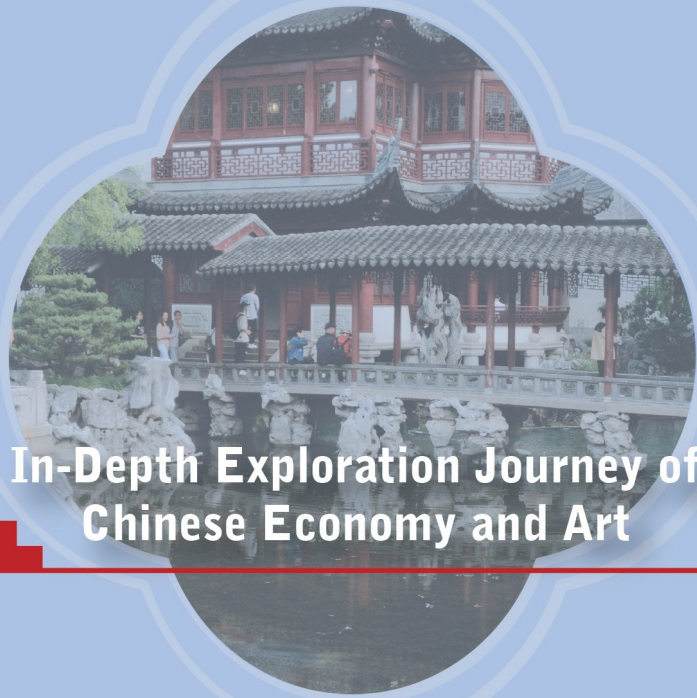


Unveiling Chinese Arts and Economy: Insights and Discoveries

A Collection of Research Reports
of the Exploration Journey
to Shanghai and Shenzhen

October 8–15, 2024



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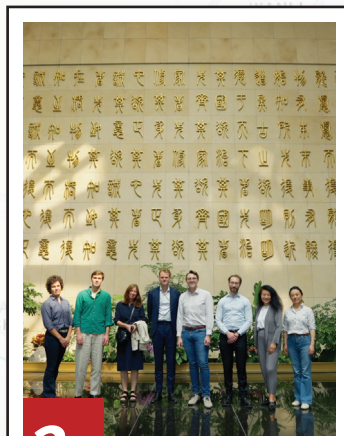
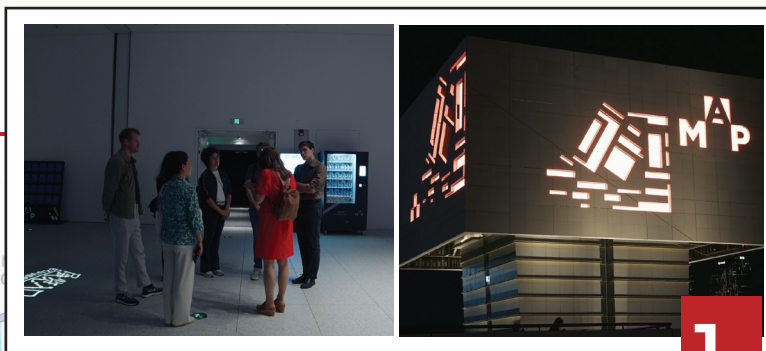
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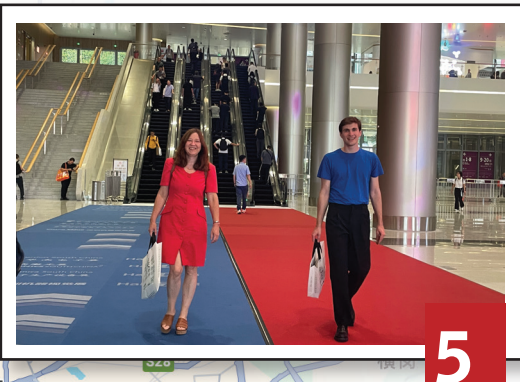
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Between Tradition and Innovation: Exploring New Arts and Old Crafts

Sjoukje van der Meulen

Introduction

The Groningen Confucius Institute selected a team of four professionals from diverse backgrounds to undertake field research in China as part of the pilot program *In-Depth Exploration Journey of Chinese Economy and Art*. United by a shared interest in the dynamic relationship between tradition and contemporaneity, innovation and continuity, and the interplay between global and local influences, the team identified Shanghai and Shenzhen as their key research destinations. Each team member developed a unique set of research questions, serving as a framework to guide and focus their explorations.

For my part, I had three research interests and questions: the intersection

of contemporary art with digital technologies; the role and status of innovative art and design education in China; and the influence of art collectors. Although the seven-day trip with three fellow researchers—each with their own unique interests—meant we couldn't explore everything, we were able to address the first two of these questions during our time in Shanghai and Shenzhen.

The first question focused more specifically on the rise of techno-art in China, asking: How does contemporary Chinese art engage with digital technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI)? The second question examined the role of art and design education, specifically: How do innovative Chinese art and design

schools contribute to contemporary society and shape the future? In this report, I will delve into these two questions while also shedding light on related insights from our captivating research journey.

One highlight, for instance, was our visit to Shenzhen's Museum of Contemporary Art and Planning, where an exhibition showcased the city's urban transformation. The display not only presented Shenzhen's innovative strategies for urban development but also employed creative and technologically advanced educational tools to communicate these concepts and plans effectively. Another intriguing visit took us to Dafen Oil Painting Village, a vibrant hub where skilled artists meticulously hand-paint replicas of famous Chinese and Western masterpieces—a unique cultural phenomenon that has drawn considerable attention.

Tidal Flux: The Art of Cao Fei at the Shanghai Museum of Art Pudong



Cao Fei, *Asia One* (2018)

To investigate my first research question on techno-art, we visited *Tidal Flux*, a mid-career solo exhibition by acclaimed Chinese artist Cao Fei at Shanghai's Museum of Art Pudong (June 22–November 18, 2024). Marking the museum's first exhibition dedicated to both a female artist and media art, it presented an intriguing blend of new and earlier works that trace Cao Fei's exploration of the intersections between art, digital technology, and contemporary society.

Spanning three decades, the artist's career has been defined by her innovative use of cutting-edge technologies such as AR, VR, and AI. Her works delve deeply into themes of urbanization, social dynamics, personal identity, and the shifting boundaries between the physical and digital realms, offering viewers a thought-provoking lens on the complexities of contemporary life in China and beyond.

Tidal Flux offered a compelling journey through Cao Fei's artistic evolution, presenting a dynamic mix of early,



Cao Fei, Solo-Show *Tidal Flux* (2024)

iconic works and recent projects. Highlights from her early career included *Hip-Hop Guangzhou* (2003) and *Cosplayers* (2004), alongside internationally celebrated pieces such as *Whose Utopia* (2006) and *RMB City* (2007–2011). The exhibition also featured her more recent artistic creations, including the installation and film *Asia One* (2018) and the ongoing *Dash Project* (2022–present), which envisions a futuristic world of automated agriculture inhabited by drones and robots.

Through these works, Cao Fei probes the societal implications of an increasingly digitized world while consistently pushing the boundaries of digital media and virtual platforms. A prime example remains the long-term project *RMB City*, an imaginary virtual metropolis built on the platform Second Life, which serves as a reflection on China's urban and social transformations. In *Asia One*, set in an automated warehouse of JD.com (China's equivalent of Amazon), the interaction between two human workers and a robot explores the

emotional consequences of automation and raises poignant questions about love and empathy in a machine-driven future.

The exhibition's design enhanced these ideas, blending immersive, urban-inspired settings with surreal, theme-park-like elements. This fusion underscored the interplay between contemporary reality and virtual worlds, offering visitors like us an engaging and thought-provoking experience.

While much of Cao Fei's work is deeply rooted in a Chinese context, *Tidal Flux* clearly demonstrates both the global context and the resonance of her oeuvre, particularly in its exploration of how virtual environments influence identity and shape lived experiences. The exhibition provides a powerful example of one of my central research questions on this exploratory trip: the rise of "techno-art" in China.

Cao Fei's art navigates the complexities of China's approach to science and technology without aligning with a singular ideological perspective. Instead, her open engagement with social issues in a digitized world fosters reflection and dialogue, encouraging a nuanced understanding of these themes. This may explain why her work is exhibited both in key institutions in China, such as UCCA Beijing (2021) and the Museum of Art Pudong (2024), and internationally in major Western art

museums.

By examining *Tidal Flux* as a case study, our team gained valuable insights into the digital and social dimensions of Cao Fei's artistic practice—and the role of new digital technologies in art more generally. At the same time, this trip highlighted the need for further exploration of the broader landscape of Chinese artists engaging with digital technologies such as AR, VR, and AI. Expanding this research would deepen our understanding of techno-art in China and its role in the country's efforts to position itself as a global leader in technology and innovation.

Tongji University's College of Design and Innovation

To investigate my second question on innovative art and design schools, I suggested a visit to Tongji University's College of Design and Innovation (D&I) in Shanghai. Widely recognized as a leader in innovation-driven design in China, the college holds a prestigious global standing, ranked 10th worldwide in the QS 2023 rankings alongside top institutions like the Eindhoven Design Academy in the Netherlands.

Before our visit, my online research uncovered a range of exciting and forward-thinking projects at Tongji's D&I College. These include advancements in car technology,



Professional Visit to Tongji's D&I College

such as human-machine interfaces (HMI); innovative ideas in ecological agriculture, such as the *Rural Silicon Valley* project; and medical solutions like *Carepre*, an intelligent system designed to assist doctors in making clinical decisions. The school is also pushing the boundaries of fashion design, exploring technologies like color-changing fabrics and other smart textiles.

From the outset, it was clear that this art and design institution is committed to expanding the limits of creativity and technology. The research trip, however, also provided a rare opportunity to experience firsthand both the physical environment and the inner workings of an innovative Chinese college—an experience that would have been nearly impossible without the steadfast support of the Groningen Confucius Institute and the generous hospitality of Tongji's D&I College. Their collaborative efforts enabled our team to gain a deep, inside look at the heart of this cutting-edge institution.



Tongji's College of Design and Innovation, Fly Me to the Moon (Dutch Design Week, 2024)



The Tongji D&I College visit consisted of two parts. First, two student representatives led us on a guided tour of the school's studios, workshops, and departments. Then, we attended a professional meeting with selected faculty members. The tour showcased the school's impressive versatility, ranging from workshops dedicated to traditional crafts like woodworking to a cutting-edge lab equipped with advanced 3D printers. Throughout the tour, we encountered a diverse array of projects at various stages of development, including furniture made from different materials, sustainable ecological experiments, ergonomic and lightweight airplane seats, and a design for a futuristic self-driving car.

The professional meeting that followed brought together several distinguished faculty members. These included Sun Jie, the Vice Dean of the college, a professor and international art and design curator; Qi Wang, an Associate Professor specializing in smart health and smart textiles; and Chen Jing, a doctoral researcher with a background in internal medicine

who has transitioned to design innovation in the medical field. Their diverse expertise highlighted the school's interdisciplinary approach to education and innovation.

The conversation, as I remember it, revolved around four interrelated topics. First, we discussed the role of innovation and how Tongji's D&I College integrates innovation-driven design across disciplines, with a particular focus on addressing societal challenges arising from emerging technologies and scientific advancements. Next, we examined the school's interdisciplinary approach, which fosters collaboration across fields to tackle a wide range of design challenges. We also talked about its practice-oriented focus, aimed at developing tangible solutions for regional and national issues such as urban-rural dynamics, mobility, ecological concerns, and community development. Lastly, we touched on the school's international outlook, demonstrated through its active participation in major design events and competitions, as well as its

commitment to fostering global collaborations.

Our team, including representatives of three Dutch Universities, was cordially invited to engage in student exchanges and visiting professorships, which may lead to collaborations in the future.

During our conversation, we also learned that Tongji's D&I College was participating in Dutch Design Week, the Netherlands' most prestigious annual design event, held in Eindhoven. After returning from China, I visited the final day of their exhibition *Fly Me to the Moon*, curated by Sun Jie. The inflatable spaceship installation stood out among the other projects. Inside, the works of multiple designers from Tongji's D&I College were displayed on screens, accompanied by headsets. The exhibition explored sustainability and the role of AI and digitization in shaping future lifestyles. While the projects addressed serious social design issues, the spaceship and multimedia displays—with their interactive and engaging nature—particularly captivated younger audiences, especially children, evoking

a sense of hope.

My conclusion is that forward-thinking art and design institutions like the Dutch Design Academy in Eindhoven and Tongji's D&I college share a strong synergy, transcending cultural differences. As such, both are well-positioned to engage in a meaningful international dialogue about the design challenges of the future.

Museum of Contemporary Art and Planning and Dafen Oil Painting Village

In Shenzhen, we visited the Museum of Contemporary Art and Planning, located in the city's cultural center. This striking, dual-purpose building was designed in 2016 by the Austrian architectural firm Coop Himmelb(l)au, renowned for their postmodern style and known in the Netherlands for their asymmetrical architectural wing of the postmodern Groninger Museum, completed in 1994. Like much of Shenzhen's architecture, this building boasts an ultra-modern design and is divided into two interconnected



Museum of Contemporary Art and Planning, Shenzhen



Dafen Oil Painting Village, Shenzhen (2024)

blocks: one focuses on the city's urban development and planning, while the other showcases contemporary art. Common public spaces such as the reception area, wide staircases and escalators, and auditoriums converge in the middle of the technologically advanced structure. We explored the first block, which features exhibits rich in educational content and utilizing cutting-edge technology—directly touching upon my research question concerning education and innovation in China.

The exhibition itself illustrates the extraordinary transformation of Shenzhen from a fishing village into a fully designed, sprawling megacity. Through interactive digital tools, models of towering skyscrapers, and urban planning concepts, visitors are immersed in the city's growth. Key figures related to demographics and urban development provide further context. The recurring themes throughout the exhibit are "designing for the future" and "innovation," both of which take on expanded meanings. Shenzhen's vision for the future is not a distant dream but a present-day reality in the making, with innovation embedded as a guiding

principle in both past and future urban plans. Equally important is the theme of ecology in the context of the metropolis: Shenzhen's development integrates vast green spaces, parks, and water into the urban fabric. Although the entire planning concept is complex, the freely accessible exhibition succeeds in engaging the citizens of Shenzhen with their city's progressive development and forward-thinking urban strategies. The use of innovative educational tools for both adults and children enhances the experience, making it an insightful and interactive journey into the city's ongoing evolution.

In Shenzhen, we also visited Dafen Oil Painting Village, renowned for producing high-quality replicas of both Chinese and Western masterpieces. At its peak, from 2004 to 2008, this bustling village accounted for about 60% of all commercially produced handmade oil paintings globally. Thousands of self-taught painters, ranging from young to old, work there, recreating iconic works like Van Gogh's—despite many never having seen an original.

The village has attracted significant attention in the West, especially after the publication of Winnie Wong's *Van Gogh on Demand* (2013) and the documentary *China's Van Goghs* (Yu Haibo, Kiki Tianqi Yu, 2016), which follows a Dafen painter who discovers his own copies being sold cheaply outside the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

Dafen provides a fascinating counterpoint to my first research question regarding the intersection of art and new technologies. It represents a world where hand-painted replicas are produced in an age-old medium, far removed from the digital technologies shaping much of contemporary art. Our visit to this village, with its domestic atmosphere, was both insightful and enriching. Spending the afternoon exploring the workshops, studios, and stores, we witnessed how entire families work together and pass on the painting trade from one generation to the next. Despite the ongoing demand for replicas, many workshops in Dafen Village are shifting towards creating original works. Some artists are embracing creativity, producing pieces that rival those found in more established galleries. However, it remains evident that these artworks are still part of a mass-produced, commercially driven industry, distinct from the professional art world. In conclusion, Dafen Oil Painting Village stands as a clear example of where Chinese economy and art intersect,

underscoring the tensions between authenticity, creativity, and the role of mass-produced traditional art in a globalized economy. Despite China's current emphasis on techno-art, Dafen offers a compelling counterpoint, illustrating how traditional art forms not only persist but also evolve, adapting to contemporary trends and carving out a distinct space for themselves.

Taken together, this research relates to what Professor Biao Xiang calls "complexed development" in China. In art, it reveals a dynamic interplay where new technologies and innovations, with their forward-looking focus, coexist alongside a reverence for traditional crafts and heritage. While my focus is on contemporary art and education, my fellow researchers will explore these themes through the lenses of the economy and business, garden design and urban development, and medicine and healthcare. Together, our collective research aims to begin shedding light on how this "complexed development" is taking shape in China today.

Gardens, Cities, and Culture in China: Where Heritage Meets Modern Life

Steven Martin Veelders

This report addresses the two research questions below:

- Decipher the spirit and uniqueness of Chinese garden art, and gain a deeper understanding of its essence and cultural significance.
- Unveil the hidden treasures of old towns, where history permeates every cobblestone and where modernity and tradition are perfectly intertwined.

Chinese Gardening and Arts

For many years, the gardening arts in different cultures and countries have fascinated me. A garden is never the same, yet at the same time several influences are present that shape the gardens and their structures. Each element in a garden has specific meanings, and there are reasons behind these elements as well. Some have practical functions, while others come from a historical or even spiritual background.

I have visited many places and gardens around the world and in

Asia. Each garden is unique, while also intertwined and connected. In some gardens in France, England, and Japan, I have noticed Chinese influences before. This brought me to explore gardens on the famous island of Gulangyu in Xiamen, China, earlier on, to compare them with gardens in, for example, Japan or Indonesia. In particular, I visited the Shuzhuang Garden on Gulangyu as a first approach to Chinese gardening arts and was fascinated by its traditional design, which brings balance between people and nature: water, rocks, pagodas and plants are just a few of the elements to mention, as well as

round Chinese gates. What makes this garden unique is its rock maze and its very special seaside location, which gives an extraordinary feeling through the hiding and revealing of the sea, depending on the viewpoint.

During the in-depth exploration journey of the Groningen Confucius Institute, I hoped to find an answer to the following research question: *Decipher the spirit and uniqueness of Chinese garden art, and gain a deeper understanding of its essence and cultural significance.*

Together with the GCI, we visited modern parks as well as famous traditional Chinese gardens, and it is with the utmost joy that I can say we gained an even deeper understanding of the cultural importance, elements and meaning of gardening arts.

The following gardens and parks were visited:

- Century Park in Shanghai
- Yuyuan Garden in Shanghai
- Bay Park in Shenzhen

While Century Park and Bay Park are both very modern in their design and purpose, Yuyuan Garden represents the classical garden style of China. Even though very different in their epochs, there were also common purposes for the gardens and parks: both in the past and the present, gardens have been used for recreation, inspiration, and harmony.

During our visit to Yuyuan Garden (a very popular garden in the heart of Shanghai with many visitors), I was able to decipher the unique aspects of Chinese gardening arts. Like other classical gardens of China, Yuyuan Garden (originally a private garden from the Ming Dynasty, erected by Pan Yunduan for his parents – very special considering its size of around 20 hectares) reflects the balance and harmony between humans and nature, visible everywhere: water elements, bridges and tiny waterfalls, pagodas, stones, stone staircases, classical Chinese round gates, and plants in harmony with water and rocks.

However, there are additions that make this garden unique: the dragon stone wall. All around the garden, a dragon can be found, which is an exceptional feature at such a scale. It represents authority, luck, foresight, but also imperial power, and can be seen as a symbol of strong belief in the empire of the Ming Dynasty. At the same time, it is a protector against evil, ensuring the garden's safety and harmony as a retreat. Each part of the garden is separated by many different paths and ways, which invite exploration and reveal new views.

Another repetitive element is the miniature aspect in the garden. What impressed us significantly were the many buildings and halls within the garden, some of which carried animal figures. Even some bridges had animal carvings – including



Garden elements in Yuyuan Garden - water, stones, plants, pagodas and bridges

elephants. This is a distinct feature, not often found. The bridge leads to the first-ever tea house in Shanghai, making it an extraordinary place. The world-famous Jade Rock (玉玲珑, Yù Línglóng) impressed both other visitors and us tremendously, as it has different aspects depending on the angle, representing endurance and longevity. It might even have been in the possession of a Chinese Emperor before it was brought to the garden.

Our visit at Yuyuan Garden and my earlier experience at Shuzhuang Garden in Gulangyu helped me place everything into a bigger context. I realized how important the influence of Chinese gardening arts – and especially their philosophical aspects – has been throughout Asia. Many traditional gardens in Japan carry the basic elements of Chinese gardens, as they imitated them and adopted their

designs and principles. At the same time, this exchange enriched Chinese gardening styles, as new aspects were added. For example, the typical Chinese dark brown wooden or stone bridges were replaced in Japan by steep, round, red bridges.

The visits to Century Park in Shanghai and Bay Park in Shenzhen were very different from the one to Yuyuan Garden, but nonetheless many common aspects could be found again: water, plants, and paths, as well as a variety of vegetation to make the gardens appealing throughout the year. Bridges were also present in Century Park. The main differences lay in the size of these modern parks and the absence of classical Chinese round gates, rocks, and pagodas. However, the main meaning and purpose have remained until today: a garden or park is a place of harmony and retreat, where everything comes back into balance and into a single flow, independent of its physical form or existence.

This could be strongly felt when we saw a group of elderly Chinese performing the art of Tai Chi in Century Park.



On a modern bridge with elements of water and plants in Shanghai's Century Park

The birds and the wind moved in the same rhythm as the bodies of the participants, creating an overall serene image of harmony and unity between humans and nature.

Urbanization – The Combination of Old and New

The new can never exist without the old, and the old inevitably influences the new. Often, traditional elements are developed further or – even when thought to be forgotten – find their way back into modern life. I was particularly curious to see how this balance plays out in Chinese culture, as it is one of the oldest continuously existing civilizations in the world, dating back some 5000 to 10000 years BCE.

China is well-known for its economic strength and innovative power, but I wanted to understand how traditional aspects and influences are woven into modern architecture, culture and everyday life. This curiosity led to the following research question: *Unveil the hidden treasures of old towns, where history permeates every cobblestone and where modernity and tradition are perfectly intertwined.*

This question was researched and analyzed during our exploration journey, across various domains ranging from architecture to fashion and lifestyle.

Therefore, the research question is subcategorized into different sections.



Combination of old and new - the Yuyuan Garden commercial district with replica buildings

1. Architecture

Modernity and dazzling architecture are easy to find in China. The country's enthusiasm for speed and innovation is omnipresent, reflected in its urban design and skyline. In Shanghai, the famous Bund has transformed in less than 50 years into a spectacular sight, both day and night. Towering modern buildings, illuminated with futuristic lights after dark, reflect across the Huangpu River, creating an awe-inspiring spectacle.

Yet, when looking across the river from Pudong – which itself was only vast fields a few decades ago – another image emerges. On the opposite bank lies the old Shanghai, where European architectural influences, particularly British and French, still stand. These buildings tell the story of Shanghai's role as a cosmopolitan, international hub in the last century. This feeling of old-world charm is even stronger in the French Concession Quarter, where many historic French-style residences and streets remain. At the same time, urbanization also

affects villages caught in the path of modern development. What impressed me deeply was the project in which entire historic buildings from a village were relocated, within the newly built circle of skyscrapers, in order to preserve heritage while making way for new construction.

These relocations are carried out using massive rollers placed beneath the buildings – a complex process, but one that highlights China's commitment to balancing respect for history with the drive for modernization. By doing so, both can coexist: the memory of the past and the promise of renewal for the future.

2. Urban Design and Innovation

What impressed us most in China was the strong belief in, and commitment to, innovation. Cities are not only preserved and developed, but also reimagined to integrate greenery and ensure a high quality of life for residents. Two aspects stand out in particular:

- A strong belief in technology and innovation, such as electric vehicles.
- The integration of greenery and parks within metropolitan areas.

Upon arriving in China, one of the first striking impressions is the silence of its vibrant cities. Both Shanghai and Shenzhen, despite their size and energy, feel unusually quiet due to the widespread use of electric cars. What



The greenery of Shenzhen seen from the Ping An Finance Center (5th highest building in the world)

made this even more remarkable was the dominance of Chinese brands on the streets – a living example of the country's innovative strength and its push for sustainability. This commitment was further emphasized during our visit to Tongji University, where research and development in sustainable technologies are at the forefront.

The streets were very clean and tidy. At the same time, the importance of greenery in urban design left a lasting impression. As described earlier in the chapter on gardens and parks, greenery in Chinese culture is deeply significant. During a previous visit to Xiamen in Fujian, I learned that about 44% of the city is covered by green spaces. In comparison, Shanghai, as



A view over the greenery of Shenzhen



The gate of Nantou Ancient Town in Shenzhen



Sun Yat-Sen Memorial in Zhongshan Park

an older city, has around 19% greenery coverage. In modern urban centers such as Shenzhen, however, greenery is not treated as an optional luxury but as an essential part of city planning. By 2020, nearly 50% of Shenzhen was covered in green, and this integration of parks, trees, and natural landscapes with urban architecture was clearly visible during our journey.

Today, Shenzhen is often referred to as the "City of Thousand Parks," with more than 1260 parks recorded

in 2024 and an expected increase to around 1350 in 2025.

Even city parts, such as Nantou Ancient Town (nearly 2000 years old) are fully integrated into modernity and greenery, with Zhongshan Park behind it. In the park a big statue of Sun Yat-Sen can be found.

The urbanization, innovation and combination of old and new, including greenery and sustainability in China, is truly inspirational.

3. Fashion and Lifestyle

Modern-day China has a broad variety of fashion, and many products can be bought online. To be highlighted is the very fast delivery. The lifestyle is about convenience, innovation and enjoyment. Eating out and delivery (even by drones) is very affordable and – in the case of the drones – truly innovative.

The virtues of modernity are also to be found in the fashion – comfortable, elegant, and efficient. In the past, fashion represented a



Drone station for delivery in Shenzhen Bay Park



Outfit in the XuYan Restaurant in Shanghai

specific function, rank, and even influence. What is a suit in modern times was a very different outfit in the past. During the exploration journey, we were able to dive into the sphere of an imperial court of the Tang Dynasty. At a grand dinner performance at XuYan Restaurant, gowns and outfits of the past can be worn. We, as a group, experienced dressing up as historical characters during the dining experience. I was the consultant of the minister, while other members of the group were the minister, princesses, concubines of the emperor, ambassadors, or even the emperor himself. We saw that clothes truly transform people, as the group members easily adapted their behaviour to the roles they were playing. In these traditional outfits, we felt elegant and important. Even more, it was like time travel into the past, and we felt like the characters we were expressing ourselves to be. In conclusion, as with urbanization, one thing is certain: the new cannot exist without the old, and some elements will or did return. The XuYan Restaurant experience was truly unforgettable.

Summary

The old and the new are connected and intertwined in China. During this journey, we realized the utmost importance of Chinese gardening, innovation, and urbanization, and one might say that the connection of the Chinese culture within and outside of China is something that inspired modernity and other countries in equal aspects. At the same time, the strong innovative power and striving mindset need to be seen as an example.

As a final conclusion, the research questions were not only answered, but rather a world was revealed that allows us to say that no developments can exist without their respective origin and that all is – in a deeper context – connected, even though these parts might develop differently.

Modern parks differ from traditional gardens, and still some elements can be found that show they share the same origins and their elements have the same meaning. Modern cities look very different from the respective ancient cities, and still those classical elements shape the heart and form the soul of modern cities.

The exploration journey of the Groningen Confucius Institute has truly brought China closer to us, and we can certainly say that we will forever carry this experience in our hearts and minds.

The Chinese Economy: Plans for the Next Decade

Nicholas Cornelius Lee Zegers

Introduction

In the past ten years, the Chinese economy has undergone astounding growth, which has seen the country experience a transformation never seen before. With a growing middle class, a shift towards high-tech production, and foreign cooperative efforts such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the economy grew tremendously from \$11.1 trillion in 2015 to \$18.2 trillion by 2024. The question now, however, is how the government will facilitate the same pace of growth in the coming decade while being plagued by political and economic challenges.

To understand the efforts for continued growth, this article will look specifically into three topics. First, the specific industrial areas on which the government will focus to strengthen China in the next decade. Secondly, how the domestic economy can become more resilient during economic turmoil

and reduce dependency on exports and external markets. Third and finally, this article will investigate the continued efforts on the BRI and the respective objectives set out for the future.

China's Industries of Focus

Comparing China to its surrounding countries through the lens of the flying geese theory, one could say that China has been able to speed up the overall process by leapfrogging steps towards the front through investments in R&D and innovation. The theory suggests that, over time, due to economic prosperity and technological innovation, a country will start producing more expensive and advanced products in a continuous cycle, as low-cost labor production becomes cheaper elsewhere. This, in turn, lowers demand for simplistic goods and drives the need to reinvent itself by producing high-tech goods.

However, as China remains a large country with different economic zones, low-cost labor production remains prevalent, often enabled by the use of technology to increase efficiency. This allows the less developed regions to continue being the production corner of the globe for simplistic goods, while simultaneously driving innovation and the development of high-tech goods in niche areas. It is primarily this focus on high-tech goods that will demand the center of attention in the years to come. Below, three industries are highlighted in which the government will specifically concentrate its efforts.

1. EVs

With superlative advancements in batteries and EVs, Western competitors are often unable to challenge Chinese brands on either technology or price. Especially in the domestic market, there is no comparison when it comes to affordability. However, in foreign markets, tariffs have been introduced on Chinese brands to defend Western companies in their home markets. Nonetheless, this will not stop Chinese companies from entering new markets, as Chinese cars have recently appeared in many countries. With new Chinese car brands opening showrooms in Western markets, it is unlikely that their success can be halted in the long term by simply imposing tariffs.

2. Semiconductors

The semiconductor industry remains an essential puzzle piece for all other industries. Investing heavily in this industry should come as no surprise. With political influence limiting accessibility to the latest chip manufacturing capabilities, China has doubled down on becoming self-reliant in producing semiconductors to bridge the gap in technological advancement. The semiconductor value chain is heavily intertwined within a global network and therefore faces inherent challenges in catching up with the latest developments. It is expected that Chinese firms will not be able to close this gap in just a few years. With deep investments, the government aims to reach international standards by 2030 at the earliest.

3. Green and Renewable Energy

Although still dependent on energy derived from traditional sources, China's clean energy production has made great strides in recent years. In 2023, China alone was responsible for 50% of all global renewable installations, which emphasizes the government's focus on pushing the country toward lower carbon emissions while simultaneously increasing its total energy production. In its five-year plans, renewable technologies have remained an important pillar. These plans incorporate all aspects such as solar, wind, green hydrogen, and even geothermal projects. Especially in

solar power, China is a global leader, accounting for almost 40% of the world's total solar energy.

Revamping and Growing the Domestic Economy

China's growth model is tackling two challenges at once. It is shifting from export-led, labor-intensive manufacturing to a domestic demand- and innovation-driven industry and services, while at the same time transitioning from a heavily coal-dependent economy to a sustainable, CO₂-neutral, and resource-efficient one. To realize this ambition, it is important to have a strong backbone in the form of a domestic economy that reduces dependency on foreign investments and exports. Especially during times of global and political tension, this becomes even more crucial. There are three main areas of focus that can strengthen the domestic economy.

1. Shift to Domestic Consumption

Boosting domestic consumption is one of the main economic goals that all governments aim to achieve. The smartphone and car industries both have domestic brands topping the sales charts and distancing themselves from previous popular Western brands. A more recent shift is happening in the fashion industry, where Chinese consumers are starting to buy more local brands. This is not only due to lower prices but also because Chinese

consumers have increasingly identified with local brands over the last few years. At the same time, Western brands have struggled to understand and adapt to the changing market.

Industries expected to follow a similar trend include healthcare as well as agriculture and food technology. Backed by technological advancements, domestic products can become more advanced and efficient, thereby reducing reliance on foreign products.

2. Reviving the Property Market

Recent policies put in place have helped revitalize the property sector. After a few tough years that resulted in a steep fall in demand for new housing developments, the property market has slowly but surely started to recover. With an RMB 500 billion injection, the government has helped restart this industry, where many citizens have invested their money, as in the past it was considered a safe investment.

3. Further Growing the Middle Class

Over 500 million citizens are now considered middle-class. Often regarded as the engine of the economy, a sizable middle-class group is vital in making an economy more resilient and propelling future growth. Policies that increase disposable income, improve access to education and healthcare, and reduce regional inequalities are central to this expansion.

The Future of the Belt and Road Initiative

1. Previous Achievements

A decade of loans across the globe has made China the world's largest sovereign lender, with over \$1.5 trillion in loans and credits. Heavily focussing on energy and transport (which account for 65% of all investments), developing countries have been able to build the infrastructure essential for their future growth. At the same time, this has also benefited the Chinese economy, as Chinese workers and materials are often used in these foreign development projects.

2. Future Plans

The BRI, both today and in the coming years, has evolved into a more selective program due to concerns about debt sustainability and repayment risks. At the same time, China has been targeting higher-value projects, focusing on green energy, digital infrastructure, and healthcare instead of large-scale infrastructure. Competition for foreign lending has increased as Middle Eastern countries have begun offering similar loans to nations that previously partnered with the BRI. The initiative remains a strong political and diplomatic tool that is essential for China to further connect with other countries and build lasting partnerships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the future of the Chinese economy will heavily depend on its ability to navigate and capitalize on key opportunities and industries while addressing existing challenges. Maintaining and emphasizing focus on high-tech industries such as semiconductors, renewable energy, and EVs will help retain China's position as a global power and partner for innovation and sustainability. At the same time, strengthening the domestic economy by promoting domestic production and consumption, reviving the property sector, and further growing the middle class will help reduce reliance on exports and enhance resilience in times of uncertainty.

The BRI, a pillar of China's foreign economic diplomacy, has shifted toward a more selective approach in the projects it undertakes. These strategies, combined with significant government investments and policy support, underpin China's ambition to remain at the forefront and act as an engine of global economic growth. Despite the challenges ahead, China's adaptability and determination point toward a positive future.

Bridging Perspectives: Insights from a Research Journey to China

Alexander Gabriël Saelmans

My name is Alexander Saelmans, and I am a medical doctor and a PhD student working on artificial intelligence clinical prediction models. A few months ago, three team members and I embarked on a journey to China. During the journey, we visited Shanghai and Shenzhen. Before this journey, we were asked to formulate research questions. The journey was tailored to our interests, as we had a say in the activities we would participate in. These activities helped us answer the research questions. We were also helped by two native Chinese experts throughout the journey. The aim of this article is to share the valuable insights I gained during this journey.

Before starting, I was unsure what the group dynamic would be like, as we are all working in different fields. However, I was more than pleasantly surprised by how we complemented each other. I would like to draw

an analogy between the way the group members complemented each other and the possibilities for the Netherlands and China to complement one another. This brings me to my first research question: In what areas can the Netherlands and China work together more intensively? We visited the Consulate of the Netherlands and the Benelux Chamber of Commerce to find out more about this. Unfortunately, we learned that the number of Dutch companies working in China is decreasing. However, there are a few target areas (e.g. semiconductors and sustainable energy) in which Dutch and Chinese companies can mutually benefit from cooperation.

China is shifting from "Made in China" to "Created in China" at an unprecedented pace. A good example of this is the development of electric vehicles. Therefore, I was wondering: What are the characteristics of the

Chinese economy that enable it to grow at such an unprecedented pace compared to Western economies? In a museum in Shenzhen, I read about how the Chinese government focuses more on the long term compared to the Netherlands. This is inherent to the Chinese governing system. However, we in the Netherlands should also look into the possibilities of integrating more long-term planning into our system. I think the Dutch economy could benefit from this, as stability tends to attract investments.

Additionally, the Chinese seemed to have quite an entrepreneurial spirit. From power bank rental stations on every corner in Shanghai to haggling for the best price for a painting in the painting village in Shenzhen. This entrepreneurial drive was visible everywhere. It also became apparent at the medical equipment conference, where everyone was very eager to speak to us and sell their equipment.

The entrepreneurial spirit of the Chinese was most apparent in the Dafen Oil Painting Village in Shenzhen. One of the team members, Steven, wanted to buy a painting of a cute panda. He wanted to get it for the lowest possible price. However, the sales lady was a skilled negotiator. She refused to lower the price, even after Steven pointed out a tiny flaw and walked around the block several times.

I, on the other hand, was not looking for a panda painting but for a bag. So,

with one of the native Chinese team members, I searched through every store. Eventually, I found a pile of bags in the back of a shop. This sales lady was also good at negotiating—She would not budge on the price. In the end, Steven and I both gave in to the sales ladies and accepted their price.

This entrepreneurial spirit was evident at the medical equipment conference in Shenzhen. Salespeople from every stand would approach us immediately, asking if we were interested in a booklet with all their products and/or an explanation. It was impressive to see how many stands there were at the conference. The conference center itself was huge. It consisted of 14 halls, whereas most conference centers in the Netherlands have only one or two halls of this size. It seemed as though Chinese hospital employees had flown in from all across China, as most visitors arrived with luggage and the airport was very nearby.

Apart from the entrepreneurial spirit, we experienced an act of kindness. Together with a team member, I ordered some food. However, we didn't know how to remove the top part of the bowl from the lower part. A girl sitting at the table next to us helped us without asking and removed the top part. She then smiled at us. We smiled back, and we both continued enjoying our food.

When we were walking around in the center of Shanghai, I noticed it was

extremely silent. I wondered what the reason for this was. Then I realized that almost all the cars driving around Shanghai are electric. When I got back to the Netherlands, I had to get used to the car sounds again. It is quite relaxing not to hear them.

These Chinese electric cars, however, are a symbol of China's shift toward creating products. There are many brands with showrooms all around the city. Some brands even offer the possibility of simply switching your car battery instead of charging it. I learned recently that BYD is now outselling Tesla in Europe.

China is not only creating electric cars, but is also investing in drones. For example, we ordered iced tea to be delivered by drone in Shenzhen Bay Park. It was cool to see that this is already allowed in China. I read that the Chinese expect to bring flying cars to the market in less than five years.

This journey furthermore focused on the arts. We explored how the Chinese lifestyle and mindset can be understood through Chinese arts. We attended a dinner dressed in traditional Chinese attire. It was inspiring to see how proud the Chinese are of their history. They can recite poetry and distinguish traditional attire from different time periods and different ranks of the courts.

In addition, we visited Tongji University, which is focused on design.

What surprised me in a positive way was the room for creativity students had there. My expectation before visiting was that there would be a more rigid approach. In Shanghai, we also went to the Pudong Museum. We saw how China's art has evolved to a world-class level, with an exhibition of one of the ten "must-watch" artists of 2024. It was comparable to exhibitions in the more prestigious European museums.

We had dinner with a Chinese artist before going to Tongji University. This restaurant felt different from European restaurants. There was a round table, and food kept on coming. I learnt that in China, businessmen tend to close deals in these restaurants. Also, the person sitting opposite the entrance is served first, as this person is supposed to be the most important at the table. As I was not aware of this rule, I sat there by accident... The artist present had actually designed a roof for a museum in Deventer. Even artists in Shanghai have closer links to our country than one might think.

I would like to share an example that could partially give insight into the Chinese mindset. One of the team members (Sjoukje) and I had to take a taxi from Shenzhen airport to the hotel in Shenzhen without any native Chinese speaker. It was enriching to experience how, even though we could not speak to each other fluently, we understood and wanted to help one another. From explaining the taxi

driver the address of the hotel to paying with Alipay, communication went surprisingly smoothly. What stood out from this half-hour ride was that the taxi driver was very keen to get things right and help us in the best way he could. After the ride, he shook our hands and said “bye” after we said “zàijiàn”.

At the hotel, I went swimming in the morning. However, in China, you need to wear a swim cap when going swimming. The lifeguard asked me in Chinese if I wanted to swim. I replied yes. Then he explained that I would need a swim cap. Immediately, I asked him if I could borrow his. He instantly

agreed and gave it to me without hesitation. This is another example, similar to the previous one, that illustrates people’s willingness to go the extra mile for a stranger.

The main takeaway of this research report is to go and experience China for yourself. Develop your own opinion through the experiences you gather along the way, and do not merely base it on what you hear. In my opinion, processing these different perspectives is one of the most enriching experiences. We have so much more in common than we think.



The Faces Behind the Research



Sjoukje van der Meulen

I am one of the team members selected for this project. Professionally, I work as an Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at Utrecht University, specializing in contemporary Chinese art among other subjects. I became involved with GCI’s project through my Chinese teacher at its Amsterdam office, where I’m currently trying to speed through the HSK language courses — though, as anyone studying Chinese knows, that’s easier said than done.

My next trip to China is scheduled for fall 2025, when I will spend a semester as a visiting researcher at Tongji University’s College of Design and Innovation in Shanghai. The GCI-organized trip, focused on Chinese art and the economy, was a valuable and rewarding experience, carried out in a remarkable team spirit — and for me, it also helped pave the way for this upcoming academic collaboration.

This is me in the photo with my Mazda MX-5 — my other favorite pastime besides learning Chinese.



Steven Martin Veelders

I was on a vacation in Indonesia, when with the biggest excitement and thrill, I received the acceptance e-mail for the In-Depth Exploration Journey of the GCI to China. Working in international trade, logistics, and automation for many years on VP and executive level, my interests outside the business world are various. China always fascinated me and even more so, since I visited this beautiful country for the first time in 2019 (when I went to my partner’s hometown Xiamen). It was also my partner, who informed me about the application possibility for this programme and so I applied. For many years, nature and specifically also the design of gardens and parks in modern and ancient times has fascinated me, wherefore I also formulated the first research question. On the other hand, I am intrigued and

truly astounded by old cities and city parts -- when they can be integrated into a modern city landscape, even more so.

I can say with absolute honesty, that the week that the group and I have spent together -- all under coordination of the GCI -- was truly unforgettable. Next to all the fascinating and new impressions of China and two of its cities (Shanghai, Shenzhen), it was also a joyful trip with wonderful interpersonal connections and laughter. I even dare to say that I hardly laughed as much while exploring as on this trip.

What remains? Unforgettable memories, the connection with wonderful people from the GCI and beyond, as well as the motivation to see and explore more of China and its thousands of facets and traditions. I also intensified my Chinese learning and hope to gain a deeper understanding. Thank you, GCI and thanks to the kind participants and this beautiful country. Soon, I will return. 很快再见，中国。



Nicholas Cornelius Lee Zegers

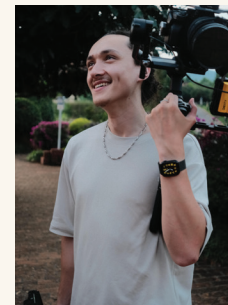
Hi, I'm Nicholas Zegers, and I was lucky to be part of this incredible trip as a member of the research team. Over the years, I've developed a strong interest in Chinese culture and its economic development, which has already taken me on several trips across the country. This journey gave me a great chance to dive deeper by speaking with local contacts and exploring where China is today and where it's headed.

In my day-to-day work as a strategy consultant, I often explore how different trends and ideas connect. That way of thinking really helped guide my approach to the research we did on this trip by looking at both what's happening now and how it fits into the bigger picture. What I enjoyed most on this trip was working with colleagues from different fields and hearing their perspectives helped me see things in a new light and understand China in ways I hadn't before. I've already been back to China since our research trip and plan to return again soon. There's so much more to explore, especially in places that are just beginning to grow and evolve!



Alexander Gabriël Saelmans

Currently, I am pursuing a PhD in the Department of Medical Informatics at Erasmus Medical Centre. This PhD focuses on clinical prediction modeling. I am a medical doctor. Apart from that I enjoy learning Chinese and diving into Chinese culture. Therefore, I am very excited to have been able to take part in this journey. Looking back, it has enriched my life. It has enabled me to comprehend China-Netherlands relations on a deeper level. Also, being able to talk to people with different perspectives has changed my perspective.



Kevin Camphuis

I'm a 26-year-old filmmaker and founder of a production company based in Amsterdam. As a self-taught creative with a deep passion for cinema, martial arts, and music, storytelling has always been at the heart of my work. Being half Chinese and half Dutch, I often find myself navigating between cultures, a perspective that deeply informs my visual style and curiosity.

Last year, I had the privilege of joining GCI on this research project in China, where I followed the group with my camera, capturing the experience as honestly and purely as possible. It wasn't just about filming for me; it became a personal journey too. I got to reconnect with my roots, learn from every conversation, and grow in unexpected ways. I'm incredibly grateful for the experience, and I hope many more like it will follow in the future.



Xuefei Knoester Cao

My name is Xuefei Cao, and I have the joy (and occasional chaos) of serving as the director of the Groningen Confucius Institute. Recently, I had the absolute pleasure of joining this wonderfully curious and slightly mischievous group on a journey through China—one that took us far beyond the usual tourist trail and well into the land of unexpected.

It wasn't just fun—it was meaningful. We didn't just visit China; we examined it, felt it, and re-thought it from fresh and surprising angles. And in doing so, I saw a new China through the eyes of my companions—a China that still amazes me. Honestly, I haven't laughed this much while learning in a long time!



Annemarij van der Ploeg

Hi! My name is Annemarij, and since 2021 I've been the Office Manager at the Groningen Confucius Institute. Chinese culture is a strong presence in my day-to-day work, and that makes my job all the more special. I feel fortunate to contribute to an organization that fosters cultural understanding and creates opportunities for meaningful exchange between the Netherlands and China.

It was truly a privilege to travel to China with such an inspiring group, full of great ideas and fresh perspectives. Experiencing the country firsthand gave me new insights into the work we do and motivation to support our mission with even more dedication.



Shu Ha

I'm the manager of this project and have had the pleasure of working with GCI for over three years. Originally from Beijing, I'm currently a visiting scholar from the Communication University of China, where I hold the position of associate professor.

My journey has brought me to the Netherlands, where I teach Chinese as a second language and take part in various cultural activities, including this project. The idea for organizing an event like this was inspired by the story of The Wizard of Oz. When I shared this vision with Xuefei, she was immediately enthusiastic and supportive.

It has been a wonderful experience contributing to such a meaningful project. I'm excited to be part of this team and to connect with people through our shared work.



Credits and Acknowledgements

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