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COMMENT

'Exhibit Asia' and its Deconstruction through Collaborative Online Learning

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Abstract

In 2022, the Centre for Global South Asia (CGSA) at Royal Holloway University of London developed a small research project entitled 'Exhibit Asia'. The aim was to explore the use of exhibitions in nation-making in postcolonial South and East Asia in contrast to the scholarly preoccupation with investigating the region's history of museums and exhibitions primarily in a colonial context. Its academic outcomes were to be a conference and related publication; but we also wanted our research to be relevant to our students. The resulting intervention in the teaching and learning of history took the form of a curatorial fellowship for an international cohort of ten students from Taiwan, Japan, India, Pakistan and the UK, leading to a co-curated online exhibition. The first section of this article sets out the development, design and delivery of the fellowship and discusses the viability and relevance of such projects. The subsequent three sections are co-authored by several of the participating students. They outline their methods, reflections and learnings; share their insights on the role of exhibitions in perceptions of Asia in the UK today; and analyse responses to 'Tea and Tigers', the online exhibition that was the outcome of the fellowship.

Keywords: museums; nation-building; postcolonial; teaching and learning; Asia

Introduction

In 2022, the Centre for Global South Asia (CGSA) at Royal Holloway University of London developed a small research project entitled 'Exhibit Asia: Partition and the Transition to Nation States in South and East Asia'. Its academic outcomes were to be a conference and related publication; but we also wanted our research to be relevant to our students and thus saw this as an opportunity to make a pedagogical intervention in the teaching and learning of history. The academic rationale for the research project shaped the way that these goals were accomplished, and so it is relevant first to outline them.

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The 1947 partition of British India into the Dominions (later republics) of India and Pakistan, and latterly Bangladesh, is a well-known event that has spawned a vast body of research. Successive generations of scholars have offered new interpretations of partition and its legacies.[1] In similar fashion, the 'partition' or division of China into the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland since 1949 has contributed not only to the fraught geopolitics of East Asia, but also to a growing divergence in culture and historical consciousness on either side of the Taiwan Strait.[2] We are currently three-quarters of a century away from most of these events, a period shorter than Asia's experience of Western colonialism and imperialism, and still just within living memory. Narratives of colonial victimhood continue to play a prominent part in public discourse in both East and South Asia. Our themes and questions therefore remain highly relevant to efforts by regimes in these regions to 'use the past to serve the present' (as Chairman Mao put it during the Cultural Revolution).[3] Furthermore, given the phenomenon of post-colonial and post-partition migration (whether forced or voluntary), we were also mindful that the historical ruptures of the late 1940s continue to have a lasting impact on lived realities not only in South and East Asia, but also in communities much further afield, in the UK and the wider world.

Scholars have established that museums and exhibitions were key tools through which colonial regimes constructed narratives or histories for their colonies;[4] and in territories still under forms of colonial rule today (e.g. Tibet, East Turkestan/Xinjiang), this has remained the case.[5] But they were also transformed into instruments for nation-building and citizen-making in postcolonial Asia.[6] Their 'social power extends far beyond their buildings', shaping how we think and imagine 'our nations and their place in the world', crucially, 'even among people who never come inside'.[7]

Our project built on these insights, with the aim of investigating how these very same tools have been repurposed to serve new national agendas across South and East Asia, and how established narratives have been unpicked, navigated or contested over time. India/Pakistan and Taiwan (ROC)/China (PRC) started out as contested entities each seeking to construct a unifying sense of national identity and culture from a shared past. The question we asked ourselves was: what role did exhibitions, arts and material culture play in this process – and how has that role evolved?

[1]For a sample, see Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya (eds.), *Partition and Post-colonial South Asia: A Reader* (3 vols; 2008).

[2]See Chris Shei (ed.), *Taiwan: Manipulation of Ideology and Struggle for Identity* (2021).

[3]On history education in China, see Alisa Jones, 'Changing the Past to Serve the Present: History Education in Mainland China', in *History Education and National Identity in East Asia*, ed. Edward Vickers and Alisa Jones (2005), 65–100.

[4]T. Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New Delhi, 2004).

[5]E. Vickers, 'Museums and Nationalism in Contemporary China', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 37 (2007), 365–82; C. Harris, *The Museum on the Roof of the World* (Chicago, 2012).

[6]K. Singh, 'The Museum is National', in *India: A National Culture?* ed. Geeti Sen (New Delhi, 2003), 176–96; M. Venkateswaran, 'Museums and the Fashioning of National History in Postcolonial Pakistan', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 47 (2023).

[7]P. Levitt, *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display* (Oakland, CA, 2015), 140.

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Moreover, the museum's seamless transition from tool of colonial control to engine of postcolonial nation-building mirrors the 'strange homonymy between colonial and anti-colonial discourses on education', and their use for nationalist propaganda and the schooling of citizens.[8] On the part of governing elites in modern nation-states there has always been (and remains) a strong sense that the peasant requires education to become a true citizen.[9] It has been observed that 'post-War redrawings of territorial maps or post-revolutionary political and social upheavals are typically followed by the deployment of 'weapons of mass instruction',[10] designed to socialise the young into new forms of identity – – through the teaching of a standardised national language, history or an explicit ideology (religious or political)'.[11]

Given that our focus was on the construction of national narratives through exhibitions, we decided to show students – all of whom would inevitably have experienced forms of citizen-making education – how to *deconstruct* these narratives in theory and through their own practice. We felt this was an ideal way to apply our scholarship in a way that might have some meaningful impact beyond the academy. For students, it would offer the chance to implement the analytical and research skills that they had already learnt while studying history or related fields, and to acquire new skills through active and collaborative learning. We decided that the best way to achieve these goals was by designing a curatorial fellowship programme leading to an online exhibition.

The Fellowship was planned to run for four weeks. International colleagues who were working with CGSA for the Exhibit Asia conference were keen to have their students participate too, so we agreed to offer two places to students from each colleague's institution. The rationale for this was to allow pairs of students to work together (face-to-face) in the same location, enabling them to create a shared (immediate) learning environment. Each institutional colleague took responsibility for selecting and mentoring students from their own university or college. In the end, we assembled a cohort of ten students: two each from Royal Holloway (UK), Kyushu University (Japan), National University of the Arts (Taiwan), Delhi University (India) and National College of Arts (Pakistan).

Designing and delivering the fellowship

It was clear from the outset that the programme would need to accommodate different levels of knowledge and skills, due to the students' diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, it was felt to be essential to identify or create a common baseline of knowledge that all Fellows could share, and from which they could build. The first week (out of four) was therefore dedicated to covering key topics through seminars and workshops. Sessions were dedicated to outlining the histories of modern and contemporary South and East Asia, discussing the histories of museums in the region

[8]K. Kumar, *Politics of Education in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2014), 14.

[9]E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Redwood City, CA).

[10]J. T. Gatto *Weapons of Mass Instruction: A Schoolteacher's Journey Through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling* (Gabriola Island, 2009) cited in *Constructing Modern Asian Citizenship*, ed. E. Vickers and K. Kumar (2014), 15.

[11]*Ibid*.

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during the same period, reviewing practical examples of curating exhibitions in these regions, and some brief training in the technical skills or knowledge needed to curate and design an online exhibition.

The scholarly content was delivered by a network of colleagues, many of whom were already collaborators on the academic side of the project. In addition to historians from Royal Holloway, they included the Director of the National Museum of Taiwan History, historians from Queen Mary University of London, National College of Arts Lahore, Kyushu University, and the Royal Asiatic Society. The Heritage Lab or THL was the online platform partner which provided both the training and the technical support the Fellows would need to realise their vision.

Sessions were co-taught and ran for no more than two hours each. Students were provided with up to three preparatory readings, and each session was broken up to include mini lectures and activities to promote active learning within the cohort. The mode of delivery for the Fellowship was virtual. All seminars, workshops and meetings were held on MS Teams. All reading materials were collated and placed in a shared folder organised week by week, including the Word documents featuring the tasks on which teachers wanted Fellows to collaborate for pre- and in-session activities. At the end of each seminar, PowerPoint slides used in the session were also placed in the relevant day's folder. The seminars were all recorded and made available for Fellows to consult for the duration of the Fellowship. Local mentors were available to provide feedback and guidance as necessary to the pair of students in their own institution, and regular check-ins and feedback sessions were scheduled throughout the fellowship. The Fellows also created a WhatsApp group to facilitate communication among themselves, contributing further to the creation of a shared learning environment. In addition to designing and co-curating an online exhibition, the Fellowship also included an opportunity for the Fellows to present their work at the Exhibit Asia Conference (31 August–2 September 2023) and contribute to a publication in an academic journal – that is, this Roundtable.

Outcomes, feedback and reflections

The Fellows ultimately produced an imaginative and creative online exhibition entitled 'Rethinking Asia: Tea and Tigers', hosted on THL. Their brief was to produce a single co-curated exhibition that would encompass the different regions of Asia from which they came, or which they had been studying. During their seminars and their own conversations, they rapidly identified national symbols and their changing meanings – over both time and space – as a common thread that would enable them to address the broad sweep of both South and East Asian history, and related cultures and identities. A few other topics – such as the opium trade or slavery – were discussed as alternative or additional themes, but given the tight schedule, they were encouraged to do what was practicable, even though these alternative ideas were in no way dismissed.

The exhibition has a simple structure – one section explores Asian connections through tea; another traces the significance of tigers; and a third brings the two together (for example by discussing novels or works of fiction in which both feature). Visitors are also offered three quizzes as a way to test their knowledge and arouse their curiosity before they explore the exhibition.

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Table 1. Summary of visitor numbers from launch to October 2024

	12 August (exhibition launch)–31 August 2023	By October 2024
Total number of unique visitors to home page	12,855	233,182
Views per user	2.28 pages/engagement time: 2:33 seconds (relatively good by web content standards, since it suggests that people spent time on the site rather than immediately clicking away)	2.56 pages
No. of clicks	2,261	Not available as analytics have changed.
Geographic regions (not accurate because of cookie settings)	India (highest) followed by US, UK, Pakistan, Bangladesh, France, UAE	
Quiz players Tea & Tigers	706	Not available as quizzes changed by THL.
Quiz players Tea	914	
Quiz players Tigers	1,528	

Responses to the exhibition from colleagues and the public were overwhelmingly positive (see Table 1). Colleagues were impressed by the speed with which Fellows were able to identify narratives and themes for the exhibition. THL reported verbally that they were impressed by the organisation and coordination that the Fellows demonstrated. Almost all Fellows said they felt they had achieved the goals they had in mind when they signed up to the programme, and almost all aspects of the Fellowship were rated 'Good' or higher (3 or above on a scale of 1–5). Fellows reported having gained fresh perspectives on their own and others' national histories and nationalism more broadly; greater knowledge and awareness of Asia including in relation to British portrayals and perceptions of the region; and a critical appreciation of the work that exhibitions do. They could also envision applying the new skills they had acquired. In terms of visitor statistics, too, the exhibition was a modest success.

Four of the Fellows were able to participate in the Exhibit Asia Conference that took place from 31 August to 2 September 2023 at Royal Holloway, where they presented both the exhibition and their experience of the Fellowship. Hearing from them about the specific skills and learning that they gained made clear that the project had succeeded as a pedagogical exercise, and several conference participants who were also academics and teachers thought it was a model that they might like to replicate.

Aside from insufficient thought having been given to promoting the exhibition and investing in its sustainability – which the Fellows themselves reflect on in their own contributions to this Roundtable – the main problem areas related to communication amongst Fellows and between Fellows and instructors. One factor here was undoubtedly varying levels of English proficiency across the cohort and amongst the instructors; for this reason, several Fellows seemed to feel a little out of their

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depth. Cultural differences also made themselves felt (for example in terms of willingness to speak up in discussions), as did idiosyncrasies of expression. Our discussions with Fellows reassured us that, for the most part, the students sought to support one another and address any confusion, as they had been explicitly encouraged to do at the outset. As collaborative learning (including problem-solving) was one of the goals of the Fellowship, grappling with such difficulties should not necessarily be construed in a negative sense, even though some Fellows perceived it in this way. There were also some logistical challenges (reported by both mentors and Fellows) involving unreliable internet connections and clunky software, highlighting the less-than-perfect nature of the online environment with which any such programme must contend.

While we were highly satisfied with the conduct of the Fellowship overall and convinced that this is a model worth refining and deploying more widely, it is worth acknowledging an important limitation to which the students themselves allude in their reflections: the relative homogeneity of the participating Fellows. This may seem paradoxical, since participants were of various nationalities and based in highly diverse locations (the UK, India, Pakistan, Taiwan and Japan). However, on another level, they were rather similar in that all were postgraduate students, English-literate (albeit to varying degrees), and selected by professors or lecturers who themselves belong to a global community of liberal-minded anglophone scholars. In a world increasingly riven by inequalities of class, educational access and opportunity, postgraduate students – however geographically dispersed, and whatever their ethnicity or nationality – arguably share more in common with each other than they do with their less educated, less privileged co-nationals. By and large, it is not postgraduates in the humanities and social sciences who are lining up to support chauvinist nationalism in South Asia, East Asia, Europe or North America. As scholars and educators, we need to remind ourselves that promoting greater tolerance and understanding within and between our societies will ultimately require more than bringing together relatively like-minded elites. Nevertheless, bringing together this transnational cohort to reflect on the politics of public history and attempt to reconcile, or at least understand, divergent national narratives represents an important start.

Finally, while the programme challenged students to transcend and question national narratives, it did not address the structures, institutions and practices that produce and maintain those narratives in the first place. Students noted how various aspects of national history were regarded as politically contentious, and also observed that museums in some societies – notably Taiwan – seemed more open than those in others to questioning established narratives and exploring new perspectives on the past. However, they did not discuss why some societies, or their cultural and educational institutions, appear more or less open to inviting debate on matters of historical controversy. Across modern Asia (although not only there), legacies of anti-colonial nationalism and state-led modernisation have meant that the central role of the state in shaping public historical narratives has tended to be taken for granted. Challenging state-centred historiography in the hope of promoting more tolerant and critical perspectives ultimately requires us to confront the political and institutional realities of the present. Just as authoritarians and nationalists seek to 'use the past to serve the present', shoring up their own legitimacy, those intent on promoting alternative

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approaches may be compelled to recognise that theirs is 'ultimately a political struggle, not a purely educational one'.[12]

Reflections on the Exhibit Asia Curatorial Fellowship and 'Tea and Tigers' exhibition

Nicholas Davidge, Varisha Shaikh and Margaux Gackiere

The Exhibit Asia Curatorial Fellowship brought together ten Fellows based in Japan, Taiwan, India, Pakistan and the UK.[13] We were tasked with curating an online exhibition relating to the contested histories of South and East Asia. More specifically, we were pushed to confront critically and deconstruct the national narratives built on those histories. The exhibition we decided to create used the transnational symbols of tea and tigers to explore the contested and shared histories of these regions, and allowed for cross-cultural insights.

The Fellowship began with an intensive two weeks of seminars, workshops, readings and group exercises. We learnt about the contested histories of South and East Asia, and how views about that history vary considerably from the perspective of different countries. We discussed how multiple perspectives on colonial and national experiences coexist and how they may be influenced by class, education, ethnicity and political affiliation. We also considered how historians could process and present these sometimes-contradictory views.[14] For example, when researching and discussing the changing representations of Japan's colonial legacy in Taiwan, we realised just how sensitive and politicised such issues have become across the entire political spectrum. This is a living history that remains as contested as it was decades ago. Those of us who study Japanese colonialism and its impact on colonised subjects were shocked to learn that a number of Taiwanese today perceive Taiwan's period of colonial rule in a positive light. Other Taiwanese people and institutions, meanwhile, frame the period as merely one of several waves of colonial rule.

This range of attitudes, which did not always align with our own, prompted a challenging question: to what extent did we want our exhibition to reflect our own views at the cost of potentially reaching fewer people? We concluded by deciding to set aside our opinions and value-judgements to engage better with a wider audience. We also surveyed and discussed media sources on the histories of India and Pakistan, which allowed us to identify and critically engage with the factual and emotional strategies employed to present a particular narrative. For instance, one source – a video

[12]E. Vickers, 'Cure or Disease? History Education and the Politics of Reconciliation in East Asia', in *Negotiating Ethnic Diversity and National Identity in History Education*, ed. H. Ting and L. Cajani, 2023), 53–73.

[13]The Fellows were Bian Yudi and Margaux Gackiere (Kyushu University), Deepika Gupta and Amarjeet Singh (University of Delhi), Li Yen and Ching-Hsiang Hung (Taipei National University of the Arts), Nicholas Davidge and Adela Davis (Royal Holloway, University of London), Wareesha Shaikh and Humna Kazi (National College of Arts, Lahore). Tea and Tigers Exhibition: https://www.theheritagelab.in/tea-tigers-national-identity/.

[14]Some of the key readings guiding these discussions included: Barak Kushner, 'Nationality and Nostalgia: The Manipulation of Memory in Japan, Taiwan, and China since 1990', *The International History Review*, 29 (2007), 793–820; and Edward Vickers, 'Three Faces of an Asian Hero: Commemorating Koxinga in Contemporary China, Taiwan and Japan', in *Taiwan: Manipulation of Ideology and Struggle for Identity*, ed. Chris Shei (2021), 157–82.

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about the 'Untold History of the Mughals' – presented its claims as fact despite lacking reliable evidence and relied on humour to discredit the opposite point of view.[15] The video source is produced by an Indian-born YouTuber called The Sham Sharma Show who focuses on the politics, history and religion of South Asia. He claims to go against the bias of the typical narrative but does so with complete lack of evidence and in a nationalistic way.

We examined how museums are not neutral spaces because many of them are linked to the current and past cultural politics within their region, which could include both nationalism and colonialism. In evaluating British museums, we concentrated on the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), two major museums with profound links to colonialism. Although there have been attempts to confront these histories, such efforts are generally superficial rather than holistic. The display labels of the twenty-one objects of the British Museum's 'Collecting and Empire' trail, one such response to decolonisation, tend to use exculpatory – even celebratory – language to justify its acquisitions linked with colonialism (whether stolen, looted or bought). One such example is the 'Ancestral Screen from Nigeria', whose label celebrates that the British saved it from 'destruction by a local fundamentalist Christian movement'.[16] The trail is moreover optional and includes fewer than two dozen objects; it ultimately fails to contextualise and confront the scale of the museum's colonial history. Such analytical exercises pushed us to consider carefully how to present our narratives, and to further probe the agendas of our sources when it came to curating our own exhibition.

As we all came from diverse backgrounds and had varied interests, we were at first confused as to how to determine the theme of our exhibition. Rather than putting aside our personal experiences and pursuits, could we use them to enhance our exhibition? This way of thinking led us to focus on the topic of national symbols – one broad enough to accommodate our group's perspectives while lending cohesion to our goal of deconstructing national narratives. Tea and tigers are symbols that transcend physical and social boundaries throughout Asia and are recognised around the world: tigers are national political symbols; tea is a global commodity that is a national drink in many nations; and both can indicate status and social hierarchy. We decided to investigate these symbols through multiple micro-themes to allow us to cover more ground in a structured manner.

Our methods and process

One aspect central to our learning and our curatorial process was participating in conversations grounded in the ethos of cultural memory and personal storytelling. With participants representing a cultural mosaic, the exchange of oral narratives became a way to apprehend the intricate interplay of individual experiences and collective memory. We unearthed latent threads of cultural resonance that underscored the significance of symbols like tea and tigers across disparate geographies. This process not only facilitated a deeper understanding of our own cohort's cultural identities and

[15]The Sham Sharma Show, *Reality of Mughal Empire*, YouTube, 1 May 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFrulVxM5DY.

[16]British Museum, *Collecting and Empire Trail: Ancestral Screen from Nigeria*, https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/object-trails/collecting-and-empire-trail.

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attitudes but also laid the groundwork for constructing a narrative tapestry beyond national borders.

To complement our exploration of oral histories we critically dissected archival images depicting tea ceremonies, tiger motifs and related cultural practices, to unpack the symbolism and nuance of meaning embedded within them. We relied on digitised museum collections and other cultural platforms, such as the V&A and the Priya Paul Collection. We constantly asked ourselves how the biography of a particular collector or knowledge of an institution's past should impact our reading of the associated collection. The Priya Paul Collection, for example, is deeply entwined with tea, one of its namesake's business ventures – how does that affect the nature of its images? Choosing to include an image from this collection meant that we had to consider how it played into the perceptions of women and tea that the collection sought to promote. Overall, through this process, we discerned recurring motifs and visual tropes that underscored the enduring significance of these symbols within socio-political discourses.

As this was an online project, we were limited in terms of the objects or images that we could use, having to bear in mind issues of copyright. One major struggle was obtaining Japanese images. With the exception of the national museums, several digitised collections of Japanese museums had strict copyright regulations or seemed intentionally vague about the copyright status of their works, thus preventing us from using images of modern paintings, for instance. Another problem we encountered was the challenge of relating our themes to every region across all historical periods. We discovered that for South Asia, it was impossible to find objects relating to tea in ancient or medieval times because tea drinking was only prevalent in East Asia during this period. However, to compensate for this gap we focussed more on South Asia in relation to other themes and periods.

At the heart of our exhibition lay a collaborative process that we strove to infuse with mutual respect and tolerance. Prior to starting we agreed to foster an inclusive environment where each Fellow's view was regarded as valuable and worthy of consideration. We did this by ensuring that everyone had their turn to voice an opinion and share feedback during the curatorial process. Each Fellow contributed suggestions of objects to display and submitted a piece of writing. This allowed us to have a sense of both individual and collective ownership towards the exhibition so we could have pride in our own work.

However, collaboration was not without its challenges. These ranged from conceptual disagreements to logistical hurdles. Living in different time zones, each with a busy schedule, we could not always brainstorm ideas together or work as a group and instead had to work asynchronously. As for tensions and differences in opinions and perspectives, we realised that they could be used as opportunities for enriching dialogue and creative exchange. These extended to discussions of how the exhibition should be structured, and whether that should be chronological or thematic. We realised that due to the differing histories we were dealing with, the period that we had defined as 'Colonial' did not work for all the countries under consideration, since they experienced colonialism in different ways at different times. The conversations that we had regarding our own histories, societies, politics and cultures allowed us to understand the similarities but also the differences that existed for us. For example, one of our exhibits was about Boba tea. Our conversations led us to realise that while

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this originated in Japan, it had spread throughout Asia including Taiwan, and was also present in the UK. This allowed us to become creative in our thoughts about how tea and tigers transcended national boundaries. These divergent viewpoints, stemming from our varied cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, served as catalysts for critical reflection. Embracing a culture of constructive criticism and open communication, we navigated these points of contention with a shared commitment to the project's overarching objectives.

Future directions and sustainability

While the exhibition has undeniably served as a catalyst for critical dialogue and reflection amongst the participating Fellows, its potential impact extends far beyond. One promising avenue for future development would be to recalibrate the exhibition to resonate with either broader or more targeted audiences, thus enlarging the communities that it reaches. By harnessing the power of digital platforms and innovative outreach strategies, we could transcend physical boundaries and make the exhibition accessible to individuals across diverse geographical locations. It could, we feel, be an effective learning tool to nurture dialogue around contested histories, especially where citizens of neighbouring countries divided by partition cannot easily travel to or interact with one another. For example, curating a comparative and collaborative exhibition about communities underrepresented in national narratives across all of Asia would allow for a greater understanding of their feelings and opinions about these narratives and histories.

It is not only the exhibition that might be adapted for future use, but also the process of its creation. Learning together and co-curating an exhibition was a productive and valuable experience. We had eye-opening conversations, acquired or practised new skills as part of the process, and learnt about areas of history that some of us had never learnt or studied before.

This model could be reused in other projects and exhibitions for many regions across the world to facilitate important conversations around contested histories and other taboo subjects. These could address issues of both national and transnational significance, including the histories of partitioned territories such as Ireland and Korea, as well as colonial histories more broadly. Such projects offer the prospect of enhancing understanding across borders and boundaries, while resonating beyond just one section of society or one area of the world. The varied backgrounds of the co-curators can also make for an exhibition that is relatable for a larger and more diverse audience.

However, we acknowledge that even though our collaborative process was effective despite our varied ethnic and national backgrounds, our cohort was limited in its diversity. We had many commonalities: we were all university-educated and relatively like-minded, sharing a liberal and cosmopolitan outlook. We did not have to grapple with very different or polarising ideas about history and its presentation, such as fervent nationalism. This would have complicated our conversations and negotiations, probably leading to an impasse over important decisions. So while in terms of ideas and generalised outlook our group was fairly homogeneous, without this shared mindset, would the exhibition have ever become reality, or would something meaningful have come of it? That is open to debate; but we believe that there may still be value in attempting to reproduce such a collaborative project with a more variable

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group of Fellows with opposing outlooks and opinions as long as participants are willing to listen and respect others. The result may be an even richer and more imaginative portrayal of contested histories.

Art, museums and our understanding of Asia in Britain today

Bian Yu-Di, Ching-Hsiang Hung, Li-Yen, Nicholas Davidge

During the Exhibit Asia Conference, participating Fellows moderated a panel on 'Art, Museums and Our understanding of Asia in Britain Today', which included Prof Sarah Ansari, Dr Alison Ohta and Prof Edward Vickers. The panel explored the history of East and South Asia as presented in British museums and galleries, and how these representations shaped public perceptions of Asia, and addressed contemporary social issues. It included Fellows' responses to exhibitions then on view in UK museums, and other observations from Asian perspectives.

We began by exploring, both as individuals and as historians, how exhibitions in the UK have shaped public perceptions of Asia. First of all, the richness and complexity of exhibitions have helped academics and the public alike to re-examine Britain's relationship with other countries, which in turn has reshaped public perceptions. For example, the exhibition 'Suleiman the Magnificent', held at the British Museum in the early 1980s, featured a large number of Turkish artefacts, giving the British public a glimpse of a non-Western culture through physical objects, and to see the exquisite items that dated from the same period as the Tudors. We have also observed that in recent years, more emphasis has been placed on historical interpretation in exhibitions than on the display of artefacts alone.

When the discussion turned to the social function of museums, the key point that emerged is the frequent need to go back to the drawing board to think about how museums define their roles. What kind of organisation is a museum? What are the functions of a museum? How do museums work with the community? How should they develop social communication through exhibitions, and respond to the audience's expectations and interpretations of exhibitions? Perhaps the history of any country can be described as a people's museum, telling us the story of the people of the land – a story which undergoes a process of constant rewriting. Ideally, therefore, the mission of national museums is first and foremost to bring in more postcolonial or transnational perspectives to avoid any form of hegemonic state narratives.

We also found that we need to take the issue of independent curatorial funding seriously. The sources of funding for exhibitions, and the power and ideology they represent, can interfere with a museum's narrative and lead to compromises. Therefore, when museums deal with difficult issues such as politics, ethnicity, etc., independent sources of funding offer greater curatorial freedom. Whereas large museums do not always have the flexibility to tackle such problems, small museums can serve as an example and encouragement to address them actively.

Apart from uncovering colonial histories, museums should have the ability to reshape their own perspectives. For example, at the Amsterdam Museum in the Netherlands, the exhibition now adopts a harshly critical attitude towards the history of the Dutch colonisers, thus increasing the potential for the Dutch community to reflect on the history of Dutch colonialism. In Taiwan, the year 2024 marks the

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400th anniversary of the Dutch landing in the city of Tainan, and various historical commemorations, representations and research activities are ongoing. How contemporary Taiwanese academics and society reflect on Dutch colonial history from a multi-ethnic and world history perspective is yet to emerge.

The panel also discussed collaborations between British and Asian museums, alongside the communities represented in resulting exhibitions. One example was the Royal Asiatic Society, which has collaborated with museums in the Netherlands, Singapore and the UK. This has taken two forms. The first is cross-disciplinary cooperation, with museums of various types and in different locations working together to design an exhibition on a particular historical theme. The second involves museums reaching out to collaborate with different organisations and the wider public. Such joint efforts create stronger links to the communities whose histories are represented in an exhibition and offers recognition of the culture and traditions that local people value by bringing them directly into exhibition design. Diverse representation is a significant issue for contemporary museums, but such practices also allow museums to observe how people responded to social issues.

Britain's colonial past has brought historical artefacts from all over the world into its museums, which has undoubtedly provided the British public with a rich cultural experience. At the same time, the interpretation of historical issues is often linked to the problems and needs of contemporary society. Exhibiting objects from former colonies can provoke a renewed discussion of history in their 'homelands' even while touching on local social issues.

The British Museum's 2023 exhibition 'China's Hidden Century' is a prime example of this. Its interpretation of Qing dynasty history has sparked debates around Chinese nationalism, providing the Chinese government with another opportunity to reinforce its legitimacy.

In the current official historical narrative of China, the period of more than 100 years of foreign aggression, from 1840 to the victory in the Asian theatre of the Second World War in 1945, is referred to as the 'Hundred Years of National Humiliation'. Britain played an important role in this period of history, as Britain's victory in the First Opium War against the Qing empire was when this period is seen to have begun. This narrative was further reinforced by Britain's role in the Second Opium War of 1856, and the suppression of civil unrest in China in the Boxer Rebellion of 1899. As a result, 'China's Hidden Century' fuelled the nationalist debate in China. For the British Museum, the aim was 'to try and understand the experiences of individuals living through a period of tumultuous change' as it had never been done before.[17]

While this exhibition was on view, it emerged that the British Museum had lost hundreds of artefacts in the previous decade.[18] The simultaneous occurrence of these two events gave Chinese official media the opportunity to criticise the UK from different perspectives. For example an article in the *Global Times*, an organ of the official media,

[17]Jessica Harrison-Hall, 'An Introduction to 19th Century China', *The British Museum*, 28 Feb. 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/introduction-19th-century-china.

[18]Nadia Khomami, 'Hundreds of Items "Missing" from British Museum since 2013', *The Guardian*, 24 Aug. 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/aug/24/hundreds-of-items-missing-from-british-museum-since-2013.

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demanded that the British Museum return the 'looted' Chinese artefacts without compensation and accused the museum of being incapable of preserving them.[19] However, not all of the objects displayed could be seen as loot. There were items willingly given by Empress Cixi as gifts to passing diplomats and other items loaned by the Hong Kong-based Teresa Coleman collection. This demand nonetheless quickly became the hottest topic on China's social media platform, Weibo. Behind China's virtual 'Great Firewall', trending topics tend to reach every netizen, and what is allowed to 'trend' is largely determined by the Chinese Communist Party, which in recent years has promoted an increasingly nationalist line.

During his presidency, Xi Jinping has promoted the concept of the 'Chinese Dream', which embraces the idea of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and its return to the centre of global affairs, linking China's present and future to its glorious past and inspiring a deep-seated sense of national pride.[20] This narrative has downplayed the former emphasis on shame and humiliation, instead stressing pride and strength. According to this narrative, China's glorious past was interrupted by the West, led by Britain, and calls for the return of pilfered artefacts allow Chinese citizens to feel involved in the drive to restore their ancient civilisational glory.

However, even if denunciation of British colonialism is in some instances manipulated by authoritarian regimes to bolster their own legitimacy, this does not necessarily detract from the validity of calls for Britain to re-examine its colonial past. How to enable Britain to achieve a more effective dialogue with countries formerly affected by British colonialism is an issue deserving serious consideration. When reassessing this history, Britain should not only look at its colonial history from a one-sided perspective but should also pay attention to the complexity of the history of its former colonies. Although the exhibition touched upon the interaction between China's ruling groups and ethnic minorities (such as the Xinjiang wars from the 1820s to the 1860s), it failed to examine the internal affairs of China from the perspective of colonialism. At present, Xinjiang and Tibet are still facing intense pressure from the regime, and human rights issues in these two regions are often discussed; yet they are seldom framed as instances of Chinese imperialism or colonialism. The period of Qing history covered by the exhibition witnessed wars of rebellion and colonial reconquest, particularly in East Turkestan (Xinjiang), but themes of Chinese or Qing imperialism are absent. If Britain can pay attention to colonialism within China alongside its own colonial past, it may contribute to enhancing awareness of the continuing reality of colonialism as experienced by Uyghurs, Tibetans and others.

In stark contrast to this partial and selective portrayal of the internal turmoil of the Qing dynasty, are the historical interpretations offered at the National Museum of Taiwan History (NMTH). For example, the NMTH does not avoid the Lin Shuang-wen Event of 1786, in which rebellion by Han migrants and indigenous groups in Taiwan was put down by the Qing government, sparking conflicts and wars in many places in Taiwan. It has been written about in Chinese history as a major moment of turmoil for the Qing dynasty, primarily due to the scope of the government's involvement

[19]'社评:请大英博物馆无偿归还中国文物', Global Times, 28 Aug. 2023, https://m.huanqiu.com/article/4EIfewXDn2h.

[20]Zheng Wang, 'The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 19 (2014), 1–13.

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as well as the added factor of ethnic conflict. The NMTH presents different historical interpretations of key players in the event, who were originally portrayed as rebels, but were in fact shamanic doctors treating the residents of the local area for illnesses. Furthermore, through this episode, the gradual establishment of a civil defence system is also explained, even as the exhibition delves into why multiple ethnic groups live together in Taiwan. The exhibition breaks down the dichotomy between the empire and the rebels, and we can see for ourselves the mobility of the inhabitants of Taiwan at that time. The aborigines, the immigrants, and the officials and soldiers on the island each had their own strategies for survival, and the Qing empire's use of iconography to honour the success of their battle to subdue the chaos served a purpose in legitimating Qing rule. We thus gain a better insight into the context of historical interpretation and its hidden purposes.

In analysing the role of museums and exhibitions in public discourse about Asia from the perspective of Taiwan, it appears that Taiwanese museums are gradually thinking about how better to present the diversity and complexity of Taiwanese history. Instead of presenting it as a singular, monolithic narrative, the emphasis is now more on providing viewpoints that allow audiences to understand and think critically about received understandings of the past. This is accompanied by a greater focus on exchanges and relationships, especially involving maritime intercourse. The history of the Han Chinese is no longer presented exclusively, and Taiwan is no longer viewed simply as a peripheral borderland of empires and colonial powers.

From this example, we can already begin to see how museums might better address contemporary social issues, shape public perceptions and present multiple perspectives. By presenting a wide range of life stories of the common people, from the rights that were quietly taken away during the period of Kuomintang Martial Law (1949–87), to stories of immigrants' cooking, the museum shows visitors that the Asian peoples who migrated to Taiwan were not just labourers or brides, but had a unique culture, emotions and agency, while contributing to Taiwanese industries and families.[21] At a time when many issues related to international politics and identity are boiling over, museums can provide an opportunity for people to take a moment to review the past and think about the future. They are not just destinations, but intermediaries, enabling visitors to feel the pulse of the community's cultural and ideological life manifested in the artefacts on display.

Analysing responses to 'Tea and Tigers'

Deepika Gupta, Li-Yen, Ching-Hsiang Hung

The Exhibit Asia Curatorial Fellowship culminated with the launch of the digital exhibition titled 'Rethinking Asia: Tea and Tigers'. Here, we analyse responses to the exhibition from students of the Bachelor of Education programme at the University of Delhi and curators at the National Museum of Taiwan.

[21]National Museum of Taiwan History, *The Defiers- 30 Years After the End of Martial* Law, 2017, https://the.nmth.gov.tw/nmth/en-us/Special/SpecialDetail/76fd9bb3-9f89-4d38-9cdc-29551378c897 (accessed 17 Feb. 2024). National Museum of Taiwan History, *The Taste of Hometown: Southeast Asian Flavors*, 2019, https://the.nmth.gov.tw/nmth/en-US/Special/SpecialDetail/d5652ab2-5172-4894-a27a-e4f3da1e28b9 (accessed 17 Feb. 2024).

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Teacher education, curiosity and the digital exhibition

The Bachelor of Education (hereafter B. Ed.) programme at the University of Delhi is a pre-service teacher education programme. After graduating, students are eligible to teach in secondary and senior secondary schools in India. One of the modules offered in the programme is 'Knowledge, Discipline and School Subjects', which aims to 'enable students to analyse the structure of knowledge' and think about their own interests in light of the structure of the curriculum.[22]

Curiosity and enquiry comprise a significant aspect of the module. In the context of knowledge and learning, curiosity is explored theoretically. In terms of educational aims, it is essential to have 'intelligent intellectual eagerness' to be able to teach effectively.[23] The teacher must have the capability to communicate this eagerness to her students as a part of the educational process.

To understand whether B.Ed. students extend their understanding of curiosity to things that might seem commonplace in everyday life but have deeper and symbolic meanings in national and transnational settings, we conducted a reflective activity. We sought responses from twenty-five student-teachers to the following two questions. The goal was to understand how student-teachers perceive tea and tigers as symbols in a broader context of curiosity, and to find out if the digital exhibition gave them a fresh perspective on them.

- You recently learned something about curiosity. One of the themes used in the class was tea. What did you learn about tea from the digital exhibition?
- In light of the academic discussion on curiosity and enquiry, what do you think is the relevance of tigers as a theme?

Tea

We tabulated the responses of student-teachers by categorising them into themes and listing their frequency. The data in Table 2 indicate that most students were able to view tea as a part of South Asian cultural tradition and connect this theme with their own life experiences of tea-drinking.

That tea has economic and political associations emerged as a prominent idea, with 72% of the students linking tea to capitalism, trade and mercantilism in the broader economic and political framework. It was striking that 36% of students were able to identify cross-cultural differences in the ideas associated with tea. The digital exhibition has given them an experience of connecting history, culture and nation. One of them wrote: 'Examining the connections can uncover shared historical experiences, cultural exchange and construction of national identities in a globalised world.' The exhibition pushed students to think of the different dimensions of seemingly ordinary objects and move beyond a simple focus on their immediate use. Gender emerged as another prominent theme for many, who saw tea as a symbol of patriarchy and viewed its representations in various media through a critical lens. Several raised questions about what they consume as media images. One of them highlighted

[22] See page 23 of the Department of Education, University of Delhi, *Curriculum for 2-year B.Ed Programme*, retrieved from https://cie.du.ac.in/userfiles/downloads/Academic/Syllabus/BED/Bed_syllabus.pdf.

[23] L. H. Chrisman, 'Arousing Curiosity', *The Journal of Education*, 133 (1950), 78–80.

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Table 2. Learning to be curious by learning about tea

Ideas that emerged around tea	Frequency (n=25)	Percentage
Tea as a part of cultural tradition	18	72%
Tea is linked to polity, economy and international relations	18	72%
Tea as a site of patriarchy	15	60%
Relationship of tea and colonial governments	13	52%
Media presents tea as an object of care and hospitality	10	40%
Learned about the origin of tea	9	36%
Popularity and cross-cultural differences in South and East Asia	9	36%
Exhibition made me curious about tea	7	28%
Tea as a symbol of nation	6	24%
Tea and trains have an organic relation with India's colonial past	3	12%
Class differences and status in tea-drinking practices	3	12%

Note: The total number of responses exceeded twenty-five as all the participants gave several ideas.

the trope of a woman making, pouring or offering tea in most media representations of family settings, and several recognised how portrayals of tea can reinforce gender-based hierarchies and normalise distinct gender-based roles in society. They noticed how tea tended to be linked to caring or nurturing behaviour commonly associated with women. However, they remained focused on the images of women serving tea. None of them mentioned the role of women in harvesting tea. One possible reason could be the urban background of most student-teachers. They connected with and retained those images that resonated with the gender roles with which they were familiar. Twenty-eight per cent of the students admitted to feeling curious about tea. One response was: 'I used to think of tea as a beverage only but after going through the digital exhibition, I got to know about some aspects behind the origin of tea as a popular drink, which I was blinded to till now.' A few students were able to connect tea with the railways in India and reflected on how the two have developed an organic relationship due to several factors including the colonial past. Overall, the student-teachers were able to raise new questions about class, status and railways, thereby going beyond the ideas presented in the exhibition.

Tigers

In India, the tiger is popularly known to everyone as both the national animal and a ferocious beast. It is uncommon to think about the tiger in symbolic terms. The digital exhibition fuelled the imagination of student-teachers and made them think more deeply about the significance of tiger imagery (see Table 3).

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Table 3. Enquiry on tiger as a theme

Ideas that emerged around tigers	Frequency (n=25)	Percentage
Tiger as a symbol of power and military strength	17	68%
Tiger is a prestigious symbol	15	60%
Tiger signifies courage	13	52%
Tiger as a symbol of nation	12	48%
Tiger as a signifier of race, colonial rule and exploitation	11	44%
Tiger as a symbol of masculinity and vigour	10	40%
Carries deeper meanings and messages	10	40%
Realised its religious and auspicious connotations	9	36%
Tiger denotes wealth	8	32%
Tiger as a historical symbol	8	32%
Learned to attribute feelings and life to tigers	3	12%
Tiger as a part of folklore	1	4%

Note: The total number of responses exceeded twenty-five as all the participants gave several ideas.

The most common and recurring ideas related tigers to notions of power, prestige and courage. Many students recognised that the nation is an abstract and constructed category that is made more relatable by the use of symbols. Not just nations, but political parties, associations and dynasties have utilised imagery of tigers and other symbols in distinct ways. Colonialism was another important theme that came across. For example, 44% associated tigers with British colonial exploitation. They recognised the use of the tiger as an image to denote colonial subjugation of the Indian subcontinent. The theme of the auspiciousness of tigers also emerged prominently. Many students extended the understanding formed through the exhibition to religious traditions by associating the image of a tiger with Hindu goddesses such as Durga the warrior goddess.Furthermore, 12% of the responses attributed life and feelings to tigers. They adopted a sensitive stance towards all life and displayed empathy. One of them wrote: 'Tiger's feelings are as important as those of any other living organism and each one should respect tigers as they are living creatures.'

Overall, student-teachers displayed a positive disposition towards enquiry and investigation. A student wrote: 'Even the most trivial things in life carry very deep meanings and messages that can make us engage with and learn about new things.'

Through the exhibition students experienced ideas that were new as well as surprising. They began thinking deeply about the ordinary, blurring the distinction between 'the usual and the unusual'.[24] Thinking about tea and tigers inspired them

[24] S. Yun, 'Curiosity, Wonder and Museum Education', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 52 (2018), 465–82.

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to pursue meaningful enquiries on their own and nurture the innate curiosity of their future students. The digital exhibition pushed them towards critical inquiry, and to pursue the symbolic as well as cross-cultural meanings of subjects whose preliminary meanings were already formed and well entrenched in their repertoire of knowledge. Teachers who are curious to challenge what they know and strive to investigate, in order to delve into diverse interpretations and meanings, would be able to guide their students to ask meaningful questions and motivate them to find answers to them.

Feedback from museum curators

On the afternoon of 8 March 2024, Ching-Hsiang Hung and Li Yen, two of the co-curators of 'Rethinking Asia: Tea and Tigers' organised a forum at the National Museum of Taiwan History (NMTH). The goal was to discuss the exhibition themes and online curatorial strategies with NMTH curators and gain their feedback.[25]

The forum opened with an introduction to the exhibition and an explanation of the curatorial process, including online curatorial techniques, Fellows' teamwork, and the themes and objects chosen for the online exhibition. The NMTH curators posed questions concerning the exhibition structure, curatorial process, exhibition promotion, and online curatorial technology.

They were struck by our choosing to organise our exhibition primarily around themes rather than chronological periods, thereby highlighting the constant or recurrent uses of particular symbols (in our case, tea and tigers). They were also interested in how the thematic arrangement of the exhibition could recognise or accommodate the diversity of national narratives and cultures. Some seemed to wonder whether the thematic logic might tend to flatten or obscure the contrasting interpretation of certain symbols in different societies. From their questions, it can be inferred that the curators were primarily preoccupied with the logic underlying our decisions over the design of the display and how this related to the messages that we sought to convey to the public.

Regarding our decisions over exhibition structure, we explained how we had provided chronological framing through the text introducing particular objects, and in a Story Map that formed part of the exhibition. We clarified that we sought to relate our presentation of the objects to national narratives and the trajectory of colonial history, but without allowing a linear, chronological story to become the organising logic of the whole exhibition (since we felt this might have detracted from the comparative, thematic focus on symbols and their uses).

We also discussed publicity, and the audience experience of the exhibition. The exhibition is presented in the form of a webpage and the viewing experience is similar to flipping through a book page by page. Another popular form, which we did not rely on, is to present a digital exhibition in a virtual 3D space, so that

[25]The forum was hosted by the Director, National Museum of Taiwan History. It was attended by NMTH curators, mainly from the Department of Research (Yu-Yuan Huang, Pei-Di Wang, An-Li Chang, and Yu-Chun Chang), the Digital Innovation Center (Xuan-Yi Lin), the Public Services and Education Division (Ju-Mei Wu), the Collection Accessibility Division (Shu-Ching Chang) and the Exhibition Division.

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the audience can have the feeling of entering the space to view the exhibition. We reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of such alternatives and explained that because we curated the exhibition using theheritagelab.in as our platform, we were restricted to working within that format. Creating a virtual space for an online exhibition is also more complicated in terms of technology and planning, and would have been challenging given our short turnaround. It is also expensive, and we did not have the funds for it. Under the specific circumstances of our project, a website was more conducive to cooperation and division of labour, conveyed the message of the exhibition clearly, and was accessible to a wider online audience.

One curator reported that when using a mobile phone to browse the exhibition website, some of the images and text were cropped and did not display correctly. Looking back at the curatorial process, we realised that although we had confirmed that the display would be smooth on a website accessed via desktop, we did not test this on different devices. This reminded us that we need to pay more attention to alternative viewing experiences in the future. It was also suggested that visitors may not be interested only in the content, but may also expect more interactive experiences. For example, the theme of tigers and tea could potentially be extended to include an experience spanning the five senses – by including sound effects or conjuring the aroma of tea, for example. Mini-games could likewise be paired with the offer of mobile phone wallpaper images as a reward, so that visitors could harvest souvenirs. By allowing players to share game scores, an interactive experience could be combined with promoting the exhibition. The exhibition format, design, content, and the visitors' browsing experience are all interrelated. From a long-term management perspective, the curators reminded us that the maintenance of the platform and the preservation of data for digital exhibitions are also very important given that digital exhibitions do not have an end date. Platform maintenance, modification of the preservation of data, and the issue of information security are all worth considering as a follow-up issue.

When curating the exhibition, we kept in mind that users of theheritagelab.in were mainly history lovers, aged between 25 and 35. In the first three weeks of the exhibition, most of the visitors were from South Asia. We believe that this may be because large parts of the themes of the exhibition are based on South Asian art and culture. This exhibition was nonetheless co-curated with Fellows from various countries, and if each of us can further publicise the exhibition through local community and museum channels, it may have the opportunity to attract more diversified audiences to the exhibition.

Sharing and discussing the 'Tea and Tigers' exhibition with colleagues and professionals in different fields such as education and museums helped us to gain fresh insights into the possibility of utilising a digital exhibition as a resource in a variety of settings.

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