

How can museums develop stable partnerships with schools and other third-party organisations for students' learning experience?

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Abstract: This study investigates how museums may form and sustain strong collaborations with schools and other third-party organisations to improve students' learning experiences both within and outside of regular classrooms. The paper investigates the historical backdrop, key causes, and benefits of these partnerships, using museums in China, such as the Sichuan Museum, and the Chester Beatty Library in Ireland as case studies. By examining both triumphs and problems, such as cultural transformations, budget allocation, and pedagogical goals, the research demonstrates how active collaboration can enable museums to function as critical educational resources. According to the findings, long-term relationships between museums and schools rely on defined objectives, open communication, shared resources, and adjustable expectations to bridge educational and cultural goals.

Keywords: Museums; Education; Student Engagements; Partnerships; School-Museum Collaboration; Cultural Institutions; Learning Experience; China; Ireland; Museum Education

These days, museums have started to play a more active role in public education. However, these educational activities are restricted and limited in scale and are sometimes treated as “more than a convenient respite from classroom routine.”

This paper will survey how museums can cooperate with schools and other third-party organisations to form a stable long-term partnership to provide students with a more efficient learning experience within and beyond their galleries. Firstly, it will survey the background that motivates the cooperation between the museums and schools. Then, it will provide examples of collaboration between museums and schools from the early stages to the present day, such as on-site classrooms and digital platforms. Based on these exemplars, it will analyse the potential challenges of museum-school partnerships and possible solutions. To be specific, this paper will focus on the experience of the museums in the People's Republic of China, like the Sichuan Museum (ScM) and of other nations' museums like the Chester Beatty Library (CBL) in Dublin, Republic of Ireland (ROI) as the supportive case studies for this paper's statements.

1. The motivations for accelerated Museum-School Partnership:

The starting point of partnership and cooperation between schools and museums was traced back to the late 19th and early 20th century in the Western World.

For example, In the 1930s, with the development of modern education theories, US educators began experimenting with conducting lessons in museums, initiating explorations of integrating museum resources with school education. These experimental classes greatly inspired other museum educators to continue exploring museum-school cooperation for the next decades. By the 1990s, the museum-school partnership had entered its flourishing period, and over 90% of museums in the United States had established partnerships with schools.

In addition to the proactive experiments undertaken by the pioneers mentioned above, the rapid social and political changes worldwide in the latter half of the 20th century further accelerated the development of the museum-school partnership as an educational model. By the late 20th century, many countries underwent tremendous social and political reform and started redefining museums' functions. People began questioning the museums' social values and economic roles after the massive investment was spent on them annually with the taxpayers' capital. Specifically, the people ask museums “how they can contribute to national or local income generation, what role they play in employment creation, education, or addressing social issues.” Thus, art museums are no longer extraordinary places separated from society. Instead, they must frequently justify their existence and compete for funding with other claims for financial resources. This has further exacerbated the difficulties faced by many museums, which were already struggling with a range of internal issues such as lack of funding, insufficient

expertise across multiple fields, poor management, and unclear institutional objectives.

At this stage, nearly all museums worldwide have to adapt a shift in emphasis of their roles: from just being a “treasure house” to a multi-functioned place that performs the job of education, leisure, entertainment, identity-formation, etc. In other words, “serving the visitor” has become the priority of the focus of museums.

Besides expanding the channels to increase revenues, many museums also develop their educational functions, such as establishing partnerships and communicating with surrounding educational institutions. It may be considered as one of their justifications for social existence and responses to the changing circumstances affected by government policies.

2. China: Revival of Nationalism and corresponding “responsibility” of public museums

The spring of Museum Studies in China came during the Chinese Economic Reform in the 1980s. During these years, the number of museums in China multiplied from 407 in 1978 to 1215 in 1991. These museums, especially the public museums, are under the regulation of the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA). In the early 1990s, some Chinese museum staff tried to develop projects related to school education. Together with the movement for economic reform and revival, there is also the movement toward cultural education reform and the nationalist movement for Chinese traditional culture revival. The public museums with abundant Chinese historical artefacts are perfectly fit for this duty. As defined by Chinese legislation, one of these public museums’ functions is to “act as a basis for ‘patriotic education’ through the commemoration and celebration of Chinese history.”

Since 2010, the NCHA has commissioned the China Museums Association to conduct a series of nationwide evaluations of the operation status of nationwide “first-class” museums. Within these annual evaluation reports, “whether museums did perform their public service and educational role” became one of the increasingly weighted criteria for assessment. This phenomenon may indicate that the Chinese government progressively emphasises museums’ educational role. One example could be the issuing of the document “Opinions on Strengthening the Exhibition and Displaying in Museums” to the offices of Cultural Relics Bureaus in each province, municipality and autonomous regions by the NCHA in December 2012. In this document, one key suggestion for improving the exhibition work of the museums was to “strengthen the educational function of museum exhibition,” which explicitly demands that museums across the country align with Quality Education initiatives closely. It emphasised the need for museums to establish robust cooperative mechanisms with educational institutions, particularly with primary and high schools, and to organise various exhibitions geared toward or designed to complement school education.

Besides pushing force by the exterior environment for museums, the internal advantages of schools and museums also draw them to the partnerships. From the view of schools, regular classroom lessons are restricted to space and the range of available materials, thus causing a lack of attractiveness to the student. In the museums, the senses of touch, smell, hearing, and signs offered by the museum’s collection would give the students more living and closer contact with the knowledge.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education published “Outline of Curriculum Reform in Elementary Education (Trial Implementation)”. This outline’s fifth section, “Management and Development of teaching materials”, proposed that the schools should fully utilise all kinds of social resources and teaching facilities like libraries, museums, etc., to conduct the classes with reformed curricula. Such policy acts as the start for creating conditions for the museum-school partnership.

Ten years later, on 24th July 2021, the PRC government implemented the new “Double Reduction Policy” on the education system to reduce the heavy learning burdens like daily homework and after-school training of the students in pre-university education. With more time and space available, many schools have started developing their outdoor or object-based learning activities for students as co-curricular activities beyond the standard syllabus. The partnership with museums is one of the ideal choices.

As one of the largest museums in Southwest China since its reopening in 2009, the SeM occupies an essential position among public museums in China, especially in museum education. For years, it has been listed as “the first branch of National Bases for Research, Study and Practical Education of Primary and Middle School Students.” and had conducted many forms of partnership with different organisations and schools.

3. Ireland: Adoption to the new environment of multi-culturalism and social employment

In Ireland, the shifting social and political background also impacted the development of the museum-school relationship. The immigration trend throughout the 1990s tremendously impacted today's Irish society. Traditionally, Ireland was considered a Roman Catholic country with a predominantly white people population. However, the influx of immigrants since the 1900s significantly changed Ireland's demographics: 4.8 million current population with 182 spoken languages. From 2002 to 2011, "the number of foreign nationals" who lived in Ireland increased by 143% and occupied 12% of the overall population in Ireland by 2011. This phenomenon of the Multi-Faiths Community profoundly influenced the education system in Ireland. As a traditional Catholic society, 96% of Irish primary schools' ownership and patronage are attributed to the different religious denominations. Among these schools, 90% of them are supported by the Catholic church. However, the appearance of a multicultural society made the Catholic Church's "dominance" in the Irish educational sector start to show signs of altering. By 2021, 82 multi-denominational schools opened in Ireland as alternative options for those wishing their children would receive non-Catholic education.

Globalisation also affects employment in Ireland. With an increasing number of multinational corporations stationed in Ireland, skills such as creative thinking have become vital for young people seeking fabulous employment in these companies. Thus, under these changes, there is a radical reformation in the Irish national curriculum of pre-university education. According to the Framework for Junior Cycle 2015 published by the Irish Department of Education and Skills, "being creative" and "Managing Information & Thinking (including thinking creatively and critically)" are currently two of the Eight Key Skills that Junior Cycle students need to acquire and enhance. Other than these reforms, there is also encouragement for intercultural and interfaith dialogue for students and teachers in Ireland.

The CBL's collections are mainly the rare books and objects from East Asia, Middle East, Northern Africa and Europe. These cross-regional collections are normally not familiar to the general Irish visitors. Thus, they are the perfect materials to support the inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogues. Hence, these collections are utilised and integrated into partnerships between schools, third-party organisations, and the CBL.

The forms of museum-school partnerships in ScM and CBL:

The most common form of cooperation between schools and museums, which both ScM and CBL had conducted, would be the teachers leading the school children having a field trip or students having a class within the museum environment. Such type of classroom activities was known as "Second Classroom" for the museums in China and had been conducted in various forms throughout the country. For the ScM, it had programs known as the "Little Academy of Science: Series of Courses of Studying Sciences and Learning from History". This type of museum-based classroom program has developed over 18 themes, including architecture, clothing, paper, ink, astronomy, agronomy, sports and others. These programs are conducted in two modes: one is conducted during weekends, which schools can reserve, and the students attend the courses in the form of classes in the museum. Another mode is undertaken during the summer and winter holidays, offering more diverse themes and in-depth content. Programs such as Ancient Nightlife, Ancient Food Culture, Twelve Chinese Animal Zodiac Signs of the Museum", and "Little Artists," have been particularly popular among primary school students and family participants. The program has attracted nearly 1300 participants from over 30 primary schools and several kindergartens in Chengdu, China.

Besides the "On-site Classroom" programs, the ScM also conducted other cooperation programs with schools between 2015 and 2020. These forms of cooperation include:

1. Carrying the school-based course.
2. Sending two teachers to the schools in various locations.
3. Let museum educational experts conduct lectures and trainings in schools.
4. Provide guidance and instruction to the museum education in schools.
5. Irregularly provided coaching programs about museum education for schoolteachers.

Besides the above, the ScM provides internship placement for higher education students. It would enable the students to experience real, practical work in museums. Such experience was described by Elizabeth A. Beckmann as "a unique learning experience (that) cannot

be delivered by any other means”, as it not only enables the interns to practice the theoretical knowledge but also to engage the most-up-date curatorial and communication technologies, the ability to be responsive to social pressures, and “capacity of ‘do more with less’”.

Some public museums in China may cooperate with educational institutions’ museums, like the university museums of Henan University and Tsing-Hua University, to help them conduct the exhibition of their own library and university collections. ScM also provides similar services in guiding the schools in constructing their own museum and exhibitions.

Besides these traditional forms of partnership, many museums, schools, and third-party organisations have started building remote partnerships by establishing online sharing databases ors. These online platforms enable them to share and access each other’s educational resources, thus strengthening their communication and allowing a long and stable partnership to last.

In 2016, the ScM started to work jointly with the Sichuan Audio Visual Education Centre to create a new museum-school partnership project, which is implemented both online and offline. As for the online aspect, the ScM cooperate with other institutions to establish the online resource planform named “Cultural Relics and Museum Section of Sichuan Publics Service Platform of Education”. It helps to integrate the scattered information of cultural relics of each museum and resources of each educational institution within the Sichuan province of China and then share these data among them. As for offline activities, the project established the educational institution known as the Sichuan Cultural Relics and Museum Alliance School, which provides training courses and conducts the activities like the “cultural antiques and museum courses competitions”, to encourage “the internal motivation of museum-school partnership.” As a result, by May 2020, 508404 teachers and 3830231 students had registered on this online platform.

For the CBL, with abundant collection resources, they had conducted a series of partnerships like cross-cultural dialogue and teacher training. For example, in the view of Jenny Siung, Head of Education of CBL, many Irish teachers and students are unfamiliar with foreign cultural objects and hence feel discouraged from visiting the museum. So, the first thing to do is provide accessible and friendly guidance to remove this fear of unfamiliarity. So, the CBL’s Learning and Education Department has cooperated with several partners, like the Junior Cycle Religious Education Team and the Intercultural Education Services of Northern Ireland, to design and produce learning resources for students and teachers. The exemplars of these learning resources would be the Way of Seeing I and II. The former provides language support resources based on the object from CBL and Ulster Museum Belfast. The latter provides materials about religions worldwide so students and teachers can learn about these foreign cultures.

4. The difficulties and the challenges that affect the stability of a museum-school partnership & the possible counter-measurements

While many partnerships are conducted, the gaps and difficulties in establishing stable and successful partnerships between schools and museums are gradually observed.

Firstly, due to some physical limitations, such as lack of funding, absence of an assessment system and safety concerns for students, some schools may be reluctant to conduct a field trip for students to visit the museum. Furthermore, students aged 12 to 17 may primarily be attracted by sports, technology, and social media. To them, the impression of museums may be “detached and boring”, thus not supporting their school in launching educational activities with museums.

To cater to these problems of financial barriers and students’ negative impressions of museums, museums sometimes will take the initiative to consider how to appeal to schools or help them.

For example, in consideration of the population (including students) who live in the remote and economically undeveloped area of Sichuan who cannot easily access the museum service, ScM introduced the exhibition of “Caravan Mobile Museum” since October 2019. Such a form of exhibition refers to a caravan that was modified into a “mobile museum” and travels around the remote local areas to hold the exhibitions. It was the first “wheeled” museum with a team, exhibition plan, and budget in the history of museums in China. By December 2019, it had travelled over 300,000 kilometres, held 105 exhibitions in different locations and served over 1.5 million people. It successfully solves the problem of the inconvenience of schools in remote areas not having access to museum services and facilitates the partnership between ScM and schools. However, it was disadvantaged in terms of being unable to last a long-term partnership because the caravan may need to

move to different places according to the schedule.

Another method for countering the challenges of physical inaccessibility and old-fashioned engagement mode in museums could be developing an online platform to access the museums' resources. For example, in 2020, During the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland, 96.03% of respondents (teachers from educational institutions across Ireland) preferred online museum resources and programs. Hence, the CBL developed multiple forms of remote programs to communicate and deliver academic activities with different schools in Ireland from 2020 to 2021. One example would be the "RTE Learn", a collaboration project by Radio Television Ireland (RTE) and other cultural institutions, including CBL. On this website, the CBL provides "online workshops, how-to videos and art activities for all ages" covering watercolours, 3D drawing, origami finger puppets, etc.

Another problem associated with the museum-school partnership is that both sides tend to view themselves as two independent dimensions during cooperation, which could result in both parties neither having crucial communication nor collaboration between them. Without clear communication, both parties may not be sure how to meet the requirements of each other during the planning. For instance, the school-teachers may not know what resources the museums have available, while the museum educators are often unsure how to make their programs relate to the school's curricula. Ultimately, there is no clear educational purpose for what students will expect to learn after the trips. Ultimately, most feedback on these field trips ends with the students having "a great time" but not learning much from the visiting experience according to schools' evaluation criteria. As a result, although these field trips are popular among students, many schoolteachers doubt the worth of field trips after spending so much capital on them.

Such a gap may attributed to the different teaching styles of each party. The school's teaching style is usually conducted in the classroom through written and spoken words. The educational goal and expectation for a school teacher in a typical classroom is whether the students can reply with "accurate" and "correct" answers after the lesson. However, to a museum educator, the expected outcome would be to stimulate students' critical thinking and the practice of skills to create their interpretation of an object and its behind information. Thus, conflict may occur during these partnership classes: the school wants the "accurate facts" as the result of the field trip, whereas the museums wish to the "diverse critical interpretation" from students after the field trip. At the same time, as school educators may be too tied to the curricula and its criteria for evaluating the standard results, it will be hard to judge how successful the students learn.

From the above, it can be observed that active communication between all stakeholders is an essential element that affects a partnership's efficiency and success level. One method Chinese museums could learn from Western museums is to apply techniques like "having a teacher advisory group" to listen to school teachers' suggestions. In this way, schools' teachers can feel a sense of membership and suggest to the museum how to design a program that maximumly meets the curricular goals of schools. Such an approach can also let museums know how active and how much they should control during the partnership. It could benefit the school staff's experience while reducing the unnecessary workload for the museums.

The ScM would usually adjust their position when cooperating with different educational institutions. For example, unlike the cooperation with pre-high school institutions, they gave away more choice-decision powers to the high-school partners. The focus of the museum education program would be more oriented to the relevance of the contextual knowledge from their school syllabus and more relevant knowledge about the future careers that students pursue.

5. Conclusion

Through examination of the case study in China and Ireland, it could be observed that the current museums are trying to walk out of their ivory and play their parts as an educational playground and resource providers for different educational communities because of their exterior surviving environment. By now, they had developed a group of programs, varied from the commonly seen "Second classrooms" form to the remote education and resources provider platform. However, museum-school partnerships could be challenged by difficulties such as insufficient physical conditions and mismatch in learning outcome expectations attributed to teaching style. It was believed that the key factors of "clear goals; open communication; shared resources and realistic expectations" would help to close the gaps between schools and museums and lead to a successful partnership, but most importantly, both museums and schools need to "be patience and flexible to each

other.” It would be a prerequisite for all partnerships.

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