




Research Fellow 

## Hoyee Tse

### Diversification vs. Racialisation: the Employment of Asian Museum and Curatorial Professionals in the UK

## MAIN ARGUMENT AND INSIGHT

Responding to the current movement of decolonisation in the arts and culture sector, my project examines the employment and working experiences of Asian museum and curatorial professionals in the UK. The significant lack of data about the ethnic minority workforce in the sector means that, despite various advocacies for diversity and inclusivity were put forward by museums and cultural institutions, we cannot even have the slightest glimpse on how diverse these institutions are structurally. My research questions are: to what extent do the Asian museum and curatorial professionals find their specialisations and roles relate to their ethnic and cultural background? And to what extent do they find their working experiences in the field were racialised? With the objectives of identifying challenges and barriers that Asian professionals experienced when searching for jobs and working in the museum and curatorial field, I collected data from social media platform LinkedIn and conducted interviews with seven Asian professionals related to the sector.

My quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated that visa policy and racialised tasks and job positions formed the main barriers for these professionals to enter the field. While understanding the advantage of their bilingual abilities, some did regard the English language as a challenge. More importantly, the monocultural working environment of their institutions facilitated a racialisation of their identity and manifested the undeniable lack of ethnic diversity in the sector. I therefore recommend organisations like CIRCE to initiate a network organising mutual support and training for ethnic minority professionals in the field as well as for their colleagues, especially the HR team. More research about the job searching and working experiences of Asian and other ethnic minority groups in the field is also recommended because the cultural nuances of the non-white professionals and the relationship between their ethnic background and working experiences are complex and certainly require more in-depth research in order to be comprehended.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

The advocacies and discourses about decolonisation have taken the centre of the stage in the cultural and creative industries since the 2010s. Talking about the National Museum of African American History, Rachel Hatzipanagos defines “decolonisation” as “a process that institutions undergo to expand the perspectives they portray beyond those of the dominant cultural group, particularly white colonisers” (Hatzipanagos, 2018). Decolonisation is a process beyond repatriation of material objects; it is a process of reforming and rethinking the existing structures and methods of representations in our art and cultural institutions. Undoubtedly, as a predominantly public-facing sector, there is plenty of research and programmes developed to diversify the profiles of the audience in the museum and art curatorial field in response to the current movement of decolonisation. Such a priority emphasises on engagement of different social groups into not only the learning activities but also the interpretation and displays of material collections and in cultural spaces. However, what is often overlooked by these institutions is its operational structure. If decolonisation is more than just piecemeal engagement activities with certain communities, the institutions should consider the composition of their personnel. In other words, they have to reflect on whose knowledge and perspectives they are using to shape their programmes.

### *Research Aim, Question and Objectives*

As diversity is a broad, general term involving multifarious social groups, I narrowed my research scope down to ethnic diversity. It was partly because the nature of the debate about post-colonialism and decolonisation was very much based on the clashes and exploitations of the white cultures over the non-white cultures. Another reason was my Asian identity and cultural background. My experiences and the experiences that I heard from the professionals of my community in the museum sector as much as in the art and cultural industry made me understand the importance of taking a closer look into the employment conditions of our Asian community. Regarding the geographical area of my research, due to the considerable number of museums and exhibition-based organisations in Europe, I concentrated my research in the UK only. With years of experience living and working in the UK, my personal and professional network would give my project a more feasible starting point.

Examining the Asian workforce in the UK museum and curatorial field, my research aim was to assess the employment conditions and barriers of the Asian museum and curatorial professionals in the UK. My research questions were: to what extent do the Asian museum and curatorial professionals find their specialisations and roles relate to their ethnic and cultural background? And to what extent do they find their working experiences in the field were racialised? My research objectives thus were:

1. To assess the factors that they considered when choosing their professional specialisations

2. To identify the challenges and barriers that they had when entering and getting their first jobs in the museum and curatorial field
3. To evaluate the advantages and disadvantages that their ethnic and cultural background had on their career development
4. To locate the challenges and barriers that they experienced when working in the field

The data gathered according to these objectives would help us to portray in what capacities the Asian professionals were employed in the field. It would demonstrate at what levels they were employed and in what ways their roles were related to their ethnic and cultural background. This would reveal whether and how art and cultural institutions, like museums, racialise their organisational structure by offering specific job positions for the Asian professionals and providing a working environment that racialises their ethnic identity. My CIRCE project was to take the employment of Asian professionals as a case study to explore how museums and cultural institutions have carried out the diversification of their workforce amid the heated debate of decolonisation. My research outcomes would demonstrate whether the current diversification of the workforce meant a diversification of the workforce at all levels or just a racialisation of the profession for different ethnic communities.

### *Demographic Diversity and Workforce Diversity*

To investigate the workforce diversity and its connection with the arts and cultural sector, it is crucial for us to understand for what reasons, at the first place, the sector cares about diversity in general. Audience always contributes an indispensable source of revenue for the organisations to support their day-to-day operations and development of new programmes. Despite the multiple sources of revenues from audience, fundraising and government funding, the sector has been facing various challenges, including ageing audiences (Manchester & Pett, 2015) and over-reliance on unpaid volunteers (Bienkowski & Jenkins, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic and decline of funding from the UK government (Shaw, A. & McGivern, H., 2023) have inevitably further pushed many of these organisations to the brink of perilous financial state. Rethinking their strategies of getting a more diverse audience through their door thus became a top priority.

The 2021 Census showed that 18.3% of the population of England and Wales was non-white (Office for National Statistics, 2022). There was a user research commissioned by ALM London indicating the lack of black and minority ethnic engagement in London's museums. The report confirmed that the museum sector with notable exceptions demonstrated "institutional racism", a term coined by Sir William Macpherson in his report on the inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1999. Macpherson defined the term as "the collective failure of an to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin" and described the situation as endemic amongst public institutions (Tissier & Nathoo, 2004: 12). Out of the 594 minority ethnic people the research team interviewed, 63% were either

negative or indifferent about museums and 66% of all Asian groups had not visited a museum in the last two years (Tissier & Nathoo, 2004).

In fact, Asian ethnic groups accounted for 9.3%, the second largest percentage, of the England and Wales population (Office for National Statistics, 2022). From an entrepreneurial perspective, these five million people could generate another sizable revenue for cultural organisations. In the guide to increase visitor diversity, Association of Independent Museums highlighted Cardiff Story Museum as a case study of successfully expanding their audience by engaging and re-profiling their visitors and volunteers according to the Black and Minority Ethnic population composition of their local area (Aldridge, Larsen & Jarvis, 2018). While recognising the pivotal role of staff in diversifying their audience, what was missing from this seemingly comprehensive guide was the diversity of the staff themselves. The staffing of one organisation is the most direct way to manifest its inclusivity and value for diversity. Although the employment of staff from a diversity of backgrounds was listed as one of the recommendations to show a stronger commitment to diversity in the 2004 user research report, it was put at the bottom of the list.

### *Workforce Diversity in the Cultural Sector*

Meanwhile, if we return to the debate related to decolonial discourses, the advocacies for repatriation and reinterpretation of historical and cultural objects have surely pointed out how substantial the number of objects UK museums were possessing associated with African and Asian cultures. In the online catalogue of the British Museum, there were 596,025 objects connected to the word 'Asia'. The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A)'s online collection had 47,683 objects related to Asian subjects as the Ashmolean Museum hosted 23,433 Asian objects online. Remember that these were the results with the word 'Asia' only. If we tried to search with individual countries or cultures, the number of objects that the online catalogues could identify would grow even bigger (In Tate's online catalogue, the word 'Asia' returned merely 451 artworks while 'Japan' returned 417 artworks alone). So, from a managerial standpoint, these objects could be the best media to engage with different ethnic communities. Lots of nuances of cultural practices and social identities were not something that one could study to comprehend, particularly for contemporary artistic and cultural objects. (I will discuss this further in the *Analysis and Insights* section.)

However, this potential of the Black and Minority Ethnic museum and curatorial professionals in contributing to the sector seemed not receiving enough recognition. Reviewing the curatorial teams of some of the most recent exhibition programmes in London's museums and cultural institutions this year, the British Museum's 'China's hidden century' exhibition was curated by Jessica Harrison-Hall and the Royal Collection Trust's 'Japan: Courts and Culture' by Rachel Peat. The 'Chinese and British' exhibition about the history of Chinese communities was co-curated by Alex Tickell and Lucienne Loh; the latter was a reader in English Literature at the University of Liverpool with Asian heritage. The V&A exhibition, interpreting a more contemporary subject, was the only one entirely curated by Asian curators, Rosalie Kim and Yoojin Choi. Exploring contemporary Asian subject matters, the 'Tokyo: Art & Photography'

exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in 2021 was co-curated by Lena Fritsch and Clare Pollard. This review of the curatorial teams was not to express any doubt and judgement towards the scholarly expertise and curatorial practices of these non-Asian curators. It was to raise the question on to what extent our cultural institutions were dedicating themselves into the decolonisation of the knowledge disseminated by their programmes. Again, to decolonise these spaces, the sector needed to think beyond what exhibitions and programmes they were curating and who were participating but who were curating these programmes and interpreting the subjects and objects.

Nonetheless, many museums and arts and cultural institutions have indeed attempted to diversify their workforce. The Arts Council England and the Museum Consultancy co-published a report to review the situations and conditions of equality and diversity in the museum workforce (Davies, Griffiths, & Wilkinson, 2015). With various methods, the report team collected direct responses from individual staff from under-represented groups that were satisfied with their experiences of being part of the museum workforce. Yet, more importantly, it underlined the issue that the visitor services staff were more diverse than the staff in curatorial, exhibition and collections care departments (Davies, Griffiths, & Wilkinson, 2015: 17-18). This, in fact, just retold the same issue in a report produced by the National Museum Directors' Conference (2006). Two decades ago, the NMDC report had already found that none of the Black and Minority Ethnic staff working in their curatorial departments even if the group accounted for 10% of the overall staffing in some of the institutions. In 2016, a report commissioned by the four major organisations of the sector shared the same perspective about such a lack of ethnic diversity. One of its key findings indicated 88% of the museum staff was made up of white women and by those with a high level of education.

Last year, the Art Fund commissioned Culture& to assess the curatorial diversity in the UK arts and heritage sector. Despite the recommendations on improving the workforce diversity in all the other reports before, the findings in this 2022 report underscored that most ethnic diversity workforce initiatives in the UK aimed only at generic entry-level positions instead of curatorial positions. Curatorial diversity remained low: museums had only 6% of its workers identifying as being Black and Minority Ethnic (Art Fund, 2022: 9). More than 15 years after the NMDC report revealed that merely one out of the eight large cultural institutions participating in its research had more than 5% of its curatorial staffing as non-white (2006: 7-8), the percentage of non-white curatorial professionals working in these institutions seemed to have increased by 1%. Compared to the 18.3% of the England and Wales population being non-white, the sector was indisputably far behind in terms of ethnic diversity.

Academic research also reaffirmed and reiterated their concerns about this noticeable lack of workforce diversity in the cultural sector. Richard Sandell (2000) developed a museum-specific model based on the concepts of diversity management to accentuate the strategic significance of workforce diversity in the sector. The interconnections of workforce diversity, collections/programmes diversity and audience diversity was emphasised. Yet, looking into specific training programmes as case studies to diversify the workforce, researchers indicated the inclination that most non-white museum and cultural professionals were taking up audience-facing roles rather than the curatorial and collection management ones (Davies &

Shaw, 2010; Hutchison & Cartmell, 2016). To tackle this imbalance, the management level was a key stakeholder to facilitate a positive, supportive working environment for a diverse group of staff members (Dragouni & McCarthy, 2021).

## RESEARCH PROCESS

Even though, from the 2000s onwards, academic and sector research continuously reviewed the situations and conditions of workforce diversity of museum and curatorial professionals. There were obvious gaps within these research projects. First and foremost, there was the lack of concrete data. Most of the data presented in these studies and reports was quantitative and aimed at reflecting on the process and development of certain recruitment and training strategies. Very few of them offered data that touched upon the issues such as recruitment practices and policy, leadership and inclusivity of the working environment. Subsequently, what we had was incomplete data about the demographics of the workforce. The barriers or challenges that Minority Ethnic groups experienced in the UK museum and curatorial field have never been fully illustrated. Moreover, not only that the demographic data was incomplete about specific experiences and barriers that the non-white professionals were experiencing. The data was also insufficient to detail the ethnic composition of non-white professionals working in the field. None of the studies and sector reports directly addressed the conditions and obstacles of a particular ethnic group in entering and working in the cultural sector. All the materials, except the user research done by Strategic Urban Futures (Tissier & Nathoo, 2004), just blended all the non-white ethnicities together. The wide variety of cultural practices and social identities embedded within every ethnicity was totally omitted. 'Asian' is such a general term, comprising six geographic subregions and more than 50% of the world population.

Of course, I am not here to dismiss the importance of the data gathered by the previous studies and sector research. Rather, my CIRCE project was built on the foundation founded by these projects. With the limited time of the fellowship and the huge number of Asian ethnicities, I concentrated my research on East Asian professionals, meaning primarily Chinese, Japanese and Korean only. More than my East Asian identity, this was partly because of the Anti-Asian Racism movement during the Covid-19 pandemic. The movement evinced the sheer size of the East Asian community in the UK as much as our less outspoken voice in the society, including in the whole decolonisation debate in the cultural sector. Chinese accounted for 0.7% of the entire population of England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2022) while, from Hong Kong alone, there were 144,500 immigrants between 2021 and 2022 mainly due to the launch of the BNO visa policy (Lee, 2023). Together with the relatively more mature socio-economic and educational backgrounds of people of South Korean and Japanese heritage, the East Asian group undoubtedly could form one of the most solid pillars for fostering the diversity of the field.

To explore this area of uncharted waters about the employment of the East Asian professionals in the UK museum and curatorial field, the methodology of my CIRCE project was a mix of methods collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. I conducted content analysis of academic literature and sector reports, analysis of East Asian professional profiles on social media and semi-structured one-to-one interviews with some of these professionals in the museum and curatorial field. My research process could be divided into the following steps:



## *Step 1: May to June*

After narrowing down my scope and consolidating my research objectives in the first month of the fellowship, I embarked on my project with literature review. Aware of the need to balance the theoretical perspectives and the perspectives expressed by the sector in practice, I searched for academic references along with sector reports. Via online catalogues of university libraries, I identified the research studies specifically about workforce diversity of the cultural sector with search words such as “museum staff”, “museum workforce” and “cultural sector diversity”. For the sector reports, I picked out some of the reports attempting to construct the picture of workforce diversity in the museum and curatorial field in the past five years via Google Search. I also consulted the reference lists and bibliography to trace back older reports (National Museums Directors’ Conference, 2006; Davies, Griffiths & Wilkinson, 2015; BOP Consulting & the Museum Consultancy, 2016) inquiring the situation and importance of having a higher multiplicity of talents with various cultural backgrounds in the sector. Additionally, I looked for literature and reports about audience diversity, cultural inclusivity and social inclusion related to the sector. Although some materials (Aldridge, Larsen & Jarvis, 2018; Tissier & Nathoo, 2004) did not directly probe into the issues about workforce, they were useful in helping to shape the context in which the workforce diversity was situated. The issues about the workforce diversity were tightly interwoven with other core components of the institutional structure and programming operations of cultural organisations. Moreover, I identified articles and projects about museum and cultural organisation management. The tie of the leadership and management of an institution with the types of the staff it hired and their working experiences was absolutely close. So, I found it necessary to refer myself to some literature about museums as workplaces (Dragouni & McCarthy, 2021; Heidelberg, 2019).

My content analysis of the literature then allowed me to determine the angle and topics that I would like to use to design the framework of the semi-structured interviews with my project participants. Based on the arguments and data provided by these reading materials, I located the gaps within the current state of research and strategies of workforce diversity in the museum and curatorial field. I commenced my project with the intention of examining the diversity of the museum workforce only. However, after consulting these materials, I decided to expand my scope to include curatorial professionals as well. It was because many curators in the arts and cultural industry were also artists or academic researchers who collaborated with or contracted by museums to work on freelance or project-based curatorial jobs. From there, I drafted interview questions and devised the structure of the interview, including setting the duration and the number of interviewees that I would like to need to get representative qualitative data to detail the experiences of the East Asian professionals in the field.

Meanwhile, I tried to approach my potential interviewees. As my existing professional network consisted of a mix of commercial art, academic and museum professionals with a broad variety of cultural backgrounds, I would need to expand my circle in the museum sector further. I participated in two workshops hosted by the Making Museum Professionals network (<https://makingmuseumprofessionals.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/workshops/>). I presented a short paper about my CIRCE project as a work-in-progress in the first workshop at Birkbeck

University of London. The session made me realise that the voice of the Asian, not just East Asian, community in the sector was underrated despite many audience members being interested in my project topic. Then, I was invited to participate in the second workshop, spending a full day at the British Museum with a group of doctoral researchers, museum professionals and academic scholars; we discussed the changes and problems that the museum sector in the UK and Europe had developed regarding hiring, employment and working conditions in relation to ethnic, gender and social diversity. I was not only able to meet other researchers with non-white cultural backgrounds and working experiences in the museum sector but also to rethink from what perspective I should refine my CIRCE project methodology. I decided to conduct one-to-one interviews because of research ethics to render the participants the right to remain anonymous and private about their personal information. It was also due to the highly personal nature of some information that the interviewees might share with me about their experiences in the field, which very often was about a third party of their organisations.

### *Step 2: July*

After deciding the framework of the interview, I drafted and wrote up an invitation template with a brief introduction of my project (approximate 50 words) and the estimated duration and formats of the interview sessions. I set the duration to about 30 to 40 minutes as I considered that, to understand the nuances of one's working experiences and its linkage with their cultural or ethnic identity and background, it would be more appropriate to have more time to ask follow-up questions rather than just asking the five structural questions of the interview.

For recruiting interviewees, I reflected on my existing network of East Asian professionals in the museum and curatorial field and found that it was still quite limited. I therefore tried to resolve this issue by adding a social media search as part of my methodology. I first reviewed what kind of information and details about their professions and jobs that different museum and curatorial professionals shared via different social media. As my research focused on the interrelationship of one's academic and professional specialisation with qualifications, working experiences and professional training and development, I chose to conduct my social media analysis of LinkedIn. Different from Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, LinkedIn was the platform where people gave the most detailed information about their academic and professional experiences. It also offered the users the privacy option to choose how much information users wanted the public to access. So, by searching and identifying East Asian museum and curatorial professionals on LinkedIn, I would be able to access those who had already consented to share information about their academic and employment history. This search on LinkedIn helped me to identify a large number of potential interviewees as well as collecting some quantitative data to plot the educational and career paths that East Asian museum and curatorial professionals went through and were at various stages of career in the field.

### *Step 3: August - September*

Following the LinkedIn search, I sent out the first emails and messages to invite some of the museum and curatorial professionals within my professional network and those that I identified on LinkedIn. My target was to examine the inclusivity and diversity of each level of the organisational hierarchy in cultural institutions. I consulted several online guides for university students about career progression (AGCAS editors, 2021; Curator Careers, n.d.) and the Museum Associations' competency framework (n.d.) before I distinguished the potential interviewees according to the number of years of working experiences in the creative and cultural industry. I counted the years of them being in creative economics instead of specifying the years that they had in the museum and curatorial field because they might acquire transferable skills and knowledge by working in other roles in the industry. I drew the lines of seniority with reference to the number of years of working experiences as: less than two years, two to five years, five to ten years, and more than ten years. My invitations were then set to reach similar numbers of professionals at each of these four levels of professional development.

I waited about two weeks for responses from the first group of potential interviewees. However, the number of responses was very low since many were on leave for their summer break. I hence contacted Dr Diana Yeh of the CIRCE Research Lab in London at the City University of London for her assistance. In an online meeting, Dr Yeh kindly gave me a list of arts and cultural professionals whom she considered as suitable for participating in my project. This meeting was useful for my project as certainly not every professional would have a LinkedIn profile and even if they had one, it might not be publicly accessible. Moreover, as a highly experienced academic in the creative industry, Dr Yeh was able to refer me to more senior professionals in the field. To try to get more responses and data, I also modified my data collection method by creating a simple online survey with my interview questions as a Google Form. This method could make the data collection process more flexible and the people could feel less committed in comparison to a live interview session. Yet, at the end of the survey, I still added a question asking if the respondents were interested and available for a live one-to-one interview session. So, I could still reach out to them if I would like them to expand and explain any of their answers further.

Near the end of August and in the beginning of September, I received more responses to my interview invitations. In the next section of this report, I will present the final step of my research process with the data that I gathered from the interviews and the profiles of East Asian museum and curatorial professionals that I identified on LinkedIn.

## ANALYSIS AND MAIN INSIGHTS

My last research step was to conduct analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data that I collected from LinkedIn and the interviews with some of the museum and curatorial professionals. On LinkedIn, I identified 53 profiles of museum and curatorial professionals. There were more Chinese professionals; it could be because of the algorithm of the platform that tended to refer me, a Hong Konger who had experiences working in Hong Kong, to people with similar cultural backgrounds and working experiences. Furthermore, I referred to Chinese as an ethnicity, so it included people from Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China. (see Appendix) For interviews, I sent out 22 invitations and received 12 responses. Seven professionals agreed to participate and were interviewed while four were interested to participate but were not available. However, two of the four professionals, despite being unavailable to be interviewed, filled up the online surveys. One respondent rejected because she was no longer working in the sector nor in the UK.

Based on the LinkedIn data, I set the criteria that the professionals must show that they had graduated at least from their first degree before 2023 January and were not taking an internship, work placement, volunteering role or apprenticeship. It was because, to evaluate their career paths and employment, it was essential that they were taking paid jobs, which usually could not be secured through their universities and were more effective for them to support their living.

More than 80% of the professionals had more than two years of experience working in the creative economies after they graduated from their first degree and more than 75% of them worked in the museum and curatorial field for more than two years after graduation. Some of the professionals were art and cultural practitioners and designers before entering the museum and curatorial field as curators, front-of-house assistants and event producers. More interestingly, I found that 49 out of 53 professionals (92.5%) completed at least one educational programme, usually at the higher education level, in the UK but, at the same time, 36 of them (67.9%) had working experiences abroad. What this data manifested was although many of these professionals might not have British citizenships, they had living experiences in the UK for no less than a year (if they came for a master's programme). The possibility of completing a postgraduate study in the UK proved that, at the minimum, they had a good level of English speaking and written proficiency, especially most of them enrolled in an arts and humanities subject, which required a higher level of English language ability compared to the scientific or business subjects.

To further expand on these observations, I should refer to the qualitative data based on the interviews that I had with some of the Asian professionals. The following analysis is divided into two sections: one about the conditions and situations of job searching of these Asian professionals and the other about the conditions and situations of them working in the museum and curatorial field.

For the privacy and the sensitive nature of some of the details the interviewees discussed in our interviews, all the interviewees were anonymised. I would refer to them (with a brief note on their professional backgrounds) as in the list below:

Professional 1	An experienced professional with a strong museum policy background for more than ten years of experiences in the field in the UK and overseas. Currently working as an academic about the museum and cultural sector in the UK.
Professional 2	A museum professional who held an undergraduate and postgraduate in art history. Currently working at an assistant level role in a major public art institution in London.
Professional 3	A recent graduate who had a background in fine art and cultural policy. Currently taking up an entry-level role on exhibition organisation in an arts and cultural organisation in London.
Professional 4	A British-born Asian artist and curator with substantial experiences in the arts and cultural sector. Currently working as an academic in a higher education institution in the UK.
Curator 1	A curator who had experiences working in Asia before coming to the UK for her postgraduate study. Currently pursuing a research degree in London while working as a freelance curator.
Curator 2	A curator who worked years in a museum in Asia before coming to the UK for his postgraduate study. Currently taking a curatorial role in an arts and cultural organisation in London.
Curator 3	A curator who had curatorial experiences working overseas as well as teaching experiences in a creative discipline in the UK. Currently taking a curatorial role in a major museum in London.

In addition to the names of the interviewees, all details which may provide identifiable details of the interviewees (e.g. the names of the organisations that they studied, had and are working in, their place of origin, the titles of their qualifications etc.) were removed.

### *Job Searching Experiences*

Before discussing their experiences of getting their first jobs in the museum and curatorial field, I first engaged with my interviewees on why, in the first place, they would choose an academic or professional specialisation related to the field. All the interviewees said that, rather than practical concerns, like salary and opportunities for career progression, or anything related to their cultural or ethnic background, personal interest and curiosity were the key reason why

they pursued an academic discipline, such as art history, design history and fine art, that eventually led them to enter the field.

“First of all, I can definitely tell you that salary was not something that I prioritised because I already knew that it's not going to be the most well-paying job or not. No one would choose to work in the cultural industry if they're going for a six figure salary.”

*Curator 1*

“I did choose things that are not familiar to me because that's usually what I'm most interested in (rather than) choos(ing) things that I know the most.”

*Professional 2*

“For instance, I applied for a job in (an institution with a strong visual art focus). I'm not convinced...Because I don't think it is a good match...unless they have a clear project-based role that is my interest...(on his current project) It is a very universal thing that doesn't require a strong ethnic background to contribute. But it's more of my interest and whether I can put my curatorial background and interest into good use.”

*Curator 2*

But, when it came to job searching, their experiences started to diverge. The major reason for why their experiences differed was about visas. For the interviewees who had a definite limit of the visa period, they considered visa to be the biggest barrier for their job search and it was closely related to whether the institutions they would like to work in or they were working in were willing and had the right to sponsor as much as the level of the positions they applied for:

“During application, I was often asked about my visa status, even before I actually started to talk about anything else. So it was a bit annoying, because it's not very related to the job, but the standard and the important factor for them to consider.”

*Professional 2*

“Not only English, not only language, the biggest thing is the visa. So it's really hard to get visa sponsors here...I think, most of the people who speak English and who have the green card or visa, will definitely get a job compared to me even though I have a really good CV and resume.”

*Professional 3*

“I'm sure there's someone in the industry who have managed to secure full-time permanent position straight out of MA as a non-European, but I could never get a permanent role because of my visa...Towards end of my contract at the museum, my team were very keen on hiring me permanently...but the HR was not on board with doing that...I know at some point previously they thought about sponsoring someone very senior...but they chose not to and they just hired someone else who is already British.”

*Curator 1*

Meanwhile, the other interviewees who were not British citizens but did not require visa sponsorships did not bring up any challenges related to their visa status. In fact, Curator 2, who graduated from his postgraduate degree not long ago, managed to get his current curatorial role seamlessly after his graduation.

Another point of divergence among the interviewees regarding their job searching experiences was linked to the kind of positions that they looked for and to what extent it was connected to their cultural or ethnic background.

“If you're like an Asian, I think it's quite difficult for you to get a job in a non-Asian department or topic or role...Even if you study the same subjects, I think most of them just prefer candidates that who's white...So I applied for some roles that were more related to...European art. Obviously I don't have strong proof or evidence....It's because of how I fit the job description. So I take most of the boxes, I would expect an interview.”

*Professional 2*

“So, unbeknownst to them, they've found themselves in a situation where their privilege, their bias, has manifested itself within their cultural programs...I mean they can put artists of colour into their programs. But it doesn't change the structural institution. It doesn't change the number of Chinese curators in those institutions. If anything, there could be an argument that they're still marginalising these Chinese curators to do East Asian work on behalf of the institution.”

*Professional 4*

The comment given by Professional 4 was of course not only about job searching but also working in the almost monocultural environment of lots of museums and cultural institutions in the UK.

### *At Work Experiences*

The first thing that many of the interviewees identified as the indicator of cultural difference as much as a barrier was language. Five interviewees had an Asian language as their mother tongue. They said that, while the fluency of a language other than English did give them an

advantage at work and they and their team did take their Asian cultural background positively , English language did sometimes become a barrier for them.

“Sometimes I have to find the right way to decode what they (his British colleagues) are trying to mean...Sometimes, they are local and they speak really fast. So that's definitely, definitely a language barrier...I'm still learning how to voice out so that people would listen to me...or voice out on what I can contribute or question.”

*Curator 2*

“Of course, I think every job has barriers and challenges because one key thing is (that) my mother language is (not English). So I don't speak my English better than (my mother language)...(although) for the language, I think it could also be an advantage because I could speak two languages. It could be really nice in the culture sector, maybe because we have lots of relationships with the other countries that could be advantageous.”

*Professional 3*

“I think, if you are not European and if English is your second language, I think the industry expects a higher performance in your English level compared to the Europeans. For example, like an Italian colleague who, clearly, the level of her English fluency isn't necessarily as good as mine, but it's fine. But if I had that level of English fluency, I don't think I would have gotten the job. Maybe that's just my personal bias but it's just from what I've been witnessing.”

*Curator 1*

In such a language context, some of the interviewees did find their overseas working experiences useful, especially for those who have either lived in another English-speaking country or worked in a fully English-speaking environment before. Curator 3 clearly expressed how her previous work in an international environment and in a project with her current institution in Asia could be used as a reference when she started working in the UK and in the same institution. Curator 2 also shared that, as he worked with a team with members from different parts of the world in Asia, he could adapt to his working environment in the UK easily. Professional 1 also worked and studied abroad. She underscored her overseas experiences and exposure to be the moments that inspired her to work in subjects related to the museum sector. On the contrary, for the younger interviewees with less or no experiences working in Asia nor in the UK, they struggled more. Yet, they emphasised that language was not the only barrier but the monocultural environment also exerted quite significant impacts on how they felt about their current working conditions:

“After getting into the gallery...sometimes I can feel slightly lonely, partly because my team, they work remotely a lot, but also partly because of the age gap. So, I'm relatively young in my group. I'm the only Asian in my group. I think most of the time outside of work we just don't have lots of common topics, but I



imagine that would also be a problem for other Asians working in the museum, because we do have slightly different cultural backgrounds.”

*Professional 2*

“It's my first time working in the UK. The (Asian) work, like (Asian) company atmosphere and (Asian) company culture, and the London (one) is really different. First time when I was working here, it was really awkward. I couldn't really get into my team. The working atmosphere and cultures were also big challenges.”

*Professional 3*

“I think I became more aware of my sort of ethnic, cultural background once I was placed in a relatively minority position. Like, for example, in (Asia), I was never really aware of me being (Asian). But in the UK, I'm really aware of it because I can clearly see that I'm the only East Asian person in the whole office. It's impossible to ignore the fact that you clearly look different. I think I was pretty lucky in the sense that the people that I directly worked with didn't necessarily make anything more difficult for me.”

*Curator 1*

While five interviewees said that they did often handle tasks and research more related to Asian culture and subjects, they saw those more as their unique contributions to their teams, the racialisation obviously took place more in the working environment. As Curator 2 put it, it was not a racial discrimination since it was just how the team was structured but, for most interviewees, it undoubtedly made them feel racialised.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIRCE

Based on my data about the racialised working environment and the barriers that Asian museum and curatorial professionals experienced, I would recommend institutions and organisations like CIRCE to work in the following capacities:

### *Research and Data*

A major issue about ethnic diversity in the field is that there is no concrete quantitative and qualitative data about the employment and working conditions of ethnic minority professionals. My project described only a very tiny slice of experiences that Asian professionals had. To capture the picture more fully, we have to expand research and data collection more extensively by surveying the experiences of professionals of more ethnic groups, at more levels and with different roles. This kind of data would build a solid ground when devising inclusive museum practices through actually responding to the structural challenges these non-white professionals are facing.

### *Liaising and Networking*

A fundamental role that different institutions and organisations can play is to initiate a cross-institution network connecting the ethnic minority professionals in the museum and curatorial field. This strategy is to challenge the barrier from bottom up. As my interviewees described, very often, they were the only Asian in their teams. To form and provide a network to allow these professionals to support each other is crucial for them to eliminate the feelings such as loneliness and helplessness when working in the field. Moreover, such a network can function as a consultation group for cultural institutions to reflect on and improve their diversity strategy.

For CIRCE, it can take the lead in gathering the data and using the data to join the professionals and their institutions. A strong trait of CIRCE is its wide network of creative and cultural professionals. Consulting or commissioning members from this network to devise training programmes for white and non-white professionals will be one of the key contributions CIRCE can make. As reflected by most of my interviewees, their working environment is monocultural. It is thus important to provide training for the white professionals, who might have worked in such an environment for the last 20 years, especially on how they can support non-white team members. Another target group of this training is the Human Resources team, who are at the frontline of deciding how diverse the workforce can be.

## Future of Diversity

What the above strategies and actions can contribute will be more structural change of the creative economies. Frustration was expressed by some of my interviewees about visa policy and challenges of taking up positions less about their cultural and ethnic backgrounds but more about their personal interest and specialisation. The importance of making changes about this situation requires organisations like CIRCE to connect the professionals with the institutions and the governments. The significant potential that the non-white professionals, mostly with international experiences and horizon in the case of East Asian professionals, deserves much more recognition. CIRCE can initiate policy changes about visa sponsorships and employment procedures by encouraging ethnic minority professionals and their institutions to record and promote their achievements in the field. Forming a database of their contributions and facilitating a redistribution of power in the sector by marketing it to the public can be the very first step for policy changes for a structurally diverse arts and cultural sector.

*But one of the things that I am wary of is that it's not simply about representation. This moment requires representation plus antiracist politics. It needs people who are going to be in those organisations and actively cultivate change within them. Not simply sit in those positions, hold those positions of power, and then let whiteness kind of wash it over them if you see what I mean?*

*Professional 4*

## REFERENCES

### *Academic Literature*

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included : Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rcauk/detail.action?docID=1173269>.

Davies, M., & Shaw, L. (2010). Measuring the Ethnic Diversity of the Museum Workforce and the Impact and Cost of Positive-Action Training, with Particular Reference to the Diversify Scheme. *Cultural Trends* 19(3), 147–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2010.495267>.

Dragouni, M., & McCarthy, D. (2021). Museums as Supportive Workplaces: An Empirical Enquiry in the UK Museum Workforce” *Museum Management and Curatorship*, April, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2021.1914142>.

Heidelberg, B. M. (2019). Evaluating Equity: Assessing Diversity Efforts through a Social Justice Lens. *Cultural Trends*, 28(5), 391–403. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2019.1680002>.

Hutchison, F. C., & Cartmell, C. (2016). Opening up Entry Routes to Our Sector: Reflections on Museums Galleries Scotland’s Internship Programme. *Museum International*, 68(1-2), 97–111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/muse.12095>.

Macdonald, S. (2022). *Doing Diversity in Museums and Heritage*. transcript Verlag.

Sandell, R. (2000). The Strategic Significance of Workforce Diversity in Museums. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 6(3), 213–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250050148205>.

### *Sector Reports*

Art Fund. (2022). Its about handing over power: The impact of ethnic diversity initiatives on curatorial roles in the UK arts & heritage sector 1998-2021. Art Fund, Museum X & Culture&.

Aldridge, J., Larsen, M. & Jarvis, P. (2018). Open Up Museum For Everyone: A practical guide to support museums to increase the diversity of their visitors. Association of Independent Museums.

BOP Consulting & the Museum Consultancy. (2016). Character Matters: Attitudes, behaviours and skills in the UK Museum Workforce. BOP Consulting.

Davies, M., Griffiths, C. & Wilkinson, H. (2015). Diversity in the workforce and governance of Arts Council England’s Major partner museums: Research Project. Arts Council England & the Museum Consultancy.

Manchester, H. & Pett, E. (2015). Teenage Kicks: Exploring cultural value from a youth perspective. Arts & Humanities Research Council.

National Museums Directors' Conference. (2006). Cultural Diversity: Final Report and Recommendations. National Museums Directors Conference.

Tissier, D. & Nathoo, S. S. (2004). Black and Minority Ethnic Engagement with London's Museums - Telling it like it is: Non-user Research January - April 2004. Strategic Urban Futures.

### *Other references*

AGCAS editors. (2021). Job profile: Museum/gallery curator. Prospects.  
<https://www.prospects.ac.uk/job-profiles/museum-gallery-curator>

Bienkowski, P. & Jenkins, S. (2019, April 23). Do volunteers still have a place in museums and cultural organisations?. Apollo.  
<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/volunteers-museums-cultural-organisations>

Curator Careers. (n.d.) The Princeton Review.  
<https://www.princetonreview.com/careers/48/curator>

Hatzipanagos, R. (2018, October 11). The 'decolonization' of the American museum. The Washington Post.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/10/12/decolonization-american-museum>

Lee, P. (2023, February 1). Over 144,000 Hongkongers move to UK in 2 years since launch of BNO visa scheme. Hong Kong Free Press.  
<https://hongkongfp.com/2023/02/01/over-144000-hongkongers-move-to-uk-in-2-years-since-launch-of-bno-visa-scheme/>

Museums Association. (n.d.). Competency Framework. Museums Association.  
<https://www.museumsassociation.org/careers/competency-framework>

Office for National Statistics. (2022, December 22). Population of England and Wales. Office for National Statistics.  
<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest#by-ethnicity>

Shaw, A. & McGivern, H. (2023, July 11). Special report: Funding cuts and weak economy send UK's visual arts into crisis. The Art Newspaper.  
<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/07/11/special-report-funding-cuts-and-weak-economy-send-uks-visual-arts-into-crisis>

## APPENDIX

Tables showing the data collected from LinkedIn

<b>Total number of professionals identified</b>	<b>53</b>
Chinese	35
Japanese	4
Korean	10
Singaporean/Malaysian/Southeast Asian	4

<b>Number of years working in the museum and curatorial field</b>	<b>No. of professionals</b>
< 2 years	13
2 - 5 years	15
5 - 10 years	13
> 10 years	12

<b>Number of years working in the creative economies</b>	<b>No. of professionals</b>
< 2 years	10
2 - 5 years	15
5 - 10 years	12
> 10 years	16

<b>Number of years working in the UK</b>	<b>No. of professionals</b>
< 2 years	21
2 - 5 years	15
5 - 10 years	6
> 10 years	11

<b>Number of years working overseas</b>	<b>No. of professionals</b>
< 2 years	31
2 - 5 years	11
5 - 10 years	7
> 10 years	4

<b>Other characteristics</b>	<b>No. of professionals</b>
Number of profiles with overseas working experiences	36
Number of profiles study in the UK before working in the UK	49

Tables of data about the professionals participated in the project

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Interview Date</b>
Professional 1	Aug 21, 2023
Professional 2	Sept 1, 2023
Professional 3	Sept 7, 2023
Professional 4	Sept 14, 2023
Curator 1	Sept 8, 2023
Curator 2	Sept 13, 2023
Curator 3	Sept 28, 2023

<b>Total number of professionals interviewed</b>	<b>7</b>
Chinese	4
Korean	2
Singaporean	1

<b>Number of years working in the sector</b>	<b>No. of professionals</b>
< 2 years	2
2 - 5 years	1
5 - 10 years	2
> 10 years	2

<b>Number of years working in the creative economies</b>	<b>No. of professionals</b>
< 2 years	2
2 - 5 years	1
5 - 10 years	1
> 10 years	3

<b>Interview Method</b>	<b>No. of professionals</b>
Online	6
In-person	1