Curating colonial heritage in Amsterdam, Warsaw and Shanghai's museums

No single road to decolonization¹

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Following the first wave of decolonization as part of the discourse of the New Museology² movement (Karp and Lavine 1991), the late 2010s have given momentum to the global debate on decolonization in museums. This momentum has been influenced by multiple factors: the ever-more active and social role of museums thanks to the increased participation of diverse (non-) staff (Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke 2018; Golding and Modest 2013; Simon 2010); the debate on object repatriation reignited in 2018 by the Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy report (Sarr and Savoy 2018); and the increasingly vocal demands to deal with racism and violence as colonial legacies during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Not only heritage practitioners but also governments, communities, activists, and artists are grappling with contested heritage in museums (Message 2015). While much critical heritage discourse concentrates on the very institution of the museum with both its colonial roots³ and its future as a site of decolonial contestation, this chapter argues that it is necessary to look comparatively at the development of decolonial narratives in various parts of the world to better understand the dynamics of present changes.

It is oft-stated that decolonization is denormalization. Thus, decolonization involves the destabilization of reigning perceptions and established narratives of colonial pasts and legacies. Regardless of the degree of decolonization, it also means shifting authority. In the process of destabilizing the existing status quo, both support for and resistance to decolonizing processes is to be expected. However, it is not the same canon that is destabilized everywhere. Our overarching question therefore explores how the global decolonization movement, influenced by historical and cultural particularities, results in divergent discourses and practices on the city level. How is destabilization through decolonization encouraged, supported, or resisted in urban centres and, specifically, their museums?

By focusing on three cities in three very different cultural and geographical regions—Amsterdam, Warsaw, and Shanghai—this chapter explores the specificities of narratives and agents of decolonization in their museum spaces.⁴ Amsterdam provides an example of Western European situatedness as a former global colonial power and as somewhat of a ‘trendsetter’ in terms

of contemporary critical heritage discourse. Warsaw represents the in-between situation of an East-Central European city that was implicated in overseas colonization but without any direct involvement in the conquest of land. Shanghai, meanwhile, exemplifies remnants and representations of European colonialism in Asia as well as Chinese ambiguities of dealing with this legacy today. Both Warsaw and Shanghai add a complexity to what colonization can mean beyond ‘overseas colonization’. Warsaw was at once a victim of the imperial ambitions of Prussia and Russia as well as home to an elite that aspired to the colonization of what is today Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania. Shanghai, in turn, was controlled by European colonizers who settled in several enclaves, yet China has also worked to influence and annex areas outside of its borders.

These differences notwithstanding, each city abounds in museums, Amsterdam over the longer term and Shanghai and Warsaw thanks to recent museum booms. Our analysis shows how museums influence decolonization processes in these cities, taking city, ethnographic, and art museums as examples. Differences include, for instance, the degree of agency of (ethnographic) museums, the extent to which racism is related to colonization, and how self-reflective the process of decolonization is able to be. Moreover, the case of Shanghai shows that ‘decolonization’ does not necessarily equal ‘critical’ discourse. Ultimately, the comparative focus adopted here helps to identify factors that escape analysis of single cases.

Amsterdam: colonizer in the past, decolonizer in the present?

The city of Amsterdam, through its historical role in both the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC), was directly involved in the global colonial system. In various overseas areas including South Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Suriname, and islands in the Caribbean, these two companies were active colonial agents. They were trading companies that exploited humans and natural resources and served under mandates of city officials and the Dutch Republic. Under these mandates, the VOC and WIC engaged in colonial activities such as the possession of land, the construction of cities, towns, and trading posts, and the enforcement of their laws and rules. Atrocities such as genocide, the trade in enslaved persons, the sexual exploitation of women and girls, and physical violence were committed, in many cases ‘legally’ (see, e.g., Kemasang 1985; Schnurmann 2003; Thomson 1994; van Rossum et al. 2020; Worden and Groenewald 2005). Alternatingly alongside or in conflict with the British, French, Portuguese, and Spanish—as well as the Belgians, Danes, Germans, Italians, and Swedes—the Dutch were part of a systematic European endeavour of overseas colonization.

Today the city of Amsterdam has a population of just over 850,000 that encompassed 174 nationalities in 2019 (OIS Amsterdam 2019, 55). This

population is very diverse, with 32 per cent having been born abroad and a further 22 per cent born in the Netherlands but who had at least one foreign-born parent (56). Significant Surinamese and Antillean communities, for instance, still reflect direct colonial ties.

Amsterdam by and large perceives itself to have been an overseas colonizer in the (distant) past. In line with this general self-perception, what does it then mean to decolonize in this city and its museums? For the city as a whole, recent years have witnessed a focus on public spaces and their visible or 'audible' colonial histories, particularly with respect to monuments and place names. Efforts have been made to increase the visibility of traces of the past already present in the city. The research project *Mapping Slavery* and the resulting publication *Amsterdam Slavery Heritage Guide* (Hondius et al. 2014), for instance, set out to highlight tangible heritages, mainly related to slavery, that are visible in Amsterdam's urban spaces in the form of gable decorations, statues, and buildings. Other initiatives have sought to replace certain histories with others, exemplified by the municipality's decision in 2019 to rename a series of streets in the IJburg neighbourhood. Previously named for 'heroes' (all male) of a 1573 naval battle, in future the streets will be named after persons (male and female) who fought against Dutch colonial oppression in the (former) colonies. A third aspect has involved shifting the narrative, for instance, by re-labelling the statues of 'colonial heroes' as 'colonial oppressors'. This debate was boosted anew in the wake of the Dutch Black Lives Matter protests that took place in mid-2020 and resulted in the vandalism of colonial statues and buildings, including the Tropenmuseum, that were in turn followed by vandalism targeting anti-colonial statues (which were defaced by the letters WLM for 'White Lives Matter'). In response, the municipality called for new research to map monuments, buildings, and place names with colonial ties, while curators, historians, and activists engaged in debates in the newspapers over whether statues should be removed, re-labelled, changed, or destroyed (e.g., Dijksterhuis 2020).

In terms of decolonizing Amsterdam's museums, the initiative was taken by the city's ethnographic museum, the Tropenmuseum. As an institution that once carried the term 'colonial' in its name and whose collections were partially amassed as a result of the 1883 Colonial Exhibition (van Dijk 1992), it is perhaps little wonder that the self-reflective act of decolonizing the museum was spearheaded here (van Brakel and Legene 2008; van Duuren 1990). This is comparable to the global museological trend of decolonization in which ethnographic museums have been held accountable for their colonial collections (Kreps 2011; Peers and Brown 2003). By now, many ethnographic museums have been involved in the repatriation of objects, engagement with source communities and stakeholders, or have renamed themselves. The Tropenmuseum has worked on decolonization for decades by adding critical, self-reflective labels indicating the sources of the collections, exhibiting slavery, pairing ethnographic objects with the work of contemporary artists, and sharing the institution's authority through research

and artist residencies. The institution has actively sought out destabilization, although this has neither been an easy process internally, nor always embraced externally.

Not all of Amsterdam's museums have been equally involved, however. Part of the issue has been the assumption that non-ethnographic collections do not contain colonial objects. Thus, although the Amsterdam Museum has objects collected from colonies or gained through colonial profits and although it discusses the colonial history of the city in its exhibitions, when asked some staff members did not construe it as 'a colonial institution' (e.g., interviews AM_S12; AM_S22; AM_S24; AM_S27). On the other hand, one staff member did consider that 'everything that has to do with the city is that [: colonial], so the museum is a part of that' (interview AM_S26, my translation). Clearly, museum staff members are divided in what they consider 'colonial' and/or what needs decolonizing; their differences reveal where they draw the line for acceptable destabilization. The 2020 advisory report on *Colonial Collections and Acknowledgement of Injustice*, which was supported by, among others, the Tropenmuseum and Rijksmuseum, will possibly allow for wider identification of colonial collections and their repatriation (Gonçalves-Ho Kang You et al. 2020). A second obstacle has been the argument that certain types of objects—for example, of the colonized—are missing or were never preserved, thus making it challenging to represent non-normative histories in traditional museological ways. However, the 2020 exhibition *In the Presence of Absence* (Stedelijk Museum) innovatively selected artworks to 'challenge the idea of collective knowledge and public consciousness through stories that remain unseen, have been ignored'.⁵ In so doing, it provided additional arguments to weaken this second obstacle to decolonization.

The still-dominant perceptions of Amsterdam as a historic colonizer resist denormalization primarily through three disconnections that might otherwise lead to destabilizing actions. First, it creates an artificially wide rift between the past and the present, effectively detaching present-day situations from their historical foundations. This has the effect of freezing even relatively recent events such as the Indonesian Independence War (1945–1949) into a distant past, thereby making it difficult to claim that the colonial 'past' is relevant. Second, it represses the fact that the Kingdom of the Netherlands still has overseas territories in the Caribbean today under two political structures: constituent countries (Aruba, Curaçao, and St. Maarten) and special municipalities (Bonaire, Saba, and St. Eustatius). Furthermore, the Netherlands still maintains unique relationships and ties—financial, political, educational, trade, and infrastructural among them—to former colonies such as South Africa, Indonesia, and Suriname. Some of these relatively newly independent states are also actively seeking reparations or legal resolutions to colonial injustices, some of which were committed during the twentieth century (van den Herik 2012). Third, it tends to disregard the existence of modern structures of systematic oppression that have their roots in

colonialism, such as modern slavery (e.g., in sweatshops); the exploitation of natural resources abroad, leaving local populations to deal with the damages; or tourism, which has been termed ‘neo-colonialism’ in the Caribbean. Many of these examples are cases in which the Global South is being exploited for its labour, environment, and resources for the benefit of the Global North, thus echoing colonial notions and actions. Conceptualizing Amsterdam as a historic colonizer arguably enables the city and its inhabitants to disconnect from any involvement in such modern structures of oppression. Thus, decolonization in these areas is not so much opposed as it is ignored.

Placing Amsterdam’s colonial role so fixedly in the past has also resulted in decolonization becoming the remit of museums dealing with history—such as the city museum mentioned above—in galleries devoted to historical colonial periods. In 2013, the Scheepvaartmuseum held an exhibition called *The Black Page* in which the slave trade was discussed historically; contemporary ties were absent. Overall, recent colonial migrations, colonial legacies surviving today, and present-day oppression remain much less explored. An exception was Tropenmuseum’s special exhibition *BITTER Chocolate Stories* staged in 2018–2019 that featured the personal stories and portraits of six child labourers employed on cocoa plantations.

Thematically, Amsterdam’s decolonization efforts have focused on slavery, as was the case with the exhibitions *Afterlives of Slavery* (Tropenmuseum 2018) and *Aan de Surinaamse Grachten – Van Loon & Suriname (1728–1863)* (Museum Van Loon 2019), as well as the installation *Blood Sugar* by artist Patricia Kaersenhout (Cargo in Context 2017).⁶ Although drawing more attention to Amsterdam’s involvement in slavery and the trade in enslaved persons is still sorely needed and plans for a museum of slavery in Amsterdam will hopefully come to fruition, the emphasis on slavery also raises the risk of obscuring other colonial histories, atrocities, and forms of oppression. Some of the aspects of Dutch colonialism that demand far more critical attention in and beyond museums include the genocides of local populations in Indonesia at the hands of the VOC and later the Dutch army, the forced migrations of Dutch orphan girls to colonies to marry colonizers, the role of the Netherlands in South African apartheid,⁷ and the Indigenous children taken from their parents by Christian missionaries. Focusing on slavery as almost synonymous with colonialism in this respect has enabled other issues to become obscured; accepting decolonization and destabilization in one thematic area has allowed other areas to remain neglected.

Thus, the reigning perception of Amsterdam as a historical colonizer has paradoxically enabled the city to disconnect itself from many colonial legacies, frameworks, structures, and ways of thinking that persist today. Discrimination and racism are ever-present in Amsterdam despite its image as a tolerant city (Wekker 2016). Recently, however, there has been stronger opposition and protests against racism have escalated with museums choosing to collect and exhibit these (Ariese 2021). In Dutch BLM protests in 2020, structural, institutional, and individual racism was overtly linked to Dutch

colonialism in speeches and on protest signs. Luciano de Boterman photographed two protests in Amsterdam and collaborated with the Amsterdam Museum on both a physical exhibition in its public courtyard and in curating an online BLM gallery for its *Corona in the City* digital exhibition. By engaging in this topic, decolonization in Amsterdam is also becoming more clearly linked to global decolonial movements. In a similar vein, the exhibition *What We Forget* at the Nieuw Dakota gallery (2019) showed the works of contemporary artists drawing broader European links to colonialism and relating (neo-)colonialism to environmental exploitation.

Ultimately, freezing the colonizing role of Amsterdam in a distant, historical past has rendered it challenging for the city of Amsterdam and its museums to decolonize. So far, emphasis has been placed primarily on monuments and names in the city, on the ethnographic museum, and on many slavery-related themes. Important decolonial progress has been made in all of these areas, yet more urgent and necessary work remains to be done, including in the re-presenting of Amsterdam as a colonizer in the present. As a staff member at the Amsterdam Museum put it, ‘decolonization is denormalization’ (interview AM_S21, my translation), and there are manifold ways that the ‘normal’ image of Amsterdam can still be disrupted.

Second-hand (de)colonialism in Warsaw

The various forms of institutionalized decolonial reactions seen in Amsterdam and other postcolonial metropolises have been absent from key museums in Warsaw, where decoloniality has only occasionally been performed by (mainly white) critically minded curators. This stems in part from the city’s ethnic composition, with the vast majority of its nearly two million inhabitants being white, predominantly Catholic Poles yet also encompassing poorly integrated new groups of migrant workers. The main reason, however, relates to Warsaw’s peculiar postcolonial historical situatedness in East-Central Europe in a manner quite different from that of Western European cities.

First, in European land conquests of the nineteenth century, the countries of this region did not participate in the processes of colonization as independent states, as they themselves formed part of other land empires at the time. This contributed to the notion that they qualified as other victims of great European powers (in this case Prussia and the Romanov and Habsburg Empires) rather than as participants in Europe’s worldwide colonial engagement. But what this discourse of ‘internal colonization’ (Thompson 2000) often misses is that for political and mostly economic reasons East-Central European populations migrated globally, contributing to settlements around the world and, moreover, that its elite often shared the colonial aspirations of Western and Southern Europeans. For instance, some Polish aristocrats kept black servants as curiosities and decorated their estates with ‘oriental’ goods, plants, and animals. Furthermore, East-Central European travellers and explorers, educated in St. Petersburg, Leipzig, Berlin, Vienna, Paris, or

London, participated in buying, exchanging, or stealing objects from other parts of the world, some of which found their way into ethnographic museums of the newly independent East-Central European nation states after 1918. Most importantly, however, colonial-style relations were replicated by the Polish elite with peasants and ethnic minorities in the territories of today's Ukraine and Belarus. These factors have been aptly described by one museum curator interviewed for our project as a 'second-hand colonialism' by white East-Central Europeans (interview APM_1).

Second, the Cold War left a mixed legacy with regard to colonialism. On the one hand, communist states supported decolonization around the world, one of the results of which was that many Asian, African, and Latin American activists and students visited or lived in cities like Warsaw. Party propaganda stressed the communist bloc's contribution to the liberation of humankind not only from 'the chains of capitalism' but also from accompanying forms of enslavement, including racist prejudices worldwide. On the other hand, however, despite its decolonial component, the communist culture of knowledge contributed to the dissemination of a European vision of the world, not least by organizing all-white archaeological and ethnographic 'expeditions' to non-European countries that competed for local resources and contacts with those organized by capitalist states. Overall, the engagement of Eastern Europeans in other cultures left the region with an implicated legacy of colonial violence (Lehrer 2020; Rothberg 2019)—even as it was filtered, nuanced, or enriched by communism (Mark, Kalinovsky, and Marung 2020) and complicated by the region's own subjugation to foreign powers (Lebow, Mazurek, and Wawrzyniak 2019). This implicated legacy can still be discerned in Warsaw's urban space today, despite the city having been destroyed and its museums' collections looted by the Nazis during the Second World War.

Let us take a brief look at the non-European collections of Warsaw's main museums. Both the Royal Łazienki Palace and the Royal Palace at Wilanów have collections of East Asian early modern and modern art, at the latter in special 'Chinese rooms'. The Royal Castle in the Old Town has over 600 eighteenth- to twentieth-century carpets from the Caucasus and Middle East and the National Museum keeps over 10,000 Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Middle Eastern objects in its Collection of Oriental Art, while the State Ethnographic Museum (SEM) has over 22,000 non-European objects, including a large collection of Africana. The Asia and Pacific Museum (APM) exhibits numerous items from across its wide regional remit. The APM also holds works by Polish artists inspired by Asia.

The origins of these collections vary. Some were amassed by royalty and aristocrats in the early modern era, while those established more recently contain donations or market acquisitions. However, the African collections of Polish ethnographic museums originated from an expedition to Cameroon organized in the 1880s by a Russian naval officer of Polish-German extraction, Stefan Szolc-Rogoziński, and his two colleagues, ethnographer Leopold Janikowski and geologist Klemens Tomczek. All three fantasized about

Polish colonies in Africa, and thanks to British support briefly competed against Germany for control of Cameroon. The SEM holdings were destroyed during the Second World War and supplemented by donations from various interwar and post-war Polish explorers as well as by African objects held in previously German institutions (situated at the territories gained by Poland after the Second World Wars) and by collections of other Polish museums as the result of centralization during the communist period (Kamocki 1966; Nadolska-Styczyńska 2011). The APM was founded in the mid-1970s by a communist-era merchant naval officer and diplomat whose career took him to many countries throughout Asia, Australia, and Oceania, with Indonesia inspiring him the most (Morawski 2016).

These differences notwithstanding, what most of these institutions have in common is the way their narratives neither problematize nor profoundly historicize the cultural encounters from which their collections originated. In Warsaw's residencies and art museums, visitors are often encouraged to admire 'exotic' objects and those viewing ethnographic museums are meant to value the contents as offering insights into foreign folk cultures without questioning how they travelled to Poland. Although the need to decolonize this type of display is a familiar topic to some curators of those collections, as yet there have been no institutionalized or widespread attempts to deal with this implicated heritage in permanent museum exhibitions. Just as in Warsaw's botanic gardens, zoo, and the zoological collections of academic institutions, as well as in other museums, many individual objects have been left devoid of a context of entangled global history. In this way, the colonial implications of white East-Central Europeans are still largely repressed in the city's most prominent and institutionalized heritage spaces.

While in the main museum venues little effort has been made to engage in the destabilization of the established cultural canon, the decolonial agenda has instead been raised in other forms and places, with, for instance, the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCCA), the Museum of Warsaw, and the History Meeting House organizing projects about the city's multicultural inhabitants, including the oral histories of Africans and Asians living in Warsaw. Recently, a number of temporary interventions have focused on the relationships between the Polish People's Republic and Asian and African countries, such as the exhibition *Polish-Indian Shop* held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 2017 that was devoted to both the larger aspects of economic modernization in Poland and India and the personal networks and unofficial trade of the time.

In addition, global colonial entanglements have been explored more profoundly by artists rather than regular museums. For instance, the Slavs and Tatars collective represented in Warsaw by the Raster Gallery challenges imperial and orientalist framings of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In a 2019 retrospective exhibition at the UCCCA entitled *Synthetic Folklore*, curator Janek Simon generated a digital mix of ethnic forms, patterns, and motifs from India, Africa, South America, Europe, and Poland to convey

that culture is produced collectively through complex processes of exchange and to ask whether digital globalization can protect societies from xenophobia and essentialism. Joanna Warsza in *Everything Is Getting Better: Unknown Knowns of Polish Post-colonialism* (2017)—presented in Berlin and discussed in Warsaw—offered an overview of various themes of the Polish colonial experience and their retrospective curatorial representations from the 2000s. *Unknown Knowns* brought together Prussia's internal colonization of Eastern Europe during the nineteenth century, Soviet imperialism as a form of colonialism, and the internal colonial aspirations of Poland, such as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or the Polish Second Republic (1918–1939) and its unrealized imperialist plans in Cameroon and Madagascar (Warsza 2017). The exhibition was also meant as a critical reference to contemporary politics by showing that Poland's past expansionary ambitions are repressed in current right-wing rhetoric, particularly in the migration crisis when prominent politicians claimed that Poland, contrary to western or southern European states, had no moral obligation to help refugees because it had not contributed to their situation in the first place.

These examples point to two divergent directions of the contemporary museum discourse in Warsaw: of the conventional, uncritical, permanent, main museum displays and of the engaged, interpretative, and often provocative temporary curatorial and artistic decolonial projects. It appears that decolonial destabilization of the canon is permitted for or even expected from artists, but has been unwelcome or unthinkable in other realms. We have observed an instance of this kind of parallel monologue within a single institution, the Museum of Warsaw, which we studied in depth (Wawrzyniak and Bukowiecki 2020). The portrait gallery of its new permanent exhibition destabilized the mainstream collective memory of white, male military heroism by placing a contemporary portrait of the (only) legendary black participant of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising in a prominent position. Centrally located among other military men, it questioned both their social roles and aesthetic representation (see also Bukowiecki's contribution to this volume). However, the same museum whose main concept of its permanent exhibition is based on displaying and narrating stories of objects for everyday use in Warsaw still shows many items that call for contextualization of their colonial provenience (such as a monkey toy, elephant figurine, or cocoa can). Most astonishingly, one of the buildings in which the museum is housed is called *kamienica pod Murzynkiem*, which literally translated means 'house under a little Negro'. This seventeenth-century name derives from a gable decoration featuring the head of a black boy on the building's façade. The nearby café is also called *pod Murzynkiem*. Despite the fact that for at least a decade, black Polish communities have protested against being called *Murzyni*, the house's name is so familiar and transparent to museum curators that they have never attempted any recontextualization, at least not before BLM initiatives across the globe in 2020 provoked a new set of discussions within Poland. More generally, several curators and Warsaw guides we interviewed did not even

think that the very term colonization/decolonization had any relevance in the Polish context (interview MW_5; MW_21; MW_23; MW_FGI_1; Głowacka-Grajper 2020). Thus, the lack of relevance of the term indicates why decolonial processes are not even on their radar for consideration, let alone supported. The dichotomies of progressive vs. silent look likely to continue in Warsaw unless institutional steps are taken to raise or support the multicultural awareness of a larger number of curators. Unlike in the Amsterdam case discussed above, Warsaw's museum space needs a far more profound historicization of its colonial implications if it is to meet present and future challenges.

The colonial matrix of power: the case of Shanghai

Certainly, museums based in non-Western countries can also spread world views that reflect the ideas of their (former) colonizers. This is considered to be a long-lasting consequence of the success of what Walter Mignolo calls 'the colonial matrix of power'. According to Mignolo, the modernity paradigm intrinsic in the colonial project became an integral part of the political life of colonized societies, which often freed themselves from their invaders but not from their epistemological structures (Mignolo 2011). This is the case with the People's Republic of China (PRC) whose museums formalize triumphant historical narratives to assert the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Denton 2016). As such, Chinese museums are agents of the stabilization of narratives promoted by the authorities. Any sort of destabilization, and therefore decolonization, of well-established national and revolutionary mythology is discouraged.

The CCP exerts a profound influence over the historical narratives presented by museums at national, provincial, and city levels. Shanghai is not an exception, and its institutions also show low engagement in decolonial practices. Two main issues haunt museums in Shanghai: first, their refusal to deal with China's own colonizing past and its present role as a neo-colonial power and second, their support of a nationalist discourse that influences the display practices used for China's ethnic minorities. These two problems are related, as China's imperialist history still influences the contemporary perception of Han Chinese as the norm, relegating ethnic minorities to social groups without a history.

The imperialist history of China and its political and cultural influence in Asia are well studied. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties (1644–1911), China expanded its political, military, and cultural influence beyond its own borders, fulfilling colonial projects aimed at eliminating 'unfriendly' populations and occupying their territories (Perdue 2005). At the end of the nineteenth century, however, China experienced Western and Japanese colonization. After the end of the First Opium War (1839–1842), foreign forces pressured the Qing dynasty to open port cities (including Shanghai) to foreign trade and to concede extraterritoriality to foreigners

(Chan 1977, 257). This system is often referred to as 'semi-colonialism', a concept that describes when a country, despite nominally preserving its juridical independence, is dominated by imperialist powers (Osterhammel 1986, 296–7). At the end of the War of Resistance against Japan (1936–1945), foreign powers lost their privileged positions in China (Chan 1977). Furthermore, the CCP started new expansionist projects after 1949 by occupying Tibet and Xinjiang, annexations often considered neo-colonial ventures (Olimat 2017, 214–5). Thus, as in the case of Poland, China can be considered both a colonizer and a victim of colonialism.

China's own colonial projects are seldom acknowledged in its museums. Its curatorial practices are embedded in Marxist-Leninist ideology and are highly critical of foreign colonialism (Varutti 2014, 36). However, at the same time, Chinese museums are based on epistemologies developed to satisfy the demands of ethno-national politics (Denton 2016). As a result, museums use the expansionist history of the Ming and of the Qing dynasties as a catalyst to remind the public of China's past greatness while whitewashing less glorious historical episodes (Pozzi, forthcoming). Meanwhile, memories of foreign imperialism are employed to foster nationalist feelings and to celebrate the CCP's success in liberating China from external intervention (Denton 2016). Following this trend, public history institutions such as the Shanghai History Museum/Shanghai Revolution Museum (SHM) present China's imperial history as a symbol of national pride.

Despite their nationalist message, Chinese institutions do not necessarily celebrate ethnic homogeneity. China defines itself as a 'multinational state' composed of 56 ethnic groups, among which the Han Chinese are a majority (C. Wang 2004, 6). The city of Shanghai currently has a population of 27 million inhabitants of whom 98.8 per cent are Han Chinese. Inhabitants belonging to ethnic minorities thus comprise only 1.2 per cent, although they are increasing. Shanghai also has over 150,000 officially registered foreigners. While Chinese museums acknowledge diversity within ethnic groups, they also minimize interethnic frictions and privilege a representation of harmonious relations, with the Han Chinese portrayed as guarantors of peace (Varutti 2011, 7–11). This bias is also present in Shanghai's museums, both those based on ethnographic collections (the Shanghai Natural History Museum, SNHM; the Shanghai Museum, SM) and on history (the SHM; the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, SJRM).

In contrast to Amsterdam and Warsaw, Shanghai does not have an ethnographic museum, yet the SNHM and the SM inherited part of their collections from the ethnographic museum of the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS). Built in Shanghai in 1874, the RAS collected items to better understand the Chinese environment and culture. However, the movement of items from a colonial institution like the RAS to local museums did not guarantee the decolonization of display practices. For instance, in the SM (an institution dedicated to ancient Chinese art), nine galleries exhibit Han Chinese artworks, while the tenth is dedicated to minority arts. The division between

‘Chinese art’ and ‘Ethnic minorities’ craftsmanship’ shows how the latter, although considered part of the Chinese nation, are still represented as the ‘other’. While the galleries of Han Chinese artworks indicate the names of artists and contain clear chronological information, artefacts in the tenth gallery are often described as ‘folk art’ and lack references to artists’ names (X. Chen 2007, 217). Visitors to the SM are therefore invited to admire ethnic minorities’ objects as devoid of history and individual agency (Karp and Lavine 1991).

Han nationalism inevitably reproduces ethnic discrimination (K-H. Chen 2010, 83), which museums thus disseminate. The ‘Peking man’ is arguably the most notorious case of a scientific theory employed to prove the longevity of the Chinese as a biological race (Schmalzer 2008). In 1929, the excavation of *Homo erectus* bones on a site near Peking sparked discussion about the possibility that Chinese people might not share a common human origin with the rest of the world. At present, several Chinese paleoanthropologists still argue that the *H. erectus* group that arrived in what is today’s China independently evolved into *H. sapiens*, therefore denying the theory that all modern humans are the descendants of *H. sapiens* that migrated out of Africa (Cheng 2017, 575). This theory is controversial and has been refuted by scientists inside and outside China, yet museums such as the SNHM still mention the possibility that the Peking man pre-dates other *H. erectus*.

The tendency to glorify Han ethnicity is also noticeable in history museums. Despite Shanghai’s status as a cosmopolitan metropolis, its public institutions minimize cultural, religious, and ethnic differences that distinguish Shanghai’s past and present inhabitants. This is particularly evident in the SHM (Pozzi 2021). Its exhibition acknowledges that Shanghai was a city built by immigrants, both foreigners and Chinese coming from other provinces. However, Europeans, Sikhs, and Japanese are presented in a colonial framework. The exhibition reduces descriptions of their daily lives and interactions to a minimum, showing instead the detailed institutional and economic development of the city. Furthermore, the exhibition also represses cultural differences among the Han Chinese. In the early twentieth century, Shanghai’s population contained immigrants for whom provincial associations were much more significant than their Han identity. People coming from different Chinese provinces had their own associations, buildings, and temples that defined their identities in the city (Goodman 1995). The exhibition, however, minimizes the importance of provincial identity, removing any grey areas that do not fit the state-supported Han-centred history.

A notable exception to the SHM’s disregard of Shanghai’s ethnic and cultural diversity is its attention to Shanghai’s Jewish community, to which curators have dedicated the cabinet ‘All cities denied access for Jews, Shanghai was the only exception’. Through miniature model houses and shops, this display describes the poor yet decent life of Jewish refugees in the city during the Second World War, representing Shanghai as a safe space for hundreds of

desperate exiles. The inclusion of the daily life of an urban ethnic minority might look like a 'decolonial attempt' by the SHM's curators, but this representation of the Jewish community remains very colonial in nature. The unmentioned longer history of Shanghai's Jews is entangled with Western colonialism. Sephardic (or Baghdadi) Jews were among the first foreigners to arrive in Shanghai with British traders in the 1840s, and some spent their entire lives in China. The Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and the Bolshevik Revolution (1917–1918) brought new influxes of Jews to Shanghai, mostly from Russia (Eber 2017, 1–2). Both the SHM and the SJRM, however, only refer to the nearly 20,000 European Jewish refugees who fled to Shanghai in 1938–1941 because its unique status as a metropolis under the control of several foreign powers did not require them to carry visas (Gao 2011, 203). Mainly from Germany, Austria, and Poland, the refugees settled in the Tilanqiao district, a destitute neighbourhood that soon became known as the city's ghetto. Most survived the war years working in the city or thanks to donations by several Jewish associations. At the end of the war, they largely immigrated to the United States, Canada, and Australia (Fizman 1998).

The SHM and the SJRM's erasure of memories of other Jews besides refugees was due to the CCP's nationalist politics after the 1990s. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, authorities repressed the memory of the presence of the Jewish war refugees. For instance, the Moses Synagogue, a gathering place in Tilanqiao, stood vacant during the 1950s and 1960s and was later used as a governmental building. During the economic reforms of the 1990s, however, memories of the Jewish wartime community resurfaced. Thanks to China opening up, many Jewish former residents of Tilanqiao came back to visit the synagogue that became a commemoration space (Y. Wang 2017, 114). In 2005, the synagogue and surrounding areas became the SJRM. It was built to support the 'Shanghai Ark' myth, a metaphor employed by official newspapers to describe the unique significance of Shanghai to the Jewish refugees (115). This discourse, promoted by the SJRM, claims that although the Jewish refugees suffered greatly under fascism in Europe, they were welcome in Shanghai where they lived simple but happy lives (116). This myth intends to celebrate the Han Chinese's good will as opposed to Europeans who did not provide safety for refugees. However, this discourse fails to take account of the memories of the Jewish refugees, who do not always agree with the SJRM's perspective (116). Although the case of the representation of the Jewish community in the SHM and the SJRM might seem like an attempt to grapple with forgotten stories of non-Han Chinese inhabitants, a closer analysis reveals that the decision to establish the museum in Tilanqiao was strictly political.

To conclude, although they are critical of the Western colonial system, museums in Shanghai remain highly colonial in nature. The CCP's authorities exert control over museums at both national and city levels, constraining the destabilization of nationalist narratives and discourses and inhibiting the progress of decolonial practices.

Comparing decolonization

This brief comparative venture into three very different urban museum spaces adds complexity to the current decolonization wave. It calls for attention to the question of how the global decolonization movement, influenced by historical and cultural particularities, results in divergent discourses and practices on the city level. As such, how is the destabilization of decolonization encouraged, supported, or resisted in urban centres and, specifically, their museums?

First, we have observed important differences at the level of agency in our three case studies. Historically, Amsterdam's decolonial discourse—similar to that found within other Western cities—was triggered by debates revolving around its ethnographic museum, the Tropenmuseum. Yet the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw did not play a comparable role. Instead, in Warsaw it was mainly independent artists and curators who pushed the boundaries of collective memory by recalling forgotten or silenced colonial histories. That said, in Amsterdam today artists and activists have indeed moved to the forefront of new waves of decolonial initiatives (discussed in greater detail in Ariese 2021). In Shanghai, however, the CCP exercises such a strong influence over museums' representation of history and culture that curators must take authorities' perspectives into account and activists are silenced.

Second, one of the most important tenets of the most recent decolonization movement in Amsterdam has been the struggle for racial equality. This has only been weakly echoed in Warsaw due to the existence of such a tiny minority of non-Polish activists aided by their white, liberal counterparts coupled with a limited sensitivity towards multiculturalism among curators. China and Shanghai reveal a different stance on race and racial equality. Unlike Warsaw, Shanghai is characterized by significant urban diversity, but this is either largely disregarded in favour of Han Chinese uniformity or 'othered'. Indeed, as the example of the Peking man shows, the focus is rather on setting the Chinese racially apart from all other humans.

Third, comparing Shanghai with two European cities shows that the term 'decolonial' does not always mean 'critical' or 'self-reflexive' in the way it has been postulated by the New Museology movement. Shanghai's museums, with their exhibitions planned in a top-down manner, reflect the current politics of memory within the Chinese Communist Party that accords limited recognition to regional and urban differences. Chinese museums are decolonial in the sense that they deal strongly with their history of European settlements; however, they are not self-reflexive in terms of critically assessing their own past nor of engaging diverse actors into the process of developing exhibitions.

Finally, we have also flagged how all three cities and their museum spaces experienced conflicts in viewing their roles in the past and present. Amsterdam has conceptualized itself firmly as a colonizer in the (distant) past. Its focus on particular colonial aspects, primarily slavery, removes energy and resources from the unresolved implications of coloniality today. Warsaw in turn has

not worked through its history and heritage deeply enough to account for the colonial implications neglected in the city space. Indeed, on an institutional level all possible entanglements of internal or second-hand colonialism tend to be disregarded. Shanghai with its past as a colonized city and its present role in China's neo-colonization efforts is deeply colonially entangled. Tapping into nationalism and patriotism produces a positive representation of Chinese imperialism and the ways in which Shanghai wrestled itself free from its oppressors, rather than any attempts to atone for hardships inflicted upon ethnic minorities in the past and in the present.

Overall, the comparison shows that there is no clear, single direction in which decolonization in museums and the associated debate will develop in the future. This is true not just for the cities discussed in this chapter but also for a myriad of places in the world whose histories are similarly entangled and contentious. Whether they concern the (former) overseas colonizer, the historically colonized, the still-colonized, the internally colonized, the internal colonizer, or a mix of any of these, processes of decolonization will be complex and vastly site- and situation-specific. Beyond historical reasons, the current demographic composition of a particular city and differences in actors will also play a role in the perceptions of colonialism and the need for, and the means to, decolonize.

Notes

- 1 This work forms part of the ECHOES project which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 770248.
- 2 The New Museology movement developed from critique in the 1970s of 'traditional' museology, which centred on collections and viewed the museum as a cultural authority. The New Museology instead emphasizes the social and political roles of the museum and perceives it as a place of dialogue.
- 3 For more about the colonial history of the museum and great exhibitions, see Bennett (1995) and Corbey (1993).
- 4 Research for this chapter was realized in 2018–2020 as part of ECHOES Work Package 3 'City Museums and Multiple Colonial Pasts' led by Joanna Wawrzyniak. We focused on city museums as they have often been overlooked in mainstream scholarship that concentrates on ethnographic and art museums. However, we also followed developments in the broader museum scene of each city, and our argument is embedded in our wider analysis of exhibitions, museum programmes, staff interviews, and a variety of secondary sources. Note: interviews with staff at the Amsterdam Museum are noted as AM_S; interviews at Warsaw's Asia and Pacific Museum are noted as APM_; and interviews at the Museum of Warsaw are noted as MW_ or as MW_FGI_1 for focus group interviews.
- 5 As quoted on the exhibition page of the Stedelijk Museum website.
- 6 These and more examples are discussed in greater detail in Ariele (2021).
- 7 Two recent exhibitions in Amsterdam focused on South Africa, *Good Hope: South Africa and the Netherlands from 1600* (Rijksmuseum 2017) and a show of South African photographer *Santu Mofokeng* (FOAM 2019). However, both were criticized for not overtly linking Dutch historical colonialism to the system of apartheid.

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