Visual arts, cultural heritage and tourism

Visual arts, heritage and tourism in China at a glance

These three sectors are deeply interconnected in China and have grown at extraordinary speed. Cultural heritage and artistic output provide **core content for tourism** – for example, museum exhibits, heritage sites, and art festivals are major tourist attractions. Conversely, tourism brings funding and audiences to the arts and heritage sectors, encouraging the preservation of cultural sites and the operation of museums/galleries. Recognising this synergy, the Chinese government merged the Ministry of Culture and the National Tourism Administration in 2018 into the unified **Ministry of Culture and Tourism**, explicitly to "promote the integrated development of the cultural and tourism industries". In practice, initiatives like **"culture + tourism"** demonstrate how a museum opening, an art biennale, or an intangible heritage festival can boost local tourism, and how tourist revenues can fund heritage protection and artistic development.

A nationwide museum boom has seen China surpass **7,000 registered museums** by 2024, with a powerful network of **galleries, private museums, and globally ambitious fairs** making China the world's third largest art market by value. Additionally, the cultural retail sector, from museum gift shops to e-commerce IP collaborations, has become a major revenue driver. Post-pandemic, institutions face pressure to diversify income and build deeper audience relationships. Younger visitors are more critical, digitally savvy, and demand participatory formats.

- **7,046:** Museums registered in China in 2024
- **1.49 billion:** Museum visitors in 2024 (up 15.4% YoY)
- **£655 billion:** Value added of China's broader cultural and related industries (2023)
- **15%:** China's global share of the art market by sales value (2024)

Opportunities for UK partners

China's visual arts and heritage sectors continue to grow in scale, complexity, and global ambition: less about rapid expansion, more about **depth, quality, and international dialogue.** For UK partners, success lies in **carefully chosen partnerships and long-term commitment.**

- **Collaborative curation beyond packaged exports.** Landmark exhibitions in the past showed the scale of impact possible. As China becomes more determined to elevate its own cultural heritage and influence, success for the future depends on sustained relationships, contextual relevance, and shared storytelling. Relevant themes like connections with the Silk Road, industrial heritage, design innovation and long-term loans with Chinese counterparts are great areas to explore.
- **Strategic alliance and knowledge sharing:** Chinese institutions, both public and private, are increasingly open to knowledge sharing around education, interpretation, and audience engagement. This isn't about shipping exhibitions but shaping the institution and industry together.
- **Digital heritage is a growth area:** From VR tours of ancient villages to immersive storytelling at historic sites, China is investing in tech-enabled cultural preservation. UK creatives, researchers and technologists are well-placed to collaborate on digital formats, tools, and platforms.
- **Artist residencies and peer-to-peer collaboration build trust.** Informal exchange, research-led residencies, and bilingual curatorial partnerships can open long-term pathways beyond government-led MOU models.
- **Cultural retail offers crossover opportunities:** China is leading the cultural commercialisation from museum shops to brand collaborations. UK museums, design schools, and brands could explore IP partnerships that combine heritage with consumer design, as well as learning from China on the advanced ecosystem of cultural retail.

Market development timeline

1990s

Chinese Avant-garde Art

The beginning of the Chinese contemporary art market.

1994 There was only 1 museum in Shanghai: Shanghai Art Museum (f.1965).
1996 Shanghai Biennale was established.
1996 ShanghART Gallery opened by Swiss gallerist Lorenz Helbling.

2000s

Chinese Art Global Debut

Through the maturation of the market economy, the Chinese art market took off after the millennium.

2000 ShanghART became the first gallery from China to participate in Art Basel, marking the beginning of an increased global presence in the years to come.
2000 Shanghai Biennale turned from focusing on traditional art to contemporary art.
2000 Shanghai M50 Contemporary Art District.
2001 Chengdu Biennale was established.
2002 Guangzhou Triennial was established.
2003 Beijing 798 Art Zone became a developed artistic community.
2004 Shanghai Mingyuan Museum opened (private).
2005 MoCA Shanghai opened.
2006 Art-ba-ba BBS forum was founded.
2007 UCCA (Beijing) opened.
2007 Shanghai E-art Festival.

2010s

Explosive Growth Chinese Art Market Ecstasy

The 2010 Shanghai Expo was a milestone for China and its art industry, kicking off a decade of the most explosive growth. Driven by real estate development and the need for urbanisation, countless new establishments of large-scale, big-name-architect-designed, internationally-facing public museums, private museums, and art fairs emerged. New art districts were planned. Art retail flourished.

2010 Shanghai Rockbund Art Museum (RAM) opened.
2011 'West Bund Culture Corridor' plan initiated.
2012 Long Museum Pudong opened.
2012 Power Station of Art (PSA) opened.
2013 The first Art Basel in Hong Kong took place.
2013 Art021 Art Fair was founded.
2014 West Bund Art & Design art fair was founded.
2014 Long Museum West Bund opened.
2014 Yuz Museum Shanghai opened (designed by Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto).
2014 K11 Art Mall held Master of Impressionism - Claude Monet in Shanghai (beginning of art retail heat).
2015 Shanghai Centre of Photography (SCoP) opened.
2016 the V&A and China Merchants Shekou Holdings (CMSK) jointly announced the launch of Design Society in Shenzhen.
2018 JINGART Art Fair was founded.
2018 Beijing Dangdai Art Fair was founded.
2019 Shanghai West Bund Museum opened.
2019 Tank Shanghai opened.
2019 West Bund Museum opened (David Chipperfield Architects). Its developer signed a 4-year partnership with Centre Pompidou.
2019 Tate signed a 3-year agreement with the state-owned developer Shanghai Lujiazui Group to be a strategic partner with the Shanghai Museum of Art Pudong (MAP).

2020s

Post-pandemic Recovery

The prolonged pandemic led to many closures of offline galleries and art spaces. While China's art market is recovering, new art spaces continue to launch and the visual arts industry continues to grow. Cultural development became an important part in governmental plans.

2020 China's Culture Power Strategy (2020-2035).
2021 M+ Hong Kong opened.
2021 Shanghai Museum of Art Pudong (MAP) opened (Designed by Atelier Jean Nouvel).
2022 China's 13th 5-year Cultural Development Plan.
2023 West Bund Art Area (西岸艺术示范区) was announced to be demolished, leading 17 art institutions to close or relocate.
2023 West Bund Museum and Centre Pompidou renewed a 5-year partnership (2024-2029).
2024 The first edition of ART021 Hong Kong.
2025 The Design Museum signed MoU with Shenzhen's Culture Square.

Market overview

Visual arts, heritage, and tourism are deeply interconnected in China.

- **Visual Arts** in China encompasses fine arts such as painting, sculpture, photography, calligraphy, and contemporary art, along with the institutions that showcase them (art galleries, art museums, and exhibitions). This sector includes both public museums and art academies (often state-funded) and private galleries and art fairs that promote artistic creation and the art market. It overlaps with China's broader "cultural industry," which has been growing into a significant economic pillar.

- **Cultural Heritage** refers to China's rich legacy of historical artefacts, monuments, traditions, and living expressions. It includes tangible heritage such as archaeological sites, historic buildings, relics in museums, and intangible heritage like traditional music, festivals, crafts, and performing arts. China has **56 UNESCO World Heritage Sites** as of 2023, second only to Italy, underscoring the global importance. Heritage resources are conserved under the National Cultural Heritage Administration and form the foundation for cultural education and tourism.

- **New legislation on restitution:** The 2024 revision of the Cultural Relics Protection Law[30] established a comprehensive "prevention, protection, utilisation, accountability" institutional framework that came into effect from 1 March 2025, marking China's transition from reactive to proactive conservation in cultural heritage safeguarding. The revised law strengthens China's commitment to international collaboration with mutual benefits in the fields of archaeology, restoration, and the repatriation of cultural relics. Meanwhile, it sets out increased regulations on international loans and cross-border movements, especially for graded cultural relics.

- **Cultural tourism** is a key segment in tourism focused on cultural experiences – visiting museums, galleries, heritage sites, festivals, and other cultural attractions.

Market size

- China is undergoing a full-scale **museum boom**. In 2024, China had **7,046 registered museums**[31]- up 213 from 2023. That's the equivalent to having a new museum opened every less than two days since 2012[32]. In 2024, a total of 43,000+ exhibitions (up 1.53%) and 510,000+ educational events (up 33.57%) were held.

- The rise in museums also sees surging attendance. China recorded **1.49 billion museum visits** (+ 15.4% from 2023) in 2024.

- **Museum retail**: While most museums are free to enter (91.5%)[33] Many have creative gift shops and cultural product lines that generate revenue. In 2024, museum retail in China generated around **£351 million** (¥3.428 billion), up 63.7% from 2023.

- **Commercial art market**: is the third-largest art market in the world, accounting for **15% of global sales** value in 2024 (Art Basel & UBS)[34].

Market segment

China's visual arts ecosystem is anchored by a mix of state-led institutions and a commercial art market.

- **Public museums** hold national collections and drive research, exhibitions, and public education. They are increasingly serving as social and tourist destinations, not just scholarly spaces.
- **Private museums and art galleries**, often founded by collectors or corporations with no public subsidy, play a major role in showcasing contemporary art. Flagship examples include the Long Museum(Shanghai), Yuz Museum (Shanghai), Today Art Museum (Beijing), UCCA (Beijing) and the He Art Museum (Foshan).[35]
- **Auction house, art fairs, and art districts:** provide global networks that facilitate exhibition and sales of visual arts. Art clusters like 798 Art Zone in Beijing and M50 in Shanghai, domestic and international auction houses like Poly Auction, Christie's, Sotheby's and Philips, and art fairs like ART021, Westbund Art & Design, Photofairs Shanghai are key to international exchange.
- **Art festivals and major events:** China's flagship art biennales like Shanghai Biennale, Guangzhou Triennial and Chengdu Biennale are nationally significant art festivals and strategic touchpoints for international collaborations. Usually backed by strong local government support, they offer platforms for emerging and established Chinese curators and artists as well as attract and feature global curators and artists.
- **Cultural retail** is booming. Museum shops, branded merchandise, and IP licensing turn heritage into consumer goods—sold online via platforms like Taobao, Douyin and WeChat.
- **Exhibition touring and logistics** are shaped by a mix of state-affiliated and private agencies. For example, Art Exhibitions China (AEC), under National Cultural Heritage Administration worked with V&A for a few touring exhibitions[36]. Youxiang Art Exhibitions facilitated the 4-city China tour for National Museum Liverpool[37]. Eric Art Services is a fine art handler providing logistics, storage and other services with extensive portfolio in China[38].

Key trends and opportunities

This section distils insights from in-depth conversations with Chinese and UK visual arts professionals. These interviews reveal four critical shifts that reflect an environment that is increasingly diversified, resilient, digitally advanced, and receptive to collaboration. These four interlinked trends highlight how China's visual arts, cultural heritage and tourism landscape is evolving, and where UK stakeholders can engage meaningfully—through strategic alliance, shared learning and long-term relationship building.

1. Institutions' increasing need for financial sustainability

Government policies and funding environments have a massive impact on international collaborations. After decades of infrastructure-led expansion that relies on governmental support and private investment, many museum and art institutions in China now have an increasing need to take responsibility for financial sustainability. Government support remains important, yet is increasingly diverted to the few major players and other priorities. Touring exhibitions, venue hire, and education programmes now sit alongside ticket sales and membership programmes as core sources of income.

Although some large art districts and arts spaces have closed or downsized post-pandemic, new ones are still emerging and others are working to consolidate and build a more robust and globally connected sector. Multi-year, high-profile partnerships such as those between the V&A and Design Society in Shenzhen or Tate and Museum of Art Pudong have helped lay the groundwork for a more diverse ecosystem. The sector is extremely dynamic and looking to raise standards in curatorial practice, audience engagement, and financial sustainability, which is where the next phase of opportunities lies.

Opportunities: UK organisations should approach collaborations with an awareness of the partner's financial model and distinguish structural challenges and practical challenges. Projects that allow flexibility around outcomes and support the long-term development of both parties are more likely to gain traction.

> **With the current economy in China and globally, very few museums and galleries could survive just on ticket sales unless they might be receiving direct funding from the government. Most institutions are juggling private patrons, sponsorship, educational programmes and retail etc.**
>
> —Deputy Head of Exhibition, a contemporary art centre in Beijing

2. Peer-to-peer exchange is always a good place to start

While top-down government-level institutional partnerships remain a core feature of the UK-China cultural landscape, there is growing momentum behind more fluid, artist- or curator-led exchanges. Informal networks, long-term residencies, and research-led formats that foster mutual understanding provide valuable opportunities for seeding larger scale outputs.

Opportunities: UK organisations and practitioners can look for low-pressure, dialogue-based opportunities like residencies, online talks, workshops, research exchange, and curatorial pairing. Matching intentions and scale—whether working at a grassroots, institutional, or governmental level—can lead to more effective and rewarding outcomes for both sides.

> **“It’s not about how many exhibitions you produce but the cultural exchanges – the WhatsApp group was set up during Manchester International Festival two years ago, and it’s still active. Artists organically started to create connections. It’s about creating the right circumstances—a greenhouse environment—for people to thrive.**
>
> —Director of a contemporary art gallery in the UK

3. Maturing audiences demand quality and meaning

After a decade of rapid museum growth and blockbuster exhibitions, Chinese audiences are becoming more discerning and confident in their cultural choices. Visitors now expect value, meaning, and engagement—not just spectacle—and are more willing to participate actively in shaping and critiquing cultural experiences. There’s a growing appetite for contextualised content, especially among younger audiences and cultural professionals outside of first-tier cities.

Opportunities: the maturing audiences in China presents a widening range of opportunities for UK stakeholders to offer more diverse content, programmes, and elements that don't necessarily rely on cultural framing.

4. Heritage goes digital: culture preservation meets creative tech

The pandemic accelerated digitisation - from online exhibitions, 3D virtual tours, to online auction sales. Digitisation has also become a strategic tool for preserving and promoting China's vast cultural heritage, particularly in rural and historically underrepresented areas. Initiatives such as the Traditional Chinese Village Digital Museum[39], launched in 2017, have built comprehensive digital catalogues of over 6,800 villages, combining oral histories, 3D modelling, and VR/AR experiences. Provincial governments, universities, and museums are all investing in heritage-tech partnerships—showcasing everything from temple murals and folk architecture to craft practices and ecological knowledge.

Opportunities: UK creatives, technologists and heritage institutions are well-positioned to collaborate on digital storytelling, immersive experiences, and cross-border research with China's counterparts. A UK-China hackathon on museum digital engagement or a joint online exhibition on a VR platform are examples of contemporary collaboration.

Case studies

In this section we showcase a mini typology of UK-China collaborations in visual arts, cultural heritage and tourism in the past few years. From gov-to-gov strategic partnership, touring exhibition, artist residencies to R&D alliances, they demonstrate the scope, scale and creativity possible when UK and Chinese partners build relationships rooted in mutuality. These models are not mutually exclusive, many successful collaborations combine elements of several.

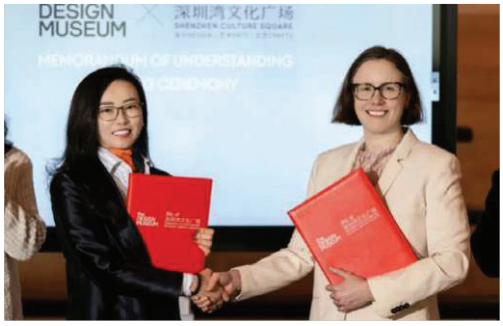
Multi-year strategic partnerships between high-profile museums

- V&A x China Merchants Shekou (CMSK): Design Society, Shenzhen
- Tate x Lujiazui Group: Museum of Art Pudong, Shanghai
- Science Museum x Palace Museum: Time, Culture, and Identity
- The British Museum x Suzhou Museum, Suzhou

These high-level, multi-year partnerships have enabled UK museums to share curatorial expertise, develop exhibitions, train museum staff, and support the launch and growth of new cultural institutions across China. The V&A's role in co-founding Design Society in Shenzhen in 2014 set a precedent for subsequent collaborations. Such partnerships are win–win: Chinese museums gain content and operational know-how, while UK institutions extend their global presence and often secure financial return.

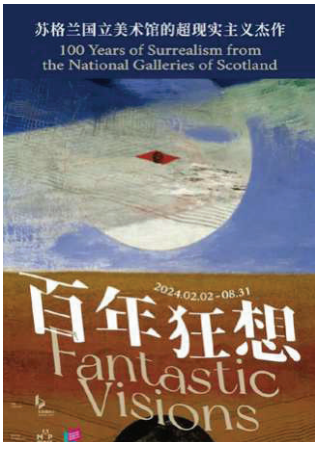
The Design Museum x Shenzhen Bay Culture Square[40], 2025

In March 2025, the Design Museum signed Memorandum of Understanding with Shenzhen's 188,000 sm^2 cultural landmark, Shenzhen Bay Culture Square, to be its strategic cultural partner, alongside another two French museum partners (Musée des Arts Décoratifs and Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres of France). The Collaboration begins with the touring exhibition*A Century of Chairs* and will explore cultural IP development, social participation models and modernised Chinese design. (Image by Jeff Spicer/PA Media Assignments © The Design Museum)



National Galleries of Scotland x Museum of Art Pudong Fantastic Visions: *100 Years of Surrealism from the National Galleries of Scotland exhibition*[41], Feb - Aug 2024

Produced by Shanghai Lujiazui Development (Group) Co., Ltd., and co-organised by the Museum of Art Pudong and the National Galleries of Scotland, this exhibition drawn entirely from the collection of the National Galleries of Scotland, contains over 100 major works by over 50 artists, including some of the world's most important surrealists like Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Leonora Carrington, and Dorothea Tanning. All the artworks on display, ranging from painting, sculpture, frottage, collage, photography, manuscripts, and books, are presented in China for the first time. (Image © Museum of Art Pudong)



National Museums Liverpool's bilateral touring exhibitions, 2018 - ongoing

The landmark touring exhibition *China's First Emperor and the Terracotta Warriors* (2018), co-organised by the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau and National Museums Liverpool attracted over 600,000 visitors and £78 million in local economic impact[42]. It catalysed ongoing partnerships and allowed National Museums Liverpool access to the museum network in China, leading to additional recent touring exhibitions like *Art in the Age of Victoria* (2023-24) and *The Greek and Roman Gods* (2024-26). UK institutions could explore co-curation of exhibitions around shared themes, e.g. Silk Road connections, industrial heritage, design innovation and long-term loans with Chinese counterparts. (Image by DU on Unsplash)

Digital Heritage Nanjing Hackathon 2024[43]

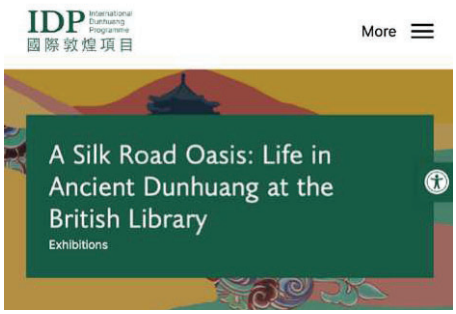
Partner: UNESCO x Nanjing Cultural Investment Holding Group

Held on July 2-8th, 2024, this event was the world's first museum immersive hackathon that invited young people to reimagine visitor experience at a historic site - Great Bao'en Temple Ruins Museum in Nanjing. Of 588 submissions, 15 finalist teams participated—including graduates from UCL, Bristol, and Goldsmiths. Judges included UK professionals. This initiative exemplifies how museums and digital technology can work together to bridge heritage and contemporary audiences. The contest not only revitalises interest in the Great Bao'en Temple but also encourages preserving and promoting cultural heritage through international collaboration and innovation.

IDP International Dunhuang Programme[44], 1994 - ongoing

Partners: British Library, National Library of China, Dunhuang Academy, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ryukoku University, and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities

One of the longest-running, most mature digital research collaborations in cultural heritage. The programme links more than 35 partners worldwide who are working to digitise manuscripts and artefacts from Dunhuang and other sites along the Eastern Silk Roads. In 2025, the British Library hosted a major exhibition, *A Silk Road Oasis*[45] and academic symposium[46]. A leading example of scholarly, technical, and diplomatic exchange. (Image © British Library Board)



Artist residencies and exchanges

There are many opportunities for residency and peer-to-peer exchanges between the UK and China. This includes funding for UK professionals to undertake residencies in China and supporting Chinese artists to go to UK residencies. Arts Council England and British Council in the UK have enabled dozens of professionals and artistic dialogue between China and the UK, meanwhile there are many artist residency opportunities enabled by Chinese organisations such as:

- Beijing Inside-Out Museum:
  https://www.ioam.org.cn/zhu-liu/
- Shanghai The Swatch Art Peace Hotel artist residency:
  https://www.swatch-art-peace-hotel.com/artist-residency
- Hangzhou BY ART MATTERS:
  https://www.byartmatters.com/residency
- Chengdu A4 ART MUSEUM:
  https://www.a4artmuseum.com/en/a4-residencyartcenter/about-residency/
- Chengdu NY20+:
  http://www.ny20plus.com/en/h-col-112.html
- Xiamen C-Platform art residency:
  https://www.c-platform.org/event/lucitopia-residency-2021-2022/
- Xiamen Chinese European Art Centre:
  https://www.ceac99.org/residency/
- Zhujiajiao Acentric Space:
  http://www.acentricspace.com/residency/