within Chinese communities in Europe, objects and records related to community life, personal objects and documents that explicitly or implicitly reflect this intercultural experience.

Such us:

- Students (e.g. work/study movement, regular students)
- Traders, peddlers
- Entrepreneurs (e.g. restaurant owners & workers, textile industry in Northern Italy)
- TMC doctors
- Refugees
- Politicians and diplomats

3 Further readings

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