
Real Contentment:

**A River of Exchange Between
Manchester and Nanjing /**

**International Artist Exchange
Programme 2025 /**



**Evaluation Report /
September 2025 /**

I. About this report

This report aims to give an independent view of the *Real Contentment* artist exchange between the UNESCO Cities of Literature in Manchester, England and Nanjing, China. (The two cities are also UNESCO Cities of Lifelong Learning.) Part of a broader partnership, the exchange was supported by the British Council, as well as by partners in the two cities.

To shape the work, and to ensure congruity with the British Council's International Collaboration Grants aims, an evaluation framework was devised which focussed on six questions:

- To what extent and how has the project strengthened capability for individuals and organisations?
- How has the project creatively addressed the theme of climate/environmental sustainability?
- To what extent and how has the project improved knowledge and understanding between people working in different contexts/cultures?
- What is involved in the process of UNESCO Cities working together as Cities?
- What learning is there from the project to inform how best to structure future partnerships between the Cities?
- What has been learnt about how international partnerships work and the role of arts creativity in this: e.g. process, time, challenges in partnership, how creation works?

This report concentrates on the artist exchange elements of the project, although the schools activity is mentioned where appropriate. It focuses on qualitative aspects of the project.

It is informed by

- Artist reflections during and after the visit by Manchester artists and writers to Nanjing
- Semi-structured interviews with artists and writers, creative producer and lead project partners in Manchester and Nanjing after the project had completed
- Attendance at exhibitions and events during the Manchester Festival of Libraries
- Consideration of the anthology produced

The report gives an overview of the project, the partners, the aims and the actual activity. We then consider each of the evaluation questions, before drawing out what seem to us to be some of the key characteristics or dimensions of the partnership and this project specifically. This then informs some considerations for future work together.

The report was commissioned by Manchester City of Literature and delivered by Mark Robinson of Thinking Practice.

2. Project Overview

/About the partners

The project involved the UNESCO Cities of Literature and UNESCO Cities of Lifelong Learning of Manchester, UK and Nanjing, China, with the two Cities of Literature offices as co-ordinating partners. It was funded by the British Council through an International Collaboration Grant.

Manchester was named a UNESCO City of Literature in 2017. It is supported by Manchester City Council, Manchester Metropolitan University and University of Manchester, and includes a wide range of other partners from education, publishing, the community and civic realm, heritage and libraries. Its vision is to create an innovative, distinctive, equitable, globally connected city of reading and writing, and for Manchester to be a city where diverse voices are celebrated, creative talent and industries are nurtured and where literary activity changes lives.

Nanjing was awarded UNESCO City of Literature status in 2019. Its main objectives are to invigorate academic and creative exchange between Nanjing and other cities, to participate in international literature activity and research, and to encourage new Nanjing literature and facilitate exchange and collaboration in multiple disciplines related to literature and culture.

As well as the UNESCO offices, partners in the project were Creative Manchester/University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester Poetry Library & School of Art), Confucius Institute Manchester, Nanjing University and Nanjing University of the Arts.

/Aims of the project

Real Contentment aimed to create a lasting partnership between Manchester, UK and Nanjing, China, building on the fact that both are UNESCO Cities of Literature and UNESCO Cities of Lifelong Learning. It took its title from a poem by Nanjing poet Han Dong which explored ecological and environmental themes, providing the starting theme for the creative work to be produced. It aimed to bring together a poet, a playwright and an artist from each of the Cities and support reciprocal visits and creation of new work.

The aims of the project were:

- To create a sustainable multi-partner infrastructure to support future artistic collaborations and a deeper partnership between UNESCO Cities of Literature and UNESCO Cities of Lifelong Learning of Manchester, UK and Nanjing, China

- To run an artist exchange which brings together 6 Chinese and UK poets, visual artists and playwrights to create a bilingual illustrated poetry collection from 4 artists working collaboratively (2 poets, 2 illustrators) and a play (written by 2 playwrights)
- To deepen inter-cultural understanding between artists and partners and to develop ways of working together as artists and partners
- To develop a schools engagement programme for young people in Nanjing and in Manchester, sharing work by young people alongside professional work in June 2025

/What actually happened in the project

International Artist Exchange Visits

The central element of the project was an artist exchange bringing Chinese and UK poets, illustrators and playwrights together to create new work exploring the theme of real contentment, inspired by a line from the poetry of Han Dong: “real contentment...(of) a ray of sunlight / Shining in a woodland glade” (Let Me Describe The Rainstorm, 1986 translated by Nicky Harman). This included a series of online meetings followed by a visit to Nanjing by the three Manchester participants to inform the commission part of the project,. This was followed by a visit to Manchester by their Nanjing peers to share work in small exhibitions and to launch the anthology, *A River of Exchange Between Manchester and Nanjing* during the Festival of Libraries at Manchester Metropolitan University.

The event showcased the projects from the artist exchange, and included work created by the six artists and speeches from the UK Ambassador to UNESCO Anna Nsubuga; Cllr Garry Bridges, Deputy Leader of Manchester City Council; Professor Duncan Ivison, Vice-Chancellor at the University of Manchester; Professor Malcolm Press, Vice Chancellor at Manchester Metropolitan University; and Chantal Harrison-Lee from the British Council.

Creation of new work

Playwrights Amy Lever and Zhou Meisen developed a work drawing on the history of the forced deportation of Chinese sailors from Liverpool during World War II, developing what the producer described as “a trans-creation of the [each] other; naturally contextualised to their playwrights with different cultural, generational life backgrounds.”

Poets Han Dong and Charlotte Shevchenko Knight both developed sequences of poetry based on the very different rivers in their respective cities, the Yangtze and the Medlock.

Visual artists Yao Yuan and Eleanor Mulhearn also developed work about rivers, with Mulhearn (and Shevchenko Knight) developing relationships with an aqua-biologist expert in the history of the much less visible Medlock in Manchester. The evolution of these projects is discussed further in the sections which follow.

A bi-lingual anthology was produced with work by all writers and artists.

Schools work leading to exhibitions

Over 300 KS2-KS3 pupils from close to 20 schools in the two cities made submissions to the project, with works from 43 pupils selected for exhibition in the Manchester Central Library running between the 2nd and 17th June in Manchester Central Library.

3. Achievement against aims



Participating artists completed reflective journals during and after the project. This included sharing words to sum up their experience of the artist exchange. These are illustrated above.

These serve as a partial summary of the section which follows, which is structured around our six evaluation questions. They reflect the excitement, connection and creative potential the project has had for those involved. They also suggest the process was a challenging one at times, with moments which were perhaps not quite as expected. It is clear from the post-project interviews, however, that all take great pride in the work created during the exchange, through a process which was new to the partners. There is a real sense of achievement and potential for what could be accomplished through future exchanges and activity.

In the rest of this section we identify key themes in relation to each of our evaluation questions. These are illustrated with quotations from interviews with artists, writers and those involved in delivering the project. We have chosen not to attribute these individually, to reflect the collective nature of the project. We also quote from the project anthology.

3.1 To what extent and how has the project strengthened capability for individuals and organisations?

Participating artists and partners are very positive about how the project has helped them develop and strengthen their creative practices and how they can achieve the strategic aims of the Cities of Literature and the partnership between them. Benefits fall into three main areas:

- Professional development via international networks and cultural connection
- Creative development via enabling new work
- Understanding motivations and frames of partners

Professional development via international networks and cultural connection

Artists involved in the exchange consistently describe the project as having provided them with significant professional and creative development from the opportunity to travel, and to meet with fellow artists and writers in the context of an exchange which built in creation of new work. This seems to be true of both the Manchester artists, some of whom are at earlier - though high-achieving - stages in their careers, and the Nanjing artists who are more established as leading in their field. For some the project has been affirming in terms of possibility and ambition. Others appreciated the opportunity to connect to different traditions and cultures, seeing this as a form of refreshment and addition to their previous practice.

"I think that trip was a once in a lifetime experience... it was a really amazing cultural immersion experience. I didn't think I'd ever go to China. And there's something about a job that makes you do things you didn't think you'd ever do. It's very special, and it definitely renewed my sense of wonder and excitement about this industry, because I was feeling quite unoptimistic about it. A project like this really makes you think, actually, there is lots of really valuable work. Like, okay, I can do this."

"I absolutely loved meeting the interns. They were all early 20s, and they did a lot of translation. They really enjoyed being with us and I've actually stayed in touch with WeChat. It's really nice to meet some 20 year olds in China and just learn about their lives."

All describe the opportunity to visit the partner city in extremely positive terms, even where this was after the main 'creation phase' of the project, as it was for the Chinese artists. The networks strengthened by the exchange go beyond the artists themselves, but to the partners – with artists strengthening relationships with the two Cities of Literature – and to others involved in the project including the Creative Producer and those serving as translators and hosts.

In addition, one can see that the experience of travel as part of the international networking also served to bring together the groups of travelling artists and writers, who formed or renewed bonds. The artists supported each other through their experiences of a very different culture. The international experience also inspired reflection on their home cities and artistic networks.

"There were also some unexpected joys - like reconnecting with Zhou Meisen, an old friend I hadn't seen or spoken to in over a decade. This project gave us the opportunity to catch up on each other's lives and creative work. So in a way, it not only sparked dialogue between me and the UK artists but also helped strengthen my connection with fellow Chinese writers."

Collaboration across languages and cultures was not always easy. Expectations differed, as did some of the cultural practices. Some of the Manchester participants found it hard to be filmed and photographed throughout their stay in Nanjing. Conversely, some of the Chinese group were surprised how discrete documentation was.

"It was powerful to meet people in the same field but with different backgrounds. I have developed new friendships - which doesn't happen often."

Development via enabling new work

"It feels like a new door or window has opened - and I have broader horizons now, and I see culture in different ways."

All the artists created new work through their involvement in *Real Contentment*. Each produced a substantial piece of work responding to the theme and context of the exchange.

"It's given me a lot of knowledge on how to navigate creative collaboration because going into it, I wasn't entirely sure what that would look like and I realised that you can't have this one set idea of what it will be. You have to go into it open to uncertainty."

The works were created in a kind of parallel collaboration - i.e. each artist or writer developed their own pieces, building on shared conversation and experiences, or in the case of the playwrights a shared idea which they wrote from different angles. All the ideas went through stages of gestation before being produced under what transpired to be a very tight deadline. This was felt to be challenging and to restrict the potential to some degree.

As well as the new work itself, the exchange and the creative ideas and themes of the work, were described by several artists as having inspired further

"The theme of water is being really, really very useful going forward. So there's already starting to work with around sort of thinking about water. So this has given me loads of my research, and plenty today, for always, actually."

work, leading to new collaborations and projects. Both Eleanor Mulhearn and Charlotte Shevchenko Knight felt they would explore rivers as themes in future and were collaborating with scientists on inter-disciplinary projects in England.

"It's definitely given me a new confidence. This project really gave me a sense of purpose... I think the most valuable thing out of it is how it's opened a lot of doors creatively, and in terms of the number of partners, and it has widened my circles. I mean, widened it so far as to China."

Confidence was a word which came up repeatedly in interviews, especially amongst the Manchester artists, for whom this project was a major boost or new development, a backing of their development as creatives (whereas for the Chinese participants it was a valuable and welcome recognition of their standing in their artforms in Nanjing and China more broadly.)

Understanding motivations and frames of partners

In its planning the international artist exchange was a manifestation of a partnership between the two UNESCO Cities of Literature, and at a secondary level their partners, the UNESCO Cities of Lifelong Learning, Universities in each city and the Confucius Institute in Manchester.

"The culture, the thinking is different, but the attitude is the same."

The partnership capacity and appetite has clearly been strengthened by the experience of delivering such an ambitious project together, with learning about the practicalities of project design and delivery, and about the strategic and cultural frames of the partners. This is discussed in more detail in section 3.4 below.

3.2 How has the project creatively addressed the theme of climate/ environmental sustainability?

The project has successfully addressed the theme of environmental sustainability, although perhaps not as directly as envisaged at the planning stages. For some the theme was a secondary motivation for being involved. In practice the collaboration developed slightly differently, becoming more focussed on the rivers of the two cities, as images of humanity's care (or neglect) of the environment, and of the everyday life of the populations of the two cities.

"Comparing the two distinct water systems and using that as a creative starting point was truly exciting. It's precisely because the differences are so stark that the process feels more challenging—and more likely to yield something fresh and original."

Ideas were shared and flexed from the original theme, with the rivers of the two cities becoming the dominant image of environmental and human concern. Collaboration came via parallel working and discussion rather than creation of shared works or translation. This was, however, still a deep experience for some. For others though there was an element of disappointment at first at this slight 'separation of duties', although all saw this as a creative and pragmatic way forward and were pleased with the final works.

For an international exchange project it is interesting that four of the six artists very much focussed on their home environments rather than those of their collaborators. This may be partly a result of the relatively short length of the research and writing phase, or the slightly lop-sided way the visits worked in relation to the commission elements of the project, with the Manchester trio visiting Nanjing to develop ideas after several short meetings online, but the Chinese artists only visiting Manchester after the completion of the new work to be featured in the anthology, exhibition and events.

The river is, of course, both literal and metaphorical in the way the artists addressed environmental sustainability. Han Dong and Yao Yuan responded to the Yangtze – a large, majestic river central to the cityscape – and their relationships to it. The Medlock, a small, almost hidden river running through Manchester features in the work by Eleanor Mulhearn and Charlotte Shevchenko Knight.

Han Dong lives in a housing block which overlooks the river, so it is very much part of his daily existence, and "Riverside Dwellers" reflects this in a series of short evocative poems. Everyday life, the river, its people and its fish co-exist with the presence of climate change:

*"A terrible rain fell from the sky.
Like flickering fishhooks dangling in the dark waters.
Dimmed lights, an unrelenting flood of consequences."*

Yao Yuan's series of painting respond to the Yangtze in Spring, experienced with the visiting artists, in a series of what the artist describes as "unpeopled scenes". For her, "imbuing a scene that includes no human people with a human presences, we can more powerfully evoke thoughts about humanity – in this liminal space between ancient landscape and genuine inner intention."



Drunken Flower, Yao Yuan



Location Undisclosed, Eleanor Mulhearn

"The core themes that emerged for me were the everyday; the warm hospitality and politeness I encountered, concern for our climate and environment, sharing of working life experiences, the familiarity of being in a studio space. For me, these experiences merged to make me feel that I wanted to focus the creative process on the everyday in a low-key way, as well as problematic effects of human behaviour on our environment."

Mulhearn's sequence of "river writings", *Truths and Tales of the River Medlock*, depicts an urban river altered by people and industry from its origins, creating both visual and imaginative images that invoke reflection on how the environment is always man-made, especially in a place as entwined with the industrial revolution as Manchester. It builds in fantastical elements such as "The Guardian of the River Medlock" in the image above, who "rises every morning at 5am. He cannot fly now, but still, he walks so quickly that it is very hard to see him at all."

Mulhearn notes in her piece that “The Medlock has been culverted over many years and will increasingly flood the city centre without extensive new measures”, a clear reference to climate change. Those culverts and the omitted parts of the Medlock become the very shape of Charlotte Shevchenko Knight’s poem “SPEECH ACT: a river in eight culverts”. The poem’s form and lineation echoes the specific shapes of eight parts of the Medlock, sometimes in curving lines.

The river is reimagined as it is reshaped, set in a context of long, historical, change: “how could this shape not be grief?” The threat to the environment is implicit:

“levees appearing to guide
the medlock somewhere
she does not want to go –
a strange palm
on the small of her back – “

Playwrights Amy Peters and Meisen took a more tangential approach, drawing on the historical connections between Chinese sailors and the Mersey river in Liverpool, in particular the story of how Chinese sailors were entrapped and then expelled after the second world war, after fighting alongside British sailors, and often having families in Liverpool. After having considered writing a two act play (one act each) the playwrights settled on writing two pieces centred on the relationship of Emma, a young woman from Liverpool and Fang Ninghao, a Chinese sailor. “One Night in Liverpool” by Zhou Meisen and “Message in a Bottle” adopt different approaches to the characters, as best described by Zhou Meisen in his reflection on the project:

“Our initial plan was for one side to write the first act and the other side the second act, then cross-edit. However, in practice....it was difficult to achieve stylistic consistency. How could we avoid a cacophony of voices and fragmented styles within a single text? At this point, Song Shiming introduced a Chinese idiom: “huā kāi liǎng duǒ, gè biǎo yī zhī” - literally, “two flowers bloom on one branch.” We realized our creative approach could be adjusted accordingly. Instead of simply stitching together separate parts by Chinese and British playwrights, our creative vision would anchor on the shared spirit of a community with a common human destiny. Through concrete artistic practice, we would demonstrate the creative tension of cultural hybridity. This project isn’t about providing a dictionary for cultural translation but rather inviting the audience to rediscover the aesthetic shock of “defamiliarization” within gaps of cognition.”

3.3 To what extent and how has the project improved knowledge and understanding between people working in different contexts/cultures?

Both artists and project partners described increased understanding and awareness of working across cultures and in diverse social and artistic contexts. The project involved encounters out of comfort zones (either geographical or artistic) which were at times uncomfortable at first. Compromise was reported as being required to find ways to engage and to deliver on the commission elements, as well as to getting the most out of the visits. The lack of clarity some felt about the creative brief and the timetable added to this.

Three themes emerged as common:

- Exposure to different practices and ways of working across cultures
- Connection through artistic practice/craft
- Different ways to achieve shared aims

Exposure to different practices and ways of working across cultures

The artists consistently describe a growth in knowledge and understanding of working with people from different countries, cultures and artistic traditions. The language barrier – none of the Manchester artists spoke Chinese and only some of the Chinese artists spoke some English – was an initial challenge. Interpreters were used throughout, in both cities, as well as online translation and translation built into communication methods such as We Chat.

"Direct verbal communication was definitely a challenge. But I believe when one door closes, another opens. In this case, the language barrier wasn't completely closed it was transformed into a new mode of interaction through live interpretation. It actually required me to listen more attentively and interpret more creatively. I wasn't just taking in what was said, I was also imagining what might be behind the words - which is closely tied to the act of creation itself."

Some even felt the particular attention required to work via interpreters added to the collaborative experience.

"The atmosphere created by the organizers was so warm and inclusive, and the interpretation felt completely seamless, making everyone feel closer, with no distance between our hearts and minds. It really made me feel that the world is one big family, that "foreigners" are just like your own family, or rather, they are family. That feeling came to me in an instant, but it has stayed with me ever since."

Cultural differences were also experienced by the artists on their visit which led to greater understanding. Visiting Nanjing the Manchester artists felt welcomed and looked after – but also were surprised at the schedule and the amount of filming and photography done of them and their visit. This was quite unlike anything they had experienced 'at home' but was seen as standard by the

Nanjing team. Conversely, the Chinese artists were at times disappointed at the lack of profile and engagement associated with their visit and would have appreciated more time with peers, academics in related areas.

One can see very different artistic traditions and practices by contrasting the work of the two visual artists, the two playwrights, and to a slightly lesser degree the two poets involved. This was noted by the artists, almost simultaneously with noticing the similarities or common impulses beneath the different traditions.

"When the UK artists visited my studio, we worked together at my painting table and experimented with traditional Chinese painting tools. Eleanor and Charlotte were particularly curious about the materials. Their approach to using brushes was quite different from ours, and when I wrote calligraphy on silk in front of them, I could see they were amazed - it was a moment of wonder.

That moment really highlighted the difference between Eastern and Western practices. On the surface, it's about the way we use brushes, but deeper than that, it's about how we understand expression. In Chinese painting, every stroke is expected to be precise and expressive, it has to reflect the artist's emotional state instantly. Our focus is on conveying inner feeling through form.

Meanwhile, their artistic thinking is different. They tend to reflect on history and contemporary reality, often using discarded or recycled materials to portray elements like fish or plants in the canals. I think the cultural difference was very clear. But by working together in person, we were able to better understand each other's creative methods and intentions."

The Creative Producer from Manchester and the Nanjing Literature Centre team played crucial roles in facilitating the cross-cultural experience (not least as Anita Ngai brought command of both languages to the role). This was in addition to other responsibilities, however, and contributed to the producer role being stretched beyond that envisaged. It would also have been useful and appreciated if budgets/time had allowed for the Creative Producer to accompany the Manchester artists on their trip to Nanjing.

For the project partners too, the process also included understanding the different contexts of their work – the different kinds of partners in each City, the different ways in which Chinese and English institutions and universities work, and the different resources and planning mechanisms that need to be navigated to bring resources to bear on a project. This will allow for deeper collaboration in future.

Connection through artistic practice/craft

"I decided to write honestly about my long-time experience living by the Yangtze River. Placing those poems side by side with works about British canals—whether poems or paintings—creates a natural dialogue. Surprisingly, the UK artists had the same idea. This approach of "juxtaposition" is, in itself, a creative response to difference. It also feels very contemporary."

The heart of the process of increasing knowledge and understanding between artists and writers is their practice as artists and writers. Where language was not shared, a connection to craft was, even if individuals brought different perspectives and experience. Visiting Yao Yuan's studio was a powerful experience for the Manchester artists: more of this kind of practice-based shared experience would have been valuable.

The differences in craft perspective also influenced the work created from the exchange, with the parallel working, and the mirroring/echoing of themes across the pieces.

"Differences in our cultural systems—whether in narrative structure, character building, or conceptions of time and space—naturally emerged during this process. But instead of creating obstacles, these differences brought exciting intertextuality and complementarity. When Chinese opera's stylized stage conventions met the Western theatrical unities of time, place, and action... when we explored the differing philosophical views on love and mortality in our respective literatures... we encountered both creative friction and surprising resonance. This mutual exchange went beyond formal fusion—it touched on the shared spiritual core of theatre as a human ritual."

Different ways to achieve shared aims

"I realised we were coming from different starting points. But those differences actually became sources of inspiration -we learned from one another and sparked new ideas through exchange."

This kind of bringing together of different perspectives can also be seen in the partners' experience of the project. The central difference which influenced the project was that the artists taking part were chosen by different methods and represented varying models for this kind of opportunity.

Manchester City of Literature put the opportunity out to open call, and selected artists in early-mid career stages (broadly speaking), including some with clear

"The core message was that true cultural exchange is about creating meaningful human connections that transcend geographical and institutional boundaries."

connections to either one of the university partners (Eleanor Mulhearn teaches and researches at Manchester School of Art) or City of Literature itself (Charlotte Shevchenko Knight is one of two current Multi-lingual City Poets).

The Nanjing participants were identified by the City of Literature team and invited to take part. This invitation was framed as them being amongst the best artists to represent Nanjing in such an international exchange. This did create some difference in dynamics for the participants, and some of the artists felt the inherent power dynamics between highly established artists and younger ones made collaboration more difficult, even though on a personal level everyone was highly hospitable and positive in their sharing.

Both approaches are reasonable and strategic. That they are different or lead to different levels of experience and status within 'cohorts' is not necessarily problematic, but more transparency of motivation and design would enable those managing the project to support artists well. It would also help artists negotiate the dynamics of a new collaboration across languages and cultures.

3.4 What is involved in the process of UNESCO Cities working together as Cities?

The project shows three elements need to combine for UNESCO Cities to work together:

- "Thinking together" in partnership
- Project development and delivery
- Broad engagement with partners and public

"Thinking Together" in Partnership

Real Contentment is an example of developing partnership through working together after an initial partnership has been developed. It is very clear that the two Cities of Literature now feel the partnership and their shared understanding is much improved as a result.

The initial connection came through the network of UNESCO Cities of Literature and built on other connections and similarities: the two places also having the Cities of Lifelong Learning designation, common strengths in arts higher education, and a significant population of Chinese heritage resident in Manchester including studying there. This led to a strong bid to the British Council which gained the funding for this project, and to a powerful commitment which ensured

delivery against the targets to a very high standard, despite a very tight budget and timeline. The achievements and the lessons learnt will inform the next phase of partnership working.

Partnership working between the two City of Literature teams was strong, but the secondary partners could have been involved more clearly earlier. It is clear that working together as Cities means bringing those secondary partners into what one partner called "thinking together and working professionally at a deeper level" with clarity and shared purpose. Some connections which were anticipated or hoped for did not transpire, perhaps due to difficulties of communication, perhaps due to greater complexity of systems than expected, or perhaps because the ambition of the project meant attention had to focus on the artists, their new work and the outputs of events and exhibitions featuring work from schools. Bringing in other partners such as those working in universities needs advance planning if resources are to be readily accessible.

Project Development and Delivery

There were a number of phases and processes that made up *Real Contentment*:

- Project design
- Artist brief development
- Artist selection
- Collaboration and exchange visits
- Artist liaison
- Schools workshops and exhibition as part of Manchester Festival of Libraries
- Production of the anthology
- Production and installation of exhibitions and displays
- Celebratory event

The project produced excellent artworks that captured the attention of artists and demonstrated high professional standards. There was some feedback that the ambition of the project placed major burdens on artists and those involved in producing and installing work, and may have focussed its efforts more, given this was the first such exchange. Although everything was done to a high standard, it may have shifted focus from the artists and their work to the partnership in a way which was not understood by all. The inclusion of schools work in each city, and by an exhibition of work from both countries was especially ambitious in the timescale. Timescales were felt to have shifted, and clearer communications would have helped some artists manage this less stressfully.

The role of the producer was crucial in delivering this. Any future roles should be scoped in light of the experience of quite how much work is required from such a freelance contract. Communications and marketing in relation to the exchange and its outputs focussed on 'institutional marketing' via the event to launch the anthology and mark Manchester's dual UNESCO status.

Broad Engagement

The third key element of working together as Cities is broad engagement with a range of secondary partners, stakeholders and audiences. The project involved multiple stakeholders - professional artists, schools, universities – to create a comprehensive cultural exchange.

This did however bring a complexity of structures and scales which led to some challenges and disappointments. Given the distances travelled, and the status of the artists and writers for instance, there was little public visibility on either visit. Readings for the poets and playwrights or talks by the visual artists, for instance, could have created further connections and networks – not least for the artists involved. A reading by the poets at the Manchester Poetry Library looks, from a distance at least, like an obvious part of an international exchange, for instance.

Whilst organisational timetables and commitments explain why this did not happen, greater meshing of timetables and more advance planning would be advantageous. (A clash with final degree shows reduced possibilities for display of original artworks, for instance, requiring a smaller display of prints, which still placed additional burden on artists and university staff whose goodwill ensured successful installation.)

The result of the very successful and well-attended event celebrating Manchester's Cities of Literature and Lifelong Learning was strong stakeholder awareness and good visibility for the UNESCO Cities in Manchester. The visibility in artistic and poetry fields could have been higher. Aside from the attractive exhibitions of work from schools in Manchester and Nanjing, there was also little profile for the visiting writers and the project as a whole in the Festival of Libraries. The Chinese visitors did see some of Manchester's historic libraries as part of their visit, but this was for some a little detached from the main focus of the exchange.

3.5 What learning is there from the project to inform how best to structure future partnerships between the Cities?

The structure of the partnership in terms of this project was that Manchester acted as lead partner for the application to British Council and for project delivery and production. It took on the reporting and contracting mechanisms necessary in the UK. Manchester City of Literature employed the Creative Producer. Each City was responsible for recruitment and contracting of artists and writers.

This structure worked well, building on – and increasing – trust and understanding between the two teams. The creative brief was managed by both teams, and communicated with artists, although some felt there was a lack of clarity at first. Flexibility was required by partners, producers and artists and writers to deliver the outputs at the quality that was achieved in the timescale and resources available.

The project had a number of elements: experiencing partner Cities and their cultures, artist encounter and exchange, creative commission, schools work, exhibitions and stakeholder events. It also included a range of artforms: visual arts, poetry, writing for theatre. This created some challenges in terms of focus, or perceptions of focus. This also meant that some possible opportunities to build relationships with broader stakeholders could not be taken in the time available in this first exchange – be that the Poetry Library, or connections to education dept in Nanjing who visited Manchester during the period of the project.

A number of factors emerged from interviews and reflections on the exchange as crucial to any structure for future exchange partnerships between the Cities:

- Consistency and clarity on briefs and timelines from the beginning of the process - change and flexibility is sometimes needed, but unexpected changes create work and pressure
- Partners should jointly identify the specific focus of each partnership activity – this might include artforms or elements
- Clarity of communications is especially important when working via interpretation, especially when visiting a country whose language you do not know or are not fluent in
- A creative producer role allows partners to focus on strategic or stakeholder matters, whilst the producer can focus on supporting artists and ensuring high quality production values appropriate to the project/artform
- When recruiting artists, each City may have their own methods and priorities, but, if possible, they should jointly consider the make-up of the whole cohort across both Cities

- Each visiting group should be accompanied by a producer or City of Literature team member, ideally experienced in the host language or culture
- The overall workload and necessary resources for any partnership project should be carefully scoped in advance
- Marketing and communications resources are needed to make stakeholders and the public aware of events or activity, and of the partnership between Cities

3.6 What has been learnt about how international partnerships work and the role of arts creativity in this: eg process, time, challenges in partnership, how creation works?

In a paper on artist international mobility in community contexts¹ I proposed some elements that might typically be found in projects that successfully connect artists and communities in an international or cross-nation context. These elements included time, trust, listening and partnership which are all relevant to learning from *Real Contentment*.

Make It Personal and Artist-Centred

Two facilitating and promotional partnership organisations such as two Cities of Literature could, theoretically, have a partnership without involving artists directly. They might combine to promote books, or creative writing in education or to commission and disseminate research to do with literature of their regions. *Real Contentment* took a poem as its starting point, and centred itself, mainly around writers and artists. Through this focus it not only supported and served those writers and artists, leading to new creative works, it gave the partners a space in which to share approaches, discover more about each other and to connect-through-making.

The centrality of a commission alongside exchange visits was both challenging and crucial to this project. It was challenging because the time available was necessarily limited for the writers and artists to develop their collaborative parallel approach, as discussed previously, and because of the language barriers. It was crucial because it was through the person-to-person encounters at all levels that creative works and partnership grow. Listening was central for artists and delivery teams alike.

For artists exchanges and projects such as *Real Contentment* land at different points in careers and lives. Some will be busy, some feeling dips in activity or confidence, some growing quickly, developing profile or becoming established or widely respected with positions which reflect that.

¹ *Roots, Routes and Rhizomes: Cultural Mobility and Local Communities* a chapter in *Volume 1: Mobility in Culture: Conceptual Frameworks and Approaches*, I-Portunus House, 2023

However, it is clear that opportunities to internationalise their practice were precious to all the artists. This was a conversation about art and literature as much as career.

So creation and partnership between complex partners such as multiple universities involved in the two Cities of Literature – which might seem if not opposed then at least separate – are intrinsically linked. Working with a brush, writing a poem in the shape of a culvert, creating a story and the script for a play are not abstract in the way some ‘strategy words’ are: they are concrete and ground the strategic aims of partners in practice. This puts the artforms of interest at the centre of the partnership, and creativity within the processes of soft power and influence which comes from international mobility.

“The familiarity of the studio space brings everybody together as a practitioner. It’s just undeniable that the act of putting ink on paper connects us even if we can’t understand each other.”

Trust, Empathy, Flexibility

The partnership process and the creative process require trust between people to share ideas, to support and challenge each other, and to be open about motivations and values. They draw on understanding and responsiveness between people, listening carefully and intently, even across languages. Openness is a powerful enabling factor. Hierarchies disrupt that, but are broken down by the creative process, as discussed earlier.

“All of this confirmed one thing for me: cross-cultural collaboration requires real empathy. We need to truly feel, experience, and understand each other—and express ourselves in that process.”

“As soon as we can move it to in person and direct conversation the better.”

Flexibility is also required – between artists, and also from delivery or commissioning teams and partners.

The time to develop trust enough to stop, reflect and flex a process or a creative idea for the benefit of the

project needs to be built into international partnerships. This is arguably always the case in artistic processes but is more so in an international exchange because of the complications of language and cultural differences – these may not always be apparent or may take time to be fully understood in their due context. There were examples in *Real Contentment* where artists came to see the motivations for things which had puzzled or perturbed them as they grew in understanding of the cultural differences at play.

Time and Timing

Most interviewees felt that the project had tried – and to a large degree succeeded through their efforts – in squeezing an awful lot of activity into too short a period of time. Writers and artists had to work under pressure of a deadline. Those involved in production had to work to tight deadlines to produce the anthology, films and exhibitions (tighter than they had originally understood). This required extra work and effort, and some later than ideal calls on resources.

More time for collaborations to emerge and evolve between the writers and artists would potentially have allowed for even more depth and greater growth and sustainability of individual relationships and the strategic partnership. It would have allowed more conversations to be instigated or followed up with stakeholders and potential future partners. It may also have encouraged more deeply collaborative working between artists. Some felt the separated parallel working approach was slightly forced by how the deadlines, commission themes and differences of approach combined as influences on the creative process.

Another aspect is timing. A central lesson (far from unique to this project, of course) is that you need to start earlier than you think because many things take longer than you think. This includes accommodating different bank holiday schedules in different countries, to give one example. Funding processes and deadlines can also squeeze delivery time, influencing what can be achieved. Having dedicated project delivery or producing capacity, realistically scoped and resourced, on board as early as possible would be beneficial, for instance. Ensuring timelines avoid workload peaks in partner organisations would also be made easier by earlier planning.

4. Conclusion: A River of Exchange

“A river is a metaphor for time. It surges forward, carrying silt and stars, cradling history and stories, flowing with love and hope.”

In [Re-Shaping Policies for Creativity](#)² Phloeun Prim, Executive Director of Cambodian Living Arts, frames cultural mobility around its impacts on the places and people reached or involved:

“When implemented for the benefit of all, cultural mobility is about building friendship, compassion and a deeper understanding of humanity... friendships and connections are the building blocks of resilience. While the future of mobility and cultural mobility will take on new forms, the principles of interpersonal, contextual and transnational learning will endure.”

This seems an appropriate quotation as we conclude our reflection on *Real Contentment*, as it echoes and summarises many of the sentiments described in this report, and many of the outcomes. Friendship, compassion, deeper understanding, connections, resilience. These contribute to the ongoing relationship through which flows creative energy.

In delivering the aims of the project, the two Cities of Literature have tested, proved and improved a model for a sustainable multi-partner infrastructure, which delivered a valuable artist exchange that the artists found exciting, challenging and enriching. Alongside this a model for working with young people in both cities has been developed. This has been a very strong start to working together in practice.

There is, as has been seen, scope to build on this strong platform: as several partners commented, this is just the beginning.

This potential comes from the power of having UNESCO City of Literature offices and partnerships featuring local/regional governments and universities in both Manchester and Nanjing. Future collaborative projects, which the Cities are keen to develop, could broaden and deepen the active involvement of all partners, and to influence their international partnerships. This could be rooted in artform or focus on testing models of practice that can influence strategy and policy.

Nanjing could, for instance, become a higher priority partner city in China for Manchester through the influence of the partnership and its outputs. In a parallel fashion, strengths within the

² *Reshaping, UNESCO 2022*

universities could lead to explorations of contemporary practice in Chinese poetry and art, poetry in public art (something both cities have an interest in), the model established by Manchester Poetry Library for operating outside a nation's capital. The Multi-lingual City Poets that are part of Manchester's programmes could also inform legacy activity.

Broader, deeper and more active partnerships with shared aims, built in at the earliest stage to well-designed and scoped plans could help unlock resources (expertise and time as well as funding) to further iterate the model.

5. Considerations for the Future

"This project is not finished, it's just beginning."

We suggest here six areas for the partnership to consider as they progress their work together.

1. Sustain the partnership through activity with clearly shared purpose and planning and focus

- Ensure both Cities and all delivery partners are aligned on goals, roles, and focus areas and maintain that focus as the project evolves to maximise depth of collaboration
- Create and share clear artist briefs early and consistently
- Build in more time for planning, creative development, and production

2. Ensure project delivery and producing capacity matches the ambition of the project

- All roles should be scoped and resourced to reflect translation, logistics, liaison, and production support needs, as part of a realistic project plan
- Scope support roles realistically and invest accordingly
- All visits should include a producer or member of the relevant team to accompany artists to support their experience and integration

3. Ensure transparency in artist selection and balance in the cohorts

- Based on a shared purpose, partners should consider the appropriate balance of artform, career stage and potential benefit in the artists selected and in the processes for selection
- A tighter focus on one particular artform or genre may encourage deeper collaboration
- Select cohorts collaboratively to shape a balanced group across both cities

4. Deepen cross-cultural and cross-artform connection

- Prioritise shared in-person practice and more time and space for practice-based encounters in or across disciplines,
- Provide opportunities for joint creation and/or translation, not just parallel working
- Further develop the model of activity leading to publication, exhibition and events, and consider building in programmes of performance, talks and sharing
- Offer pre-visit cultural orientation sessions and briefings to all participants, perhaps drawing on partner organisations

6. Focus communications and influencing activity

- Strengthen visibility and engagement with public and stakeholders via marketing and comms activity, with public-facing events (e.g. readings, artist talks) integral to the project
- Coordinate schedules with partner institutions to avoid clashes and maximise opportunities for engagement and sharing of resources, spaces and marketing
- Identify areas where the exchange could join up more directly with partners such as the UNESCO Cities of Lifelong Learning, and the international strategies of Manchester and Nanjing cities and universities

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