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Chinese Art Going Out and Coming Back

**Cultural Journeys of Chinese Art in Exhibitions in 1935
and 2019**

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To my parents Zhang Zhongmin and Xu Guihua, my grandparents Zhang Sicun and Ma Chuanying, and all my family in China, whom I have not seen in person since September 2019, whom I missed so much every day.

献给我的父母张忠民、徐桂华，献给我的祖父母张泗存、马传英，以及我在中国的所有家人们，自 2019 年 9 月一别至今尚未团圆，我却日思夜想的人。

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Abstract

This thesis examines two pivotal exhibition events: the 1935 London International Exhibition of Chinese Art at Burlington House and “The Journey Back Home: An Exhibition of Chinese Artifacts Repatriated from Abroad on the Seventieth Founding Anniversary of New China” at the National Museum of China, Beijing. Drawing from diverse linguistic backgrounds, transnational institutions, and various archival formats, this research reveals the grand journeys of the artworks in these exhibitions, spanning both geographical and temporal dimensions. Through tracing the exhibitions’ journey, several key questions will be addressed: How do shifts in location and period affect the narratives of the artworks in these exhibitions? What aspects of China’s cultural identity are conveyed by the artworks? How did the curation, presentation, and narration of the 1935 and 2019 Exhibitions reflect and reinforce these notions? Finally, what role does art play in shaping national identity, as illustrated by the Chinese art showcased in the 1935 and 2019 Exhibitions?

This research represents the first comprehensive scholarly exploration of the 2019 Exhibition as a pivotal moment in the evolution of exhibition practices and their intersection with art and politics. Rather than presenting a linear historical narrative, this study frames exhibitions as transcultural intellectual journeys centred on Chinese art, highlighting their capacity to reflect the socio-political landscapes of their respective eras. Beyond being mere repositories of art, these exhibitions function as symbolic microcosms of society, constructing unique, reality-linked theatres within specific socio-economic contexts.

Employing anthropological research methods, the study investigates the activities and organisations involved in the exhibitions. It examines three main aspects—mobility of objects, individual engagement, and shifts of Chinese art concept, through four stages of the journey—origin, en route, destination, and afterlife. The research aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how these two exhibitions, situated in distinct historical and cultural contexts, conveyed unique messages to their audiences while shaping and reflecting broader societal narratives, and build a bridge between them to understand the interplay between Chinese art and politics on a global stage.

Beyond the explicit examination of the two exhibitions, a subtle thread runs through this research concerning the development of China’s museum industry. Museums, as repositories of a nation’s

history and culture, are inextricably tied to its development. This research sheds light on what has unfolded within Chinese society since the dawn of modernisation: learning, interaction, collision, and integration. I explore the role of museums in strengthening national identity and shaping the collective memory of the nation through artistic and cultural activities.

Ultimately, this study explores the fluid nature of the national treasure, emphasising its context-dependent character. By juxtaposing historical and contemporary exhibitions, this research aims to offer a nuanced understanding of the intricate connections between art and politics within the rich cultural heritage of China.

Keywords: 1935 London International Exhibition of Chinese Art; 2019 “The Journey Back Home”; art and politics; cultural identity; Chinese art history; cultural heritage repatriation, National Palace Museum, transcultural studies

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When I studied for my MA at SOAS, I heard from a friend that doing a PhD was torture physically, mentally, and financially. On the other hand, it was also about personal, intellectual and professional growth. Having done it myself, I must say that it is so true. I am now at the end of this unforgettable journey full of challenges, obstacles, achievements, encounters, happiness, rejections, failures, sweat and tears. Throughout it all, I remember why I started: a passion for the arts of my motherland and an interest in finding intriguing details in history.

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Abbreviations

BM	British Museum
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CPC	Communist Party of China
KMT	Kuomintang
MMCPR	Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution
MCH	Museum of Chinese History
MCR	Museum of the Chinese Revolution
NAM	National Antique Museum
NCHA	National Cultural Heritage Administration
NMC	National Museum of China
NPM	National Palace Museum
OCS	Oriental Ceramic Society
PRC	People's Republic of China
RA	RA
ROC	Republic of China
V&A	Victoria and Albert Museum
1935 Exhibition	The International Exhibition of Chinese Art
2019 Exhibition	The Journey Back Home: An Exhibition of Chinese Artifacts Repatriated from Abroad on the 70th Founding Anniversary of New China

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Notes, Romanisation and Translation

All translations in this thesis are the author's own unless otherwise stated. For shorter translations of historical documents, the original text is provided in parentheses within the main body. Full sentences or paragraph-length quotations from archives are cited in footnotes, along with the original-language text, followed by the English translation in parentheses only if the English translation is quoted in the thesis, along with complete source information.

In dealing with Chinese names, this thesis follows established conventions while refining others. The Hanyu Pinyin romanisation system—adopted as the official standard by the People's Republic of China in 1958 and gradually accepted in academic writing internationally—has been used to transliterate Chinese terms. Chinese names are presented in Hanyu Pinyin with surnames preceding given names, e.g., Fu Zhenlun (傅振伦, 1906–1999). Exceptions are made for individuals more widely known under alternative spellings, such as Wade-Giles or anglicised forms. In such cases, the familiar form is provided first, followed by the Chinese name in brackets, e.g., F. T. Cheng (Zheng Tianxi 郑天锡, 1884–1970) and Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi 蒋介石, 1887–1975). Names from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other regions outside mainland China follow their respective local conventions.

For Chinese publications, English titles are used, followed by Hanyu Pinyin and the original Chinese title in brackets. Titles of books, catalogues, magazines, journals, and articles appear in italics—for example, *Illustrated Catalogue of Chinese Government Exhibits for the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London* (*Canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui chupin tushuo* 参加伦敦中国艺术国际展览会出品图说). Exhibition titles are presented in quotation marks, such as “The Journey Back Home” (*Huigui zhi lu* 回归之路).

In 1956, the PRC Government introduced the Character Simplification Scheme to standardise and promote the use of simplified Chinese characters. Since then, simplified characters have been used in mainland China for official purposes, education, publishing, and public signage. Traditional characters, by contrast, continue to be used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. For consistency, this thesis uses simplified Chinese characters throughout, regardless of region or publication date.

Following the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, a portion of the National Palace Museum's collection was relocated to Taiwan. Since then, two related institutions have existed on either side of the Taiwan Strait. In official usage, the institution in Taipei retains the name National

Palace Museum (*Guoli gugong bowuyuan* 国立故宫博物院), while the institution in Beijing refers to itself as The Palace Museum (*Gugong bowuyuan* 故宫博物院). In this thesis, these respective official titles are used consistently when discussing the relevant history and citing materials from the two institutions. This choice is made solely out of respect for institutional self-designation and adherence to academic convention, with no political implications intended.

Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis explores the dynamic interplay between Chinese art and politics through an in-depth examination of two major exhibitions. The first is the International Exhibition of Chinese Art (*Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui* 中国艺术国际展览会, hereinafter the 1935 Exhibition), held from 28 November 1935 to 7 March 1936 at Burlington House, the Royal Academy of Arts (hereinafter RA) in London. The second is “The Journey Back Home: An Exhibition of Chinese Artifacts Repatriated from Abroad on the Seventieth Founding Anniversary of New China” (*Huigui zhilu—xin Zhongguo chengli 70 zhounian liushi wenwu huigui chengguozhan* 回归之路——新中国成立 70 周年流失文物回归成果展, hereinafter the 2019 Exhibition), which took place from 17 September to 27 November 2019 at the National Museum of China (*Zhongguo guojia bowuguan* 中国国家博物馆, hereinafter NMC) in Beijing.

The rationale for selecting these two exhibitions as case studies lies not only in their pioneering nature, grand scale, international impact, and high levels of public engagement. More significantly, both exhibitions took place at critical junctures in Chinese history, when political and cultural paradigms were undergoing profound transformation. In addition to their historical timing, both exhibitions involved the mobilisation of significant artworks and resources, reflecting the state’s interest not only in cultural diplomacy but also in shaping public consciousness. While each prominently featured classical Chinese art that transcends temporal and geographic boundaries, their curatorial approaches offered contrasting interpretations of “China” as represented through antiquity.

In museums and art institutions that function as symbols of cultural authority, exhibitions are not merely platforms for artistic display but also powerful stages upon which national narratives are performed. These exhibitions operate as miniature theatres, enabling China to project its image, both to the world and to its own citizens, through the strategic presentation of antiquities and curatorial storytelling. By contextualising the exhibitions within frameworks such as diplomatic relations, exhibition practices and technologies, urban culture, and fashion, they serve as mirrors reflecting broader social conditions. Overall, the comparative study of the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions reveals how classical Chinese art has been mobilised and reinterpreted across distinct historical moments, offering a unique lens through which to examine the interplay between cultural representation and state-driven narratives. This research further highlights how such exhibitions serve not only as cultural showcases but also as instruments of political expression—appropriating

and instrumentalising art to shape public perceptions of national identity, heritage, and China's place in the world.

This thesis examines the exhibition histories and explores how Chineseness as a concept was manifested at two crucial points in modern Chinese history through exhibition organisation, curation, presentation, and interpretation. Rather than focusing on a single artwork, genre, or individual, my research views exhibitions as organic wholes, composed of objects, people, and ideas that are interrelated and closely connected to the broader socio-political and cultural contexts. I explore how exhibitions function as dynamic systems, revealing the interplay between their internal elements and how these elements collectively shape meaning, impact, and public discourse within specific socio-cultural contexts, moving beyond the analysis of isolated components. The two exhibitions, which are both independent and interconnected, are interpreted as fluid processes of exchange. Through analysis, comparison, and the linking of their exhibition histories, this thesis uncovers common themes and key differences in the ways Chinese art has been displayed and narrated across different eras. This exploration deepens the understanding of how these exhibitions contributed to the evolution of Chinese art on the international stage. The journey of Chinese art in these contexts highlights not only the cultural dialogue between East and West but also the strategic use of art as a tool for diplomacy, showcasing national strength, and redefining China's image. By examining how these exhibitions reflected and shaped the social values, cultural policies, and national images of China in their respective periods, the thesis seeks insights into the dynamics of power, the projection of national identity, and the assertion of state influence in art mobility. This analysis prompts several key questions: What facet of China did these exhibitions aim to portray, and what compelled the Republic of China (ROC) in the 1930s and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 2010s to present themselves in such a manner? What cultural identity and core values are conveyed through the artworks featured in these exhibitions? How did the curation, presentation, and narration of the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions reflect and reinforce these ideas? These questions build upon one another, enabling a deeper understanding of how art has been used as a tool for political and cultural expression across different eras of Chinese history.

This thesis is structured as follows. In the subsequent sections of the Introduction, I provide an overview of the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions, emphasising their significance and impact. I then explore the rationale for studying these exhibitions as reflections of Chinese society and politics during the pivotal historical moments. These exhibitions not only highlighted China's evolving role on the global stage but also served as key indicators of the nation's shifting identity and influence during critical junctures in its history. In literature, the 1935 Exhibition and the 2019 Exhibition

reveal an imbalance in scholarly attention and research interest. The 1935 Exhibition has received extensive research across various national and disciplinary lines, partly because it is a milestone event with many of its archives already published and readily accessible. In contrast, the 2019 Exhibition has yet to receive similar academic scrutiny, partly because its archives and data remain opaque and less available for research, limiting the ability of scholars to engage with it fully. Alternative materials were justified and used. There has been a proliferation of discussions on topics such as Chinese museology, cultural heritage repatriation, cultural policy and diplomacy, and the interdependent and evolving relationship between Chinese art and officialdom. These works help trace the travel of Chinese art in the 2019 Exhibition, and support my argument that the event was a showcase for the Chinese government's domestically targeted national branding exercise by creating an internationalised discourse. The thesis draws upon a detailed examination of archival materials, catalogues, photographs, and digital resources related to the exhibitions. Both textual and visual analyses are employed to interpret these sources. However, conducting this PhD research during the COVID-19 pandemic has presented unexpected challenges, necessitating adjustments along the way.

Methodologically, the thesis situates the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions within the framework of travel theories, viewing the exhibitions as dynamic processes in which art and culture, people, and ideology traverse time and space. The discussion of the journeys of Chinese art develops in alignment with the development of these exhibitions, following a sequence of origin, en route, destination, and afterlife. This thesis traces the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions along parallel timelines while also being compared and contrasted with one another. Throughout this process, the broader context of the two images of China depicted by the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions is explored, considering their distinct historical and geopolitical circumstances. The shift in locations and occasions, along with the de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation of artworks, contributed to transforming these pieces into political tokens that bolstered the legitimacy of the Chinese regime.

In examining the movement of the two exhibitions, the thesis reveals the complexities involved in their negotiation, organisation, presentation, and representation of Chineseness, as well as how the reconfiguration of art within different spaces and cultural contexts reshaped its meanings, reinforcing national narratives. The 1935 Exhibition, held during the Republican era, sought to project an image of a young, modernising nation reconnecting with its ancient cultural heritage, while the 2019 Exhibition emphasised the PRC's rising global influence and cultural revival. Both exhibitions, despite being eight decades apart, utilised art as a diplomatic tool to assert China's cultural authority and political power on the international stage. By tracing the journey of Chinese

art across time, space, and political boundaries, this thesis highlights how art serves as a medium of cultural diplomacy, continuously shaping and reshaping national identity in response to shifting global dynamics.

The Journey Back Home, National Museum of China, Beijing, 2019

In 2019, China marked the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. To celebrate this significant occasion, numerous cultural, political, and diplomatic events were held in Beijing, as well as in other domestic cities and international capitals. These events included exhibitions, films and TV shows, public art installations and statues, performances, meetings, receptions, and fireworks throughout September and October. In the national capital, a grand military parade and mass pageant took place on the morning of the National Day at Tian'anmen Square, followed by an elaborate evening gala at the same location. Concurrently, on the east side of the square, inside the solemn building of the NMC, the special exhibition "The Journey Back Home: An Exhibition of Chinese Artifacts Repatriated from Abroad on the Seventieth Founding Anniversary of New China" was on display. Running from September 17 to November 27, the 2019 Exhibition featured over six hundred objects selected from eighteen museums and institutions across twelve provinces and cities, representing twenty-five significant repatriation cases from ten countries and regions since the 1950s.¹ The 2019 Exhibition, as "the first panoramic showcase" of cultural heritage repatriation in the PRC since 1949, displayed a wide range of artefacts—bronzes, paintings, calligraphy, ceramics, and more—from prehistory to the late Qing Dynasty.² While showcasing the breadth of "Chinese civilisation stretching over five thousand years," the protagonist was the PRC, which had "diligently strived for seventy years" in its efforts.³ Celebrating the cultural, political, diplomatic and legal achievements of the PRC through the accumulating display of repatriated artefacts, this exhibition worked as an excellent example of Chinese political nostalgia and the Chinese Dream of

1 NMC, *2019 Zhongguo guojia bowuguan shehui fuwu baogao* 2019 中国国家博物馆社会服务报告 [2019 NMC annual report on social service] (Beijing: Zhongguo guojia bowuguan, 2020), 9. Hereafter cited as *2019 NMC Annual Report*.

2 Ibid.

3 NCHA, *Huigui zhi lu: xin zhongguo chengli qishi zhounian liushiwenwu huigui chengguozhan* 回归之路：新中国成立七十周年流失文物回归成果展 [The Journey Back Home: An Exhibition of Chinese Artifacts Repatriated from Abroad on the Seventieth Founding Anniversary of New China] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2019), 13. Hereafter cited as *2019 Catalogue*.

Great Rejuvenation (*weida fuxing de Zhongguo meng* 伟大复兴的中国梦) under Xi Jinping's time.⁴

Organised and overseen by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (*Wenhua bu* 文化部) and the National Cultural Heritage Administration (*Guojia Wenwu ju* 国家文物局, hereinafter NCHA), with assistance from Art Exhibitions China (*Zhongguo Wenwu Jiaoliu Zhongxin* 中国文物交流中心, hereinafter AEC), the 2019 Exhibition was a governmental project. The opening ceremony of the 2019 Exhibition was attended by the Minister of Culture and Tourism, Luo Shugang (雒树刚, 1955—), Director of the NCHA, Liu Yuzhu (刘玉珠, 1957-), with Director of the NMC Wang Chunfa (王春法, 1963-) and Director of the National Palace Museum (*Gugong bowuyuan* 故宫博物院, hereinafter NPM) Wang Xudong (王旭东, 1967-), with the Vice Minister of Cultural and Tourism Guan Qiang (关强, 1964-) as the event host.⁵ The presence of representatives from the government and state-owned museums emphasised the commitment of the Chinese government to the event's success and further underscored the significance in promoting and preserving China's cultural heritage for the country. To open the exhibition, Liu Yuzhu cited Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平, 1953-) statement, which set the tone for this state-led exhibition:

The fate of culture and country is tied together, just as the legacy of culture and country is closely intertwined.⁶

Originally delivered at the 2016 Tenth Congress of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the Ninth Congress of the Chinese Writers Association, this statement of Xi reinforced the critical link between cultural heritage and national identity, positioning cultural continuity as vital to national strength.⁷ It illuminates the strategic role of heritage in shaping collective identity and consolidating state authority, revealing the government's intent to align cultural narratives closely with national ideology. Art is thus urged to follow a “people-centred” approach. Facing the context of China's political and economic rise, Chinese literary and art workers are encouraged to innovate

4 See Maria Adele Carrai, “Chinese Political Nostalgia and Xi Jinping's Dream of Great Rejuvenation,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2021): 7-25.

5 Ma Siwei 马思伟, “Guobo jiangshu ‘Huigui zhi lu’—Huigui wenwu zhan jianzheng zuguo qiangda” 国博讲述“回归之路”——回归文物展见证祖国强大 [NMC tells “The Journey Back Home”—exhibition of repatriated cultural heritage witnesses the strength of the nation], Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the PRC, September 17, 2019, https://www.mct.gov.cn/whzx/whyw/201909/t20190917_846866.htm.

6 “文运同国运相牵，文脉同国脉相连。”2019 Catalogue, 9.

7 “Xi Jinping: zai Zhongguo wenlian shida, Zhongguo zuoxie jiuda kaimushi shang de jianghua” 习近平：在中国文联十大、中国作协九大开幕式上的讲话 [Xi Jinping: speech at the opening ceremony of the tenth Congress of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the ninth Congress of the China Writers Association], Xinhua Net, November 30, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/30/c_1120025319_2.htm.

while remaining anchored in traditional Chinese culture, aiming to produce “works that reflect the spirit of the times.”⁸

The topic of the 2019 Exhibition, cultural repatriation, is a priority task for the PRC since its founding. Efforts to reclaim these lost national treasures reflect China’s commitment to safeguarding its cultural heritage, asserting national sovereignty, and enhancing its global cultural influence. The repatriation and restitution of displaced cultural objects from abroad constitute a national endeavour closely linked to the restoration of national dignity, which was compromised during the so-called the “Century of Humiliation” (*bainian chiru* 百年耻辱), also referred to as the “National Humiliation” (*guochi* 国耻), and to the broader aspiration of building a powerful, rising nation.⁹ While cultural repatriation is a complex and multifaceted issue with increasing international recognition, for countries like China, claims for objects wrongfully displaced during colonial history are usually regarded as response to the decolonisation. This effort aims to restore cultural heritage disrupted by colonial practices and address ongoing inequalities and exclusions from the past to the present day.¹⁰

The 2019 Exhibition presented a historical narrative with Chinese characteristics within the context of contemporary Chinese museology. China’s museum narratives are shifting from communist ideology to cultural nationalism, aiming to provide the modern government with new sources of political legitimacy by reinterpreting ancient history and strengthening national identity, while showcasing national prestige and attracting foreign capital and tourists. This transformation reflects the complex challenges faced by China’s museology in adapting to modernisation demands and national strategies.¹¹ Through the museum policy and the representation in the national museums which aligns to the official history narrative and education, many citizens also feel deeply connected to this government-led mission.¹² This historical narrative was visually and conceptually conveyed through the design and storytelling approach throughout the 2019 Exhibition, highlighting China’s cultural reclamation efforts.

Set red as the main tone of the exhibition, exhibits were organised according to the year they were repatriated to China, instead of being arranged in historical chronological order or by material or genre. The portrayal emphasised the nation as a powerful and assertive state, evident through the

8 Ibid.

9 Lin Li, “Repatriation, Colonialism, and Decolonization in China,” *ICOFOM Study Series* 49, no. 2 (2021): 155, 160.

10 Bryony Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonising Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 33, quoted in Lin Li, “Repatriation, Colonialism, and Decolonization in China,” 147.

11 Marzia Varutti, *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation After Mao* (Woolbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 2-3.

12 Lin Li, “Repatriation, Colonialism, and Decolonization in China,” 153.

repatriation of artworks from various locations worldwide. Preluded by a collective display of the bronze heads of the Chinese zodiac from the Yuanmingyuan Old Summer Palace (*Yuanming yuan* 圆明园), the 2019 Exhibition was presented in three chapters:

1. From the establishment of the state to the end of the Cultural Revolution (1949-1978), showcasing the government's early attempts to restore the cultural heritage loss since the First Opium War;
2. From Reform and Opening Policy to the first decade of the twenty-first century (1978-2012), demonstrating that the Chinese government explored practical ways of repatriating lost cultural relics abroad after reform and opening up;
3. From the Eighteenth National Congress of the CPC to a few months before the opening of the exhibition (2012-2019), focusing on the progress of repatriation since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012.

Given the Chinese government's strong emphasis on repatriating cultural relics, the returned items on display were designated as national treasures. However, the political significance of the objects overshadowed their aesthetic and historical values.

Since its opening, the 2019 Exhibition was visited by party organisations, public institutions, schools, groups, and individuals. These visits were often covered in news reports, and many attendees shared their thoughts on social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo. From the published articles and pictures on official websites and news media, as well as posts and comments on social media platforms, the 2019 Exhibition received considerable attention from audiences in China. The discussions surrounding the event not only focused on appreciating the beauty of Chinese art and the greatness of Chinese civilisation, but also delved into crucial themes such as cultural heritage preservation and patriotism.

Due to the recentness of the event and the unavailability of data, the total number of visitors and financial revenue for the 2019 Exhibition remain unclear. However, according to *The 2019 Annual Report of the NMC on Social Service*, the institution—one of the most-visited museums in China—welcomed 7.39 million visitors throughout the year, down from 8.61 million the previous year.¹³ The museum attributed this decline to the introduction of a timeslot-based reservation system on April 10, which capped daily visitors at 30,000.¹⁴ To accommodate more visitors, the NMC

¹³ NMC, *2019 NMC Annual Report*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

extended its opening hours until 9:00 PM on Sunday evenings starting in the summer of 2019 and on Saturday evenings from October 12, which contributed an additional 47,434 visitors to the yearly total.¹⁵

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit China in early 2020, all museums in the country had to close, pausing all exhibitions and cancelling nocturnes. In order to “enrich Chinese people’s spiritual and cultural life” and keep visibility, nine museums, guided by NCHA, livestreamed their exhibitions in collaboration with the video-sharing app Douyin (抖音, aka Chinese TikTok).¹⁶ On February 22, 2020, Dai Meng (戴萌), a guide from the NMC, led the audience on a 90-minute virtual tour of the 2019 Exhibition. With her professional and friendly attitude and extensive knowledge, Dai demonstrated a series of high-definition three-dimensional photographs of the objects and exhibition installations.¹⁷ The livestream successfully attracted approximately 52,000 viewers and received 174,000 likes, further broadening the reach of the 2019 Exhibition.¹⁸ The emerging institution-audience interaction approach based on the Internet shed light on new thinking on the museum management and the curation and presentation of exhibitions in the post-COVID era.

The 2019 Exhibition, the first significant state-led cultural event following the commencement of my PhD, quickly drew my academic interest. Its significance lies in its role within officialdom, its representation of the Chinese cultural repatriation and preservation, and its contribution to the historical narrative of Chinese exhibitions in the post-Mao era. Due to its recentness, the 2019 exhibition remains understudied, with no academic research published to date. This thesis, therefore, offers a unique opportunity to pioneer scholarly analysis and highlight an event that reflects key themes in China’s contemporary art and cultural landscape. The 2019 Exhibition attracted my research interest not only due to its artistic and cultural significance but also because it portrays Chinese civilisation as an uninterrupted continuum spanning several millennia. The exhibition conveyed political messages directly and explicitly through its selection of exhibits, as well as its visual and verbal strategies.

Beyond its artistic merits, this spotlighted event, held at a critical moment of challenging domestic and international contexts, was imbued with substantial non-artistic significance, serving as a

15 Ibid. The opening evenings of the NMC have been cancelled since its reopening after COVID-19.

16 Wang Xueyao 王学涛 and Wei Biao 魏飏, “Zaijia ‘yunyou’ bowuguan” 在家“云游”博物馆 [Visit museums virtually at home], Xinhua Net, February 23, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-02/23/c_1125615405.htm.

17 “Yunyou bowuguan: Huigui zhi lu—Xin Zhongguo chengli 70 zhounian liushi wenwu huigui chengguo zhan” 云游博物馆：回归之路——新中国成立 70 周年流失文物回归成果展 [Virtual museum tour: The Journey Back Home: An Exhibition of Chinese Artifacts Repatriated from Abroad on the 70th Founding Anniversary of New China], NMC, February 22, 2022, https://www.chnmuseum.cn/sp/zbhk/202109/t20210929_251629.shtml.

18 Wang Xuetao and Wei Biao, “Zaijia ‘yunyou’ bowuguan.”

powerful statement of national identity and pride. Why an exhibition of repatriated artefacts for China's 2019 National Day? What does cultural heritage repatriation mean for China, and for the world? How did the exhibition convey the organiser's messages, which were mostly political, to its audience through its curation, presentation, and narrative?

I am intrigued by the discussion of the “journey” of Chinese art and how the meanings of these artworks transformed as they moved through different contexts across time and space. The key to understanding the 2019 Exhibition hinges on its title. First, this title embodied the rhetoric of contemporary Chinese political discourse. “The Journey Back Home” resonated with “The Road to Rejuvenation” (*fluxing zhi lu* 复兴之路), an exhibition initially inaugurated at the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution in 2007, reopened at the NMC in 2011, and has been a permanent display there since then. The exhibition traces the historical process of the Chinese people's struggle for liberation, under the leadership of the CPC, starting from the First Opium War. In November 2012, during his visit to “The Road to Rejuvenation” at the NMC, Xi Jinping introduced the ideology of the “Chinese Dream” as the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghua minzu de weida fluxing* 中华民族的伟大复兴).¹⁹ Subsequently, this phrase gained widespread prominence and became a cornerstone of the political ideology.

Deeply embedded in China's national narrative, the term *huigui* (回归) means coming back. It indicated the return of cultural relics to China, which was the subject of the exhibition, meanwhile, referred to the reunification of Hong Kong and Macau, underscoring China's position on sovereignty over the former colonies of the West. The large-scale protests and demonstrations that occurred in Hong Kong in June and July 2019 drew extensive attention from both China and the international community. Whether it was the relatively moderate response to “moderate demands for local democracy” or the resolute opposition to “radical calls for separatism,” the Chinese authorities' and public's hardline attitude on the Hong Kong issue demonstrated the authoritarian government's firm position in safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and highlights the supreme authority of the state within China's political framework.²⁰ Moreover, *huigui* also served as a reminder of Taiwan, which has yet to be unified with what the Chinese government considers its rightful place within the PRC. As a product of the Chinese Cold War, the Taiwan issue is more complex than the cases of Hong Kong and Macau. Over time, policies on the sides of the

19 Yang Yan 杨艳, “Xi Jinping zongshuji deng zhongyang lingdao canguan Guobo ‘Fuxing zhi lu’ jiben chenlie jishi” 习近平总书记等中央领导参观国博“复兴之路”基本陈列纪实 [General Secretary Xi Jinping visits “The Road of Rejuvenation” exhibition with CPC Central Committee leadership], *Zhongguo guojia bowuguan guankan* 中国国家博物馆馆刊 1, no. 114 (2013): 8–9.

20 Dimitar D. Gueorguiev and Dongshu Liu, “Double Standard: Chinese Public Opinion on the Hong Kong Protests,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 41, no. 4 (2023): 344.

Taiwan Strait have diverged, shaped by changing political contexts. This divergence has led Taiwan to increasingly distance itself from the idea of unification, instead advocating for a vision of national self-determination.²¹ However, on the other side of the strait, China has adopted a more uncompromising stance on this issue in the government and among its public, especially in recent years.²²

The last character in the title is *lu* (路), which means “road,” “path”, or “journey.” In Chinese culture, *lu* symbolises more than just a physical route; it is inherently associated with the idea of movement, development and progression. This concept can be applied rhetorically to various aspects, such as personal growth, geographical displacement, societal changes, or historical evolution, suggesting that a journey or path is not merely a destination but a continuous process of development and transformation. The linguistic choice subtly evoked associations with the overarching narrative of “the socialist path with Chinese characteristics (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi daolu* 中国特色社会主义道路)” and “the road to modernisation (*xiandaihua zhi lu* 现代化之路).” Furthermore, it also encapsulated China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, commonly known as “One Belt and One Road” (*yidai yilu* 一带一路), a global development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 that aimed at expanding China’s international influence through infrastructure and economic connectivity initiatives.

Furthermore, the art repatriation displayed in the 2019 Exhibition can be viewed as a representation of the “journey”—a journey that mirrors China’s own path through history. The exhibits featured in the exhibition underwent a complex and multifaceted journey: beginning with their forced displacement or exportation to foreign lands, followed by a long process of return, and culminating in their triumphant repatriation to their places of origin or home museums. In the autumn of 2019, these artworks were transferred to Beijing, where they were presented within a specific context that highlighted their cultural and political significance. This journey, spanning nearly two centuries and involving not only the artworks themselves but also significant human and societal resources, interweaves art with the dynamics of power, diplomacy, and policy. Each phase of this journey adds layers of meaning to the narrative of the artworks, symbolism, and sacredness. Thus, the exhibition transcended mere display, serving as a powerful narrative that reflects both historical context and contemporary significance.

21 Lowell Dittmer, “Taiwan and the Waning Dream of Reunification,” in *Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace*, ed. Lowell Dittmer (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 283–300.

22 Jing Huang, “Xi Jinping’s Taiwan Policy: Boxing Taiwan In with the One-China Framework,” in *Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace*, ed. Lowell Dittmer (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 239–48.

While the practice of exhibiting returned Chinese art that was wrongfully displaced abroad in formal exhibitions is a relatively new phenomenon, sending Chinese art abroad to exhibit and mobilising Chinese cultural artefacts on an international scale have long been common practices with a deep historical foundation. International exhibitions and cultural events have long been part of China's engagement with the world. As the country opened up and the economy developed, China's global engagement has expanded significantly. With its recurring presence in the global art landscape, China plays a significant role in shaping the political narrative, serving both cultural diplomacy and commercial purposes, as it reflects a shift toward non-Western methodologies and the intersection of art with the global market.²³ Compared to the active expansion of Chinese art nowadays, the early movement of Chinese art onto the global stage took place in the context of foreign invasions and colonialism. Although there was a degree of passivity, it was also accompanied by the nation's intention to actively showcase and engage in cultural exchange as part of its self-strengthening. From the Qing court's participation in universal expositions and world fairs in Europe and America from the late nineteenth century to modern China's more proactive, frequent, and reciprocal international art exchanges, exhibitions, modernisation of art techniques, education, and research has been key in the search for national identity. Among the most notable exhibitions of travelling Chinese art was the International Exhibition of Chinese Art held at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in the autumn of 1935. This exhibition not only highlighted the artworks themselves but also sparked significant discussions and reflections on the process leading up to the event, the journeys involved in the movement of Chinese art, and the broader social context of its occurrence.

The 1935 International Exhibition of Chinese Art, Burlington House, London, 1935

From November 28, 1935, to March 7, 1936, the International Exhibition of Chinese Art was hosted at the Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, Piccadilly, in the heart of London. The exhibition was a collaborative achievement by the Chinese and British governments. The exhibition featured 3,080 items from 246 public and private collections across fifteen countries, making it "the largest cultural event of its kind ever mounted."²⁴ The exhibits included a wide range of items, such as bronzes, sculptures, ceramics, ritual and religious objects, furniture, paintings and calligraphy,

²³ Jane Chin Davidson, *Staging Art and Chineseness: The Politics of Trans/nationalism and Global Expositions* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2021), 2.

jewellery, rare books, and archaeological finds, spanning from the Shang to the late Qing dynasty. The exhibition attempted to present a general history of Chinese art by showcasing renowned Chinese art collections from around the world. In order to broaden Western audiences' understanding of Chinese art and traditional culture, thirty-two lectures by committee members were held as side events of the exhibition.²⁵

As a successor of a series of exhibitions of foreign national art held by the institution, the 1935 Exhibition brought together a wide range of Chinese art to the RA, where British art is institutionalised.²⁶ The 1935 Exhibition was a significant cultural event lauded Britain's global network, and artistically displayed Europe's internationalism during the brief interlude of peacetime between two world wars. Subsequently, it was the last exhibition of foreign national art at the RA before the outbreak of WWII, which also enhanced its significance in the history of the institution.²⁷ The grand exhibition propelled "China fashion" in the West to its pinnacle, igniting a lasting fascination with the art and culture of this distant Oriental nation. The growing recognition of these art forms in Europe was closely linked to the expansion of Western imperialism in China, with the increasing influx of Chinese artefacts into Europe significantly contributing to this phenomenon. The 1935 Exhibition further explored and illuminated this complex relationship. From an art historical perspective, this event revolutionised the study of Chinese art history in Western academia, establishing it as a distinct discipline separate from the art of other Asian countries. Consequently, the 1935 Exhibition became a benchmark for evaluating subsequent exhibitions of Chinese art abroad, and exhibitions exported from China.²⁸ The significance of the exhibition, in terms of art practices, history, and politics, has drawn attention from scholars and professionals across various fields, who have either studied it directly or used it as a reference point for other works of art.

The 1935 Exhibition held significant importance for both the Chinese government and society, marking the first time China sent its national treasures to be exhibited on an international stage. The

24 "Index of Lenders," in *Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935–6* (London: RA, 1936), xxvii–xv. Hereafter cited as *RA Catalogue*; Jason Steuber, "The Exhibition of Chinese Art at Burlington House, London, 1935–36," *The Burlington Magazine* 148, no. 1241 (2006): 528.

25 *RA Catalogue*, xi–ii.

26 Before the 1935 Exhibition, the RA had held the Exhibition of Spanish Painting in 1920, the Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art in 1927, the Exhibition of Dutch Art in 1929, the Exhibition of Italian Art in 1930, the Exhibition of Persian Art in 1931, and the Exhibition of French art in 1932.

27 The RA had to pause its international art exhibition due to the outbreak of the war and was not revived until "The Exhibition of Art from India and Pakistan 2400 B.C. to 1947 A.D." in 1947.

28 Steuber, "The Exhibition of Chinese Art," 536; Ilaria Scaglia, "The Aesthetics of Internationalism: Culture and Politics on Display at the 1935–1936 International Exhibition of Chinese Art," *Journal of World History* 26, no. 1 (2015): 106; Warren I. Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 146.

government viewed its participation as a means to “foster Sino-British relations, exchange cultural knowledge, promote art, and celebrate the anniversary of the coronation of the English king” giving the event notable diplomatic significance.²⁹ A total of 1,022 carefully selected pieces of art were sent, comprising nearly one-third of the exhibition’s total items.³⁰ Among these, 735 pieces came from the NPM’s collection, which had originally belonged to the Chinese emperors. These objects spanned various materials, dynasties, artists, and subjects, showcasing the finest craftsmanship and providing a comprehensive view of Chinese art history. The exhibition aimed to “make the West appreciate the beauty of Chinese art.”³¹

The success of the 1935 Exhibition was rooted in the museumification of classical art and the modernisation of artistic practices during the early Republican years, as it sought to strengthen national identity and raise public awareness. The exhibition, which involved extensive discussions between Chinese and British parties on preparation, transportation, curation, and presentation, as well as on underlying aesthetic theories facilitated the systematisation and further development of Chinese art history studies. As an early example of “Chinese art going global,” the Chinese government sought to transform the 1935 Exhibition into a diplomatic stage that advanced China’s national interests amid the overlapping domestic and international contexts that the nation faced in the 1930s. Meanwhile, the actors from different social sectors involved in the 1935 Exhibition elevated it to a nationwide movement. China’s endeavour could be observed through the negotiation with the British counterpart, the curation and interpretation of the exhibition, and the social activities. Although the 1935 Exhibition earned limited political impacts because the world was quickly involved in wars after it closed, it was undoubtedly that the 1935 Exhibition promoted cultural exchange between China and Britain and positively impacted culture, art and fashion in both countries.

The 1935 Exhibition was well received by the audience and made a profit. To put it in figures, as the *RA’s Annual Report* recorded, the 1935 Exhibition had 401,768 paying visitors, and 2,531 season tickets sold. The increasing visitor numbers were consistently reported in the media through

29 Fu Zhenlun 傅振伦, “Lundun Zhongguo yizhan shimo 1” 伦敦中国艺展始末 1 [The beginning and the end of the London Chinese Art Exhibition 1], *Zijin Cheng* 紫禁城 1 (2004): 147. Hereafter cited as “Fu Zhenlun Travelogue.”

30 Zhuang Shangyan 庄尚严, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji” 赴英参加伦敦中国艺术展览会记 [Report on the London Chinese Art Exhibition], *Guoli Beiping Gugong Bowuyuan Niankan* 国立北平故宫博物院年刊 (1936): 115.

31 “使西方人士得见中国艺术之伟美。” *Canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui chupin tushuo* 参加伦敦中国艺术国际展览会出品图说 [Illustrated catalogue of Chinese Government exhibits for the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London], Vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuju, 1936), iii–iv. Hereafter cited as *Illustrated Catalogue*.

the exhibition, with the final total reaching approximately 420,000.³² Letters were sent to the RA with enquiries about visit matters, requests for extensions to opening hours, and feedback on the artwork and presentation. In the face of the huge number of visitors, “concerns arose about safety to the point that the doors had to be closed to prevent overcrowding.”³³ As the closing date approached, the exhibition atmosphere got hysterical.³⁴ On the last day of the exhibition, Burlington House especially kept open until ten at night to provide a last-minute opportunity to view the treasure on display.³⁵ “As late as ten minutes, before closing the enthusiasts rode up in taxis to catch a glimpse of a few rare exhibits,” while “thousands lingered sadly to bid farewell to all the beauty which had delighted London for three months.”³⁶

A total of 108,914 exhibition catalogues, 3,486 illustrated supplements, 2,196 handbooks and 336 copies of the Royal Society of Arts Journal’s special issue for the 1935 Exhibition were sold, with “one in four visitors buying publications.”³⁷ From the financial perspective, according to the RA Annual Report, the 1935 Exhibition achieved a remarkable gross receipt of £48,830, with a net amount of £12,135.³⁸ To make a comparison, this net figure was approximately ten times higher than the earnings from the Exhibition of British Art in Industry (£1,290), which ran from January 5 to March 9, 1935.³⁹ This unprecedented financial outcome underscored the tremendous popularity and widespread appeal of the Chinese Art Exhibition, solidifying its significance as a monumental cultural exchange in the history of art between China and Britain. The Receipts and Expenditures accounts for the period between October 1935 and September 1936 revealed a noteworthy surplus of £12,575, a significant improvement compared to the £1,752 deficit recorded in the previous year;

32 *Annual Report for the Council of the Royal Academy of the General Assembly of Academicians and Associates for the Year 1936* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1937), 23, 40. Hereafter cited as *RA Annual Report*. See also Steuber, “The Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 528; Scaglia, “Aesthetics of Internationalism,” 105.

33 Scaglia, “Aesthetics of Internationalism,” 106.

34 A letter signed by Naomi Boynton, who introduced herself as having worked with English archaeologist Cecil Harcourt Smith (1859-1944) for the Hungarian Exhibition in London, was sent to the secretary of the 1935 Exhibition from Paris. In the letter, Boynton requested special admission for her friend, Henriette Caillaux (1874-1943), wife of French politician Joseph Caillaux (1863-1944), on Sunday, March 8, after the official closing day on Saturday. The request aimed to accommodate Caillaux’s arrival in London on Friday night, allowing her to visit the Exhibition on two consecutive days. However, the Exhibition Secretary had to regrettfully decline, citing the imminent dismantling of the Exhibition, which was to “begin immediately after the closing.” Access during this period was restricted to the Committee and exhibition staff “during the anxious period of packing thereafter.” Letter from Naomi Boynton to the 1935 Exhibition Committee,” date unknown, RA Archives, London; Letter from George Spendlove to Naomi Boynton, March 3, 1936, RA Archives, London.

35 “End of Chinese Exhibition,” *The Times*, March 9, 1936, 11.

36 *The Times*, March 3, 1936; *Jersey Evening Post*, March 9, 1936; *Shanghai Times*, March 27, 1936; Scaglia, “Aesthetics of Internationalism,” 106.

37 Steuber, “The Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 528.

38 *RA Annual Report*, 68, 71.

39 *Ibid.* 68.

this gratifying outcome was largely credited to the remarkable success of the 1935 Exhibition and the Summer Exhibition of 1936.⁴⁰

London was undoubtedly a popular tourist site for art lovers and high society people during the 1935 Exhibition. Individuals and groups from throughout Britain and from all over the world came to the heart of London to have a view of fine Chinese art. The extensive list of notable visitors included government leaders, officers, socialites, artists, businessmen, collectors, and scholars. Among the prominent figures were Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin (1867-1947) and his wife Lucy Baldwin (1869-1945), Lady Oxford and Asquith (1864-1945), widow of the former Prime Minister; Prince Frederick of Prussia (1911-1966); and various foreign diplomats stationed in London, among others.⁴¹ The first female pilot of China and only female delegate of China to the League of Nations Congress in Geneva, Yan Yaqing (Hilda Yank Sing Yen 颜雅清, 1906-1970) travelled from Moscow with her uncle Yan Huiqing (Weiching Williams Yen 颜惠庆, 1877-1950), then Chinese Ambassador to the USSR, to the 1935 Exhibition to “see the treasures of China which she will never see in China itself.”⁴² On January 12, 1936, British King George V and Queen Mary “spent nearly an hour and a half” appreciating Chinese art at Burlington House.⁴³ A week later, the King passed away, affecting the social events and receptions associated with the 1935 Exhibition.⁴⁴

The grandeur of the 1935 Exhibition left an indelible impression on those who experienced the event. For individuals deeply involved in the event, such as Quo Tai-Chi (Guo Taiqi 郭泰祺, 1888-1952), then Chinese ambassador in London, and jurist Dr. F. T. Cheng (Zheng Tianxi 郑天锡, 1884-1970), the Special Commissioner of the Chinese Government to the Exhibition, along with several Chinese and British committee members and curators—the exhibition was not only a defining moment of their careers, earning them significant recognition at the time, but also a highlight in their later memoirs.

The prominent artist and promoter of Chinese culture in the West in the mid-twentieth century, “The Silent Traveller” Chiang Yee (Jiang Yi 蒋彝, 1903-1977) had moved to London since 1933, fondly recalled the popularity of the 1935 Exhibition, noting that it had become a common topic in

40 Ibid. 66.

41 “These Came to see the Chinese Exhibition. And These Stayed at Home,” *Western Mail*, December 2, 1935; Wu Sue-Ying 吴淑瑛, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo’: yi 1961 nian Zhongguo guyishupin fumei zhanlan weili” 展览中的“中国”: 以 1961 年中国古艺术品赴美展览为例 [“China” in exhibition: the 1961 Exhibition of Chinese Art Treasures in the USA as an example], (Master’s dissertation, National Chengchi University, 2002), 19.

42 Dudley Barker, “Young China Likes Old London,” *Daily Standard*, January 11, 1936.

43 “King and Queen See Chinese Art,” *Daily Mail*, December 2, 1935.

44 “Cancellations and Postponements. Engagements Affected by the King’s Death,” *Morning Advertiser*, January 22, 1936.

everyday discussions and the news.⁴⁵ One of China's "Four Great Academy Presidents," Paris-educated artist Lin Fengmian (林风眠, 1900-1991) worked as the first President of the National Academy of Art (*guoli yishu yuan* 国立艺术院) in Hangzhou from 1928, devoting himself in introducing Western art to China.⁴⁶ He wrote in the preface to his *Arts from Around the World in 1935* (*1935 nian de shijie yishu* 1935 年的世界艺术), one of several works he published to introduce Western art genres and contemporary artistic activities to Chinese readers:

We wish to take a closer look at the state of the art around the world in 1935. This year, Chinese art has received a great deal of publicity in Europe, which can be considered a true honour to us.⁴⁷

"The great deal of publicity" mentioned in Lin's text is believed to refer to the 1935 Exhibition.⁴⁸ Remarks from Cheng, Lin, and Chiang and others on the 1935 Exhibition proved the significance of the event in the history of Chinese art and its resonance within British society during the 1930s. The names of these individuals mentioned above, along with their like-minded colleagues, as well as their internationalised life journeys, will appear again in the subsequent chapters of this thesis on the modernisation of Chinese art and the quest for national cultural identity.

The significance of the transcontinental movement of Chinese art from the summer of 1935 to the spring of 1936 went both ways for China. Externally, the 1935 Exhibition served as a diplomatic stage strategically employed by the Chinese government to enhance its global standing and foster international relationships. By enforcing cultural policies through such exhibitions, the government sought to shape societal values and national identities. Chinese cultural officials carefully curated and commodified the nation's heritage, positioning it as a valuable asset to be reclaimed, possessed, and defended. Showcasing a unified and culturally rich national image on the international stage was a deliberate effort to project strength and coherence—an approach that remains evident in international art exhibitions today. Internally, the 1935 Exhibition provided the Chinese government with an opportunity to cultivate a collective memory and strengthen cultural identity among the populace by reinventing antiques and reforming modern Chinese artistic expressions, thereby

45 Jiang Yi 蒋彝 (Chiang Yee), *Chongfang Zhongguo* 重访中国 [China revisited], trans. Yin Zhipeng 殷志鹏 and Liao Cijie 廖慈节 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1980), 26.

46 Xu Youchun 徐友春, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian* 民国人物大辞典 [Dictionary of figures from the Republic of China] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Renmin Chubanshe, 1991), 469.

47 Lin Fengmian 林风眠, *1935 nian de shijie yishu* 1935 年的世界艺术 [Arts around the world in 1935], (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuju, 1936), 1, quoted in Zheng Shengtian, "Waves Lashed the Bund from the West: Shanghai's Art Scene in the 1930s," in *Shanghai Modern 1919-1945*, eds. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker Ken Lum, and Zheng Shengtian (Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag, 2004), 174.

48 Zheng Shengtian, "Waves Lashed the Bund from the West," 174.

contributing to a more cohesive and resilient nation. This creative surge, deeply intertwined with Chinese cultural diplomacy and nationalism, aimed to reclaim China's cultural heritage and present a forward-looking image on the global stage, instilling a sense of pride and identity among its people. However, the exhibition also mirrored the intense nationalism and conservatism prevalent at the time. On a broader scale, Chinese art in the 1930s underwent a transformative phase that bridged traditional craftsmanship with innovative perspectives. This fusion of heritage and modernity not only revitalised ancient techniques but also reshaped the narrative of Chinese art, reflecting the nation's aspirations for cultural renewal and international recognition. Ultimately, the transformation of Chinese art and the nation itself was realised through this transcontinental movement of art.

Building a Bridge between 1935 and 2019

Despite their temporal and geographical differences, the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions reveal a tapestry of connections and contradictions. Both were large-scale, government-backed exhibitions organised for special occasions, showcasing a wide range of art genres, materials, and subjects to provide a comprehensive overview of Chinese art. By displaying an extensive collection of works, both exhibitions emphasised the breadth of China's artistic traditions. Along with the commonalities, noticeable differences and contradictions emerge. Both exhibitions dealt with the mobilised Chinese art, but in opposite directions: the 1935 Exhibition sent Chinese art abroad, while the 2019 Exhibition featured its return. Such exhibitions, through their large scale and the political and cultural significance attributed to them, mobilised a wide range of social resources and personnel, transforming into a kind of dynamic “mass movements” that engage and energise diverse sectors of society.

Positioned at two key periods in the internationalisation of Chinese art, the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions presented contrasting narratives on Chinese art history, despite their similar selection of art objects. As identified by prominent art historian Wu Hung, these stages mark significant shifts in the field. The first stage, emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century, saw Chinese art history “delegitimized from the traditional literati discourse.” This transformation expanded the boundaries of *yishu* 艺术 or *meishu* 美术 (art), moving beyond the sole focus on painting and calligraphy to more genres and materials, and incorporated “modern” and “scientific” art historical methodologies

influenced by Europe and Japan.⁴⁹ The second stage, beginning after the Cultural Revolution and continuing into the present, is defined by the reopening of art education and the re-establishment of international connections. This period has also witnessed a paradigm shift in academic research, transitioning from “pure formal analysis” and “macrocosmic narratives” to contextual studies focused on historical investigation.⁵⁰

The two exhibitions also provide contrasting yet complementary perspectives on the evolving role of Chinese art in shaping national identity and international relations. In the 1930s, under the Nanjing Government led by the Kuomintang (Guomindang 国民党, hereinafter KMT), China was a young republic transitioning from imperial rule to a modern nation-state. Colin Mackerras commented that the decade from 1927 to 1937, often considered a “Golden Age” in modern Chinese history, saw its best pre-1949 economic conditions, driven by modernisation, urbanisation, and industrialisation, alongside significant advancements in politics, arts, education, diplomacy, as well as military development.⁵¹ At the same time, the nation grappled with regional imbalances, political turmoil, and foreign invasion, prompting the government to seek international support. The 1935 exhibition was a strategic effort to project a modern, progressive image of China to the world, showcasing its rich cultural heritage while asserting its place in global artistic discourse. This reflected a desire for international recognition and solidarity during a period of vulnerability.

By contrast, the 2019 Exhibition unfolded in an era when China had risen as a global power under the single-party rule of the Communist Party (Gongchandang 共产党, hereinafter CPC). Marked by expanding international influence, this period saw Chinese art employed as a key instrument to promote the nation’s cultural heritage and assert its position as the rightful inheritor of Chinese civilisation.⁵² The exhibition emphasised the return of cultural artefacts dispersed by historical wars and revolution, symbolising China’s regained control over its cultural legacy and its growing confidence on the global stage. Official narratives during this time blended traditional motifs with themes of modernity and socialist values, reflecting cultural preservation and forward-looking development.

In such spaces full of artistic and political implications, the exhibitions revealed how Chinese art has been mobilised to navigate the nation’s political and diplomatic circumstances. While the 1935 Exhibition conveyed China’s quest for legitimacy and modernisation amidst foreign aggression, the

49 Wu Hung, *Chinese Art and Dynastic Time* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2022), 1-2.

50 Ibid. 2-3.

51 Colin Mackerras, *China in Transformation, 1900–1949*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2008), 52.

52 Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 50; Varutti, *Museums in China*, 3.

2019 Exhibition celebrated national pride and cultural continuity in an era of global prominence. Together, they illustrate China's shifting approach to cultural diplomacy—from seeking external validation to asserting ownership of its heritage and global influence—and serve as powerful case studies of how art has been used to reflect and shape the country's political and social transformations.

Moreover, both exhibitions served as poignant reflections of the enduring legacy of ancient Chinese civilisation and responses to the “National Humiliation” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although this term first appeared during the Republican era, it has become more frequently mentioned in contemporary times. It is used by Chinese historians and the public to describe the period from the First Opium War to the replacement of the ROC by the PRC. During this era, China suffered from “a litany of indignities” “at the hands of foreigners” and experienced a weakening of dynastic governmental control, leading to local fragmentations and being forced into a semi-colonial society.⁵³ This period directly led to China no longer naively considering itself the centre of the world but rather reflecting on its national image and joining the international system.⁵⁴ The feeling of humiliation, for Chinese, as Paul A. Cohen put it, was a “persistent sense of anxiety” that “took different forms in different periods,” mixing with imperviousness, forgetting, and remembering.⁵⁵ The constant reminders of China's victimisation through different activities and media serve to reinforce people's consciousness of “not forgetting” (*wuwang* 勿忘). However, this emphasis could lead to “distortion” or “manipulation,” resulting in “an overall sense of memory debasement or loss.”⁵⁶ The 1935 and 2019 exhibitions revealed different interpretations and reflections on this humiliating history. They also led to a re-evaluation of the role of cultural production within authoritarian contexts, particularly regarding how the government influenced and controlled art narratives. The politicisation of objects to fit the exhibition purposes further illustrates how art can shape national narratives and influence public perception.

In summary, the diametrically opposed journeys of Chinese art presented in the 1935 Exhibition and the 2019 Exhibition showcased the divergent historical and political landscapes navigated by each regime in China. The differing political, historical, and cultural contexts, along with the governing bodies involved, influenced the organisation, curation, interpretation, narrative, and reception of each exhibition, resulting in distinct approaches to presenting Chinese art. A major task of this

53 Alison Adcock Kaufman, “The ‘Century of Humiliation’ Then and Now: Chinese Perceptions of the International Order,” *Pacific Focus* 25, no. 1 (2010): 4–5.

54 Ibid. 6.

55 Paul A. Cohen, “Remembering and Forgetting National Humiliation in Twentieth-Century China,” in *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 148.

56 Ibid. 156.

thesis is to study the history of these two exhibitions and identify the merits and controversies of each, aiming to understand how these factors influenced the public's perception and appreciation of Chinese art, conveyed the messages of the Chinese government, and shaped the collective memory of the Chinese nation through art.

Chapter 2. Methodology

The history of Chinese art is the result of cross-cultural exchanges, disseminations, and interactions. Ancient trade routes such as the Silk Road, with monks, merchants, and envoys travelling on it, served as arteries for the movement of Chinese objects, such as ceramics, silk, and other goods to far-flung destinations, while simultaneously bringing back foreign styles, techniques, and ideas that enriched the national art forms. The integration of foreign religions with local philosophical systems, created unique artistic expressions that reflected a blend of spiritual and cultural perspectives. Furthermore, in modern times, Chinese art was passively incorporated into the global art market, through colonialist expansion, exposing Chinese art to Western artistic ideas and techniques. This interaction led to significant transformations and the blending of traditional Chinese art with modern influences and practices. Furthermore, after the economic reforms of the late twentieth century, Chinese contemporary art began to take its place on the international stage, moving beyond its previous marginalised status to become a key component of the global art market.

It is widely acknowledged that art and movement are inseparable, as reflected in fruitful publications and conferences that address related areas such as art-making, spectatorship, emerging artistic and cultural trends, associated fashions, and interregional and international cultural exchanges. When the concept of travel is introduced into the way of seeing art, the traditional notion of viewing art, often regarded as “static” and “passive,” is challenged, prompting a re-evaluation of how bodily movement and active engagement shape the act of seeing.⁵⁷ The advancement of transportation technologies and systems signifies modernity, reshaping travel patterns and labour system, broadening human mobility, and reducing spatial distances between cities, regions, and cultures. These changes have not only facilitated the flow of people and cultures but also played a pivotal role in the global circulation of art, fostering cultural exchanges and enriching the field of art history by connecting artistic traditions across diverse contexts.

By examining the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions as moments of transcultural intellectual exchange, this study uses a multi-dimensional methodological framework to explore the physical, human, and conceptual journeys of Chinese art, drawing extensively on archives and secondary materials. Central to this inquiry are the material and logistical movements of artefacts, the roles and travels of

57 “Mobile Spectators: Viewing on the Move. Call for Papers,” University of Nottingham, July 17, 2013, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/crvc/archive/news/mobile-spectators.aspx>.

individuals who shaped the exhibitions, and the evolution of the concept of Chinese art in the context of historical, cultural, and political transformations. Through this approach, the thesis situates these exhibitions within broader narratives of cultural diplomacy, cross-cultural interaction, and the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, offering insights into how Chinese art has navigated and redefined its place on the global stage.

Travel as Methodology

Ting Chang notes that transcultural travel is not merely “an assimilation of foreign territories” but also a disorienting experience for those who leave the safe ground of home.⁵⁸ Her perspective highlights travel’s transformative potential to foster mutual understanding, cross-cultural fertilisation, and at times unsettling re-evaluations of cultural identity. In her study of French collector-travellers and their efforts to museumify Asian art in nineteenth-century France—set against the backdrop of colonialism, Orientalism, and early globalism spurred by advancements in transportation—Chang observes a “subtle reversal” of traditional dichotomies between East and West, masculine and feminine, active and passive—contrasts that have long defined Orientalist imagery.⁵⁹ This insight underscores the complexities of cross-cultural exchange and challenges dichotomies that have historically defined such interactions. Her observations prompt a reconsideration of established power dynamics and cultural narratives.

Such transcultural encounters lead to significant shifts in cultural forms, material culture, and lifestyles, as people and objects move through intersecting spaces of exchange. In a globalised context, material artefacts may adopt local meanings while staying rooted in their original motifs, enriching their manifestations. Art historians often study these exchanges through art, yet they also appear vividly in our landscapes and everyday objects. Building on Chang’s insights, this thesis examines the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions as pivotal moments of transcultural exchange, reflecting the evolving political, cultural, and historical dynamics between China and the wider world.

In line with the idea of “travel,” this thesis conceptualises travel in three dimensions: the physical journey of artworks as material objects, the influence and agency of individuals, and the evolution of the concept of Chinese art as an intangible idea. The analysis is structured around four phases of

58 Ting Chang, *Travel, Collecting, and Museums of Asian Art in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 73.

59 Ibid. 74.

travel: origin, *en route*, destination, and afterlife, examining the movement and transformation involved in the two exhibitions through each of these perspectives.

Aspect 1. Travel of Objects

The thesis first explores the journeys of Chinese artefacts exhibited in 1935 and 2019, analysing their contents, the institutions that housed them, and the logistics involved in transporting them, including routes, labour, and technologies. In exhibition spaces, art frequently intersects with broader discourses, such as historical and political narratives, which often take precedence in shaping the viewer's perception. These non-artistic contexts play a pivotal role in constructing history, influencing both the arrangement and interpretation of the artworks on display, as well as the design and architecture of the exhibition itself.⁶⁰ The 1935 Exhibition saw Chinese art venture abroad, framed within the broader context of the Sino-Western cultural exchange and the modernisation of Chinese art practices in the first half of the twentieth century. This trip symbolised China's attempt to redefine its cultural identity on the world stage, with the careful selection and transport of its national treasures reflecting both logistical and symbolic challenges. In contrast, the 2019 exhibition showcased the return of Chinese art to its homeland, following a period of loss and dispersion that dates to the late nineteenth century. Although detailed records of the artefacts' transport back to Beijing remain elusive, the significance of their return is profound. This homecoming reflects not only China's reclaiming of its cultural heritage but also its reassertion of national pride and identity in the contemporary era. The movement of these artefacts from displacement to repatriation symbolises China's shift in global standing and cultural policy over time. Both exhibitions demonstrate that the travel of these artworks was much more than physical—it was a journey deeply intertwined with China's evolving national image. Behind the scenes, these exhibitions were the results of intense efforts, negotiations, and compromises between China and other nations, highlighting the broader context of international relations, cultural diplomacy, and shifting power dynamics. The journey of these objects, whether venturing abroad or returning home, mirrors China's historical path of resilience, negotiation, and cultural reclamation.

60 Jean-Marc Poinot, "Large Exhibitions: A Sketch of a Typology," trans. Robert McGee, in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 27.

Aspect 2. Travel of People

Secondly, the travel of individuals involved in the exhibitions, reflecting the critical role of human agency in art and cultural exchange. With a keen interest in prosopography, the thesis seeks to uncover the identities and roles of the key figures behind the two exhibitions, including state and non-state actors, art professionals and individuals from other fields. Who were they, and what roles did they play in shaping the exhibitions? How did their travels and activities reflect the exhibition agendas? The movement and connection of these individuals were instrumental in transporting the objects, while the success of the events depended on the relationships between these actors. From a geographical perspective, their travels facilitated exchanges between knowledge elites from different cultures. Simultaneously, changes in the nature, purpose, and modes of travel mirror adjustments in a country's foreign policy and shifts in its international standing. By uncovering the names, identities, and actions of these individuals, this thesis highlights the significance of cross-cultural exchanges in shaping China's modernisation and national identity, examining these dynamics from personal and group perspectives, and expanding the analysis to a broader, macro-level context.

The creators of the exhibitions are of particular interest. Curators, once seen as arbiters of taste and quality and intermediaries between institutions and different social sectors, have now evolved into cultural brokers, focusing on advocating inclusiveness and empowering marginalised or emerging cultural groups to gain recognition in the art world.⁶¹ The concept of curators in China originated from the West. As an imported profession, it has yet to establish clear boundaries and responsibilities locally, leading to a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding its role and functions. Scholars generally agree that China's curatorship, both independent curators and institutional curators, began after the reform and opening up. Chinese curatorial practices began to take shape, especially during the 85 New Wave (85 *xinchao* 八五新潮) art movement and the influential yet controversial exhibition "China/Avant-garde" (*Zhongguo xiandai yishu dazhan* 中国现代艺术大展) in 1989, where they were considered "avant-garde."⁶² However, in the early twentieth century, amidst the modernisation and institutionalisation of Chinese art, with artists

61 Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Brokering Identities: Art Curators and the Politics of Cultural Representation," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 15–6.

62 Jiang Wenbo 蒋文博, "Duli cezhanren de zhiduhua yu Zhongguohua" 独立策展人的制度化与中国化 [Institutionalisation and localisation of independent curators in China], *Meishuguan* 美术馆 1 (2008), 241; Wang Zihao 王子豪, "Qiantan Zhongguo bowuguan cezhanren zhidu xianzhuang" 浅谈中国博物馆策展人制度现状 [On the current situation of the curator system in Chinese museums], *Chifeng xueyuan xuebao* 赤峰学院学报 42. no. 9 (2021): 54.

studying abroad and integrating into Western art circles, early attempts at Chinese curatorship had started. These efforts promoted dialogue between Chinese and Western art, offering early examples of how Chinese art engaged with international discourse and contributed to the shaping of China's artistic image and status on the global stage.

In contemporary times, Chinese independent curators, similar to their artist colleagues, strive to make a name in the international art world while balancing power, finance, networking, and academia. They navigate the tension between freedom of expression and government censorship. In contrast, curators in official art institutions may not need to worry much about financial issues related to exhibitions or the mobilisation of social resources. Instead, their focus is likely more on educating the public, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting the development of social ideologies.⁶³ Other challenges also exist, including the misuse of the term “curation” and the blurred lines between “museum studies” and “heritage management” in both education and practice.⁶⁴ The museum industry in China still has an opinion of “valuing artefacts over curation.”⁶⁵ Studying the identities and activities of curators during the exhibitions in this thesis offers examples of the shifting roles of Chinese curators over time, revealing their multiple social identities and prompting reflections on their professionalism in curation, all within the framework of political exigencies shaping these exhibitions.

Beyond curators, these individuals formed a diverse group of “exhibition-makers” that included professional art practitioners, amateurs, curators, and official administrators, some of whom had international backgrounds. High social cohesion brings better results to the exhibitions, but it can also lead to a reluctance. Therefore, negotiation and dialogue become essential to balance existing relationships to not only achieve consensus but also innovations with the need for creativity.⁶⁶ Their distinct identities facilitate the happening of the exhibitions, and influence the nature of the exhibitions, with these purposes often extending beyond the field of art itself, forming an integral part of the exhibition ecosystem. Turning the exhibitions into mass movements that transcended different social sectors and national borders, their immersive experiences reflected the diversity, creativity, dedication and interconnectedness of artistic expression and cultural dialogue.

63 Wang Zihao, “Qiantan Zhongguo bowuguan cezhanren zhidu xianzhuang,” 55; Shi Mingli 史明立, “Zhongxifang bowuguan cezhanren (curator) zhidu qianxi” 中西方博物馆策展人 (curator) 制度浅析 [An analysis of curator systems in Chinese and Western museums], *Zhongguo bowuguan* 中国博物馆 4 (2018): 55-6.

64 James Hamilton, “Collections Need Curators,” *The British Art Journal* 19, no. 3 (2018/2019): 64-9.

65 Shi Mingli, “Zhongxifang bowuguan cezhanren zhidu qianxi,” 56.

66 *The Making of Exhibitions: The Purpose, Structure, Roles and Process* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2022), 19.

Aspect 3. Travel of Chinese Art as a Concept

The third aspect of travel involves viewing Chinese art as a dynamic and evolving concept, whose meaning and form have shifted across time, geography, and cultural landscapes. Focusing on ancient and classical art, its development reflects a shift from functional utility to aesthetic symbolism, driven by technological advancements, the influence of philosophical thought, and cultural exchange. The rich complexity of Chinese art is shaped by temporal changes and ongoing cultural interactions, illustrating how Chinese art has continually redefined itself in response to social, political, and artistic transformations.⁶⁷ Chinese art has continually redefined itself in response to societal changes, yet it has consistently maintained a deep connection to its traditional roots. The adaptability of Chinese art enables it to engage with modern influences while maintaining a deep connection to its historical origins, creating a fluid dialogue between tradition and modernity, preservation and innovation. This dynamic nature reflects the resilience and versatility of Chinese art, allowing it to remain relevant and vital across diverse periods and contexts. Through this ongoing evolution, Chinese art embodies both continuity and change, showcasing its ability to transcend boundaries while remaining rooted in its rich cultural heritage.

Mobilising Chinese art has long been a strategic tool in cultural diplomacy, integral to China's soft power initiatives. These exhibitions present a curated narrative that fosters global appreciation, cooperation, and influence, while also highlighting shared historical and cultural achievements to strengthen national cultural identity. These efforts encompass sending its arts, both traditional and contemporary, to foreign countries to exhibit, organising international art exhibitions, cultural events, and facilitating artistic and cultural exchanges and education programmes. More than mere cultural displays, these exhibitions serve as instruments of influence, designed to shape international perceptions by showcasing China's historical grandeur, cultural sophistication, and contemporary vitality. By inspiring empathy, admiration, or aspiration among global audiences, they aim to "shape the preferences of others," reinforcing China's image as a cultural and political power on the global stage.⁶⁸ In this dynamic process, both governmental and non-governmental actors, including private individuals and civil society organisations, play integral roles in the formulation, execution, and reception of exhibitions, collectively contributing to the enhancement of national cultural soft power through cultural exchanges.⁶⁹

67 Zhao Jing, "The Historical Evolution Characteristics of Ancient Chinese Arts and Crafts," *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 20, no. 3 (2023): 334-5.

68 Joseph Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80 (Autumn 1990): 166-7; Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5.

69 Nye, *Soft Power*, 5.

State sponsorship often reflects political agendas, raising concerns about the balance between advancing government narratives and fostering authentic cultural dialogue. The images and themes presented in these exhibitions reveal not only the state's strategic objectives but also the shifting socio-political contexts over time. By leveraging art exhibitions as tools of cultural diplomacy, China integrates its soft power strategy into a broader effort to strengthen its national identity and enhance its global influence.

China's soft power operates on two interconnected fronts: internationally, as a foreign policy tool to enhance global influence, and domestically, as a strategy to strengthen national identity and cohesion.⁷⁰ Such dual approach functions as a "two-level game," balancing outward-facing initiatives, such as cultural diplomacy and international exhibitions, with inward-facing efforts to promote national pride and government legitimacy.⁷¹ This alignment of cultural heritage with broader geopolitical and domestic ambitions underscores the evolving priorities of China's cultural policies. In recent decades, China has experienced a surge in nationalism, fuelled by significant economic growth and expanding international influence. This has been exemplified by the meticulous organisation and participation in grand international events, showcasing China's ambition as a rising superpower and its efforts to further integrate with the global community. These events showcase the country's investments, social mobilisation, architecture, displays, networking and media coverage, celebrating its achievements and asserting its global stature.

Since its first state-led export exhibition at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, held against the backdrop of the Self-Strengthening Movement (*yangwu yundong* 洋务运动), which illustrated "the dilemmas of late Qing China in the face of modernity," China has consistently participated in World's Fairs, *expositions universelles*, and later, biennales and other international exhibitions across various countries and historical periods.⁷² This tradition of leveraging international platforms

70 Young Nam Cho and Jong Ho Jeong, "China's Soft Power: Discussions, Resources, and Prospects," *Asian Survey* 48, no. 3 (2008): 458; Michael Barr, "Nation Branding as Nation Building: China's Image Campaign," *East Asia* 29, no. 1 (May 2012): 82; Hendrik W. Ohnesorge and John M. Owen, "Mnemonic Soft Power: The Role of Memory in China's Quest for Global Power," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 52, no. 2 (2023): 290; Zhang Guozuo 张国祚, "Zhongguo wenhua ruanshili lilun chuangxin—jian xi Yuesefu Nai de 'ruanshili' sixiang" 中国文化软实力理论创新——简析约瑟夫·奈的"软实力"思想 [Theoretical innovation of Chinese cultural soft power—an analysis of Joseph Nye's idea of 'soft power'], *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 中国社会科学 5 (2023): 200–1.

71 Shaomin Xu, "The Evolution of Chinese Soft Power: Its International and Domestic Roles" (PhD thesis, The University of Western Australia, 2016), 5.

72 Cheng-hua Wang 王正华, "Chengxian 'Zhongguo': wanqing canyu 1904 Meiguo Shengluyi wanguo bolanhui zhi yanjiu" 呈现'中国': 晚清参与 1904 美国圣路易万国博览会之研究 [Presenting "China": a study of China's participation in the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair in the US], in *Hua zhong you hua: jindai Zhongguo de shijue biao shu yu wenhua goutu* 画中有话: 近代中国的视觉表述与文化构图 [When images speak: visual representation and cultural composition of modern China], ed. Huang Ko-wu 黄克武 (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2003), 473.

to project China's cultural prominence and national modernity has continued into the contemporary era. In recent years, China has become the host of such expos, demonstrating its influence through discourse. Chinese art is also a frequent participant in international major exhibitions, with Chinese museums lending objects or providing expertise to collaborate on exhibitions.⁷³ These strategies were already reflected in the 1935 Exhibition.

However, the overseas exhibitions of Chinese art experienced interruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a worldwide decline in museum activities and exhibitions. As the world gradually recovers, Chinese art exhibitions abroad have resumed, yet challenges and controversies persist. Some of these have hindered the realisation of planned exhibitions or led to China's absence.⁷⁴ Simultaneously, overseas repatriated artefacts have begun to be exhibited abroad since 2019 in national and regional museums. A new dimension of internationalisation of Chinese art has emerged. These developments reflect not only the complexities of exhibition agendas and national cultural policies, but also the shifting strategies in China's engagement with the global cultural sphere.

The 1935 and 2019 exhibitions provide insights into historical narratives, cultural exchanges, and socio-political dynamics, while revealing the realities of their respective eras. Through their lenses, this thesis explores how exhibitions serve as potent tools of representation. By analysing curatorial choices, artwork selection, and exhibition design, this study unravels the ideological, artistic, and societal underpinnings that shaped their conception and reception. Even in the preliminary stages of preparation and transportation, the negotiations with various parties reveal complex dynamics. These exhibitions, serving as microcosms of historical transformations, demonstrate the enduring power of art to mediate between the local and global, the historical and contemporary, and the

73 Xu Ling 徐玲 and Wang Chengyuan 王骋远, "Gaige kaifang chuqi bowuguan chuguo zhanlan de biao hua yu yi yi (1979-1989)" 改革开放初期博物馆出国展览的变化与意义 (1979-1989) [Trend and significance of museum exhibitions abroad in the early period of Reform and Opening Up (1979-1989)], *Zhongguo bowuguan* 3 (2022): 61-7.

74 For instance, due to interventions by Chinese museums in the exhibition's historical narrative, the Mongolian cultural exhibition, originally scheduled to open on October 17, 2020, at the Musée d'Histoire de Nantes, France, was postponed to October 14, 2023, and would run until May 5, 2024. The exhibition, titled "Genghis Khan et les Mongols ont changé notre perception du monde (Genghis Khan and the Mongols changed our perception of the world)," became a bilateral collaboration between Mongolia and France, with the display of objects from French and Mongolian museums, several European private the public collections, and copies of portraits and paintings from the National Place Museum Taipei. Another example is the exhibition "China's Hidden Century" at the British Museum in 2023. There were no exhibits from institutions or collections in China. However, the exhibition sparked awe among Chinese visitors and netizens, igniting a wave of patriotic sentiment about the idea that "no Chinese could leave the British Museum with a smile." It also reignited discussions on the repatriation of Chinese artefacts and the legitimacy of museum collections. See Bolor Lkhaajav, "Ulaanbaatar's Cultural Diplomacy Strengthens France-Mongolia Ties," *The Diplomat*, last modified October 21, 2023, access December 16, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/ulaanbaatars-cultural-diplomacy-strengthens-france-mongolia-ties/>.

personal and political. They underscore the role of exhibitions in reflecting China's evolving position in the global cultural landscape and its ongoing aspirations as a rising superpower.

Through the journeys of Chinese art, this thesis seeks to deepen the understanding of its evolution, revealing how art and politics have intersected across different historical contexts to shape national identity and influence China's global representation. By tracing the transformations of Chinese art over time and across cultural landscapes, this research explores how shifting socio-political conditions informed the conception, execution, and reception of these exhibitions. It highlights the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, continuity and change, as Chinese art adapted to and reflected the demands of its era. Finally, this analysis examines how these exhibitions not only shaped global perceptions of Chinese art but also illuminated China's evolving role in international dialogue, offering insights into its aspirations as a cultural and political power on the world arena.

Not Being Able to Travel: Research during the COVID-19

Before 2020, almost no one could have foreseen that the COVID-19 pandemic—described as the “biggest challenge for the world since World War Two”—would have such a profound impact on the world, completely transforming people's way of life and every facet of society.⁷⁵ To respond to the pandemic, countries implemented various preventive measures to combat the spread of the virus, including closing borders, enforcing quarantines, and restricting travel, among others. Within their borders, many countries also implemented various restrictions and health measures to control the spread of the pandemic. China, as the first country to experience the pandemic outbreak, implemented very strict travel restrictions and the controversial “Zero-COVID” policy as soon as the pandemic began, and did not fully lift these measures until late 2022, nearly three years after the outbreak started. The UK also initiated its lockdown in March 2020, followed by a series of adjustments where restrictions were eased and then tightened again based on the evolving situation. Universities closed and moved to remote learning during the first lockdown and did not fully return to normal operations until the academic year 2021-22 began.

Museums, art organisations, and research institutions also faced significant disruptions during the COVID-19. According to UNESCO, the sudden outbreak of the pandemic particularly affected

⁷⁵ “Coronavirus: Greatest test since World War Two, says UN chief,” BBC, April 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52114829>.

estimated ninety percent of museums worldwide, leading to a significant decrease in visitor numbers, financial revenue, and public funding.⁷⁶ For some underdeveloped countries that are unable to respond and take measures to challenges in time, there was even a fear that their museums may permanently close.⁷⁷ There was not only the decline in tourism and sales, but also the impact in the cultural preservation, education, and creative industries of different countries. China was not immune to the impact on its museums. In 2020, museums in China remained closed for several months, with a forty to sixty percent reduction in the number of visitors and no more than a twenty percent drop in revenue.⁷⁸

New requirements for museums in response to the pandemic, as outlined in the 2020 UNESCO Report, align with the 2015 UNESCO *Recommendation on the Protection and Promotion of Museums*, particularly emphasising the development of digital platforms.⁷⁹ In the earlier document, museums are encouraged to develop information and communication technologies to create digital platforms for knowledge creation, research, preservation, and sharing—ensuring their primary functions and knowledge dissemination in a changing world.⁸⁰ However, the digital transition varies significantly across countries, highlighting disparities in access and resources.⁸¹

China's museum digitisation started no later than 2016 as a governmental commission.⁸² When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in China, all in-person museum activities were suspended, but online programmes were able to transition relatively quickly. In 2020, Chinese museums organised over 29,000 exhibitions and 225,000 educational activities, attracting 540 million visitors and offering public cultural services to millions through the Internet.⁸³ The livestream of the 2019 Exhibition that I consulted for my research was one of them, which compensated me for being unable to visit the event in person. Using new technologies, virtual museums have become

76 UNESCO, *UNESCO Report: Museums around the World in the Face of COVID-19*, May 2020, (Paris: UNESCO, 2020), 4-5.

77 Ibid. 6.

78 Ibid. 16-7.

79 Ibid. 22-3.

80 UNESCO, *Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, Their Diversity and their Role in Society*, adopted by the General Conference at Its 38th Session, Paris, November 17, 2015, (Paris: UNESCO, 2015), 5.

81 UNESCO, *Museums around the World in the Face of COVID-19*, 4-5.

82 NCHA, et al., *Guojia wenwuju, guojia fazhan he gaige weiyuanhui, kexue jishubu, gongye he xinxihua bu, caizhengbu guanyu yinfa "hulianwang + zhonghua wenming" sannian xingdong jihua" de tongzhi* 国家文物局、国家发展和改革委员会、科学技术部、工业和信息化部、财政部关于印发《“互联网+中华文明”三年行动计划》的通知 [Notice by the NCHA, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and Ministry of Finance on issuing the “Internet + Chinese civilisation” three-year action plan], no. [2016]1944, November 29, 2016.

83 Xinhua, “2020 nian 5.4yi ren ci ‘daka’ bowuguan” 2020 年 5.4 亿人次‘打卡’博物馆 [540 million people “visits” to museums in 2020], State Council of the PRC, May 18, 2021, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-05/18/content_5608389.htm.

conventional, taking on the educational, research, and marketing functions, and to a certain extent breaking the geographical limits of museums themselves, allowing them to reach further afield.

The immediate effect of the pandemic on my research was the need to adapt to new circumstances. My fieldwork research involved rescheduled appointments for museum and library visits and limited access to research sources. When I conducted my archival research at the RA in London from February to April 2022, Archivist Mark Pomeroy told me that I was the first external researcher permitted to work in the RA Library after its reopening following the lockdown. However, due to travel restrictions, I regrettably could not go to China for my archive research for the two exhibitions in my thesis. Therefore, regarding the archives related to the 1935 Exhibition kept on the other side of the continent, this thesis mainly relies on content that has already been digitised or published. These include historical archives, official documents, photographs, and media coverage. On the other hand, access to archives from the 2019 Exhibition was limited not only by pandemic travel restrictions, but also by the event's recentness, and museum policy. The bureaucracy of the NMC and the policies during the pandemic, including museum opening hours and travel restrictions, further complicated the situation.⁸⁴ The multi-located and multimedia archives, as well as alternative archives, will be introduced, justified and reviewed in the next chapter.

Not being able to travel while working on a thesis about travel is certainly ironic, yet the experience became uniquely valuable, allowing me to experience first-hand the essential role of digital archives in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge. Relying on online databases, virtual exhibits, and digitised collections not only compensated for the absence of traditional, in-person research but also highlighted the importance of open access for researchers globally—particularly for those with limited resources or venerable.⁸⁵ The shift to digital archival platforms has expanded—and, in some cases, dissolved—the traditional boundaries of archives. What were once static, centralised “classic archives” have transformed into “dynamic memory and storage agencies,” open to collective contributions “(co-)produced by online users for their own needs.”⁸⁶ In fact, my experience with both physical archives and digital materials reflects the reality of modern research: materials are no longer limited to papers and books but encompass objects, spaces, and even virtual resources. As

84 I wrote emails to the NMC to inquire about archival research, but I have not received a response.

85 An example of archival digitisation is the International Dunhuang Project, a collaboration among institutions worldwide to digitise and provide access to historical materials. This project compiles objects, artworks, documents, books, and visual resources from Dunhuang, Gansu province, China and other Silk Road archaeological sites for scholarly study. See “About the International Dunhuang Programme (IDP),” International Dunhuang Project, accessed September 25, 2023, <https://idp.bl.uk/about/>.

86 Wolfgang Ernst, “Archive as Metaphor: From Archival Space to Archival Time,” *Open 7* (2004): 47–8; Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 95.

Hanna B. Hölling observes, archives—whether physical or digital, immobilised or online—are “a dynamic space of exchange and actualization,” through which “regulations and statements” produce knowledge.⁸⁷ While traditional archives provide irreplaceable tactile and contextual insights, digital archives significantly enhance accessibility and preservation, creating an interactive space for knowledge exchange. As museums and cultural institutions continue to digitise collections, they ensure continuity during times of crisis and create a lasting, accessible record for future scholars, bridging past and present in innovative ways.

87 Hanna B. Hölling, “Archive and Documentation,” *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* 17 (2018): 20.

Chapter 3. Archives, Research Materials, and Literature Review

This chapter reviews the research materials and literature on both events, which reveals an uneven landscape of scholarly publications between the former and the latter. The 1935 Exhibition, with its historical significance, far-reaching influences, and the wealth of available historical materials, has attracted a great deal of scholarly interest, and its articulation extends far beyond art history. In contrast, the 2019 Exhibition has no direct scholarly publication at this time. Therefore, alternative materials will be considered and justified in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the event's status and influence in contemporary society and international relations.

Revealing the Sources: Catalogues, Archives and Literature of the 1935 Exhibition

As a pivotal cultural event, the 1935 Exhibition not only showcased China's rich artistic heritage but also acted as a significant point of interaction between China and the West. The discussion begins with an exploration of the three distinct catalogues produced for the exhibition, offering insight into the range of artworks displayed and the curatorial practices of the time. This section then moves on to the extensive archives related to the event, preserved across regions, providing valuable context on the exhibition's organisation, challenges, and its political and cultural implications. Finally, the section highlights the interdisciplinary research that has emerged around the 1935 Exhibition, drawing from fields such as art history, museum studies, political science, and cultural diplomacy. This broad academic engagement reveals how the exhibition contributed not only to the global appreciation of Chinese art but also to the shaping of modern Chinese identity and its role in international cultural exchange. The lasting legacy of the 1935 Exhibition is reflected through its catalogues, archival materials, and the diverse scholarly perspectives that continue to explore its profound impact.

Multiple Versions of the 1935 Exhibition Catalogues

There are three versions of catalogues existing for the 1935 Exhibition: (1) *The Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-6* and its illustrated supplement that include all 3,080 items from all lenders that were displayed in the exhibition, (2) *The Illustrated Catalogue of Chinese Government Exhibits for the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London* for the artworks selected by the Chinese Government (*Canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishupin zhanlanhui chupin tulu* 参加伦敦中国艺术品展览会出品图录) published in Shanghai, under the commission of the Chinese government; and (3) *The Catalogue of Exhibits at the Preliminary Exhibition in Shanghai*, a pocket-sized book with essentially the same content as its predecessor, no pictures, and a tight layout (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Multiple versions of catalogues of the 1935 Exhibition.

I obtained the first two versions of the catalogue from the University of Nottingham Library Collection. Following the style of previous catalogues from the same institution, the RA Catalogue of the 1935 Exhibition is formatted as a B-format trade paperback, measuring twenty-one centimetres by thirteen centimetres. Each entry contains a brief description, providing essential information about the artwork. *The Illustrated Supplement*, which is now bound after the *RA Catalogue*, contains photographs of artworks with significant artistic and cultural value, though they are of smaller sizes. The catalogue in the University Collection was presented by the poet, literary critic, translator and historian, Vivian de Sola Pinto (1895–1969) to the University in 1955.⁸⁸ From 1938 to his retirement in 1961, Pinto worked at the University of Nottingham as Professor of English and the first Dean of the Faculty of Arts.⁸⁹ While there is no evidence of his interest in Chinese or Asian art, it is likely that the London-born, then forty-year-old gentleman with a deep appreciation for literature and art, might have been among the visitors to the 1935 Exhibition, and purchased a catalogue.

Measuring twenty centimetres by twenty-seven and a half centimetres, the Shanghai-published Illustrated Catalogue is an exquisite and monumental work. Written in Chinese and English, the catalogue is organised into four volumes, corresponding to the Chinese Committee's curatorial categories: bronzes, porcelain, paintings and calligraphy, and miscellaneous objects. Each volume begins with an introductory essay on the art history, cultural symbolism, and aesthetic appreciation of the artworks, authored by notable scholars of the time. There are 1028 items included in the catalogue. All objects were photographed in Shanghai. For special artefacts of cultural significance, those with signatures, inscriptions, or engravings, multiple photographs from different angles or perspectives are provided.

Some intriguing findings in the Illustrated Catalogue from the University Collection include receipts from the publisher and two telegrams found in the first volume. A sale receipt, though partially unclear, indicates a purchase made in Chongqing (重庆), the KMT government's temporary capital from 1937 to 1945. The two telegrams, written in “*yangwen*” (洋文, foreign language) and sent to foreign destinations, are dated December 31, 1938.

88 Label shown on the preface of the catalogue in the University Collection.

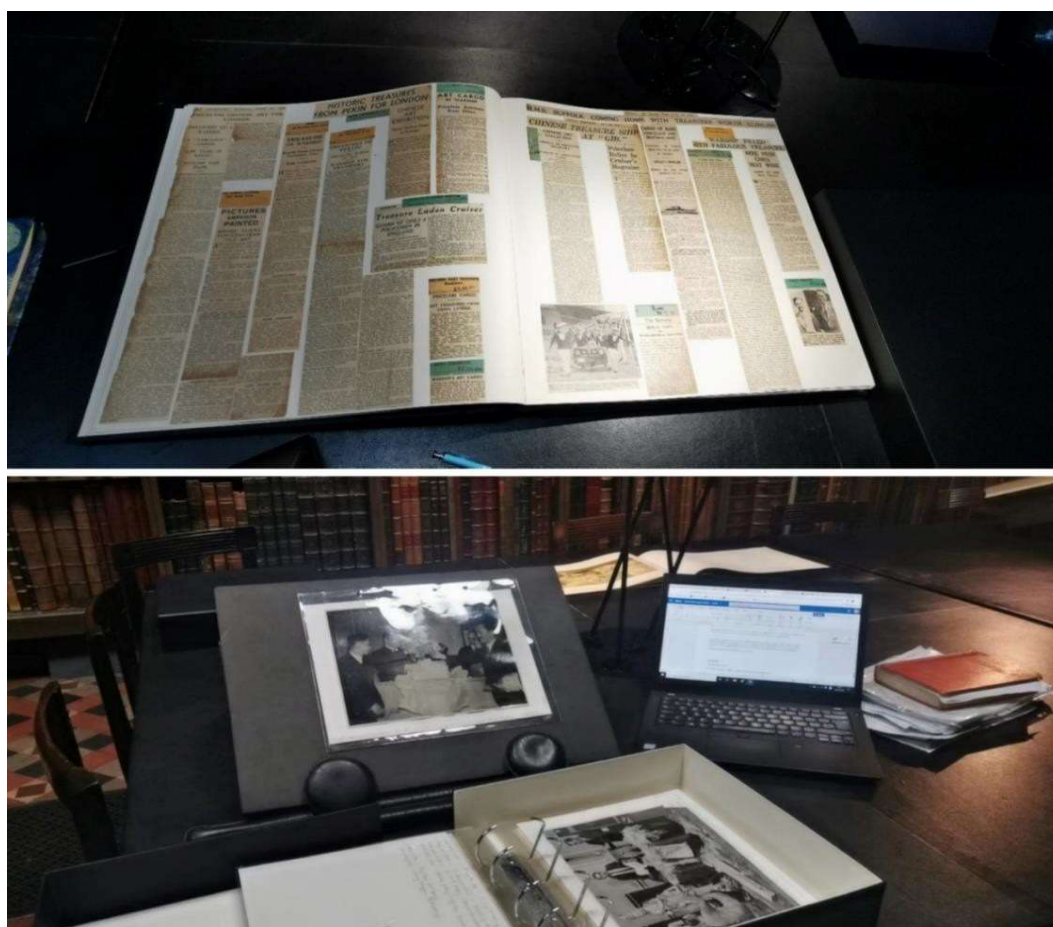
89 Professor Pinto was an expert in seventeenth-century Restoration poets, and a translator of the Slovene Romanticist poet France Prešeren (1800–1849) into English. During his years at Nottingham, Pinto was a major influence on the development of D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) studies and the establishment of the Lawrence Collection in the University Library. He also played a significant role in the University history, particularly the Department of Fine Art, and was also an amateur artist and a regular contributor to annual exhibitions. See *University of Nottingham Gazette*, no. 39 (September 1961): 700–1; *University of Nottingham Gazette*, no. 66 (September 1969): 1528.

The compact-sized Catalogue of Exhibits at the Preliminary Exhibition in Shanghai was discovered in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies (hereinafter SOAS). This particular copy belonged to the collection of George Eumorfopoulos (1863–1939), a distinguished British collector of Greek origin and founder of the Oriental Ceramic Society (hereinafter OCS). The Society significantly promotes Asian art and knowledge in Britain and played a key role in organising the 1935 Exhibition. Eumorfopoulos himself served as a committee member during the event. The layout and contents of this catalogue generally align with those of the four-volume Illustrated Catalogue. However, it listed only objects from the NPM, the National Antique Museum (*guwu chenliesuo* 古物陈列所, hereinafter NAM), Academia Sinica, the Henan Museum, and the Anhui Library, totalling 753 items. It excluded objects from the Beijing Library and the only private collection represented—that of Chang Nai-Chi (Zhang Naiji 张乃骥, 1899-1948).

Extensive Archives of the 1935 Exhibition

The 1935 Exhibition archives are extensive, encompassing a wide range of materials, and are distributed across various international locations. In the UK, most of the archives related to the British Committee and the exhibition are housed in the RA. When I held those fragile pieces of paper, over eighty years old, in my hands, searching for historical details between the lines and uncovering new perspectives and interpretations, history came to life, transforming from distant events into vivid, tangible moments, filled with new meaning and depth (Figures 2 & 3). The RA Archives holds ten folders related to the 1935 Exhibition, including official papers, legal documents, memoranda, meeting minutes from the British Committee, and correspondence with various parties and the audience. These files, spanning from December 1934 to March 1936, not only document the entire exhibition process but also provide valuable insights into early twentieth-century exhibition history, curation practices, and installation methods. The photographic materials from the 1935 Exhibition document the packaging, transportation, and installation processes, as well as gallery views and detailed images of valuable artworks. The photography service was provided by Topical Press Agency, a London-based agency that provided photographic and advertising services from 1902 to 1957. In the late 1920s and the

1930s, the agency reached its peak with its team of one thousand agents in London and worldwide.⁹⁰



Figures 2 & 3. Working with the archives of the 1935 Exhibition at the RA.

There are five volumes of press cuttings regarding the exhibition, spanning publications from 1934 to 1936. These include newspapers and magazines from Britain, China, and various European countries, all in their respective languages, except for those in Chinese.⁹¹ The press cuttings were organised by Alleyne Clarice Zander (1893–1958), known as Ms. Zander, who was hired by the RA as a publicity agent and later became the publicity manager from 1934 to 1946. Zander's job responsibilities included overseeing the publicity and press-cutting archive for the

⁹⁰ "Topical Press," Exploring Twentieth-Century London, accessed March 3, 2023, <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/topical-press>.

⁹¹ The China-based newspapers, such as *Beihua jiebao* 北华捷报 [North China Herald], that are included in the press cutting, were all written in English.

institution's exhibitions.⁹² The newspapers and magazines cover various topics from the 1935 Exhibition, including reports on the exhibition's progress and related activities, articles about Chinese art and culture, interviews with notable visitors, fashion trends inspired by the exhibition, and even anecdotes about Chinese history and culture.

The materials housed at the RA attest to the significance and glamour of the 1935 Exhibition in art history and its impact on the Sino-British relationship. They serve as a valuable resource for understanding the exhibition history, reception, and legacy, emphasising the "China art craze" that permeated nearly every aspect of London metropolitan life. More importantly, they provide both textual and visual evidence of this cultural event and the era in which it took place, offering insights into pivotal moments, the notable figures involved, especially lesser-known contributors, and the minutiae that characterised the exhibition. Lu Zhang examines the British-held archives related to the 1935 Exhibition, illustrating the event as a platform for Chinese goodwill and emphasising the critical role of diverse sources in historical and provenance research.⁹³

As a result of the Chinese Civil War, archives from the Chinese side regarding the 1935 Exhibition are divided across the Taiwan Strait. Chen Shiju from the Academia Historica (*guoshiguan* 国史馆) in Taiwan notes that historical records about the NPM's overseas exhibitions are classified as "Nationalist Government" and "Ministry of the Interior" within the institution's holdings.⁹⁴ To be specific, the institution retains eight volumes of archives concerning the 1935 Exhibition. The archives span from April 1934 to September 1936 and cover issues such as personnel matters, committee meetings, loan agreements, and the storage of artefacts in Shanghai. On the other side, the documents that were not brought to Taiwan are housed in the Second Historical Archives of China (*Zhongguo dier lishi dang'an guan* 中国第二历史档案馆) in Nanjing, the former capital of the ROC before its relocation to Taiwan. In 2010, Liu Nannan from the Second Historical Archives compiled and published documents and correspondence between the NPM, the exhibition committee and official administration, providing the Chinese government's perspective on the organisation and management of the 1935

92 "Alleyne Clarice Zander (1893-1958)," RA, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/alleyne-clarice-zander>; "Records of Public Engagement Directorate," RA, accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/archive/records-of-public-engagement-directorate>.

93 Lu Zhang, "'Behind Every Treasure the Chinese Government Had Sent to the Exhibition They Had All the Good Will of the Chinese Nation': Archives Research on Chinese Government's Preparation for the 1935 RA International Exhibition of Chinese Art," in *Thinking about the Archive & Provenance Research*, eds. Carl Deußen and Yagmur Karakis, Boasblogs Papers 4 (Bonn, Bremen, Cologne, and Siegen: Boasblogs, 2022), 56–67.

94 Chen Shiju 陈世局, "Guoshiguan guancang Guomin zhengfu shiqi Gugong haiwai zhanlan shiliao jieshao" 国史馆馆藏国民政府时期故宫海外展览史料介绍 [Introduction to historical materials on overseas exhibitions of the NPM Collections in the Republican era], *Guoshi tongxun yanjiu* 国史通讯研究 7 (2014): 176.

Exhibition.⁹⁵ The geographical dispersion of the NPM's archives and collections challenges the completeness and accessibility of historical research, but also creates opportunities for new perspectives.

As one of the most significant international cultural events in the year 1935-1936, both the RA and the NPM recorded the 1935 Exhibition in their annual reports. The RA's annual report reveals the exhibition's statistics and financial expenditures, and revenue. The NPM's report, written by Zhuang Shangyan (Chuang Shang-yen 庄尚严, 1899-1980), one of the two secretaries of the Special Chinese Commission who accompanied the national treasures to London, documents the entire process of the exhibition, from the preparation to the return of the national treasures.⁹⁶ Alongside Zhuang's paper, his colleague, Fu Zhenlun (傅振伦, 1906-1999), who also travelled to London as an exhibition assistant, offered observations on the 1935 Exhibition, particularly regarding its curation and presentation. Fu's paper provides valuable reference and comparative insight for the emerging development of museums in China during that time.⁹⁷ In contrast to the RA's report, which is statistical, the NPM's reports are more narrative, featuring detailed accounts of experiences along with reflections and observations from the Chinese perspective on the transnational journey of the national treasures.

Additionally, Fu Zhenlun's diary, published in 2014 in the NPM-sponsored magazine, *Zijincheng* (紫禁城, literally The Forbidden City), presents detailed insights into the 1935 Exhibition, covering the period from July 1935 to March 1936.⁹⁸ During his travels in Britain and Europe, Fu reflected on local society and its relevance to Chinese modernisation, cultural heritage preservation, and nationalist sentiments. As a well-educated and promising young man, Fu's cross-cultural experiences and networking with Chinese and Westerners served as an example of the early twentieth-century generation of Chinese youth who ventured abroad to observe and learn from the world. Their pursuit of knowledge, advancement, and global engagement could draw parallels to the Grand Tour in history and foreshadow later developments in contemporary international education as a transcultural journey.

95 Liu Nannan 刘楠楠, "Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui shiliao xuanji" 北平故宫博物院参加伦敦中国艺术国际展览会史料选辑 [Selected archives of the participation of the NPM Beijing in the London International Exhibition of Chinese Art], *Minguo dang'an* 民国档案 3 (2010): 6-14.

96 Zhuang, "Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji," 113-6.

97 Fu Zhenlun, "Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui cangan ji" 中国艺术国际展览会参观记 [Observations from visiting the China art International Exhibition], *Guoli Beiping Gugong bowuyuan niankan* (1936): 137- 67.

98 Fu Zhenlun's diary of the 1935 Exhibition was serialised in twelve issues of the magazine in 2014. See "Fu Zhenlun Travelogue 1-12," *Zijincheng* 1-12, (2004).

The legacy of the 1935 Exhibition remained influential for decades, as figures involved continued to commemorate its significance. On November 26, 1985, to mark the golden jubilee of the exhibition, British art historian Basil Gray (1904-1989), the last surviving member of the British Committee, presented a commemorative paper. In it, he highlighted the event's lasting importance in the study of Chinese art in Britain, acknowledged the valuable contributions of the OCS, and shared his personal recollections.⁹⁹ Similarly, Na Zhiliang (那志良, 1908-1998) from the NPM, published commemorative works every decade starting in 1957 to mark his anniversaries at the institution. These books, which chronicle the history of the NPM, consistently include content related to the 1935 Exhibition, underscoring the enduring impact of this event on both the institution's history and the author's professional journey.

Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the 1935 Exhibition

As a highly significant international cultural event that captured widespread attention during its time and has left a lasting impact on future generations, the 1935 Exhibition has experienced an increase in scholarly interest in the last two decades, driven by newly available and examined archives. Researchers from diverse fields, including art history, museum studies, fashion, design, political science, and history, have examined the 1935 Exhibition. Scholars in global studies have contextualised it within broader historical and sociocultural frameworks, linking it to national and international narratives of the 1930s and beyond. The interdisciplinary and international nature allows researchers to approach the significance of the cultural event and its contexts, bringing a new contribution to the research matrix of the 1935 Exhibition and shedding new light on its profound impact and legacies.

As the first long march of the NPM collection overseas, the 1935 Exhibition has been studied for its significance in the museum history of the NPM. Xu Wanling from the NMP Beijing has demonstrated a dedicated commitment to uncovering the historical trajectory of the NPM Collection in the Republican era on China's early cultural exports, museum management, and heritage conservation.¹⁰⁰ *The Odyssey of China's Imperial Art Treasures* by Jeannette Shambaugh

99 Basil Gray, "The RA Exhibition of Chinese Art, 1935-36, in Retrospect," *Transactions of the OCS 1985-1986* (1987): 50.

100 For example, Xu Wanling 徐婉玲, "Guozhijiao zaiyu minxiangqin—yi Yingguo huangjia yishu xueyuan sanchang Zhongguo yishuzhan wei zhongxin de kaocha" 国之交在于民相亲——以英国皇家艺术学院三场中国艺术展为中心的考察 [Interaction between nations lies in friendship between people—an examination on three exhibitions of Chinese art at the RA in Britain], *China Culture*, February 20, 2019, http://en.chinaculture.org/cica/cn/2019-02/20/content_1349457.htm; Xu Wanling, "1935 nian Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui shimo yiqi

Elliott and David Shambaugh primarily chronicles the tumultuous formation and transformation of the imperial collections through dynasties, wars, and political shifts. Especially after the museumification of the palace in 1925 and the eventual division between Beijing and Taipei, the study emphasises the ongoing struggle for control and preservation of its collections.¹⁰¹ The 1935 Exhibition was a successful precedent for the export of Chinese culture, and the relocation and separation of the NPM collection through the maelstrom of violence, chaos, and starvation became a powerful symbol of cultural resilience of the nation. Behind the courage and commitment of the curators who devoted themselves to protecting these national treasures in motion was the deep fear of losing the country's civilisation in the face of national peril.

When studying modern Chinese art history, the lexicon frequently includes terms like “meet” and “encounter,” which emphasise its interactive character, while words such as “new,” “pioneer,” and ‘modern’ highlight its innovative and avant-garde nature. The modernisation of Chinese art can be understood as a pluralist trajectory that decentralises the Western paradigm of art, shaped by transcultural exchange and the interconnectedness of cultures, and deeply influenced by the historical context, including political upheavals, colonial encounters, shifting power dynamics, and the increasing internationalisation of cultural practices.¹⁰² This process resonates with decentralisation and decolonialisation, emphasising the interconnectedness of cultures, which are “plural in their nature” and exist as “dynamic entities” that influence and draw strength from their encounters with each other.¹⁰³ With exhibitions of modern and ancient Chinese art in major Western metropolises, the first decades of the twentieth century saw “European public in these years experienced a compelling encounter with Chinese culture.”¹⁰⁴

Within this broader framework of transcultural exchange and evolving artistic practices, the 1935 Exhibition forged a powerful cultural link between China and Britain, reshaping Western views of Chinese art and fostering comparative studies between Chinese and Western artistic traditions. It was instrumental in driving the modernisation of Chinese art, serving as a platform to express and represent Chinese modernity through innovative artistic forms. Jiang Jiehong and Lu Yangkun, from an art historian's perspective, explore the curatorship, exhibition space, and the academic

yingxiang” 1935 年伦敦中国艺术国际展览会始末及其影响 [The International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London in 1935 and its impact], *Zhonghua dushu bao* 中华读书报, December 18, 2019, 18.

101 Jeannette Shambaugh Elliott and David Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China's Imperial Art Treasures* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

102 Michaela Pejčochová, “Introduction,” in *Modern Chinese Painting & Europe: New Perceptions, Artists Encounters, and the Formation of Collections*, eds., Michaela Pejčochová and Clarissa von Spee (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2017), 21.

103 David Clarke, *Chinese Art and Its Encounter with the World*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 2-4

104 Pejčochová, “Introduction,” 21.

thinking, methodologies, and research scope embodied in the exhibition. Jiang Jiehong, one of the earliest researchers to write about the 1935 Exhibition, highlights the differences in art-making techniques, curatorship, and the appreciation of Chinese art within the British context. This, he notes, provides a unique opportunity for the world to see Chinese art and for China to reflect on itself.¹⁰⁵ Lu Yangkun's essay is grounded in the reconstruction of the exhibition space, reflecting the development of Chinese art history in the West, including its shortcomings and misinterpretations.¹⁰⁶

When reviewing the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition, Huang Wen-Yu acknowledged its significance in modernising Chinese art and the museum sector, particularly in showcasing cultural diplomacy, enhancing global appreciation of Chinese art, and representing early public exhibition practices that raised awareness and contributed to the systematisation of art history.¹⁰⁷ Also focusing on the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition, Hui Guo situates the 1935 Exhibition within the broader socio-political and cultural contexts of the early twentieth century, a period when Chinese art navigated between modernity and tradition in search of national identity, while also interacting with Japan and the West.¹⁰⁸ The distinct organisation of the Chinese and British committees, along with their intellectual negotiations, made the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition a unique opportunity to showcase Chinese art through modern exhibition practices.¹⁰⁹

Expanding the research scope from art to literature, Tokyo-educated Fan Liya views the 1935 Exhibition as a significant interaction in the artistic and cultural transmission between “Chinese minds,” “Western eyes,” and “Japanese eyes.”¹¹⁰ The success of the 1935 Exhibition was largely attributed to influential Chinese writers and artists, most of whom were Western- educated, who actively promoted Chinese culture in the West. Their efforts were well-received by British

105 Jiehong 节泓, “Diyici yuanzheng—1935 nian Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui zai Lundun” 第一次远征——1935 年中国艺术国际展览会在伦敦 [The first expedition—1935 International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London], *Zhongguo shuhua* 中国书画 6 (2004): 98-105.

106 Lu Yangkun 鲁旻堃, “Yuanjing chenggou yu zhishi shengcheng: dui Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui de zaisikao” 原境重构与知识生成：对伦敦中国艺术国际展览会的再思考 [Reconstructing contexts and generating knowledge: reconsideration of the London International Exhibition of Chinese Art], *Nanjing yishu daxue xuebao* 南京艺术大学学报 6 (2020): 33-9.

107 Huang Wen-Yu 黄雯瑜, “1935 nian ‘Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui’ Shanghai yuzhan de jindai yiyi” 1935 年“中国艺术国际展览会”上海预展的近代意义 [The modern significance of the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition of the 1935 International Exhibition of Chinese Art], *Gugong wenwu yuekan* 故宫文物月刊, 457 (April 2021), 92-101.

108 Hui Guo, “Writing Art History in Early Twentieth Century China” (PhD thesis, University of Leiden, 2010), 138-9.

109 Ibid. 138.

110 Fan Liya, “The 1935 London International Exhibition of Chinese Art: The China Critic Reacts,” *China Heritage Quarterly* 30/31 (September 2012), accessed October 18, 2024, http://chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=030_fan.inc&issue=030; Fan Liya 范丽雅, “Chongkao 1935 nian Lundun yizhan zai Zhongguo yishushi he zhongxi wenhua jiaoliushi shang de yiyi” 重考 1935 年伦敦艺展在中国艺术史和中西文化交流史上的意义 [Rethinking the significance of the 1935 London Chinese Art Exhibition in Chinese art history and Sino-Western cultural exchange], *Artron*, September 6, 2021, <https://video.artron.net/c7952.html>.

intellectuals, shifting the reliance on Japanese sources for knowledge of China, despite a persistent knowledge gap among the general public. During this process, Chinese literati engaged in literary and artistic pursuits to shape a brighter national future and search for a national identity, while also participating in a cultural diplomatic exchange between China and Britain, amid the turbulence in 1930s China.

This cross-cultural dialogue fused traditional Chinese art with global cultural influences, transforming the exhibition into a platform for new interpretations and comparative perspectives on evolving cultural identities. This comparison exists in the parallel analysis of the 1935 Exhibition alongside similar exhibitions from the same period. For example, Vivian Yan Li examines the 1935 Exhibition as one of the early examples of other exported Chinese exhibitions in the 1930s. These exhibitions presented Chinese art as “resilient and continuous, rather than romantic and static,” reflecting its elevated philosophical prestige, which was driven by overseas returning intellectuals and promoted by the government.¹¹¹

The comparison also extends to an analysis of the 1935 Exhibition with other travelling exhibitions concerning Chinese national treasures. Wu Sue-Ying considers the 1935 Exhibition as “a precursor,” “a creative attempt,” and “an exemplary example” for subsequent travelling exhibitions of objects of the NPM, especially the touring “The Chinese Art Treasures” to the United States in 1961-62.¹¹² Because of the social, cultural, and ideological connotations showcased in the display, it was a crucial tendency to intervene in the study of exhibitions with cultural wholeness. Additionally, for the collections kept in the Palace Museum in Beijing, Susan Naquin combs through its history of going abroad for exhibitions since 1949, especially after the Cultural Revolution to the early 2000s.¹¹³

Beyond art history, the 1935 Exhibition sparked discussions in fields such as politics, economics, and diplomacy of the countries involved. Reflecting both domestic and international socio-political factors of China, Jason Steuber interprets the event as “the culmination” of Chinese art exhibitions of the time, revealing its competitive and nationalist nature.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, Ilaria Scaglia claims that the 1935 Exhibition was an orchestrated, somewhat performative display of interwar European internationalism, with diverse national bodies collaborating at every phase to

111 Vivian Yan Li, “Art Negotiations: Chinese International Art Exhibitions in the 1930s” (Master’s dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2006), iii.

112 Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 19, 61-2.

113 See Susan Naquin, “The Forbidden City Goes Abroad: Qing History and the Foreign Exhibitions of the Palace Museum, 1974-2004,” *T’oung Pao* 90, no. 4/5 (2004): 341–97.

114 Steuber, “The Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 530.

create a fully internationalised exhibition exclusively dedicated to Chinese art, gathering international collections in London.¹¹⁵ Despite lingering contradictions, such as the coexistence of “universalism,” “assumption about national difference,” and varying allegiances among participants, the event provided a stage for a utopia of internationalism in pursuit of a unified goal.¹¹⁶ In recent years, Scaglia has continued her research on how internationalism was manifested in large-scale cultural events during the interwar period, realised through the cooperation of international or regional organisations. As she argues in her work, these events, or “political performances,” not only facilitated navigation of international relations but also employed emotional appeals to achieve both political and non-political objectives.¹¹⁷ Behind the booming scene lay contradictions within the complex political and cultural landscape of the 1930s. Building on Scaglia’s argument on internationalism, Antony Best highlights the political implications of the 1935 Exhibition, noting the distinct needs and objectives of the key forces involved. He argues that the exhibition served as a balancing act, allowing the British state to showcase its foreign policies, maintain its commercial presence in China, and protect its interests in East Asia, particularly during the Second Sino-Japanese War.¹¹⁸

Furthermore, other research perspectives on the 1935 Exhibition include its influence on fashion and design, highlighting how this grand cultural event that showcased “Eastern aesthetics” corrected Western misconceptions about Chinese art. It also advanced the influence of Chinese aesthetics within the Western fashion and design industries, inspiring London’s fashion, urban culture, and wide civic life.¹¹⁹ Wu Yue confirms the “chasing after Chinese clothing fashion” in Britain in the following years after the 1935 Exhibition and lasting until the 1940s.¹²⁰ In her thesis that examines the representation of China in *The Illustrated London News* from 1840 to 1940, Wu acknowledges the weekly magazine’s role in promoting the 1935 Exhibition and positioning

115 Scaglia, “The Aesthetics of Internationalism,” 105-137.

116 Ibid. 136-37.

117 See Ilaria Scaglia, *Emotions of Internationalism: Feeling International Cooperation in the Alps in the Interwar Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Ilaria Scaglia, “‘Beauty Has Ever a Healing Touch’: Visible Internationalism at the 1927 Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art in London,” *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 1 (2022): 1-15.

118 Antony Best, “‘To Contemplate the Soul of the Oldest Civilization in the World’: Britain and the Chinese Art Exhibition of 1935–36,” *The International History Review* 45, no. 2 (April 2023): 293.

119 Zheng Lijun 郑立君, “Lundun Zhongguo yizhanhui yu Zhongguo duiwai sheji jiaoliu” 伦敦中国艺展会与中国对外设计交流 [The London exhibition of Chinese art and China’s international design exchange], in *Dongfang wenhua yu sheji zhexue: Di’erjie Dongfang sheji luntan ji 2016 Dongfang wenhua yu sheji zhexue guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 东方文化与设计哲学：第二届东方设计论坛暨 2016 东方文化与设计哲学国际学术研讨会论文集 [Oriental culture and design philosophy: Proceedings of the second Oriental Design Forum and 2016 international symposium on Oriental culture and design philosophy], ed. Zhou Wuzhong 周武忠 (Shanghai: Shanghai Jiao Tong Daxue Chubanshe, 2017), 44–50.; Xu Wanling, “Guozhijiao zaiyu minxiangqin.”

120 Wu Yue 吴悦, “Lundun xinwen huabao” yu jindai Zhongguo tuxiang” 《伦敦新闻画报》与近现代中国图像 [Illustrated London News and images of modern China], (PhD thesis, China Academy of Art, 2021), 66.

Britain as a key authority in Chinese art studies, but criticises its Western- centric perspective, which downplays the China's crucial role, despite the exhibition primarily showcasing Chinese government-sent collections.¹²¹ However, these studies portray the 1935 Exhibition as a one-way cultural export from China to the West. The exhibition's impact on China's urban and consumer cultures remains underexplored, despite these areas being common research subjects in the Republican period. Moreover, the studies primarily focus on the outward export of Chinese culture, overlooking the bi-directional cultural flow and the exhibition's influence on design and commercial sectors in China.

In sum, the 1935 Exhibition was not merely a cultural export, but a dynamic and reciprocal platform that fostered transcultural exchange, modernised Chinese art practice and historiography, and contributed to China's emerging national identity in a global context. The extensive research regarding the chosen event identifies transcultural exchange and cross-border mobility as central themes. As a travelling exhibition, it not only enabled the cross-border movement of physical art objects but also symbolised the circulation of ideas, aesthetic values, and diplomatic intent. Yet, existing scholarship often treats the logistics of transportation as a preparatory or intermediary phase, overlooking the significance of the people involved, the routes taken, the methods used, and the labour dynamics at play. This is a critical omission, particularly in light of the inefficiencies of early twentieth-century cargo systems, the rarity of long-distance individual travel, and the structural inequalities embedded in colonial power relations. Framing the exhibition through the lens of art mobility situates it within a broader context of global circulation, not as a passive movement of commodities or a consequence of imperialist plunder, but as a pivotal moment in which the Chinese government actively asserted cultural agency. This strategic and "proactive intervention" marked a shift towards purposeful cultural diplomacy and national self-representation. It also prefigured ongoing debates around the mobility and rightful ownership of Chinese art, while anticipating the state's later efforts to reclaim lost cultural heritage and promote Chinese culture on the global stage.

121 Ibid. 144-54.

Filling the Void: Catalogue and Related Literature of the 2019 Exhibition

In contrast to the extensive archives of the 1935 Exhibition, access to materials related to the 2019 Exhibition is limited, primarily to the catalogue, as official documents remain restricted due to their recent publication, strict museum policies, and pandemic-related challenges. This section explores the exhibition catalogue and related publications, which focus on the repatriation of Chinese cultural heritage and its broader implications. The alternative literature, while not directly addressing the exhibition, offers valuable insights into the ongoing discourse on cultural repatriation in China and beyond. These sources help to illuminate the complex relationship between nationalism, cultural heritage, and global debates on restitution, highlighting the exhibition's role in China's broader cultural and political narrative.

The 2019 Exhibition Catalogue and Repatriation Efforts

The catalogue of the exhibition was published by the Cultural Relics Press (*Wenwu chubanshe* 文物出版社), the only publisher in China specialising in cultural heritage under the administration of the Ministry of Culture. (Figure 4). The catalogue features an exquisite quarto, measuring twenty-three and a half centimetres by thirty and a half centimetres, printed on glossy coated paper. With the beautiful and large images of artworks and their details, brief text and loose layout, the catalogue for the 2019 Exhibition resembles more a photo book, or a display book, compared to the catalogues from its earlier counterparts. Each chapter and case study begins with a brief textual background explaining how the exhibits were lost, repatriated, and how Chinese policies evolved. While the current institutions holding the exhibits are listed, their previous ownership before repatriation is omitted. The catalogue offers only a brief appreciation of the artistic and cultural value of the exhibits, focusing more on general knowledge than scholarly analysis. For some items, the descriptions next to the photographs are limited to the title, date, dimensions, and current collection.

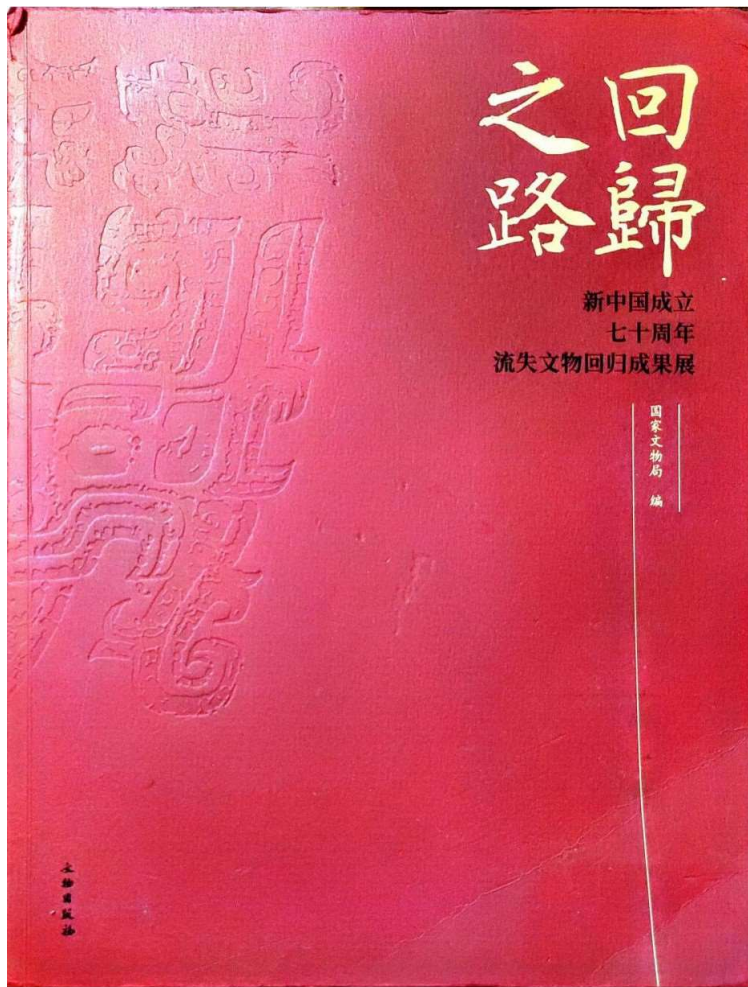


Figure 4. Catalogue of the 2019 Exhibition.

In 2021, the NMC published a book reviewing government efforts to repatriate Chinese cultural heritage since 1949, including objects from the 2019 exhibition and related events, framing these efforts as a demonstration of China's political and social evolution and the PRC's legitimacy as the inheritor of Chinese civilization, albeit with a propagandistic undertone.¹²² Together, the two publications are the only primary sources that directly address the 2019 Exhibition to date. Both present a Chinese historical narrative, counter-distortions, and aim to enhance public understanding and awareness through the topic of cultural repatriation, linking ancient civilisation with contemporary political discourse and positioning China's cultural growth within its broader national agenda.

¹²² Weng Huainan 翁淮南, "Qianyan" 前言 [preface], in Li Jinghui 李竞辉 and Yang Xiaoming 杨晓明, *Guilai: Zhongguo haiwai wenwu huigui jishi* 归来：中国海外文物回归纪实 [Coming home: A chronicle of Chinese overseas cultural relics repatriation] (Beijing: Zhongguo Dabaike Quanshu Chubanshe, 2022), 1.

Alternative Literature of the 2019 Exhibition and Discourse of Repatriation

To compensate for lacking direct literature on the 2019 Exhibition, this thesis consults tangentially related sources. Although these works do not focus specifically on the chosen exhibition, they offer valuable insights that help bridge the knowledge gap. First, there have been rich sources that address the objects displayed at the 2019 Exhibition, particularly those of great cultural and historical significance. A notable example is the exhibition's star showcase, the bronze heads of the Chinese zodiac from the Yuanmingyuan. As one of China's most well-known repatriation cases, the bronze heads have been studied from various perspectives, including their role in transcultural intellectual exchanges between China and the West through temporal and spatial shifts and different ways of display; their evolving symbolism as imperial artefacts shaped by their construction, destruction, and reconstruction, and their economic and provenance analysis, particularly regarding their afterlife following their forced removal.¹²³ Consulting the history of these objects clarifies how they were lost overseas—through legal acquisitions, illicit looting during wartime, and potentially unethical dealings with artefact dealers—while also uncovering common themes that illuminate the exhibition's purpose. The research highlights how objects such as the bronze heads reflect complex dynamics of power, culture, and politics.

A second key avenue for understanding the 2019 Exhibition is the ongoing discourse around cultural repatriation and restitution. The increasing public and academic interest in the return of Chinese relics is often linked to China's rising economic and political power, alongside the disruptions in the international art market in the twenty-first century, particularly following the controversial 2009 sale of the Yuanmingyuan bronze heads at Christie's in Paris.¹²⁴ Academic debates on repatriation and restitution engage with broader issues of cultural heritage management, legislation, national identity, and the tension between nationalism and universalism. In China, scholars have approached research on repatriation to preserve China's cultural identity and national pride, address historical wrongs, promote Chinese art and culture, enforce legal and ethical accountability, and enhance cultural diplomacy and soft power.

¹²³ Literature regarding the Yuanmingyuan Summer Palace, for example, see Greg M. Thomas, "The Looting of Yuanming Yuan and the Translation of Chinese Art in Europe," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 7, no. 2 (Autumn 2008): 22-54; Greg M. Thomas, "Yuanming Yuan/Versailles: Intercultural Interactions between Chinese European Palace Cultures," *Art History* 32, no. 1 (February 2009): 115-43; Louise Tythacott, "Trophies of War: Representing 'Summer Palace' Loot in Military Museums in the UK," *Museum & Society* 13, no. 3 (November 2015): 469-488; Louise Tythacott, *The Yuanmingyuan and Its Objects* (London: Routledge, 2017); Louise Tythacott, ed., *Collecting and Displaying China's "Summer Palace" in the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018); Christine Howald and Léa Saint-Raymond, "Tracking Dispersal: Auction Sales from the Yuanmingyuan Loot in Paris in the 1860s," *Journal for Art Market Studies* 2, no. 2 (2018): 1-23.

¹²⁴ Richard Curt Kraus, "The Repatriation of Plundered Chinese Art," *China Quarterly* 199 (September 2009): 839.

As a notable advocate for museums as “repositories of things and knowledge dedicated to the dissemination of learning,” James Cuno engages with proponents of nationalistic claims to cultural objects and underscores the necessity of preserving and sharing antiquities globally as “the cultural property of all humankind.”¹²⁵ Cuno notes that the central concern is a conflict between ordinary people who cherish their national art and nation-states with cultural property laws that tend to favour retaining artefacts within their borders.¹²⁶

Taking China as an example, in *Who Owns Antiquity*, Cuno discusses how the national cultural property laws are intertwined with modern nation-building politics, therefore having an impact on the excavation and preservation of cultural heritage. Cuno opposes the Chinese government’s efforts to repatriate war-looted art and combat smuggling, arguing that these actions serve state nationalism rather than genuine cultural preservation.¹²⁷ He criticises the “nationalist retentionist” policies of modern China, arguing that they are based solely on the geographical coincidence of the contemporary state with the diverse peoples and artefacts that once occupied the land now considered Chinese territory.¹²⁸ Cuno highlights the ambiguity surrounding China’s cultural repatriation efforts and its controversial ethnic minority policies, which not only lack deeper research and accurate information but also seem unnecessary to the main topic.¹²⁹

As an advocate of the “universal museum” or “encyclopaedic museum” concept, the retired President and Chief Executive Officer at the Getty Trust and former Director of the Art Institute of Chicago advocates the need for responsible acquisitions in exhibitions and advocates for the protection of shared art heritage against nationalist agendas and restrictive cultural property laws.¹³⁰ While his perspective is rooted in the belief that cultural heritage is a shared legacy for all of humanity, he does so by challenging the significance of nationhood and national identity, seeking to diminish the importance of national heritage movements. However, his oversight of the long-standing repatriation debate – including the origins of culturally significant objects with questionable provenance, their transport to museums primarily located in developed countries, the representation and narrative of these objects in such institutions, and the travel costs borne by individuals from the cultures of origin who wish to view and appreciate them – has attracted criticism from scholars in recent years.

125 James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), xxxi-ii.

126 Ibid. xxxvi.

127 Ibid. xxxii.

128 Ibid. 93.

129 Ibid. 95-103.

130 James Cuno, *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Kraus criticises Cuno for his selective and arguably chimerical approach to the issue of repatriation, particularly regarding Cuno's "unfounded fear" that countries like China seek to empty some of the world's largest museums.¹³¹ Kraus' paper was written in 2009 when the sale of bronze heads of rat and rabbit of Yuanmingyuan in Paris drew significant attention among the Chinese audience, sparking nationalist debates over the protection of cultural treasures. Confronting the complex historical and diplomatic context, Kraus argues that "China will certainly continue to demand the return of plundered art" due to the role of cultural repatriation in its "broader national cultural ambitions."¹³² However, he also critically contrasts China's "high-toned visions" of reclaiming lost art with its more 'profitable and unglamorous' role in the global cultural economy."¹³³

The discourse of cultural repatriation in China is often tied to nationalism, nation-building and nation-branding. As the claimed rightful owner of previously displaced objects, China is often portrayed as a victim of historical injustice and a victor when its cultural heritage is restored. Wang Kaixi, a specialist in Late Qing Dynasty history, reveals the complexities involved in legally repatriating Chinese cultural relics due to the diverse ways they were lost overseas historically, stressing that it is imperative to recover looted cultural relics still held by foreign nations.¹³⁴ From a legal perspective, Yu Meng examines the evolution of repatriation methods from a single-channel to a multifaceted approach, propelled by China's increasing national power, greater international engagement, and enhanced legal frameworks.¹³⁵ Meanwhile, Zuozhen Liu's work takes a more comprehensive and macro-level approach, situating cultural repatriation within the historical context of cultural loss as represented in Chinese historiography, along with its philosophical, ethical, and legal frameworks, such as whether original owners can reclaim cultural objects looted before the establishment of key international conventions.¹³⁶ Both Yu and Liu emphasised the importance of museums leveraging valid legal titles and adhering to due diligence standards in order to promote ethical practices and establish a robust framework for the return and donation of cultural artefacts.

131 Kraus, "The Repatriation of Plundered Chinese Art," 841.

132 Ibid. 842.

133 Ibid.

134 Wang Kaixi 王开玺, "Liushi haiwai de Yuanmingyuan wenwu zenyang caineng huigui zuguo?—lun liushi wenwu huigui de fangfa he tujing yu guoji fal" 流失海外的圆明园文物怎样才能回归祖国?——论流失文物回归的方法和途径与国际法理 [How can the lost Yuanmingyuan relics overseas be returned to the motherland?—methods and pathways for the return of lost relics and international legal principles], *Beijing shifan daxue xuebao* 北京师范大学学报 6, no. 246 (2014): 57.

135 Yu Meng 余萌, "Woguo haiwai liushi wenwu huigui tujing de shizheng fenxi" 我国海外流失文物回归途径的实证分析 [An empirical study of approaches to the recovery of the lost overseas Chinese cultural objects], *Wuda guojifa pinglun* 武大国际法评论 1 (2018): 109-10.

136 Zuozhen Liu, *The Case for Repatriating China's Cultural Objects* (Singapore: Springer, 2016).

While cultural repatriation has become a prominent global phenomenon, with Western museums—sometimes through small, performative gestures—returning artefacts to their countries of origin, it has sparked widespread debate among politicians, museum professionals, scholars, and the public.¹³⁷ This is closely linked to broader global discourses on decolonisation, which scrutinise the colonial legacies of museum collections and advocate for the restitution of cultural heritage. This trend is shaped by a critical reassessment of the “universal museum” concept and facilitated by advancements in art digitisation technologies. However, the path to cultural repatriation is fraught with complexities. In her dissertation, Zheng Xi calls for a balanced and cautious approach that finds middle ground between “cultural internationalism” and “cultural nationalism,” advocating for a fair and nuanced narrative surrounding artefacts with contested provenance.¹³⁸ In critiquing the “universal museum,” Zheng references former Chair of the ICOM Ethics Committee, Geoffrey Lewis, who suggests that such institutions may seek to maintain “a higher degree of immunity from claims for repatriation.”¹³⁹ From China’s perspective as a victim of wartime looting and illicit smuggling, Zheng underscores the urgent need for a robust global mechanism to facilitate the return of cultural relics, alongside raising awareness among authorities and the public about the significance of repatriation efforts. These developments encourage more collaborative approaches with source communities and different social sectors, thereby redefining the role of museums in addressing historical injustices and fostering equitable cultural exchanges.

Exhibition as Historical Space

Exhibitions are occasions for the condensed presentation of history, events, people, and ideologies, and art is used by officials or organisers as an expression of politics. The growth of exhibition history and curatorial studies as an academic field has sparked significant scholarly interest in the complex intersections of artworks, institutions, curatorial practices, and their semiotic dimensions. This expansion is largely due to the “development of curatorial studies and

137 Pierre Losson, “‘Opening Pandora’s Box: Will the Return of Cultural Heritage Objects to Their Country of Origin Empty Western Museums?’” *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 51, no. 6 (2021): 379-80.

138 Zheng Xi 郑希, “Ershiyi shiji yilai guoji wenwu fanhuan zhengce bianhua qushi yanjiu” 二十一世纪以来国际文物返还政策变化趋势研究 [Research on the changing trends in international cultural relics repatriation policies since the twenty-first century], (Master’s dissertation, Shanghai University, 2021), ii.

139 Ibid, 26; Geoffrey Lewis, “‘The ‘Universal Museum’: A Case of Special Pleading?’” in *Art and Cultural Heritage: Law, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Barbara T. Hoffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 381.

the profession of curatorship” and the “growing academic programs in curatorial practices.”¹⁴⁰ Exhibitions are increasingly recognised as powerful avenues for advancing historical narratives, shaping cultural discourse, and promoting national identities. As repositories of knowledge, they present carefully curated collections of objects and narratives, employing spatial arrangements, semiotics, and visual displays to immerse viewers in a structured experience that mirrors the zeitgeist of the time.

In recent years, exhibition history has increasingly integrated with regional and area studies, as well as with studies across other social sectors. Exhibitions act as dynamic repositories of knowledge and ideas, curating collections of objects, texts, and narratives that convey complex cultural and historical contexts. By bridging these fields, the study of exhibitions provides valuable insights into intellectual histories, revealing cultural debates, and highlighting the interconnectedness of art with broader political, economic, and social domains.¹⁴¹ By combining exhibition studies with regional research, scholars can explore the complexities of how art is displayed, interpreted, and politicised in different parts of the world and different periods. The regional, comparative, and international approach to analysing cultural practices and institutional conditions establishes the foundation for examining both shared and distinctive contexts. This approach stresses artistic representations, political influences, and geographic variations, offering a rethinking of regional art history from a global perspective.

This field of research is marked by diverse methods across disciplines, yet these varying approaches contribute to a rich, eclectic framework informed by the urgent political and cultural debates.¹⁴² In their 1996 anthology *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Reese Greenberg and other scholars bring a Euro-American lens to the cutting-edge field, focusing particularly on the dynamics between temporary exhibitions and the contentious relationship they have with established, permanent institutional displays. Two critical writings stand out in this anthology. Jean-Marc Poinot argues that exhibitions are sites where art intertwines with historical and political narratives, which tend to be “manifestly stronger and more evident.”¹⁴³ He contends that exhibitions shape history through the intentional arrangement and narrative layering of artworks, as well as through the architectural designs framing them. This creates a “new order of seeing” in

140 Maria-Kristiina Soomre, “Art, Politics and Exhibitions: (Re)writing the History of (Re)presentations,” *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 21 (2012): 106-7.

141 Stefano Collicelli Cagol, “Exhibition History and the Institution as a Medium,” *Stedelijk Studies Journal* 2 (2015), accessed April 4, 2024, <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/exhibition-history-and-the-institution-as-a-medium/>.

142 “Introduction,” in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reese Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 2.

143 Poinot, “Large Exhibitions,” 27.

which exhibitions are no longer purely symbolic utopias. Instead, they function as enclosures marked by hierarchical spatial organisation, permanence, and symbolic value, much like monuments.¹⁴⁴ In this framework, exhibitions go beyond presenting art as a separate, abstract concept for societal reflection. Instead, they become structured, quasi-permanent settings that embody the values and power structures of the societies that produce them.

Tony Bennett's concept of the "exhibitionary complex" explores how exhibitions historically served as instruments of state power, ideological transmission, and public education. He argues that exhibitions act as performative spaces, transforming private collections into public spectacles where displayed objects and bodies project state ideologies. This transition from private to public display involves moving objects from restricted, enclosed domains into open, accessible arenas. Through carefully curated representations, these exhibitions become vehicles for disseminating messages of power across society.¹⁴⁵ Bennett suggests that this process goes beyond merely transferring knowledge; it also subtly encourages self-surveillance and the internalisation of social norms, fostering a regulated form of public behaviour that aligns with state interests.

The ideas of Poinot and Bennett resonate with Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia and Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. Foucault's concept of heterotopia provides a lens to understand enclosed spaces like museums and exhibitions as reflections of societal norms and as areas where those norms can be questioned or inverted. These spaces act as mirrors, presenting cultural values and simultaneously creating environments that challenge, disrupt, or reimagine those values.¹⁴⁶ By juxtaposing objects that span diverse temporalities, geographies, and cultural contexts, exhibition spaces create a layered reality, one that exists both within and outside conventional time and place.¹⁴⁷ Through the meticulous curation and preservation of objects, exhibitions present "immediate knowledge," as Foucault puts it, a form of direct insight that connects past representations with present realities, enabling audiences to experience a fusion of historical and contemporary narratives.¹⁴⁸ In this way, exhibitions function not only as sites of reflection but also as places where cultural norms can be critically examined and redefined.

Pierre Nora expands the media or agents of representation beyond enclosed spaces to include a diverse range of symbolic sites, tangible and intangible objects. In his notion of *lieux de mémoire*,

144 Ibid. 27, 38.

145 Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 59.

146 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

147 Ibid. 27.

148 Ibid. 26.

these sites construct memory by preserving it, while also serving as arenas where that memory can be questioned and contested.¹⁴⁹ Through their symbolic significance, such sites play a crucial role in shaping how societies remember and interpret the past, providing spaces for both continuity and critical re-evaluation of historical narratives. Lieux de mémoire are not static historical sites but dynamic intersections of history and memory.¹⁵⁰ They represent the preservation of the past and its continuous reinterpretation, shaping how we understand history and envision the future. Their significance lies in their fluidity, as they transform over time, offering a lens for both reflecting on the past and imagining future possibilities.

Exhibitions, as curated spaces, act as powerful intermediaries between artists, their works, and the public, shaping cultural discourse and societal narratives. Anna C. Cline explores how exhibitions forge connections among artworks, transforming them into cohesive, organic experiences that enhance interpretation and imbue objects with symbolic power linked to ideological aims.¹⁵¹ She argues that exhibitions are not just reflective of societal concerns and cutting-edge ideologies, but also serve to reinforce dominant cultural narratives, often influenced by government perspectives. In this way, exhibitions transcend their role as simple art displays, becoming active agents of collective memory, ideological reinforcement, and socio-political influence.¹⁵²

By shaping public opinion and engaging with political values, exhibitions highlight the interconnectedness of art and social structures. They not only produce knowledge but also shape individual and collective identities. When governments designate institutions, museums, and monuments as sites of public discourse, they may compress diverse historical memories into a singular narrative aligned with national identity.¹⁵³ In this context, exhibitions become focal points where cultural and political narratives converge, consolidating collective memory and reinforcing the official national story. Through their carefully curated displays, these exhibitions function as tools of representation, shaping both the perception of the past and the construction of national identity.

The study of Chinese art has a long tradition, historically rooted in fields such as epigraphy and antiquarianism, and evolving into a “ritual-literature-art” trinitarian structure intertwined with

149 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 9–10.

150 Ibid. 19.

151 Anna C. Cline, “The Evolving Role of the Exhibition and Its Impact on Art and Culture” (Senior thesis, Trinity College, 2012), 6.

152 Ibid. 3–5.

153 Pierre Nora, “The Era of Commemoration,” in *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, Vol. 3, eds. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 635.

individual spiritual practices, feudal hierarchy, and broader socio-economic and political contexts.¹⁵⁴ Ancient China left a rich legacy of inscriptions, treatises and inventories that document principles of artistic creation and appreciation, providing insight into historical aesthetics and artistic values. The systematic study, however, became formalised at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a group of Western scholars, curators, collectors, dealers, and orientalists—often overlapping in their roles—who were instrumental in establishing Chinese art history as an academic field in the West during the 1920s and 1930s. Their endeavour was purposed to project a modern nation-state image of China, introduce new categories of fine arts, and adopt academic methodologies for the study of art history.¹⁵⁵ However, due to being embedded in different cultural contexts, Chinese art history in the West faced challenges such as conceptual mismatches, knowledge gaps, and exoticisation, leading to misreading or partial understanding. Meanwhile in China, the beginnings of modern art history writing emerged, marked by a strong nationalist overtone and supported by the state, as Chinese scholars and artists began to analyse and categorise national art using historical and aesthetic frameworks.¹⁵⁶ The 1935 Exhibition provides a key example of the complex yet significant confluence between Chinese culture and the Western world. In contrast, the 2019 Exhibition offered a more Chinese official historical narrative and rhetoric, shaped by the social and political transformations of the past eighty years, reflecting a narrative rooted in Chinese perspectives and experiences.

Two key disconnections in the global discourse on Chinese art history are pointed out: the lack of connection between Chinese art and the study of other regional arts, and the need to reconsider Chinese art concepts outside a Western-centric framework. This calls for “a new, three-dimensional structure” that examines regional art vertically, while also linking it horizontally to the broader global art scene on both historical and conceptual levels.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, scholars such as Wu Hung, Vimalin Rujivacharakul, and Michelle Ying Ling Huang have advocated for a more nuanced framework that acknowledges Chinese art and its interconnections with broader contexts, considering perspectives such as expressive techniques, material culture, collection practices, perception and reception.¹⁵⁸ Their works seek to reconceptualise Chinese art not as an

154 Zhang Fa 张法, “Zhongguo gudai yishu de yixi jiegou” 中国古代艺术的体系结构 [The systemic structure of ancient Chinese art], *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 4 (2021): 166-85.

155 Hui Guo, “Writing Art History”, 171.

156 Ibid. 172.

157 Wu Hung, *Chinese Art and Dynastic Time*, 4

158 Vimalin Rujivacharakul, *Collecting China: The World, China, and a History of Collecting* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011); Michelle Ying Ling Huang ed., *The Reception of Chinese Art Across Cultures* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

isolated tradition but as part of a dynamic, global conversation, fostering greater cross-cultural understanding and collaboration within the field.

The studies of Chinese exhibition history gained momentum after the Cultural Revolution, aligning with China's economic growth and cultural revitalisation, and soon became part of the global field of exhibition history research. Key themes include the cross-border movement of Chinese artworks, the museumification of Chinese history and its representations of past and present, the role of exhibitions in nation-building and national identity, the portrayal of Chinese art within decolonial and post-colonial discourses, and the impact of globalisation and localisation.

Reflecting on the museum boom as a manifestation of China's evolving cultural and political ambitions, 2014 marked a notable year for scholarship on Chinese museum studies with three publications in English by Kirk A. Denton in the United States, Marzia Varutti in Europe, and Tracy L-D Lu in Hong Kong. They provide valuable insights into the role of Chinese museums in shaping national narratives and public education, exploring the interplay between national memory, cultural representation, and political agendas. Lu's approach is historical, tracing the Western-influenced origins of Chinese museums in the late nineteenth century within colonial contexts and examining their evolving social, political, and cultural roles through changing times. Then she explores how new technologies have diversified and digitised museum collections and exhibition formats, broadening their reach and impact. Under Lu's analysis, the formation of the early Chinese museum industry is framed as a social movement shaped by Sino-Western exchange. In this process, influential Chinese and Western figures—spanning official and social, religious and secular sectors—played significant roles. These individuals were also key players in China's concurrent transition away from imperial rule and its early movement toward democratisation.¹⁵⁹ In Lu's linear narrative, illustrated through key museums, Western-origin museums have gradually transformed into distinctly Chinese institutions amid China's social, political, and cultural transformations across historical stages. Over time, they have evolved into powerful tools for constructing national identity and articulating cultural selfhood.

Both focusing on post-Mao China, Varutti and Denton agree that the country's official museums operate as politicised instruments of national ideology, shaping and reinforcing state-sanctioned narratives of identity and history through their architecture, curatorial choices, interpretive frameworks, and representational strategies. Amid rapid economic growth, failed calls for

159 Tracey L-D Lu, *Museums in China: Power, Politics, and Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 3-17.

democratic reform, and significant global shifts at the close of the twentieth century, both scholars observe that Chinese museums have adopted narratives of cultural nationalism to legitimise the regime, inspire unity, and boost tourism.¹⁶⁰ The reason was that Communist ideology no longer serves as “the main cohesive force in Chinese society.”¹⁶¹ While the need to “participate in the market economy by contributing to the cultural life of cities, making them more attractive to tourism, commercial investment, and global trade” has increased in the new era, the essential functions of Chinese museums, as Denton points out in an earlier essay, have remained focused on propagating and legitimizing the authority of the state.¹⁶² Therefore, “claiming a historically uninterrupted link” to the imperial tradition and framing contemporary socialist achievements “in a line of continuity” with this legacy has become a core strategy in today’s museums and other cultural forms.¹⁶³ Varutti identifies two main approaches for establishing a connection between objects and national identity with an exhibition space. The first approach involves the objectification of the nation through the display and interpretation of museum collections, while the second entails international distribution, loans, or travelling exhibitions.¹⁶⁴

From the perspective of memory studies, Denton’s analysis reveals how exhibitions in Chinese museums are meticulously curated by the CPC to emphasise historical events and figures that align with its official narrative—such as the struggles of anti-feudalism and anti-imperialism, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the Communist Revolution, while downplaying or reinterpreting more contentious periods, including the Cultural Revolution. The main argument in Denton’s book is that these curated memory sites are central to the ruling party’s strategy of maintaining authority by shaping collective memory, reinterpreting sensitive historical moments, and weaving public history into state ideology, thereby mitigating potentially humiliating aspects of the past or even reframing them as sources of national resilience and unity. Denton believes contemporary museums in China reflect an “ideologically ambiguous” cultural landscape, where commercialisation, globalisation, and the official historical narrative intertwine, underlying the flexibility within state discourse and the evolving nature of public memory.¹⁶⁵ Similar ideas can be found in Lu’s and Varutti’s books. Together, the three writers’ insights into the mechanisms

160 Varutti, *Museums in China*, 2-3; Kirk A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), 9.

161 Varutti, *Museums in China*, 2.

162 Kirk A. Denton, “Museums, Memorial Sites and Exhibitionary Culture in the People’s Republic of China,” *The China Quarterly* 9 (2005): 572.

163 Varutti, *Museums in China*, 98.

164 Ibid. 80.

165 Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 9-10; Léo Kloeckner, “Kirk A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China*,” *China Perspectives* 1 (2015): 66-7.

and historical development of the Chinese museum industry, particularly through notable state-led institutions like the NPM, NMC, offer valuable references for this thesis. The writers also explore regional and emerging museums, as well as innovative exhibition formats. Within the framework of official historical narratives, these museums also attempt to address themes such as ethnic minorities, Hong Kong, and other culturally nuanced elements. Although these themes lie outside the main scope of my thesis, this analysis highlights how such institutions function under state guidance while occasionally incorporating diverse regional identities and perspectives within a national context.

Chapter 4. China at Crossroads: Historical Backgrounds

The understanding and reinterpretation of historical changes typically occur at specific historical moments, particularly when there are significant shifts in how people observe their society and history.¹⁶⁶

Wang Hui (汪晖, 1959-)

Despite differing historical contexts, both the 1930s and 2010s were marked by significant challenges and transitions. In 1935, China faced profound internal strikes and external pressures, with Japanese aggression threatening its sovereignty. Unresolved problems inherited from previous regimes worsened the nation's struggles. In contrast, by 2019, China had emerged as the world's second-largest economy and a pivotal global player. However, in this period, China faced new challenges, including intensifying trade tensions with the United States and rising global economic uncertainty. In both eras, China faced crises and opportunities that demanded decisive leadership and strategic responses, shaping its trajectory of development and transformation. These two historical junctures carry profound symbolic significance in China's history, demonstrating how the nation navigated major turning points to adapt and thrive. Though separated by over eight decades, the similarities in the gravity of their challenges underline the enduring importance of leadership and adaptability in China's historical narrative. Before the journeys of Chinese art official commerce, this chapter provides a broad overview of the historical contexts of the 1930s and 2010s to set the stage for the analysis that follows.

China in 1935: “The Golden Age” in Crisis

In 1935, China was in its twenty-fourth year as the ROC, navigating a turbulent path of political, economic, and social transformation. The country faced a complex web of challenges, including internal political fragmentation, foreign intervention, and regional disparities. Merely two decades earlier, China had ended over two millennia of imperial rule, embarking on a bold and revolutionary experiment as a fledgling republic. This transformative period was marked by profound struggles, described as a “painful process of pioneering,” as the nation endeavoured to

166 Wang Hui 汪晖, “Liangyang zhijian de wenming” 两洋之间的文明 [Civilisations between two oceans], *Jingji daokan* 经济导刊 8 (2015): 12.

modernise and “develop new resources in accordance with new processes and scientific inventions.”¹⁶⁷ The early twentieth century in China was a time of revolutionary change, intertwined with the global expansion of Western capitalism, which profoundly disrupted traditional society and economy, and spurred ideas of self-renewal among advanced Chinese.¹⁶⁸ The nation grappled with the twin pressures of foreign encroachment and domestic upheavals, striving to redefine its identity and adapt to a rapidly shifting world.

Despite efforts to assert its independence and establish itself as a sovereign entity, the national government found itself entangled in a complex web of foreign interference and domination. The Republican government did not resolve issues left by the Qing Dynasty, such as unequal treaties, territorial concessions, and foreign extraterritorial rights, which continued to undermine China’s sovereignty and modernisation efforts. The fragmented political landscape hindered effective governance, plagued by corruption, weak institutions, and conflicts between the KMT and the CPC. Regional warlords, focused on their own interests rather than national unity, further exacerbated social disparities and impeded the efforts to consolidate power under a centralised government. Despite these setbacks, China entered an era of awakening, decentralisation, and the rise of nationalism. This period saw the competing forces of tradition and modernity shape China’s political and cultural landscape, fuelling intense debates over the nation’s identity and future direction. Confronted by the legacy of Western imperialism and the demands of modernisation, China sought to reconcile its historical roots with the aspirations of an emerging nation-state, embarking on a journey of transformation that was as challenging as it was unprecedented.

From the mid-nineteenth century, China was subjected to political, economic, and military pressure from Western powers driven by the rapid development of capitalism and industrialism.¹⁶⁹ The arrival of foreign powers from the sea, the emergence of a new social order, economic structures and the intrusion of unfamiliar cultures forced China to readjust its traditional governance and agrarian economy. At the same time, the establishment of concessions and treaty ports spurred the rise of coastal and riverine cities in the south and east, marking China’s shift

167 Chiang Kai-Shek and Soong Mei-ling, *China at the Crossroads: An Account of the Fortnight in Sian, When the Fate of China Hung in the Balance* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1937), 12.

168 Wang Hui, “Shiji de dansheng—20 shiji Zhongguo de lishi weizhi (zhiyi)” 世纪的诞生——20 世纪中国的历史位置 (之一) [The birth of the century—the historical position of China in the twentieth century, Part I], *Kaifang shidai* 开放时代 4 (2017): 21.

169 Peng Chun Chang, *China at the Crossroads: The Chinese Situation in Perspective* (London: Evan Brothers, 1936), 121.

from a land-centered empire to a “maritime China” era.¹⁷⁰ The shift in global dynamics forced China to relinquish its long-held “sense of self-sufficient,” a sentiment rooted in its enduring “satisfaction of traditional forms and methods” as the “Middle Kingdom.”¹⁷¹ China underwent a series of “collapse” and “transformation,” striving to build a modern state, as a response to both the internal and external challenges it confronted.¹⁷² The ideology of nationalism, as an imported product, evolved its meaning along with the transformations of Chinese society and the process of westernisation. The various notions of nationalism and the resulting debates about the East versus the West, and ancient versus modern, reflected the Chinese intellectuals at that time, identifying and rethinking China’s position as a part of global history.

The short-lived “ideological vacuum” following the collapse of the dynastic system allowed political movements and imported ideologies to emerge and compete for dominance as China sought to redefine its identity and governance structure, trying to shape the future direction of the nation.¹⁷³ Beginning with vernacular literature and subsequently expanding to other progressive trends in society, the New Cultural Movement (*xinwenhua yundong* 新文化运动) led by advanced intellectuals and returned overseas students throughout the 1910s and 1920s aimed to replace old traditions and the existing social system. The movement was “a comprehensive series of progressive events and developments that collectively constituted the cultural and intellectual revolution.”¹⁷⁴ Advanced intellectuals and activists advocated for embracing Democracy and Science—the “two gentlemen” who could save China. Politically, the demands centred on national sovereignty, modernisation, and sweeping social reforms.

China’s international status improved after the First World War, as it was one of the Allies and a member of the League of Nations. However, the unfair treatment that China received at the Paris Peace Conference on the Shandong issue and the weak attitude of the Beiyang Government triggered student protests in Beijing, leading to the May Fourth Movement (*wusi yundong* 五四运动), aiming to oppose Japanese demands and defend China’s territorial integrity. The movement proved to be an effective mass political movement against foreign imperialism.

On a deeper level, it had a profound impact on China’s cultural and political transformations. The May Fourth Movement, along with the earlier New Culture Movement, promoted advancements

170 John K. Fairbank, “Introduction: Maritime and Continental in China’s History,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 12, *Republican China, 1912–1949*, part 1, ed. John K. Fairbank (1983; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 20.

171 Peng Chun Chang, *China at the Crossroads*, 158.

172 Ibid. 123–26.

173 Mackerras, *China in Transformation*, 36.

174 Ibid. 41.

in education, gender equality, and publishing.¹⁷⁵ Words such as “culture (*wenhua* 文化)” and “civilisation (*wenming* 文明)” were introduced into Chinese discourse from an anthropological terminological perspective.¹⁷⁶ The word “art (*meishu* 美术)” and its modern concepts and practices entered China more prominently around the same time, as Chinese students studying Japan and European countries increased and brought back the new ideas.¹⁷⁷ The ideological pluralism provided crucial ideological and organisational groundwork for the founding of the CPC in 1921 and its rise on the Chinese political stage.¹⁷⁸ Communist ideas gained popularity, driven by some leftist intellectuals such as Li Dazhao (李大钊, 1889-1927) and Chen Duxiu (陈独秀, 1879-1942).

While much of the world grappled with the devastation of World War I, China’s national industries experienced an “economic miracle.” The war’s upheaval created an opportunity for China to expand its industrial sector as European powers were distracted and their economies weakened. The resulting economic boom enabled China’s bourgeoisie to gain influence and consolidate power.¹⁷⁹ Although China remained an agriculture-dominated nation with “a large agricultural (or rural) sector” and “a much smaller non-agricultural (or urban) sector,” domestic industries, Sino-foreign joint ventures, and foreign investments grew significantly during this period, bringing notable economic changes despite pronounced regional disparities.¹⁸⁰ Infrastructure development surged, with railways extending from the eastern coastal regions into the central hinterland, enhancing national connectivity.¹⁸¹ Urbanisation accelerated, with cities such as Shanghai emerging as economic and cultural hubs, increasing mobility, boosting urban

175 Benjamin I. Schwartz, “Themes in Intellectual History: May Fourth and After,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 12, *Republican China, 1912–1949*, part 1, ed. John K. Fairbank (1983; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 428.

176 Luo Zhitian, “Wholeness and Individuality: Revisiting the New Culture Movement, as Symbolized by May Fourth,” *Chinese Studies in History* 52, no. 3–4 (2019): 193–4.

177 Jiang Diankun 姜殿坤 and Li Yinghe 李英翯, “‘Meishu’ ciyuan xiaokao” “美术”词源小考 [Etymology of “art”], *Guangming ribao* 光明日报, June 25, 2018, 14.

178 Party History Research Centre of the CPC Central Committee, *Zhongguo gongchandang de jiushinian (xin minzhuzhuyi geming shiqi)* 中国共产党的九十年 (新民主主义革命时期) [Ninety years of the Communist Party of China (period of the New Democratic Revolution)], (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, dangjian duwu chubanshe: 2016), 20, quoted in Xiao Guiqing 肖贵清 and Liu Zhijun 刘治君, “Mao Zedong guanyu wusi yundong lishi diwei de fenxi he pingjia” 毛泽东关于五四运动历史地位的分析 and 评价 [Mao Zedong’s analysis and evaluation of the historical status of the May Fourth Movement], *Xibei gongye daxue xuebao* 西北工业大学学报 2 (2019): 10.

179 Marie-Claire Bergère, *The Golden Age of the Chinese Bourgeoisie 1911-1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 63.

180 Albert Feuerwerker, “Economic Trends, 1912–49,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 12, *Republican China, 1912–1949*, part 1, ed. John K. Fairbank (1983; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 428.

181 Chen Qingchen 陈清晨, “Guoqu yinian de shijie jingji yu Zhongguo jingji” 过去一年的世界经济与中国经济 [The global economy and China’s economy over the past year], originally published in *Qingnianjie* 青年界 9, no. 3 (1936), Marxists Internet Archive, accessed September 29, 2024, <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/chengqichang/mia-chinese-chengqichang-193509-10.htm>.

populations, and transforming lifestyles. However, this rapid growth also introduced “the same problems as cities in other industrial capitalist economies.”¹⁸² China’s urban modernity began to draw comparisons with the West, even adopting Western narratives about urban development and characteristics.

The collapse of the imperial system and the subsequent fragmentation of China allowed autonomous social forces to emerge, particularly in urban areas, which contributed to the country’s economic modernisation and the formation of a nascent bourgeois society. Despite the chaos of warlord rule and ideological conflicts, these forces laid the groundwork for local self-government and played a key role in shaping the modernisation of China.¹⁸³ However, this “Golden Age” of the bourgeoisie was short, as it was gradually absorbed by the state after 1927, marking the end of an era of regional autonomy and the beginning of a new phase of centralised governance under the KMT.¹⁸⁴ Fragmentation ended when Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi 蒋介石, 1887-1975) led the National Revolutionary Army (*Guomin geming jun* 国民革命军) into Nanjing during the Northern Expedition, declaring it the national capital of the Republic. This move symbolised the consolidation of power under the KMT, unifying the country after years of civil war and regional division. Although challenges persisted, this marked the start of a new era in China’s political and social development, driven by the KMT’s centralisation of authority. Driven by rising nationalism, many hoped that the new government would restore national unity, strengthen the state, and foster economic growth. However, before addressing these aspirations, the Nanjing government prioritised resolving internal struggles over who would wield ultimate power.¹⁸⁵

The KMT managed to maintain social stability and economic resilience through the world depression of the early 1930s, despite having already begun to experience a downturn caused by an economic crisis, foreign aggression, and the rise of domestic revolutionary movements.¹⁸⁶ While Western nations began recovering through military-industrial expansion, China’s economy plunged into a severe recession in 1935. The abandonment of the gold standard by Western countries caused China’s currency to appreciate, while the United States silver purchasing

182 Toby Lincoln, “Chinese Urban Visions: The Birth of Urban Sociology in China” (paper presented at *East Asian Cities and Globalisation: The Past in the Present*, University of Warwick, July 9, 2000), 1–2.

183 Bergère, *The Golden Age*, 7.

184 Ibid. 8.

185 Lloyd E. Eastman, “Nationalist China during the Nanking Decade 1927–1937,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 13, Republican China, 1912–1949, part 2, eds. John K. Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 117.

186 Marie-Claire Bergère, “The Chinese Bourgeoisie, 1911–37,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 12, *Republican China, 1912–1949*, Part 1, ed. John K. Fairbank (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005; repr. 1983), 787.

policies drained China's reserves, triggering severe deflation, worsening trade conditions, and a deep agricultural crisis.¹⁸⁷ In response, the government imposed an export tax on silver in 1934 and implemented currency reforms in 1935, enabling an expansionary monetary policy under close supervision by technocratic elites.¹⁸⁸ This marked a decisive shift from laissez-faire policies and helped China gradually recover from the crisis.¹⁸⁹ At the time, Shanghai had already developed to be the largest city and financial centre of China, playing a pivotal role in connecting the national economy with the other parts of the world and driving the monetary reforms.¹⁹⁰ The reform revitalised economic activity. However, this revival was artificial, and the vibrancy was distorted. In truth, China's economy, still "reeling from the previous years' panic, had fundamentally deteriorated even further," leaving "the entire nation deeply entrenched in a state of crisis."¹⁹¹ The Chinese economic base grew increasingly dire.

Besides the politicisation of the economy, everyday life was also infused with political significance. China's political spectrum in the 1930s was "neither totalitarian nor democratic, but uncertainly situated between these extremes."¹⁹² Rather, it was "a dictatorship sustained by military power."¹⁹³ Similar to the fascist movements in Italy and Germany, factions such as the Central Club Clique, (*Zhongyang julebu* 中央俱乐部) and Blue Shirt Society (*lanyi she* 蓝衣社) emerged within the KMT, aiming to promote the personal cult of Chiang Kai-shek and strengthen ideological control over military officials not only in their professional roles but also personal lives.¹⁹⁴ In 1934, Chiang and his wife, Soong Mei-ling (Song Meiling 宋美龄, 1898-2003), launched the New Life Movement (*xinshenghuo yundong* 新生活运动) to promote a "clean, effective administration" by encouraging a new lifestyle focused on being "military-minded, productive, and artistic."¹⁹⁵ The New Life Movement was a social and political project aimed at building a unified, orderly, and modernised nation through moral education and behavioural

187 Guan Hanhui 管汉晖, "20 shiji 30 niandai da xiaotiao zhong de Zhongguo hongguan jingji" 20 世纪 30 年代大萧条中的中国宏观经济 [China's macroeconomy in the Great Depression], *Jingji yanjiu* 经济研究 2 (2007): 19.

188 Ibid.

189 Stephen R. Halsey, "Review of *China during the Great Depression: Market, State, and the World Economy, 1929-1937*, by Tomoko Shiroyama," *China Review International* 18, no. 1 (2011): 104.

190 Zhou Ziheng 周子衡, *20 shiji 30 niandai da xiaotiao dui Zhongguo huobi jingji de chongji—1933-1948 nian Zhongguo huobi jingji de xiandai zhuanxing, shibai jiqi yichan* 20 世纪 30 年代大萧条对中国货币经济的冲击——1933-1948 年中国货币经济的现代转型、失败及其遗产 [The impact of the Great Depression on China's monetary economy in the 1930s—the modern transformation, failure, and legacy of China's monetary economy, 1933-1948] (Shanghai: Shanghai Institute of Finance and Law, 2012), 1.

191 Chen Qingchen, "Guoqu yinian."

192 Lloyd Eastman, et al., *The Nationalist Era in China, 1927-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19.

193 Eastman, "Nationalist China during the Nanking Decade," 117.

194 Mackerras, *China in Transformation*, 56-7.

195 Xinshenghuo Yundong Cujin Zonghui 新生活运动促进总会, *Shenghuo junshihua shengchanhua yishuhua chubu tuixing fang'an* 生活军事化生产化艺术化初步推行方案 [Initial implementation plan for the military-minded, productive, and artistic life], February 19, 1935.

norms, wrapped by a centralised ideology that integrated the revival of traditional Confucian virtues, modern Western thought and Christianity.¹⁹⁶ Its authoritarian and formalistic approach failed to address the more pressing issues facing the country, such as improving people's economic and living conditions. Furthermore, its rejection of individualism, liberalism, socialism, and communism underscored how far Chiang's vision for the movement had drifted toward Fascism.¹⁹⁷ Due to its vague goals, superficial reforms, and bureaucratic implementation, the movement had limited impact, but still influenced modern daily life in the 1930s by shaping urban norms around food, fashion, behavior, and etiquette, contributing to modest social progress. Although the importance of the New Life Movement faded after 1937, it remained a theme in government propaganda until 1945 and persisted after the KMT retreated to Taiwan. Historians outside China have studied its ideological and social influence, while assessments in mainland China since the 1980s have largely criticised its conservatism, anti- communism, and fascist tendencies.¹⁹⁸

The KMT dictatorship did not get firm control over all the provinces of China, primarily concentrating its authority in cities. The Nanchang Uprising (*Nanchang qiyi* 南昌起义) on August 1, 1927, marked the CPC's initial armed resistance against the KMT. In the early 1930s, the scattered rural regions in southern China became the Central Revolutionary Base of the Chinese Soviet Republic. Chiang launched several campaigns to crush this base in the first half of the 1930s, which forced the Red Army of the CPC to embark on the Long March, retreating from Ruijin (瑞金), Jiangxi province in October 1934. With its headquarters relocating to Yan'an (延安), Shaanxi province in December 1936, the CPC entered the "Yan'an Decade" led by Mao Zedong, in opposition to the KMT's Nanjing Decade.¹⁹⁹

Japan's invasion of China, beginning with its expansion into northeastern China and later spreading nationwide, overwhelmed China's limited resources and military capabilities. Due to

196 Chiang Kai-shek, "Xinshenghuo yundong de zhenyi" 新生活运动的真义 [Essentials of the New Life Movement], in *Xian zongtong Jianggong sixiang yanlun zongji* 先总统蒋公思想言论总集 [The general collection of thoughts and speeches of the late President Chiang Kai-shek], Vol. 12 (Taipei: Zhongguo guomindang zhongyang weiyuanhui dangshi weiyuanhui, 1984), 176–9.

197 Hu Shi 胡适, "Wei xinshenghuo yundong jinyibu jie" 为新生活运动进一步解 [Further explanation for the New Life Movement], *Ta Kung Pao* 大公报, March 25, 1934; Keith R. Schoppa, *The Revolution and Its Past: Identities and Change in Modern Chinese History* (New York: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 209.

198 For example, Arif Dirlik, "The Ideological Foundations of the New Life Movement: A Study in Counterrevolution," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (1975): 945–80; Qin Chengjie 秦程节, "'Xinshenghuo yundong' yanjiu zongshu" "新生活运动"研究综述 [Research summary on "The New Life Movement"], *Yibin xueyuan xuebao* 宜宾学院学报 11, no. 1 (2011): 47–9; He Zhuo'en 何卓恩 and Li Zhoufeng 李周峰, "Shichu yu zhaichu: minzu fuxing yundong shilun zhong de xinshenghuo yundong 实处与窄处: 民族复兴运动时论中的新生活运动 [The New Life Movement in the discourse of the national revival], *Anhui shixue* 安徽史学 2 (2015): 15–22.

199 Mackerras, *China in Transformation*, 66.

differing responses to Western powers in the late nineteenth century, China and its neighbouring country, historically and culturally intertwined, followed opposing development paths.²⁰⁰ Japan's growing influence in northeastern China was a manifestation of its imperial expansion, driven by competition and negotiations with Russia for dominance in Northeast Asia, the strategic interests of Western powers who balanced their economic and diplomatic relations, and the concerns about the spread of communism.²⁰¹ The technologically superior Japanese forces caused widespread destruction and suffering across China. From 1932 until the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1945, Japan supported the last Manchu emperor of the Qing Dynasty, Puyi (溥仪, 1906–1967), in establishing a pro-Japanese puppet state, Manchukuo (满洲国), with Changchun (长春), then renamed as Xijing (新京), meaning “new capital,” as its capital. Despite these overwhelming challenges, China demonstrated remarkable resilience in its struggle for national sovereignty. The period, intertwined with World War II in a broader landscape, was pivotal in shaping China's future. In response to the Japanese invasion, the CPC called for an alliance with the KMT, publishing the “Appeal to Fellow-countrymen to Resist Japan and for National Salvation (*Wei kangri jiuguo gao quanti tongbao shu* 为抗日救国告全体同胞书)” on August 1, 1935. However, the KMT maintained a more conciliatory stance toward Japan, while the CPC gained significant political support for its resistance efforts.²⁰² The alliance between the two parties to fight against the Japanese army was not formed until 1937.

Chinese art and Nation-building in the Early Republican Era

Social and political turmoil, along with the fragmentation of the nation and a flourishing diversity of thought, gave rise to a cultural and artistic renaissance. Literary and artistic societies emerged with various styles, creating works with passion to express their hope for the nation and critical reflections on social realities. Since the May Fourth Movement, a literary revolution advocated for a new form of literature that was more “popular” and “social,” emphasising its political dimensions.²⁰³ As revolutionary movements evolved, literary and artistic creation became

200 John K. Fairbank and Edwin O. Reischauer, *China: Tradition & Transformation* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 307.

201 Shinkichi Eto, “China's International Relations 1911–1931,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 13, *Republican China, 1912–1949*, part 2, eds. John K. Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85–87, 103–07.

202 Mackerras, *China in Transformation*, 66.

203 Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Literary trends I: the quest for modernity, 1895–1927,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 12, *Republican China, 1912–1949*, Part 1, ed. John K. Fairbank (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005; repr. 1983), 469.

increasingly radical, exemplifying the emergence of Leftist writers and artists who connected their works with the goals of social reform and national liberation.

The first Minister of Education of the ROC, Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培, 1868-1940) promoted the ideology of “Aesthetic Education (*meixue jiaoyu* 美学教育)” as a cornerstone of national education and the foundation of nation-building for the new Republic. Cai regarded aesthetic education as universal and transcendent, capable of unifying society through shared values. In his influential 1930 essay “Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education” which was originally published in the revolutionary magazine *La Jeunesse (Xin Qingnian* 新青年), Cai argued that aesthetic education, which was “liberated, progressive, and universal,” should replace religion, which he viewed as “forcible, conservative, and limited.”²⁰⁴ His vision infused art with a spiritual purpose for modern times, asserting its role as a mediator and framework for societal cohesion. Aesthetic education was implemented not only in formal education but also in state-led social education initiatives.²⁰⁵ In this context, the Social Education Office was established, headed by Lu Xun (鲁迅, 1881-1936), in 1912, which facilitated the development and regulation of art industries and promoted public engagement with the arts. By the 1920s, aesthetic education had been incorporated into higher education curricula, echoing early twentieth-century European internationalist movements.²⁰⁶

The state embarked on nation-building efforts through the arts, laying the groundwork for the literary and artistic prosperity of the 1930s. These initiatives included the nationalisation of former imperial collections, the establishment of national and local museums, the development of national archaeology, the canonisation of national history, and the internationalisation of art education. Similar to contemporary politics, China’s art industry pursued modernisation and Westernisation while adapting traditional elements to new contexts. The ROC’s efforts to popularise art education helped shape ideological hegemony within the country while integrating new artistic techniques and theories brought back by Chinese students and artists who studied abroad. These developments enriched China’s framework for art history, including its terminology, historiographical styles, and research methods.²⁰⁷

204 Cai Yuanpei, “Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education,” trans. Julia F. Andrews, in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 182.

205 Zhao Xing, “Displacement and Anachronism: Art Education and Exhibitions in Meta-Institutionalizing China, 1912-1937” (PhD thesis, University of California San Diego, 2021), 14.

206 Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, “Art History in Republican China,” paper presented at the College Art Association Annual Meeting, Seattle, March 19, 2004; Vivian Yan Li, “Art Negotiations,” 13.

207 Cao Tiezheng 曹铁铮 and Cao Tiewa 曹铁娃, “Minguo shiqi Zhongguo meishushi xiezuo de fenqi fangfa yanjiu” 民国时期中国美术史写作的分期方法研究 [Research on the periodisation methods in the writing of Chinese art history during the Republican era], *Meishu guan cha* 美术观察 1 (2017): 118-9.

The ROC adopted a strategic cultural policy aimed at leveraging the legacy of Chinese civilisation for nation-building and diplomacy, projecting a modernised image of China amid domestic and international crises. This cultural promotion aligned with the ROC's ambition to present itself as a youthful, progressive nation advancing in modernisation and industrialisation, despite facing significant challenges. Cultural diplomacy became a "high-priority political matter," as the government sought to engage with the global community and assert its political and diplomatic significance.²⁰⁸ Within this framework, exhibitions, world fairs, and major cultural events became key platforms for showcasing China's cultural and artistic achievements, with government support to humanise and modernise its image in the West. These initiatives, including the 1935 Exhibition, helped present the "new face" of China, earning international recognition and support, while reflecting the broader goal of establishing China's international reputation during a time of both vitality and challenge.

China in 2019: Emerging Superpower amid Challenges

China began to recover in the late 1970s and 1980s from the widespread political purges, educational disruptions, and destruction of cultural heritage experienced during the "ten years of chaos" of the Cultural Revolution. This recovery was marked by efforts to normalise society, restore education, and rebuild international ties. Over the forty years, China underwent a momentous transformation, transitioning from Mao's socialist state to a system incorporating market-oriented reforms, with the rise of a vibrant economy. While this journey was fraught with challenges and setbacks, it shaped modern China into a dynamic global power poised to influence the course of the twenty-first century. This period marks China's growing responsibility on the world stage while underscoring the challenges it faced in its pursuit of modernisation and national rejuvenation. The concept of the "Chinese Dream," functioning as "as an effective buttress against the American Dream" seeks to strengthen cultural sovereignty and social cohesion through "strong cultural power."²⁰⁹ By 2019, China had emerged as a global economic powerhouse, ranking as the second-largest economy in the world after the United States, serving as a manufacturing hub, and leading in international trade, driven by technological advancements

208 Lu Zhouxiang, "China and the World Fairs (1915–2010): Blending Nationalism and Internationalism," in *Identity Discourses and Communities in International Events, Festivals and Spectacles*, ed. Udo Merkel (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 157–8.

209 Michael Keane and Ying Chen, "Entrepreneurial Solutionism, Characteristic Cultural Industries and the Chinese Dream," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 25, no. 6 (2019): 745.

and growing global influence. China's rise shifted China-US relations from "strategic engagement" to "strategic competition."²¹⁰ Xi Jinping and Donald Trump (1946-), two political giants representing opposite sides of the Pacific, influence global dynamics, particularly in the Pacific and Northeast Asia, where tensions escalated amid global economic downturns and regional conflicts.²¹¹ At this juncture, China strives to maintain its development momentum, enhance its global standing, and address important issues in economic and political transformation, technological innovation, and solving social inequality.²¹²

The year 1989 marked the end of the Cold War that had divided the West and the Soviet bloc since World War II. It was a time of profound global transformations, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela's (1918–2013) secret meeting with President P. W. Botha (1916–2006) paved the way for the end of apartheid in South Africa. Meanwhile, in the heart of Asia, major geopolitical shifts unfolded in the Middle East as the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, which escalated tensions among regional powers and significantly impacted global politics. Additionally, the invention of the World Wide Web revolutionised information exchange, driving globalisation and reshaping power dynamics toward pluralism, decentralisation, and delegitimisation.²¹³ In this context of a global wave of pro-democratic movements, the "reform era's spirit of open critique also galvanised the student movement."²¹⁴ Primarily driven by domestic concerns, pro- democracy protests erupted in Beijing during the spring and summer of 1989, demanding political reforms, freedom of expression, and an end to corruption. The movement's spirit was symbolised by the ten-meter-tall "Goddess of Democracy" statue, created by students from the Central Academy of Arts.²¹⁵ Positioned in Tian'anmen Square, facing Mao Zedong's portrait hung above the central arc of the vermilion Tian'anmen Gate and backed by the Monument to the People's Heroes (*renmin yingxiong jinianbei* 人民英雄纪念碑), this powerful juxtaposition embodied their call for change and underscored the political tensions of the era.²¹⁶

210 Danah Alenezi, "Biden's Strategic Competition Approach Towards China," *Asian Social Science* 20, no. 1 (2024): 65.

211 Kevin Rudd, "U.S.-China Relations in 2019," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 13 (Winter, 2019): 12-3.

212 Li-Min Wang, Xiang-Li Wu, and Nan-Chen Chu, "Financial Development, Technological Innovation and Urban-Rural Income Gap: Time Series Evidence from China," *PLoS One* 18, no. 2 (2018): 1-18.

213 Alexandra Munroe, "A Test Site," in *Art and China after 1989: Theatre of the World*, eds. Alexandra Munroe, et al. (New York: Guggenheim, 2017), 21.

214 Ibid. 23.

215 "Report from Amnesty International," in *Witness Reports on the Democratic Movement of China '89*, ed. Chinese Democratic Movement (Hong Kong: Information Centre, 1990), 276.

216 Joseph W. Esherick and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Acting Out Democracy: Political Theater in Modern China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 4 (November 1990): 838-43.

The Tian'anmen Square Incident and its tragic conclusion led to the political and social tightening and centralisation; however, it ushered in an era that integrated China into the global system via its industrialisation, privatisation and economic reform. Domestically, China's one-party system, led by the CPC, remained firmly in place as the absolute ruling authority. Rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and commercialisation, combined with the relaxation of state control over the economy, fostered the emergence of a burgeoning middle class and brought significant improvements to the quality of life for many Chinese citizens. Internationally, China increased its engagement with the international community, and opened up to foreign investment and cooperation by strengthening diplomatic relations, expanding cultural exchanges, and playing a more active role in international organisations. Its growing influence and participation in global affairs marked a significant departure from its previous more isolationist approach. China took a pragmatic approach to its foreign relations, evolving its diplomacy to "an increasingly outward-looking, pro-active and system-identifying character" under the main themes of "peace" and "development."²¹⁷

China's growing prominence on the global stage was reflected in its political milestones and in its ability to host world-class events that highlighted its cultural and economic achievements. The retrocession of Hong Kong from Britain in 1997 and Macau from Portugal in 1999 marked significant milestones in China's efforts to reclaim historical territories and assert its sovereignty. China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001, marking a pivotal step in integrating the nation into the global economy, opening new avenues for trade and economic growth. Earlier that year, the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (*Shanghai hezuo zuzhi* 上海合作组织) aimed to promote regional stability, enhance economic cooperation, and strengthen diplomatic ties across the Eurasian continent.²¹⁸ The Shanghai Expo in 2010 further showcased China's advancements, attracting millions of visitors and reinforcing its status as a global economic powerhouse.

Since hosting the Asian Games in Beijing in 1990, China has continued to capture global attention with international sport events. As windows for China to the world, these events showcased not only the country's organisational prowess but also its rapid economic development, cultural heritage, and technological innovation. From Panpan (盼盼, meaning

217 Qingguo Jia, "From Self-imposed Isolation to Global Cooperation: The Evolution of Chinese Foreign Policy since the 1980s," *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 2 (1999): 168-9; Su Ge, "The Great Historic Journey of Chinese Diplomacy," *China International Studies* 6 (2017), 5.

218 "Shanghai hezuo zuzhi jianjie" 上海合作组织简介 [Introduction to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation], The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, accessed July 3, 2023, http://chn.sectsc.org/about_sco/20151209/26996.html.

“anticipation”) of the 1990 Asian Games to Bei Jing Huan Ying Ni (北京欢迎你, meaning “Beijing welcomes you”) of the 2008 Olympic Games, the mascots’ names offered a glimpse into China’s eagerness to present itself to the world, while showcasing its increasing openness and growing confidence achieved through years of development (Figures 5 & 6). Entangled with weighty political discourse, these milestones offered significant opportunities for propaganda, showcasing China’s growing global stature and enhancing its soft power. They fostered international cooperation, promoted cultural exchange, and reinforced China’s role as a key global player. Additionally, the mobilisation efforts of the society not only improved infrastructure but also strengthened social cohesion and national pride.



Figures 5 & 6. Panpan (left), mascot of the 1990 Beijing Asian Games, and Bei Jing Huan Ying Ni (right), mascots of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games. Source: Sohu.

This momentum has not diminished after Xi Jinping came to power. Instead, China has gradually emerged as a leading participant in asserting proactive influence in international affairs. Starting in 2013, the “One Belt One Road” project and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (*Yazhou jichu sheshi touzi yinhang* 亚洲基础设施投资银行) expanded China’s reach through massive infrastructure projects across regions worldwide, seeking to strengthen economic ties and regional cooperation while positioning China as the centre of geo-economics and geo-politics.²¹⁹ In Xi’s era, China is presented as a “benign major power” advocating for win-win international cooperation, “the creation of a Community of Shared Future and a New Model of International

²¹⁹ Hong Yu, “Motivation behind China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 105 (2017): 354.

Relations.” However, it simultaneously emphasises the need to “strongly defend China’s core interests, the CCP’s political legitimacy, and reshape the international order along the lines of Chinese political values and imperatives.”²²⁰ China’s assertive national image and commitment to national rejuvenation continue to define its role on the global stage.

The implementation of these projects was accompanied by the centralisation of government power, but it also exposed several shortcomings in society, including bureaucratic inefficiency, poor coordination, unresolved territorial disputes, the risk of neo-colonialism, and growing international competition.²²¹ In this complex environment, China faces crucial decisions that shape its domestic policies, economic direction, political stance, and international relations. Despite significant successes, China is grappling with mounting challenges, such as rising inequality, environmental degradation, and external scrutiny. Simultaneously, the country must navigate economic transitions, address growing social inequalities, manage environmental sustainability, and respond to international concerns, particularly around human rights. The 2019 protests against the proposed amendments to the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance in Hong Kong, as a continuation of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, were driven by concerns that the “One Country, Two Systems” framework, which had afforded the region a high degree of autonomy, was being undermined by Beijing’s increasing encroachment. This resonated with Taiwan, where the 2014 Sunflower Movement had similarly arisen, driven by concerns over Taiwan’s growing political and economic dependence on China, particularly regarding a trade agreement with Beijing that many feared could undermine Taiwan’s sovereignty.²²² In the diplomatic sphere, alongside China’s rising power, competition with another global superpower, the United States, has intensified in recent years, contributing to a fluctuating global political landscape and increasing international uncertainties.

The Interplay of Art and Politics in Contemporary China

After a decade of Chinese art being tightly controlled and highly politicised during the Cultural Revolution, where creativity was suppressed and artistic expression strictly subordinated to ideological conformity, the late 1970s and 1980s saw the beginning of a cultural renaissance, with

220 Jorge Antonio Chávez Mazuelos, “The Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation and Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping,” *Agenda Internacional* 40 (2022): 33.

221 Hong Yu, “Motivation behind China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ Initiatives,” 354.

222 Annette Wong, “Desperate for Democracy: A Comparison between Hong Kong’s 2014 Umbrella Movement and 2019 AntiELAB Protests,” (Senior thesis, Claremont McKenna College, 2020).

the government's policies becoming more open and tolerant.²²³ The loosening of state control on cultural management stimulated the privatisation of the cultural industry and spurred the emergence and rapid growth of the creative industry as a key component of urban economies.²²⁴ Artists embraced individualism, gaining more freedom to explore diverse mediums, forms, styles, and themes. As the government began to adopt more liberal cultural policies, art in China began shifting towards a more open and experimental environment.

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a flourishing of “decentralisation” in artistic creativity, as the art scene became more diverse and open, reflecting both Chinese cultural traditions and global artistic trends.²²⁵ Artistic practices were encouraged to explore creative ideas within a more “open and multi-directional space” in the pursuit of “real freedom of creation.”²²⁶ Avant-garde movements emerged, which began to question past ideologies and criticise social and political realities. Driven by “an interest in reinventing the language of artistic expression,” Chinese art, while still retaining its political radicalism, moved itself away from mainstream propaganda through non-official and non-institutional self-positioning, incorporated urban culture with new art forms and materials, and actively embraced internationalisation.²²⁷ Prominent artists, such as Ai Weiwei (艾未未, 1957-), Xu Bing (徐冰, 1955-), Cai Guoqiang (蔡国强, 1957-) and Huang Yong Ping (黄永砗, 1954-2019) use their artworks to express their critical observations and satirical commentaries on Chinese society and the world, boldly addressing themes like identity, social critique, historical memory, and cultural traditions, often challenging orthodox views. Adopting Western, contemporary, and experimental forms of expression to challenge social, political, and traditional ideologies, they also infused their works with elements of traditional Chinese culture, exploring the complexities of historical memory and cultural identity.

Emboldened by political progress and economic reform, Chinese art grew increasingly critical, engaging with political discourse and intertwining with broader social and political narratives. As Chinese art gained international recognition, artists and curators participated in global exhibitions, connecting with the global art community. The “China/Avant-garde” exhibition at the National Art Gallery (*Zhongguo meishuguan* 中国美术馆) Beijing in February 1989 demonstrated the artists’ determination to liberalisation, modernisation and cosmopolitanism

223 Maria B. Galikowski, “Art and Politics in China, 1949-1986,” (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1990), 217.

224 Shi-lian Shan, “Chinese Cultural Policy and the Cultural Industries,” *City, Culture and Society* 5 (2014): 116-7.

225 Hou Hanru, “Towards an ‘Un-Unofficial Art’: De-ideologicalisation of China’s Contemporary Art in the 1990s,” *Third Text* 10, no. 34 (Spring 1996): 41.

226 Ibid.

227 Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China* (Chicago: Smart Art Museum, University of Chicago, 2000), 11.

without a U-turn (Figure 7).²²⁸ Coinciding with the “*Magiciens de la Terre*” exhibition at the Grand Palais, Paris, from May to August 1989, it marked Chinese contemporary art’s engagement with the global art scene and post-colonial discourse.²²⁹ However, the two exhibitions received vastly different reactions both at home and abroad.



Figure 7. Opening of “China/Avant-garde” at the National Art Gallery, February 5, 1989. Source: Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, 16.

The controversies that “China/Avant-garde” caused led to its forced closure twice due to political suppression and safety concerns. Following the 1989 political crackdown, Chinese authorities ended the temporary and relative freedom in the country’s art scene.²³⁰ The tight governmental control over the arts resulted in censorship and restrictions, particularly regarding political dissent. In the wake of the failed democracy movement after 1989 and the rise of international consumerism, Chinese artists nowadays find themselves caught between two challenges: striving to gain recognition in the global art world while navigating a delicate balance between creative freedom and adherence to state directives. Their works embody the tension between “Western conceptualism” and “Chinese reality.”²³¹ While the blending of cultural and political threads could inspire remarkable art that captured the nation’s spirit, it also led to censorship and self-censorship, as they exercised caution to avoid crossing sensitive lines.

228 Philip Tinari, “Between Palimpsest and Teleology: The Problem of ‘Chinese Contemporary Art,’” in *Art and China after 1989: Theatre of the World*, eds. Alexandra Munroe, et al. (New York: Guggenheim, 2017), 51, 55.

229 Marianne Brouwer, “Preface,” in *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-garde Art in New China*, ed. Karen Smith (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2008), 12-4.

230 Ibid. 12.

231 Tinari, “Between Palimpsest and Teleology,” 59.

Since Xi Jinping assumed power, the goal of “enhancing the nation’s cultural soft power” has become closely tied to the vision of “building a strong socialist cultural nation,” a key element in achieving the “Chinese Dream” within the framework of the “Two Centenaries (*liangge yibainian* 两个一百年)” blueprint.²³² The slogan “to tell China’s story well (*jianghao Zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事)” has emerged as a key focus of cultural policy, emphasising the need to shape narratives that highlight China’s achievements, values, and global aspirations.²³³ In this context, China projects its image through “a unifying sense of cultural Chineseness,” aiming to navigate and stabilise the impacts of its domestic political and economic transformations.²³⁴ Globally, it integrates cultural diplomacy with its economic and political strategies, leveraging the export of cultural products, international exchanges, and global events. These efforts not only challenge Western dominance in cultural discourse but also advance China’s vision of global governance, deeply rooted in its civilisation heritage.²³⁵

Accompanying the expansion of Chinese art overseas is the simultaneous strengthening of ideological demands on art within the country. The government regulates artistic production to shape a cultural narrative with Chinese characteristics. This ideological framework serves not only as a domestic constraint but also as a core element of China’s cultural export strategy. Chinese officials have repeatedly emphasised the role of art as a tool to advance the goals of the Communist Party and contribute to the nation’s cultural prosperity in recent times. In 2014, Xi delivered a speech emphasising that artistic works should “advocate integrity, merit, and compassion,” serve “the people and socialism,” and uphold “socialist values.”²³⁶ His speech was widely discussed by Chinese scholars and compared to Mao Zedong’s 1942 Talk at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art (*Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui* 延安文艺座谈). Many viewed it as an extension of Mao’s ideas on the relationship between art and politics, adapted to a new historical context.²³⁷ Two years later, the interdependence between Chinese art and politics was further

232 “Xi Jinping: jianshe shehuizhuyi wenhua qiangguo, zhuoli tigao guojia wenhua ruanshili” 习近平：建设社会主义文化强国着力提高国家文化软实力 [Xi Jinping: building a Socialist cultural power, focusing on enhancing national cultural soft power], *Remin ribao* 人民日报, January 1, 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0101/c64094-23995307.html>.

233 Liu Yaqiong 刘亚琼, “Xi Jinping guanyu ‘jianghao Zhongguo gushi’ de wuge lunduan” 习近平关于“讲好中国故事”的五个论断 [Xi Jinping’s five assertions on telling “China’s story well”], Central University of Finance and Economics School of Marxism, last modified May 22, 2019, accessed September 19, 2023, <https://marxism.cufe.edu.cn/info/1032/1582.htm>.

234 Yao Yung-Wen, “The Void of Chineseness: Contemporary Art and Cultural Diplomacy in China,” (PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2015).

235 Koh King Kee, “A Community with Shared Future—China’s Vision of the New Global Order,” *China.org*, January 28, 2021, http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2021-01/28/content_77165072.htm.

236 Xinhua, “China’s Xi points way for arts,” *China Daily*, October 10, 2014, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/art/2014-10/16/content_18746127.htm.

reinforced by the connection between artistic creation and the nation's fate.²³⁸ Xi's rhetoric has intensified government control over culture and the arts, solidifying it as a core principle of China's cultural policy.²³⁹ It reiterated the notion that art and culture play a central role in shaping the nation's identity and international image. His speech reiterated the Communist Party of China's doctrine of art as a public service, an educational tool and a propaganda channel, calling for cultural prosperity through the creation of high-quality works.

The Chinese government values culture, particularly its cultural heritage, as a cornerstone of its national identity and a "biggest soft power asset."²⁴⁰ Antiquity serves as both a source of inspiration for contemporary art and a means of fostering national pride, portraying China as "an ancient, but vibrant" cultural state.²⁴¹ This heritage reinforces a narrative of resilience following the "Century of Humiliation," a period marked by foreign invasions and the loss of cultural treasures. Therefore, it is evident that China places great importance on cultural heritage repatriation. For China, this effort is framed as integral to the narrative of national rejuvenation through the restoration of artefacts, the recovery of antiquities, and the reclamation of its cultural sovereignty and dignity on the global stage. The significance of these endeavours culminated in the 2019 Exhibition, which will be discussed in detail as the journey of Chinese art unfolds in later chapters of the thesis.

237 Zhang Jing 张晶, "Renmin shi yishu shenmei de zhuti – dui Xi Jinping tongzhi zai wenyi gongzuo zuotanhui shang jianghua de meixue lijie" 人民是艺术审美的主体——对习近平同志在文艺工作座谈会上讲话的美学理解 [The people are the main body of artistic aesthetics: an aesthetic understanding of comrade Xi Jinping's speech at the Symposium on Literary and Art Work], in *Daxue wenhua chuancheng chuangxin yanjiu* 大学文化传承创新研究 [Research on the cultural inheritance and innovation in universities], ed. Ministry of Education Science and Technology Development Center (Beijing: Xinhua Chubanshe, 2015), 27–41.

238 "Xi Jinping: zai Zhongguo wenlian," Xinhua Net.

239 Ibid.

240 Ingrid D'Hooghe, *China's Public Diplomacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 101.

241 Ibid. 15.

Chapter 5. Origin: Before the Departure of Chinese Art

This chapter traces the preparatory stages of the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions from the perspectives of the institutional foundations, staffing arrangements, and exhibit selection processes. It reveals how evolving political, cultural, and historical contexts shaped the motives and narratives of each event. However, opacity in the administration of the 2019 Exhibition hindered transparency compared to the meticulous documentation of the 1935 Exhibition. While archives regarding the 1935 Exhibition have been opened, facilitating extensive research, the 2019 Exhibition remains less accessible than its predecessor due to contemporary restrictions. This disparity reflects broader shifts in institutional practices and how state narratives shaped the curatorial approach and design of the respective exhibition.

For the 1935 Exhibition, the chapter highlights the interplay between the British and Chinese committees, exploring their collaboration and negotiation on exhibit selection and the cultural diplomacy underpinning the event. It contextualises these efforts within the foundation of the NMP and the emergence of modern Chinese identity, illustrating how the new regime navigated the dual process of dismantling and reinterpreting the legacy of the old regime, while utilising the museumification of cultural heritage to materialise and consolidate national identity. Amid the internal turmoil and external threats, as well as China's need to counter colonial narratives, the necessity for Chinese art to "go out" emerged as both a cultural imperative and a diplomatic strategy. Simultaneously, this effort resonated with the Western fascination for "Oriental" aesthetics, paving the way for cultural exchange and offering a stage to redefine China's image in an internationalist discourse.

On the other hand, the museumification of China in the late twentieth and early twentieth century, exemplified by the formation of the NMC and the renovation of its new building, illustrated a new Chinese narrative history in museums in the post-Mao era, shifting from a Marxist-Leninist "revolutionary" focus to an emphasis on ancient history, civilisation, and contemporary resurgence. The 2019 Exhibition could be regarded as a culmination of this transformative journey. While international exhibitions remained an important aspect of Chinese cultural policies, especially in terms of global soft power and diplomatic engagement, the concept of "coming back" for the artefacts that had been unjustly "sent out" previously, reflects a more introspective and nationalistic turn. This repatriation not only signifies the restoration of China's

cultural heritage but also reinforces the importance of reclaiming its historical narrative, marking a new phase in how China projects its identity domestically and globally.

Preparing for the 1935 Exhibition

Despite the xenophobic views toward China prevalent in early twentieth-century Europe, groups of collectors and academics continued to promote Chinese art. Exhibitions of Chinese art were held in major European capitals.²⁴² Shaped by exoticism and orientalism, Chinese art was often reduced to a static and timeless visual representation, which was usually opposed to its Western counterpart characterised by perceived “fundamental absences, such as movement, reason, order, meaning, and so on.”²⁴³ These exhibitions often presented fine and decorative arts, as well as traditional and contemporary works, under a broad and undifferentiated aesthetic. This approach revealed both a limited understanding of Chinese art at the time and a curatorial framework still shaped by Eurocentric assumptions and essentialist interpretations.

The increasing scales and impacts of the exhibitions suggest a fast-increasing interest in Chinese art and archaeology, fueled by advancements in expanding trade networks, the exotic appeal of Chinese culture, infrastructure construction and technology innovations, archaeological discoveries, all of which were deeply intertwined with the dynamics of colonialism. China faced the challenges of Western imperialism following several military defeats and the imposition of unfair treaties that forcibly opened treaty ports, further straining its vulnerable economy, politics, and culture. The explorations in Western China and Central Asia during the Great Game, which saw Britain competing with Russia and other Western countries, and by the increasing number of

242 Some exhibitions of Chinese art in European cities were the 1926 *Ausstellung Asiatische Kunst Köln* (Asian Art Exhibition, Cologne), the 1929 *Ausstellung Chinesischer Kunst* (Exhibition of Chinese Art) in Berlin by *Gesellschaft für Ostasiatische Kunst* (East Asian Art Society), the 1931 *Ausstellung Chinesischer Maler der Jetztzeit* (Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Painters) organised by China-institut and *Frankfurt Kunstverein* (Frankfurt Art Association), and the 1933-34 *Mostra di Pittura Cinese antica e moderna* (Exhibition of Ancient and Modern Chinese Painting) at the Palazzo Reale (Royal Palace) in Milan. Besides, the Dutch *Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst* (Society of Friends of Asiatic Art) organised a series of Chinese and Asian art at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and Gemeente-Museum, The Hague in the 1910s to 1930s. Vivian Yan Li, “Art Negotiations,” 2; Steuber, “The Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 530; Wang Ching-Ling 王静灵, “Helan ren de Yazhou tansuo: Helan Amusitedan guojia bowuguan de Yazhou yishu shoucang” 荷兰人的亚洲探索：荷兰阿姆斯特丹国家博物馆的亚洲艺术收藏 [Dutch explorations of Asia: The Asian art collection of the National Museum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands], *Bowuguan* 博物馆 4 (2013): 70-2.

243 Stephanie Su, “Exhibition as Art Historical Space: The 1933 Chinese Art Exhibition in Paris,” *The Art Bulletin* 103 (2021): 127.

genuine art specimens being brought back by soldiers, scholars, diplomats and collectors to Britain from China through both legal and illicit means.

The instability of early twentieth-century Chinese society also led to a significant exodus of the nation's wealth and artworks, many of which enriched the art marketplace or found their way into Western museums and collections, including some exceptionally important pieces.²⁴⁴ Travelers between the two countries—missionaries, officers, officials, geographers, archaeologists, and explorers—facilitated this process by transporting knowledge, artifacts, and cultural interpretations across borders. The flourishing of Chinese art in terms of both quantity and quality began to reshape the Western collecting world and its associations, fostering greater academic study of Chinese art and stimulating the growth of the market.

During this period, international visitors arrived in China for diverse national or personal reasons, bringing varying levels of knowledge and influenced by contemporary interests.²⁴⁵ This era saw an increasing interest in collecting and studying Chinese art among the Western bourgeoisie and intellectual class, aligned with periods of imperial expansion, military conflict, and intensified global commerce. Consequently, a growing community of sinologists and Chinese art enthusiasts in the West contributed to the systematic study of Chinese art, fostering a Sino-Western dialogue that converged over time.

The discussion of the 1935 Exhibition as a collaborative project between Britain and China commenced with the signing of contracts in early January 1934. These agreements were made among a group of British promoters and collectors of Chinese art, the RA, and the Chinese Ambassador, Quo Tai-chi.²⁴⁶ For this exhibition, the British representatives proposed to invite artworks from the NMP and the latest archaeological findings, providing Western audiences with a valuable opportunity to gain insight into the world's oldest surviving civilisation.²⁴⁷ The exhibition was intended to foster international exchanges, enhance China's cultural image, and promote economic and commercial development between the two nations. In line with these objectives, China's diplomatic and political interests were also aligned, as the Chinese government hoped the exhibition would strengthen Sino-British relations and garner Western support to help the Republic navigate its internal and external challenges. Plus, the great success

244 Stacey Pierson, "How the British Fell for Chinese Art," *Apollo*, November 18, 2017, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/how-the-british-fell-for-chinese-art/>.

245 Ting Chang, *Travel, Collecting*, 17.

246 Zhuang, "Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji," 114.

247 "Memorandum on an International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London," January 3, 1934, RAA/SEC/24/25/1, Royal Academy Archives, London.

of the London-based Chinese playwright Hsiung Shih-I's (Xiong Shiyi 熊式一, 1902-1991) English-language play of traditional Chinese story, *Lady Precious Stream* (*Wang Baochuan zhuan* 王宝钏传), which premiered in London in November 1934, reinforced the idea that the Chinese government would use the national culture as a vehicle for soft power and transnational heritage diplomacy.²⁴⁸

China's confidence in the 1935 Exhibition at the RA also drew from the financial and diplomatic success of the 1930 Exhibition of Italian Art at the same venue. Splendid yet controversial, the Italian Art Exhibition, supported by Benito Mussolini (1883-1945), featured over 900 Renaissance masterpieces to celebrate Italy's cultural heritage while promoting its national prestige and portraying the country as peaceful and cooperative, essentially serving as a promotion of "*italianità*" that implicitly functioned as a vehicle for Fascism.²⁴⁹ The exhibition attracted approximately 600,000 visitors, "more than has ever been recorded for an exhibition at the Academy before or since," and generated a profit exceeding £6,000.²⁵⁰ As a result, it ranked as the fourth most visited exhibition in the RA's history.²⁵¹ In a report regarding the organisation, selection, and safety of the 1935 Exhibition, drafted by Minister of Education Wang Shijie (王世杰, 1891-1981) for the NPM Committee, this idea was introduced:

...the previous Italian Art Exhibition earned much success so that the previous misunderstandings between Britain and Italy were eliminated, the two countries became friends. The Italian Prime Minister Mussolini had allowed 20,000 pounds to finance the exhibition, but the fund remained unspent until the end of the exhibition, and a profit of 37,000 pounds (over 700,000 Chinese yuan) was made. This is the first time that the treasures of our national art and culture have been presented on an international scale in Europe. The benefits to China's international perceptions and China-British relations will be great. The author anticipates that the success of this exhibition will rival, if not greater, those of previous exhibitions of European arts.²⁵²

248 Dianna Yeh, *The Happy Hsiungs: Performing China and Struggle for Modernity* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 65.

249 Sidney C. Hutchison, *The History of the RA 1768-1968* (New York: Tanager Publishing Company, 1969), 170; Francis Haskell, "Botticelli, Fascism and Burlington House: The 'Italian Exhibition' of 1930," *The Burlington Magazine* 141, no. 1157 (1999): 472; Katherine Jane Alexander, "Mussolini and the RA: A 90-Year-Old Controversy," RA, April 21, 2020, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/magazine-mussolini-1930-italian-art-exhibition>.

250 Hutchison, *The History of the RA*, 170.

251 Alexander, "Mussolini and the RA."

252 "谓前次意大利艺术展览会获益甚大, 使英、意过去之误会根本消除, 两国由是亲善。意首相墨索里尼曾准以二万镑为该会经费, 惟展览结果该经费迄未动支, 并且获利三万七千磅 (合我国币七十余万元)。我国艺术文化之精华在欧洲国际大规模表见此为首次, 其于国际观念、中英感情获益必大, 比之历次欧洲各国之展览, 说者预料此次成功倘非过之, 亦当相等。" Wang Shijie 王世杰, *Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui choushua jinkuang baogao* 伦敦中国艺术国际展览会筹画近况报告 [Report on the preparations for

The Ministry of Education agreed sending the NPM collections to London for exhibition in May 1934.²⁵³ Soon afterwards, Quo Tai-chi confirmed the plan for an exhibition of Chinese art at the RA, “for which the Chinese government had already privately agreed to loan work” on an occasion in London.²⁵⁴ On September 19, 1934, the Executive Yuan approved the proposal for the 1935 Exhibition and the establishment of its Preparatory Committee (*choubei weiyuanhui* 筹备委员会).²⁵⁵ Upon this point, the first overseas journey of Chinese national treasures officially started its preparation.²⁵⁶

The timeframe for the preparation of the 1935 Exhibition was notably brief, with less than a year. However, its significance in facilitating the international recognition of Chinese art can be traced back to the establishment of the NPM, which was an important measure to address the legacy of the previous dynasty in the wake of the revolution. The NPM played a pivotal role in preserving, presenting, as well as reinterpreting China’s imperial heritage, reflecting the efforts to demonstrate national modernity while cultivating a sense of national identity.

Foundation of the NPM and Shaping Modern Chinese Identity

On October 10, 1925, the fourteenth anniversary of the Republic of China, Zhuang Yunkuan (庄蕴宽, 1867–1932) stood in front of the Palace of Heavenly Purity (*Qianqing gong* 乾清宫). As the largest and most central palace within the Forbidden City, this palace had served as the political heart of China, where emperors of the Ming and Qing Dynasties convened with officials. The Xinhai Revolution in 1911 ended China’s imperial history. Although the grand palace buildings were preserved and the young emperor continued to reside there with his servants, the political and power centre of this country had long since shifted. Zhuang, a traditional literati and former official in both the late Qing and the early Republic, was, at the time, the head of the

the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London], October 3, 1934, quoted in Liu Nannan, “Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia,” 7.

253 Beiping gugong bowuyuan lishihui zhi jiaoyubu gonghangao 北平故宫博物院理事会致教育部公函稿 [Official letter from the committee of the NPM Beiping to the Ministry of Education], signed by Cai Yuanpei, May 26, 1934, quoted in Liu Nannan, “Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia,” 6.

254 Yeh, *The Happy Hsiungs*, 65.

255 “Guomin zhengfu zhuxi Lin Sen zhiling xingzhengyuan wei canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui xian she choubei weiyuanhui banli bing tongguo zuzhi gangyao banfa yian chengjian junxi” 国民政府主席林森指令行政院为参加伦敦中国艺术国际展览会先设筹备委员会办理并通过组织纲要办法一案呈件均悉 [National Government Chairman Lin Sen directs the Executive Yuan to establish a preparatory committee and approves organisational guidelines for participation in the London International Exhibition of Chinese Art], September 19, 1934, 001-012071-00134-004, Academia Historica, accessed September 18, 2024, <https://ahonline.drn.gov.tw/index.php?act=Display/image/5189505=gWcQRY#23F>.

256 “Fu Zhenlun Travelogue 1,” *Zijincheng* 1 (2004): 147.

National Audit Office and was chosen to preside over the opening ceremony of the NPM which took place at three p.m. on the day.²⁵⁷ During the ceremony, Li Shizeng (李石曾, 1881-1973) reported the preparatory process, and other committees delivered speeches that celebrated the museum's significance.²⁵⁸ A communiqué was sent to the Beiyang Government, Ministries and other social sectors.²⁵⁹ The once-forbidden palace was open to the public. Tens of thousands gathered to witness the historic event.²⁶⁰ Above the central arch of the Gate of Divine Prowess (*Shenwu men*, 神武门), the northern entrance of the museum, a plaque bearing the inscription “*Gugong Bowuyuan* (故宫博物院),” written by Li Shizeng was displayed (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The NPM on its anniversary in 1929, with the national flag of the ROC (right) and the flag of the KMT (left) hanging at the entrance. Source: The Palace Museum Beijing Collection.

257 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 307.

258 Na Zhiliang 那志良, *Wo yu gugong wushinian* 我与故宫五十年 [My fifty years at the NPM] (Hefei: Huangshan chubanshe, 2008), 22.

259 Ibid.

260 Ibid. 2-3.

The establishment of the NPM marked the end of over five centuries as the exclusive residence and administrative centre of the Ming and Qing emperors, serving as the supreme symbol of Chinese imperial power. From this moment, the once-mysterious palace was opened to the public, transforming into a space for visitation, recreation, and education. The art, objects, and architecture that once belonged solely to the imperial family became national treasures and public assets. The setting of the opening ceremony, including its date and carefully designed activities, embodied the discourse of the new Republic replacing the old monarchy. The ritualised opening of the museum was staged as a significant occasion, reinforcing democratic and republican ideologies while promoting a shared Chinese cultural identity.

The transformation of the Forbidden City into a museum took less than a year, beginning immediately after Puyi was evicted from the palace on November 14, 1924. This marked the end of imperial rule and left behind a wealth of cultural assets, including artworks, rare books, decorative objects, and the palace itself.²⁶¹ To oversee the management and redistribution of these assets, the Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Qing Court (Qingshi shanhou weiyuanhui 清室善后委员会) was established, with Li Shizeng as its head.²⁶² According to the audit result in 1925, there were approximately 1.17 million pieces of art stored within the Forbidden City.²⁶³ However, determining ownership of the artefacts and the palace itself proved to be a lengthy and chaotic process.²⁶⁴ Li, who witnessed Puyi's eviction, argued that "items related to history and culture should not be removed, as they are national treasures and do not belong to a single person or a family."²⁶⁵ Puyi initially tried to delay his departure, claiming to pack his personal belongings. But *The Amendment to the Special Treatment Conditions for the Qing Dynasty* (*Xiuzheng qingshi youdai tiaojian* 修正清室优待条件) clarified the distinction between private and public property, stating: "the private property of the Qing court belongs exclusively to its members, and the Republic government is responsible for its special protection, while all public

261 The negotiation between the Qing imperial family and the Beiyang Government, and the preparation of the establishment for the NPM, see Elliott and Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China's Imperial Art Treasures*, 68-71.

262 Zhang Hongwei 章宏伟, "Cong huanggong dao bowuguan: gugong bowuyuan de qianshi jinsheng" 从皇宫到博物馆: 故宫博物院的前世今生 [From palace to museum: past and present of the NPM], *Zijincheng* 10 (2020): 80-101.

263 Zheng Xinmiao 郑欣淼, *Tianfu yongcang: liang'an gugong bowuyuan wenwu cangpin gaishu* 天府永藏: 两岸故宫博物院文物藏品概述 [Heavenly treasures in imperial repository: an overview of the NPM collections across the Strait] (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2008), 22.

264 Xu Wanling, "Bowuguan yu guojia rentong zhi jiagou—yi gugong bowuyuan kaiyuan wei zhongxin" 博物馆与国家认同之建构——以故宫博物院开院为中心 [Museums and building a National consensus—focusing on the establishment of the Palace Museum], *Gugong xuekan* 故宫学刊 2 (2020): 402-8.

265 Ibid. 405; Zhang Hongwei, "Cong huanggong dao bowuguan," 87.

property is the property of the Republic government.”²⁶⁶ This stance reflected an ideological shift from monarchy to republicanism. Once the highly centralised political heart of the Qing Dynasty, the Forbidden City was transformed into a public institution dedicated to managing, preserving, exhibiting, and researching its collections, namely NPM. It stands as both a record of China’s dynastic history and a symbol of the nation’s transition from imperial rule to a modern republic.

The establishment of the NPM enjoyed multiple layers of meaning. Firstly, it changed the Chinese attitude towards antiquarianism. Traditionally, literati and rulers collected ancient and artistic objects to satisfy their personal interests or to demonstrate their knowledge and power. Starting in the early tenth century, Chinese traditional antiquarianism originated from Confucianism which was to justify the past histories as guidance for contemporary behaviours. It enjoyed esteemed moral purposes, while “in its best form it does not arbitrarily follow any vicissitudinous tide of politics or ideological fashion.”²⁶⁷ In the NPM, a new historical narrative, and national memory was created via the public demonstration of the past imperial collections in the palace that used to be only reserved for emperors and their families. The endeavour was double meaning: it celebrated the thousands of years of unstopped Chinese civilisation, and a new start of China with its national treasures “open to the public” and “for the public.” In this way, the government declared the legitimacy of the regime by linking the construction complex that symbolised the past imperial power to the celebration of the modern state, and by transmitting this new national memory to the citizens through a series of performative events or propaganda.

Secondly, the NPM played a significant educational role by providing the public with access to centuries of Chinese history and culture. Under the ideological framework of “Aesthetic Education,” modern museums were envisioned as tools for fostering national identity and cultivating public appreciation for art and history. The NPM thus became a fundamental element in the state’s efforts to integrate cultural heritage into national education, blending the traditional with the modern to shape a unified national collective memory.²⁶⁸ This role remains vital to the museum mission nowadays. The government, through the Ministry of Education, closely

266 “Beijing guowuyuan dian Yan Xishan yi yu qingshi Puyi shangding youdai tiaojian” 北京国务院电阎锡山已与清室溥仪商定有待条件 [Beijing State Council telegram Yan Xishan has negotiated Amendment to the Special Treatment Conditions with Puyi of Qing court], November 5, 1925, 116-010101-0019-118, Academia Historica, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://ahonline.drn.gov.tw/index.php?act=Display/image/3078364q=ltmeU#bao>; Xu Wanling, “Bowuguan yu guojia rentong zhi jiagou,” 404.

267 K. C. Chang, “Archaeology and Chinese Histography,” *World Archaeology* 13, no. 2 (1981): 156-7.

268 The development and role of museums in public education in the Republican era, see Shi Lei 石磊, “Minguo shiqi minzhong jiaoyuguan meiyu gongzuo yanjiu (1927-1949)” 民国时期民众教育馆美育工作研究 (1927-1949) [Aesthetic education in public education museums in the Republican era (1927-1949)], (PhD thesis, Nanjing University of the Arts, 2021).

monitored museum development, ensuring that their exhibitions and educational programs aligned with the goals of national education. At both the national and local levels, museums were tasked with disseminating knowledge, instilling patriotic values, and fostering a sense of cultural pride.

Museums that originated in nineteenth-century Europe were introduced to China along with the country's westernisation. Prior to the establishment of the ROC, a few earliest museums in China were established by Catholic missionaries for the purpose of “familiarizing the Chinese with Western civilization and its achievements” with the exhibitions of scientific paraphernalia, “which attracted many curious Chinese students.”²⁶⁹ Some of the early Chinese who bravely ventured abroad to observe the world recorded their observations in European museums in their travelogues.²⁷⁰ Progressive intellectuals and officials also recognised the potential of museums to advance higher education and public enlightenment, publishing their ideas in magazines and government reports.²⁷¹ The beginning of the museum industry in China at the turn of the twentieth century was driven by Western influences, highlighting the role of museum in showcasing progress and modernity, inspired by Darwinism and industrial exhibitions in foreign countries.²⁷² The NPM epitomised this transition by exhibiting the art and artefacts of the imperial past, educating visitors about China's rich history while nurturing the narrative of transformation and public awareness, preserving the past while inspiring a vision for a modern Chinese identity.

More importantly, through the process of museumification, the ROC asserted its legitimacy as a governing regime. The transformation of the Forbidden City into the NPM paralleled the repurposing of the Louvre following the French Revolution, serving as a revolutionary metaphor. Li Shizeng, educated in France and a contributor to Sino-French education, likely understood the historical significance of the Louvre's transformation and its relevance to the ROC's own revolutionary narrative.²⁷³ The Xinhai Revolution, led by Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan 孙中山,

269 Liu Chao 刘超, “Kaogu faxian yu minzu renting—yi minguo shiqi Zhongguo lishi jiaokeshu wei zhongxin” 考古发现与民族认同——以民国时期中国历史教科书为中心 [Archaeological discoveries and national identity—centred on Chinese history textbooks in the republican era], *Fudan xuebao* 复旦学报 3 (2016): 24.

270 Yang Zi 杨梓, “Jindai yuwai youji zhong de Ouzhou chengshi—yi Lundun he Bali wei zhongxin (1840-1911)” 近代域外游记中的欧洲城市——以伦敦和巴黎为中心 (1840-1911) [European cities in modern extraterritorial travelogues—London and Paris as Examples (1840-1911)], (Master's dissertation, Shanghai Normal University, 2014).

271 Li Jun 李军, “Wanqing minguo shiqi dui bowuguan jiaoyu de renshi” 晚清民国时期对博物馆教育的认识 [Understanding of museum education in the late Qing and republican era], *Dongnan wenhua* 东南文化 1, no. 327 (2014): 107-11.

272 Guolong Lai, “The Emergence of ‘Cultural Heritage’ in Modern China: A Historical and Legal Perspective,” in *Reconsidering Cultural Heritage in East Asia*, eds. Akira Matsuda and Louisa Elena Mengoni (London: Ubiquity Press, 2016), 70.

273 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 307.

1866-1925), overthrew the Qing Dynasty and established the ROC. With the centralised ideology of the party-state, art became a politicised apparatus to unify and uniform the ROC as a totalised country. In a state-centric discourse, the policies and measures in the selection and preservation of the antiques as national treasures sanctioned the place of antiquities in Chinese art history as well as in Chinese society. These measures also prepared the groundwork for the eventual overseas exhibition of national treasures, showcasing the determination of a modernised and culturally-rooted state.

In dynastic history, the artworks and objects in the imperial collections were amassed and curated by emperors, valued for their historical, cultural, artistic, ritual, and religious significance, as well as their rarity and uniqueness. The act of collecting and displaying these items not only manifested the personal tastes of individual emperors but also materialised and ritualised their worldview, cosmology, and the embodiment of state power and governance. When a new dynasty inherited the collections of its predecessor, it signified the transfer of providence and legitimacy, reaffirming the successive dynasty's right to rule.²⁷⁴ In contrast, the transformation of the Forbidden City into the NPM marked the transfer of ownership of the former imperial collections to the government. These collections, once the private property of the imperial family, became shared cultural assets, connecting the Chinese people to their nation's history and culture.²⁷⁵ As a result, the NPM emerged as a symbol of Chinese civilisation and a repository of the founding spirit of the ROC. By making these treasures accessible to the public and emphasising their role as part of China's collective heritage, the museum fostered a sense of shared ownership and pride among the Chinese people. These objects were no longer seen merely as relics of the past but as integral components of their cultural legacy. This transformation redefined the NPM's role and marked a significant development in China's museum history.

By the late Qing Dynasty, a sense of public consciousness had already begun to take shape in society. "Even the Qing government started to attend to the public needs."²⁷⁶ With the advent of the Republic, this awareness deepened and continued to evolve. This was accomplished through the construction of public facilities aimed at conveying modern ideas and culminated in the establishment of state legislation for cultural heritage protection.²⁷⁷ Public parks, museums, and libraries were established to cultivate the citizens' public consciousness, and nurturing their

274 Zheng Xinmiao, "Gugong yu xinhai geming" 故宫与辛亥革命 [The Forbidden City and Xinhai Revolution], *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宫博物院院刊 5, no. 157 (2011): 12.

275 Zheng Xinmiao, *Tianfu yongcang*, 22.

276 Lai, "The Emergence of 'Cultural Heritage,'" 51.

277 Ibid. 70.

collective national identity rooted in being Chinese.²⁷⁸ Founded in 1905, the Nantong Museum (*Nantong bowuyuan* 南通博物苑) was the first Chinese-run museum, established by Qing official, entrepreneur, and educator Zhang Jian (张謇, 1852-1926). With education as its primary mission, the museum housed collections in various disciplines spanning sciences and arts, alongside a botanical garden and the first Chinese-owned climate monitoring station of Jiangsu province. The founder wished to “set it up as a school to educate, with a focus on familiarising people with the names of birds, animals, plants, and trees.”²⁷⁹ Zhang encouraged collectors to donate their collections for the public good and established regulations to guide visitors’ behaviour, promoting public morality, encouraging respect for shared property, and urging visitors to treat the museum’s objects as their own.²⁸⁰ These institutions showcased the nation’s cultural wealth and strengthened the Chinese national identity, connecting the past, present, and future. Following the establishment of the NPM, Chinese museums expanded at both the national and local levels. By the time the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, 141 museums and galleries had been established across the country, showcasing achievements in art, culture, science, and technology.²⁸¹

In 1928, the Nanjing Government formed a new NPM Committee with twenty-seven appointed members and ten recommended by them.²⁸² The committee included prominent politicians and influential intellectuals of the time, many of whom played key roles in the 1935 Exhibition. In response to the escalating threat of Japanese invasion, the NPM, led by the new head, Ma Heng (马衡, 1881-1955), decided to evacuate its collections to Shanghai, along with former imperial collections and documents from other museums and libraries.²⁸³ Na Zhiliang provides a detailed record of the types and quantities of objects from the institution in his memoirs.²⁸⁴ The evacuation took three months, from February to May 1933, with the objects being sent in five batches.²⁸⁵ This laid the foundation for sending the national treasures of the palace abroad for exhibition.

278 Ibid. 55.

279 “设为庠序学校以教，多识鸟兽草木之名。” The couplets written by Zhang Jian are at the main entrance of the Nantong Museum.

280 Lai, “The Emergence of ‘Cultural Heritage,’” 55.

281 Bao Zunpeng 包遵彭, *Zhongguo bowuguan shi* 中国博物馆史 [History of Chinese museums] (Taipei: Zhonghua congshu bianshen weiyuanhui, 1964), 26.

282 “Liren tuandui” 历任团队 [Historical leaders], The Palace Museum, accessed January 24, 2023, https://www.dpm.org.cn/about/history_leader.html.

283 Elliott and Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China’s Imperial Art Treasures*, 74.

284 Na, *Wo yu gugong wushinian*, 62-8.

285 Liu Nannan 刘楠楠, Cai Quanzhou 蔡全周, and Pang Lu 庞璐, “Gugong bowuyuan guwu nanqian gefang lai wang handian yizu” 故宫博物院古物南迁各方来往函电一组 [Selected correspondences regarding the evacuation of the NPM’s antiques to the south], *Minguo dang’an* 3, (2014): 3-14.

Staffing the 1935 Exhibition

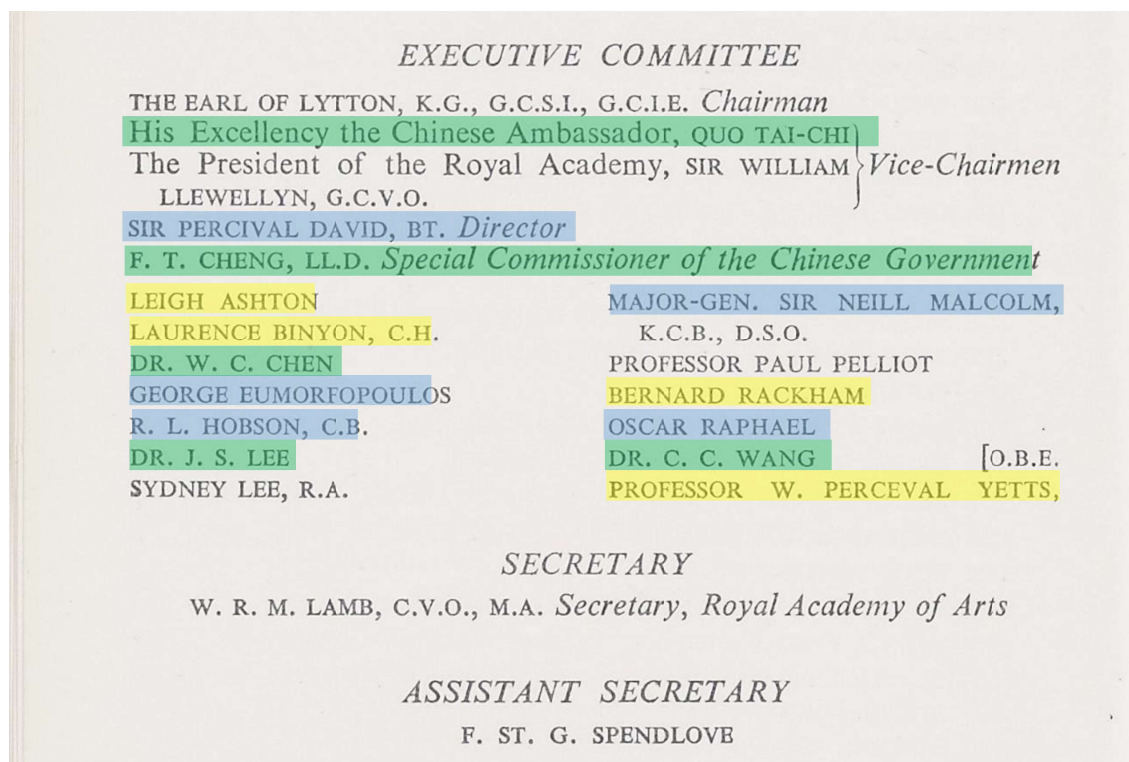


Figure 9. The Executive Committee and secretaries of the 1935 Exhibition. Source: RA Catalogue.

The Executive Committee for the 1935 Exhibition was established on November 1, 1934, and held its first meeting at the RA.²⁸⁶ At the same time, a list of members of the Chinese Preparatory Committee was sent to the RA for notification.²⁸⁷ The Executive Committee was the decision-making body for the exhibition's operations and curation (Figure 9). To reflect the collaborative nature of the exhibition, Chinese Ambassador Quo Tai-chi and RA President William Llewellyn (1858-1941), who strongly promoted international exhibitions, were named vice-presidents.²⁸⁸ The position of the Committee President was held by Victor Bulwer-Lytton, Second Earl of Lytton (1876-1947). In December 1931, Lytton led a team of officials on behalf of the League of Nations to China for the investigation of the September 18 Incident (*Jiuyiba shibian* 九一八事变), in which the Japanese army invaded and occupied Manchuria, prompting widespread condemnation. The incident significantly marked the beginning of Japan's aggressive expansion in China, ultimately leading to the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo. In response, the League of Nations

²⁸⁶ "Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-6 Committee Meeting Minutes," November 1, 1934, RA Archives, London; *RA Catalogue*, viii.

²⁸⁷ "Memorandum on an International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London," January 3, 1934, RAA/SEC/24/25/1, RA Archives, London; Scaglia, "The Aesthetics of Internationalism," 114-5.

²⁸⁸ James Fenton, *School of Genius: A History of the Royal Academy* (London: RA, 2006), 257.

did not recognise the areas that Japan gained through conquest, and Japan withdrew from the League in 1933.²⁸⁹ Having an influential British politician working in the League of Nations and defending justice for China as the leader of the Committee reflected the official nature of the 1935 Exhibition and was probably “the most explicit reference to internationalism.”²⁹⁰

The Oriental Ceramic Society played a significant role in the success of the 1935 Exhibition, with its members serving on the British Committee, as highlighted in the blue-shade in Figure 9. Established on January 31, 1921 in Chelsea, London, the OCS was among collectors and museum experts who were all keenly interested in ceramics and Asian art.²⁹¹ Initially operating as an exclusive network, the Society broadened its membership in 1933, becoming open to a wider public.²⁹² The society accumulated a diverse group of scholars, collectors, art professionals, and amateurs who shared a common passion. They maintained close relationships, fostering collaboration in scholarship, connoisseurship, and acquisition. This network not only elevated the academic and aesthetic appreciation of Asian ceramics but also influenced the direction of major exhibitions and collections in Britain and beyond.

The first president of the OCS, entrepreneur-collector, George Eumorfopoulos, enjoyed a wide range of collection interests, including ceramics, bronzes, paintings and modern European sculpture. In 1934, due to the Depression, Eumorfopoulos sold a large part of his collection to the British Museum (BM) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) for the token sum of £100,000.²⁹³ The remainder of his collection continued to grow but was eventually dispersed in 1940 following his death.²⁹⁴

Another key figure in the OCS, Percival David (1892-1964) joined the OCS in 1930, and “brought to it a special knowledge of the imperial wares of China.”²⁹⁵ David was likely one of the greatest beneficiaries of the 1935 Exhibition, which cemented his status as a leading authority on Chinese art collections in Britain and beyond. This success was rooted in his privileged background, affluent financial resources, sharp business acumen, passion and expertise in Chinese art, and a powerful

289 Quincy Wright, “The Sino-Japanese Controversy and the League of Nations. The September 18 Incident is generally regarded as the prelude to the Second Sino-Japanese War. By Westel W. Willoughby. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press. 1935. Pp. Xxv, 733),” *American Political Science Review* 29, no. 6 (1935): 1075-6.

290 Scaglia, “The Aesthetics of Internationalism,” 125.

291 “History of the OCS,” OCS, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.orientalceramicsociety.org.uk/about/history>.

292 Harry M. Garner, “Foreword,” in *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Ceramic Art of China* (London: OCS, 1971), 1.

293 “George Eumorfopoulos,” BM, accessed September 19, 2023, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG9752>.

294 Garner, “Foreword,” 1.

295 Ibid.

network spanning China, Britain, and other countries. David's family, had extensive business interests in Asia, including Shanghai.²⁹⁶ After abdication, Puyi mortgaged a portion of ancient porcelain pieces to some banks in Beijing, and later this collection was acquired by David, which became the basis of his collection.²⁹⁷ David's connection with Beijing began in the 1920s, during which he established networks with local officials and actively acquired artworks.²⁹⁸ In 1928, David worked at the NPM as an exhibition consultant for the porcelain from the Song to Ming dynasties, and generously provided financial contribution to the Museum during its early years.²⁹⁹ He travelled to China in 1932 and determined to "bring to London some of the very pieces" that he had helped to put on display in the NPM.³⁰⁰ David's contribution to the 1935 Exhibition was remarkable, providing large personal collections, his extensive contacts, and great efforts in bringing the event to fruition.

When news that the NPM collections had been moved to Shanghai reached Paul Pelliot (1878-1945), this renowned French sinologist and member of the Académie Française, who had unfortunately failed to examine the collections in 1931 due to the war threat in northern China, suggested that the British government invite China to send the collection to England for an exhibition, allowing Western scholars and collectors to view the treasures firsthand.³⁰¹ Pelliot was famous for his excavation in the Mogao Caves (*Mogao ku* 莫高窟) near Dunhuang (敦煌) in Gansu province, whose findings greatly enriched French collections of Chinese art, including the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Musée Guimet. Years of work and research in Asia, along with a strong command of the Chinese language, have enabled Pelliot to cultivate an extensive network among Chinese intellectuals, including some prominent ones such as Wang Guowei (王国维, 1877-1927) and Luo Zhenyu (罗振玉, 1866-1940).³⁰² Pelliot was elected President of the Société Asiatique in 1935, marking a significant acknowledgment of his contributions to Asian studies and his stature in the field of sinology.³⁰³

296 Stacy Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560-1960* (Oxford: Lang Peter, 2007), 100-2.

297 Zhuang Shangyan, *Shantang qinghua* 山堂清话 [Stories from the Mountain Hall] (Taipei: NPM, 1959), quoted in Wu Sue-Ying, "Zhanlan zhong de 'Zhongguo,'" 28.

298 Rosemary E. Scott, "Introduction," in *Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art: A Guide to the Collection* (London: SOAS University of London, 1989), 10-11; Audrey Wang, *Chinese Antiquities: An Introduction to the Art Market* (London: Lund Humphries, 2016), 111.

299 Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums*, 129-30.

300 Scott, "Introduction," 12-3.

301 *Ta Kung Pao*, January 20, 1935, 3; Wu Sue-Ying, "Zhanlan zhong de 'Zhongguo,'" 21.

302 Qin Hualin 秦桦林, "1909 nian Beijing xuejie gongyan Bo Xihe shijian bukao—jianlun Wang Guowei yu zaoqi Dunhuangxue" 1909 年北京学界公宴伯希和事件补考——兼论王国维与早期敦煌学 [A re-examination of the 1909 Beijing scholarly banquet for Paul Pelliot—with additional discussion on Wang Guowei and early Dunhuang studies], *Zhejiang daxue xuebao* 浙江大学学报, 4. no. 3 (2018): 44-56.

303 Jacques Bacot, "Paul Pelliot (1878-1945)," *Annales de Géographie* 55, no. 298 (1946): 129.

The 1935 Exhibition was initiated by the individual will of an exclusive group of people equipped with a certain level of knowledge of Chinese art. They did this out of their passion for Chinese art and to promote the development of the Chinese art market by enhancing appreciation. At the same time, organising an exhibition with OCS members as leading figures reinforced the Society's authority in Chinese art.

In the British Committee, museum professionals and scholars from well-established British institutions are highlighted in yellow in Figure 9. Laurence Binyon (1869-1943), the former Keeper of the Prints and Drawings Department at the British Museum, retired in 1933 but played a significant role. Leigh Ashton (1897-1983) and Bernard Rackham (1876-1964), both from the Department of Ceramics at the V&A, also contributed; Ashton had previously worked with textiles before specialising in ceramics.³⁰⁴ W. Perceval Yetts (1878-1957) from the SOAS brought his expertise in Chinese bronzes and ritual objects to the exhibition. Earlier in his career, Yetts practiced medicine in Beijing during the 1910s, where he "at once fell under the spell of the beauty and dignity of that city."³⁰⁵ These individuals, with their abundant knowledge of Chinese art, were the driving force behind the exhibition, exercising substantial control over the selection and curation process.

For the practical functioning of the exhibition, Sydney Lee (1866-1949), the treasurer of the RA, was enlisted on the Executive Committee. Walter Lamb (1882-1961) from the RA served as secretary, while F. St. G. Spendlove (1897-1962) was appointed as his assistant. Spendlove, a World War I veteran and art dealer from Canada, travelled to London in 1934 to study Chinese archaeology at the Courtauld Institute. He was later recommended to the RA to assist with the 1935 Exhibition, for which he taught himself Chinese. Following his work on the exhibition, Spendlove pursued a career in museums in Britain and Canada, including the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, where he curated Japanese, East Indian, European, and Canadian art.³⁰⁶ Most of the exhibition's correspondence and audience inquiries were handled by Lamb and Spendlove.

Five Chinese figures, in green shade in Figure 9, were enlisted in the British Committee. J. S. Lee (also known as Li Rongsen 利荣森, 1915-2007), who used the name "*Beishan tang* (北山堂)," was a collector from Hong Kong's prominent Lee family, renowned for their industrial ventures. The

304 Lee Sorensen, "Ashton, Leigh, Sir," Dictionary of Art Historians, accessed January 20, 2024, <https://arthistorians.info/ashtonl/>.

305 S. Howard Hansford, "Walter Perceval Yetts," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1/2 (April 1958): 110.

306 "Spendlove, F. ST. G.," Queen's University Archives, accessed September 19, 2023), <http://dbarchives.library.queensu.ca/index.php/f-st-george-spendlove>.

family's origins have been linked to a historical association with the opium trade.³⁰⁷ Lee's connection to the Chinese government has yet to be researched. Otherwise, however, all these people had official backgrounds. These people also exemplified modernised Chinese people actively embracing Western culture through their internationalised education and career backgrounds.

Ambassador Quo, a Qing government-sponsored student, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1911.³⁰⁸ He served as a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference, and later joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the Guangzhou Government era.³⁰⁹ After 1927, Quo, regarded as a strong supporter of the Nanjing Government, held several key roles within the Ministry.³¹⁰ From 1932 to 1940, he served as China's first representative to Britain, eventually rising to the position of ambassador.³¹¹ W. C. Cheng (Chen Weicheng 陈维成, 1880—?) who obtained his doctoral degree from the University of Michigan, held various diplomatic posts in London and Copenhagen from 1914 to the 1930s.³¹² When Japan invaded northeastern China, Quo and Chen stayed in London to manage the embassy, working to present China's case against Japan's aggressive expansion, despite the British focus on fascist aggression in Europe.³¹³ At that same time, the Yale- and Illinois-educated C. C. Wang (Wang Jingchun, 王景春, 1882–1956) was also in London and held the responsibility of procuring supplies for the war on behalf of the Chinese government.³¹⁴

Alongside Quo, another key figure who made a great contribution to the Sino-British friendship and cultural exchanges was F. T. Cheng, who functioned as the Special Commissioner of the Chinese government to the 1935 Exhibition. Born in Fujian province to parents from Guangdong, Cheng studied at Queen's College (*Huangren xueyuan* 皇仁学院) in Hong Kong and earned a JD from University College London in 1915, before practicing law extensively in Britain, the United States, and China.³¹⁵ Cheng had a particular interest in ancient Chinese history and philosophy, as well as western culture, which made him a popular figure during the 1935 Exhibition and his future

307 For the Lee family, See Li Dehui 利德蕙, *Xianggang Lishi jiazushi* 香港利史氏家族史 [History of the Lee family of Hong Kong], trans. Gu Xiaofang 顾筱芳 (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011).

308 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 853.

309 Ibid; Gu Weijun 顾维钧, *Gu Weijun huiyilu* 顾维钧回忆录 [Memoir of Gu Weijun], Vol. 7 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 282.

310 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 854; Gu Weijun, *Gu Weijun huiyilu*, Vol. 7, 282.

311 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 854.

312 Ibid. 1062.

313 "Zhuying shiguan mishu Lu Tongping lai Hu tanhua: Yingguo minzhong pobiao tongqing yu wo" 驻英使馆秘书鲁潼平来沪谈话：英国民众颇表同情于我 [Secretary of the Chinese Embassy to Britain Lu Tongping came to Shanghai to talk: the British public showed sympathy to China], *Shun Pao* 申报, June 26, 1932, 14.

314 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 87.

315 Ibid. 1477.

ambassadorship in Britain.³¹⁶ In 1932, Cheng accepted the invitation of the Chinese Government to take up the post of Executive Vice-Minister and sometimes Acting Minister of the Justice Ministry. In 1935, Cheng became an advisor in the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³¹⁷ On behalf of the government, Cheng escorted the artefacts from Shanghai to London, unpackaged and examined them with Chinese and British staff, participated in the opening and closing ceremonies, delivered lectures about Chinese art, and socialised in the event period. During this trip to Europe, Cheng had two other missions: representing China at a conference in Berlin on criminal law and prison management and attending a conference in Denmark focused on harmonising the national criminal law programme.³¹⁸

Two additional committees were formed in the 1935 Exhibition, each with extensive networks that contributed significantly to the event. The British and Foreign General Committees, comprising prominent scholars and museum professionals like Osvald Sirén (Xi Longren 喜龙仁, 1879-1966), J.G. Andersson (1874-1960), and Kenneth Clark (1903-1980), emphasised expertise in Chinese art and exhibitions.³¹⁹ The Committee of Honour included officials, ambassadors, and academics, highlighting the event's academic and diplomatic significance.³²⁰ Some highly placed Chinese officials and academics in British society are among them. As evident from the information presented, the 1935 Exhibition evolved into both an academic and diplomatic festival celebrating Chinese art.

The Chinese Preparatory Committee was responsible for selecting the artworks, ensuring the interpretation, and coordinating with the British Committee to materialise the 1935 Exhibition, while the British committee reserved the right to inspect the selection and share their opinions.³²¹ Table 1 illustrates Chinese committees that I compiled, with their names, roles in the Committee and their official positions in 1935. The information is from archives, newspapers, and research works of Wu Sue-Ying and Ilaria Scaglia.³²² However, the composition of this committee was extensive and fluid, which made the identifying work difficult. Some Chinese committees were also listed in the Committee of Honour on the British side, which I mark with the symbol (☆) shown.

316 Ibid. 415; Wong Chun Wai 黄振威, *Fanshu yu huanglong: Xianggang Huangren shuyuan huaren jingying yu jindai Zhongguo* 番书与黄龙：香港皇仁书院华人精英与近代中国 [English lessons and the yellow dragon: Chinese elites of Hong Kong Queen's College and modern China] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 2019), 448.

317 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 87.

318 Wong Chun Wai, *Fanshu yu huanglong*, 433-4.

319 *RA Catalogue*, viii-x.

320 Ibid. vi-vii.

321 Telegram from Wang Shijie to the Committee of the 1935 Exhibition, December 12, 1934, RAA/SEC/24/25/1, RA Archives, London; Scaglia, "The Aesthetics of Internationalism," 114-5.

322 *Shun Pao*, February 22, 1935; *Shun Pao*, March 14, 1935; Wu Sue-Ying, "Zhanlan zhong de 'Zhongguo,'" 26-28; Scaglia, "The Aesthetics of Internationalism," 114-5.

Table 1. Chinese Preparatory Committee for the 1935 Exhibition		
Director of Committee	Wang Shijie ☆	Minister of Education
Ex-officio Committees	Chu Minyi (褚民谊, 1884-1946)	Secretary-general of the Executive Yuan
	Gan Naiguang (甘乃光, 1897-1956)	Deputy Minister of the Interior
	Xu Mo (徐谟, 1893-1956)	Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs
	Zou Lin (邹琳, 1888-1984)	Deputy Minister of Finance
	Duan Xipeng (段锡朋, 1896-1948)	Deputy Minister of Education
	Ma Heng ☆	Director of the NPM
Honorary Officers	Hang Liwu (杭立武, 1903-1991)	Leader of the British-Chinese Educational Association
	Li Shengwu (李圣五, 1899-1985)	Director of General Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Founder of <i>The Eastern Miscellany</i> (<i>Dongfang zazhi</i> 东方杂志)
	Pan Gongzhan (潘公展, 1895-1975)	Editor of <i>Shun Pao</i> and <i>Journal of Commerce</i> (<i>Shangbao</i> 商报); Director of Shanghai Municipal Education Bureau; Vice Minister of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the KMT; Executive Director and Secretary General of China Cultural Constructing Association (<i>Zhongguo wenhua jianshe xiehui</i> 中国文化建设协会)
	He Dekui (何德奎 1896-1983)	Secretary of the Association of Chinese Taxpayers of International Settlement (<i>gonggong zujie nashui huarenhui</i> 公共租界纳税华人会)
	Lei Zhen (雷震, 1897-1979)	General director of the Department of General Affairs of the Ministry of Education

	Lu Xirong (卢锡荣, 1894-1857)	General director of the Department of Etiquette of the Ministry of Interior
	Li Dachao (李大超, 1900-1984)	Section Chief of the Government of Shanghai
Preparatory committees	Chen Shuren (陈树人, 1884-1948)	Minister of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission; Artist
	Zhang Daofan (张道藩, 1897-1968)	Executive Vice-minister of the Ministry of Transportation and Communications; Founder of the National Theatre School
	Zeng Zhongming (曾仲鸣, 1896-1939)	Executive Vice-minister of the Ministry of Railway
	Yuan Tongli (袁同礼, 1895-1965)	President of the National Beiping Library
Conservation Committee	Cai Yuanpei ☆	President of Academia Sinica; Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the NPM
	Cheng Linsheng (程霖生 1886-1943)	Shanghai-based property tycoon; Collector
	Qian Yongming (钱永铭, 1885-1958)	Deputy Minister of Finance; Banker; Vice President of Shanghai Civic Association (<i>Shanghai defang weichihui</i> 上海地方维持会)
	Ye Gongchuo (叶恭绰, 1881-1968) ³²³	Minister of Transportation; Artist, collector and antiquarian
	Wang Yunwu (王云五 1888-1979)	Manager of Commercial Press; Researcher of the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica
	Wu Hufan (吴湖帆 1894-1968)	Artist, collector and antiquarian
Specialised Committee Consultant	Lei Zhen	See “Honourary Officers”

323 The position was represented by painter Wang Jiqian (王季迁, 1906-2003) later, quoted in Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 26.

Specialised Committee Members	Bronzes	
	Tang Lan (唐兰, 1901-1979)	Historian; Bronze expert
	Li Ji (李济, 1896-1979)	Archaeologist, anthropologist; Head of Archaeology Department, Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica
	Ouyang Daoda (欧阳道达, 1893-1976)	Head of the NPM Archives
	Painting and Calligraphy	
	Deng Yizhe (邓以蛰, 1892-1973)	Artist, art theorist and collector
	Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿, 1895-1953)	Professor in Art at the National Central University; Artist
	Yang Zhensheng (杨振声, 1890-1956)	President of the National University of Qingdao
	Gu Shusen (顾树森, 1886-1967)	Educator; Head of the Department of National Education, Ministry of Education
	Ye Gongchuo	See “Conservation Committee”
	Porcelain	
	Guo Baochang (郭葆昌, 1879-1942)	Scholar Collector and antiquarian; Committee of the NPM
	Zhang Yuquan (张煜全, 1879-1953)	Scholar in International Law; Former President of Tsinghua University
Committee members³²⁴	Rong Geng (容庚, 1894-1983)	Professor at Yenching University; Archaeologist; Palaeography scholar; Collector and antiquarian
	Zhu Wenjun (朱文钧, 1882-1937)	Committee of NPM; Collector

³²⁴ Their names appear in the archives, articles, and web pages regarding the 1935 Exhibition, but their specific positions are not available.

	Chen Handi (陈汉第, 1874-1949)	Artist
General Secretary	Yang Zhensheng	See “Specialised Committee Members”
Secretary of Shanghai Preparatory Office	Tang Xifen (唐惜芬)	Educational Inspector of the Ministry of Education
Secretary of the Committee	Xue Quanzeng (薛铨曾)	

In contrast to the international makeup of the British Committee, the Chinese Committee was a homogeneous group, both in terms of gender and nationality. The Ministry of Education of the ROC was responsible for overseeing the exhibition, with Minister Wang Shijie serving as the Head of the Committee, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior.³²⁵ The Chinese Committee gathered officials and scholars from art, history, archaeology, education, as well as influential local people in Shanghai. The exhibits were divided into four categories: bronzes, porcelain, paintings and calligraphy, and miscellaneous objects. For each category, leading artists, scholars, and collectors in their respective fields were appointed as committees responsible for selecting the exhibits for the 1935 Exhibition. This composition of the Committee demonstrated high-level governmental engagement, guaranteed the quality and presentation of the artefacts, and ensured the exhibition ran smoothly.

At the same time, the personnel arrangement of the Committee demonstrated the determination of China to connect with the world. Most of them received modernised and westernised education and experience of living and working abroad. Taking the Head and Ex-officio Committees as examples, Wang Shijie studied at the London School of Economics from 1913 and graduated with a Bachelor of Economics and Political Science in 1917, and earned his doctorate in Law from the University of Paris in 1920.³²⁶ Chu Minyi was educated in Japan, France, and Belgium.³²⁷ He obtained his doctorate in medicine from the University of Strasbourg in 1925. During his time in Europe, he was

325 “Xingzheng yuanzhang Wang Zhaoming micheng guoming zhengfu zhuxi Lin Sen wei canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui xianshe choubei weiyuanhui banli bing tongguo zuzhi dabang banfa qing jianhe” 行政院长汪兆銘密呈国民政府主席林森为参加伦敦中国艺术国际展览会先设筹备委员会办理并通过组织大纲办法请鉴核 [Executive Yuan Premier Wang Zhaoming submitted a report to the National Government Chairman Lin Sen to establish a preparatory committee for the participation in the London International Exhibition of Chinese Art, and requested approval and review of the organisational outline and methods], September 14, 1934, 001-012071-00134-003, Academia Historica, accessed September 18, 2024, <https://ahonline.drn.gov.tw/index.php?act=Display/image/5214430658=Z9n#6eH2>.

326 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 45.

327 Ibid. 1346.

active in supporting Sino-French educational exchanges. Chu joined the Revolutionary Alliance (*Tongmeng hui* 同盟会) in 1905 in Singapore, and supported Sun Yat-sen to oppose Yuan Shikai's (袁世凯, 1859-1916) restoration in 1915. Gan Naiguang started his political career in the KMT in 1924 after he graduated from Lingnan University in Guangzhou, majoring in Politics and Economics.³²⁸ He continued his study in the same area in the University of Chicago during his exile from 1928 to 1929.³²⁹ Gan was the last Ambassador of the ROC to Australia (1947-1950) before the PRC; he remained in Australia in the last years of his life.³³⁰ Likewise, Xu Mo was one of the earliest practitioners and professors in International Law in China. In the 1920s, he was sent by the Beiyang temporary government to the Chinese Embassy in the United States, where he also gained his master's degree in law at George Washington University.³³¹ During his time in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1928 and throughout the 1930s, Xu played an important role in the negotiations with Britain, France, Japan, and some smaller European countries, and the formulation and implementation of China's foreign policy. In the 1940s to 1950s, Xu's later years were spent as Chinese Ambassador in different countries around the world.³³² Duan Xipeng, an alumnus of Peking University and a student leader during the May Fourth Movement in 1919, pursued further studies at Columbia University with financial support from Chinese entrepreneur Mu Xiangyue (穆湘玥, 1876-1943), who was also US-educated. While in the United States, Duan organised Chinese students to advocate for the Washington Conference in 1921.³³³ Before he returned to China, he also studied at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the University of Berlin, and the University of Paris.³³⁴ Upon his return, Duan taught in universities then entered politics, holding key positions within the party and government. Finally, Zou Lin, although there is no record of him studying or living outside China, was a graduate of the School of Translation of Peking Imperial University in 1907, and National Peking School of Law and Politics (*Guoli zhengfa zhuanmen xuexiao* 国立北京政法专门学校) in 1912.³³⁵ Both were the earliest Chinese modern institutions

328 Bao Huade 包华德 (Howard L Boorman), *Minguo mingren zhuanji cidian* 民国名人传记辞典 [Biographical dictionary of famous people in the ROC], Vol. 1, trans. Shen Zimin 沈自敏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 81.

329 In 1927, Gan Naiguang, then Mayor of Guangzhou, was accused of "allowing and protecting the Communist rebellion in Guangzhou" and "misappropriating public funds," and was dismissed from his position. In 1929, Gan returned to China, and was expelled from the KMT. In 1931, he was reinstated and returned to a prominent position in the KMT central government after the September 18 Incident. Ibid. 82.

330 Ibid.

331 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 703.

332 Ibid. 703-4.

333 Ibid. 606; Jiangxi Provincial History Editorial Office ed., *Jiangxi jinxindai renwu zhuangao* 江西近现代人物传稿 [A biographical manuscript of modern and contemporary figures of Jiangxi] (Haikou: Hainan renmin chubanshe, 1989), 153.

334 Xu Youchun, ed., *Minguo renwu da cidian*, 703.

335 Ibid. 1290.

that specialised in Westernised study subjects. Similar experiences were shared by other committee members.³³⁶

This committee also reflected the modernisation in the realm of Chinese art. In this case, Xu Beihong was a figure of paramount significance in modern Chinese painting, whose contributions cannot be overlooked. Xu Beihong, who first studied in Japan and later at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, was renowned for blending Eastern and Western artistic styles. His work often explored Chinese themes while incorporating traditional and Western techniques. As one of the “Four Great Academy Presidents,” Xu revolutionised Chinese art education and addressed social and political issues in his art, earning international acclaim.³³⁷ In Paris, Xu collaborated with peers from the *Association des Artistes Chinois en France* and the *Société Chinoise des Arts Décoratifs* to exhibit and curate Chinese art. While these efforts met with mixed success, they contributed significantly to the canonisation of modern art and the formation of Chinese cultural identity. Xu’s legacy continues to shape Chinese art and education.³³⁸

Chen Shuren was a representative painter in Lingnan School (Lingnan huapai 岭南画派), famous for his landscapes, flowers and birds. Chen, who studied at art schools in Kyoto and Tokyo during the 1910s, incorporated Japanese influences into his work. Inspired by Imao Keinen (今尾景年, 1845-1924), Chen promoted the blending of scientific observation with techniques learned from painting manuals to create realistic and lively depictions of natural subjects.³³⁹ Chen was a key figure in studying modern Sino-Japanese artistic interaction in the early twenty century, and embedded this subtle interaction in the broader art scene. Chen’s achievements in art led to his appointment as a committee member for several overseas exhibitions, including the 1933 Paris Exhibition of Chinese Art, which Xu co-curated with André Dezarrois (1889-1979).³⁴⁰ Plus, Chen’s relationship with Wang Jingwei (汪精卫, 1883-1944) in the 1920s and 1930s also makes him an interesting presence in Chinese politics.³⁴¹ When Wang started the Peace Movement and led a

336 For example, Yang Zhensheng studied Education at Columbia University and Educational Psychology at Harvard in the 1920s, and was awarded a PhD in Education. Yuan Tongli was a student at Columbia in the 1920s. Before working as the Director of the National Library in 1924, he travelled around Europe to examine the libraries and museums. Ibid. 649, 1232.

337 Shu-Chin Wang, “Realist Agency in the Art Field of Twentieth-Century China: Realism in the Art and Writing of Xu Beihong (1895-1953)”, (PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, 2009).

338 Craig Clunas, “Chinese Art and Chinese Artists in France (1924-1925)”, *Arts Asiatiques* 44 (1989) : 100-6.

339 Su Wenhui 苏文惠 (Stephanie Su), “Chen Shuren yu Riben xiandai huaniaohua de biange: cong Yue li tu tanqi” 陈树人与日本现代花鸟画的变革：从《跃鲤图》谈起 [Chen Shuren and the reform of bird-and-flower painting in modern Japan: starting from Leaping Carp], in *Jielu Fusang: liu Ri huajia de Zhongguohua gailiang, 1905–1937* 借路扶桑：留日画家的中国画改良 1905–1937 [Passing through Japan: the reform of painting by Chinese artists studied in Japan], ed. Le Zhengwei 乐正维 (Guangzhou: Lingnan Meishu Chubanshe, 2018), 248–66.

340 Stephanie Su, “Exhibition as Art Historical Space,” 134.

Japan-friendly collaborationist government from 1940 to 1944, Chen withdrew politically from him.³⁴²

The staffing arrangement put China and Britain in an equal position, a great honour for the Chinese Government, which has been discriminated against in its international relations. Tao Xiaojun attributed this “concession” by Britain to the considerable expected financial profit of the exhibition.³⁴³ Notwithstanding, as Ilaria Scaglia argues, the British and Chinese staff formed a heterogeneous group with state and non-state, national and transnational actors who were “each distinguished by nationality and yet committed to a common goal.”³⁴⁴ This goal was nothing but to contribute a glamorous celebration of the art and culture of one country in the territory of another.³⁴⁵ Clearly, without the collaborative endeavour of both governments, such an ambitious project would not have been possible.

Selecting Objects for the 1935 Exhibition

It only took four months for the Chinese Committee to select artworks for the 1935 Exhibition.³⁴⁶ Presenting “China” and “Chinese culture” to a foreign audience differed from the earlier imperial approach of collecting, showcasing and appreciating art, necessitating the reorganisation and reinterpretation of artefacts.³⁴⁷ After the Chinese Committee finalised the selection based on criteria set by the British Committee, the results were submitted for review, with the British holding final decision over the exhibition, despite the exhibition’s focus on Chinese art.³⁴⁸ Xu Bangda (徐邦达, 1911-2012), an expert in the appraisal of Chinese calligraphy and paintings and researcher at the NPM, who visited the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition expressed his scepticism about the

341 Julia F. Andrews, *Between the Thunder and the Rain: Chinese Painting from the Opium War to the Cultural Revolution, 1940-1979* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and Echo Rock Ventures, 2000), 176.

342 Ibid.

343 Tao Xiaojun 陶小军, “1935 nian Lundun yizhan zhi shimo kaocha” 1935 年伦敦艺展之始末考察 [An examination of the 1935 London Art Exhibition], *Meishu guan cha* 美术观察 20 (2015): 111.

344 Scaglia, “The Aesthetics of Internationalism,” 114-5.

345 Ibid.

346 Zhuang, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji,” 115.

347 Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 20.

348 “关于物品之选择，在选择以前，英方得提出标准。选定后，并由英方提出意，见以供中国方面之决定。” (Regarding the selection of items, the British side would first propose the criteria. After the selection, the British side would provide their opinions for the Chinese side to make the final decision.) “Beiping gugong bowuyuan lishihui zhi jiaoyubu gonghangao” 北平故宫博物院理事会致教育部公函稿 [Official letter from the Committee of the NPM Beiping to the Ministry of Education], signed by Cai Yuanpei, October 3, 1934, quoted in Liu Nannan, “Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia,” 7.

authenticity of the paintings, and criticised the fact that they were “all chosen by foreigners.”³⁴⁹ Wu Hufan, a member of the Conservation Committee, participated in the appraisal and selection of exhibits and reportedly identified more than half of the NPM’s collection as forgeries.³⁵⁰ Although the authenticity of the artworks falls outside the scope of this thesis, the selection that adequately represented Chinese art and culture, and the manner in which they were presented in such a large-scale event the modern age of China is one of the important components. Selecting exhibits for the 1935 Exhibition further consolidated the NPM collection—nationalised a decade earlier—and contributed to the systematisation of Chinese art history.

Table 2. Exhibits selected by the Chinese Government for the 1935 Exhibition								
	NPM	NAM	HM	AL	BL	AS	ZNJ	Total
Bronze	60 (59)	36 (37)	8	4				108
Porcelain	352							352
Painting and Calligraphy	170	5						175
Jade	60 (66)	2 (6)					65	127 (137)
Archaeological Objects						113		113
Rare books					50			50
Furniture	19							19
Cloisoné	16 (13)							16 (13)
Textiles	28	1						29
Lacquer	5 (4)							5 (4)
Fans	20							20
Miscellaneous	5	3						8
Total	735 (736)	47 (52)	8	4	50	113	65	1022 (1028)

Table 2 presents the number of artefacts, categorised by institutions and genres, selected by the China Committee for the 1935 Exhibition, as extracted from Zhuang Shangyan’s report in the

349 Cao Peng 曹鹏, “Pingsheng suohao shi shuhua—Xu Bangda fangtan lu” 平生所好是书画——徐邦达访谈录 [Painting and calligraphy is passion of my life: interview with Xu Bangda], *Zhongguo shuhua* 12 (2003): 9.

350 Cao Peng, “Lishishang diyici guobaozhan: 1935 zhi 1936nian Lundun Zhongguo yishupin zhanlan zhitan” 历史上第一次国宝展——1935 至 1936 年伦敦中国艺术品展览摭谈 [The first exhibition of national treasures in history: a discussion on London Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-1936], *Zhongguo shuhua*, 6 (2004): 108.

Bulletin of the NPM. The numbers in brackets indicate the number of artworks in the same category exhibited in the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition, if different from the final number sent to London.³⁵¹ A total of 1,022 artworks and objects were selected for the 1935 Exhibition from six public institutions—the NPM, NAM, National Beiping Library (BL), Academia Sinica (AS), Henan Museum (HM), Anhui Library (AL)—and the private collection of Chang Nai-chi (ZNJ), comprising approximately one-third of the 3,080 exhibits. These were labelled as “The Chinese Government Loan” and “Chang Nai-chi, Shanghai” in the RA Catalogue. Among these artefacts, 735 were from the NPM. Combined with forty-seven exhibits from the NAM, artefacts originating from the Forbidden City accounted for more than two-thirds of the total. The artefacts included a wide range of dates, materials, and styles, trying to represent Chinese culture and “the totality of Chinese art.”³⁵²

Due to constraints such as limited preparation time, budget restrictions, and the need to ensure the safety of fragile historical objects, the exhibits were selected exclusively from state-owned collections, with NPM artefacts chosen solely from those kept in Shanghai, “instead of contacting the private ones.”³⁵³ The rushed preparation also prevented the staff from providing “systematic art-historical descriptions” of all the artworks, a shortcoming Zhuang Shangyan later regretted.³⁵⁴

Considering the distance of transportation, the difficulty of handling and the potential for damage to the artworks during the exhibition, rare works, some extremely valuable items, inferior works, works with old paper or silk, and that have become fragile were selected.³⁵⁵ The long- time journey on the sea also led to restrictions on the size and weight of Chinese artworks, for example, most of the bronzes chosen in China (Lots 6-105) are medium- or small-size, ranged between thirty to ten centimetres.³⁵⁶ The largest object from China is the bronze cauldron known as the “*Taotie Ding* (饕餮鼎)” (Lot 52) from the early Zhou Dynasty, which is part of the NPM Collection. This unusually large vessel is adorned with coiled serpent patterns and ogre mask patterns at the tops of its legs. It measures 74.8 centimetres in height, including the handles, has a maximum circumference of 162 centimetres, and weighs eighty jin (approximately forty-eight kilos).³⁵⁷

351 *Illustrated Catalogue*, vols. 1-4.

352 Ye Gongchuo 叶恭绰, “Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlan” 伦敦中国艺术国际展 [London International Exhibition of Chinese Art], *Shun Pao*, April 9, 1935, 3.

353 *Illustrated Catalogue*, Vol. 1, 11-12; Zhuang, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji,” 115.

354 Zhuang, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji,” 115.

355 Na, *Wo yu gugong wushinian*, 83; Cao, “Lishishang diyici guobaozhan,” 108.

356 *RA Catalogue*, 1-8.

357 *Illustrated Catalogue*, Vol. 1, 20; *RA Catalogue*, 4.

The selection of the Chinese artefacts for the 1935 Exhibition was a result of the negotiations between the Chinese and British Committees. Differences of opinion existed from the outset. Primarily, the British side focused on presenting an international exhibition with Chinese art collections from all over the world. In the inaugural lecture of the exhibition on November 29, 1935, delivered by Percival David at the Royal Society, Burlington House, he said:

The Chinese contribution forms the axis, as it were, around which the Exhibition revolves. But it is an international Exhibition of Chinese art, and the international character of the display is apparent from the sources from which the exhibits have been derived.³⁵⁸

To form the international display, the Committee members went to different countries to network, select and arrange artworks. In February 1935, David, Pelliot, Eumorfopoulos, Hobson and Raphael left for China to make arrangements with the Chinese Government for the 1935 Exhibition.³⁵⁹ David and Raphael travelled to Beiping on March 4, 1935, before heading to Shanghai, where they stayed until the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition concluded. After that, David left for the United States, while Raphael went to Japan to continue the selection process before both returned to Britain to prepare for the exhibition. Eumorfopoulos and Hobson arrived in Shanghai on March 13. After Shanghai, Eumorfopoulos travelled to Russia to join Ashton to select exhibits.³⁶⁰ Binyon, Rackham, and Yetts oversaw the selection of artefacts from European collections, while Ashton travelled across Europe to network and assist with the selection process.³⁶¹

For the Chinese Committee, the goal was to have a Chinese art exhibition on the world stage. Therefore, they tried to provide Chinese art of various categories with an emphasis on the diversity of eras, regions, types, styles, patterns and usage in an effort to comprehensively demonstrate the charm of Chinese art and the historical changes in modelling techniques and aesthetics. However, the underestimation of the taste and connoisseurship of Chinese art in the West also made the quality of some of the exhibits from China unsatisfactory. As Basil Gray regretted,

The Chinese Committee's choice was conditioned in the first place by the contents of the Palace Collection, and only secondly by their more or less conscious law, in which the Chinese Committee was probably correct. In this situation, however, we can only

358 Percival David, "The Chinese Exhibition," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 84, no. 4333 (1935): 112.

359 *Transactions of the OCS 1934-1935* (1936): 7.

360 *Shun Pao*, March 13, 1935, 3.

361 Wu Sue-Ying, "Zhanlan zhong de 'Zhongguo,'" 20.

regret that their loan was adulterated with so much dull work since there were quite a number of good, and some outstanding, paintings among the loans.³⁶²

The majority of the exhibits fell into the category of what Western viewers considered to be “decorative art,” a trend rooted in the history of Western collecting practices that often emphasised the aesthetic and ornamental qualities of Chinese artefacts over their historical or cultural contexts. Jiang Jiehong explains, “In the English language, ‘China’ is the same word as ‘china’...As decorative art, the delicate colours and beautiful shapes had a more immediate appeal in the West.”³⁶³ As Stacey Pierson has noted, this focus marked a departure from the earlier tradition of British trade in Chinese porcelain, which had historically encompassed objects valued for both their decorative appeal and functional utility, such as interior decor and tea or dining sets.³⁶⁴ This evolving perspective on Chinese art reflected a shift in its appreciation in Western contexts, moving from items primarily seen as functional or decorative to being regarded as objects of intrinsic artistic and cultural significance.

The Chinese Government Loan in the 1935 Exhibition showcased an exceptional collection of 352 porcelain pieces spanning multiple dynasties, all sourced from the NPM collection. Among these treasures were artefacts once owned by the emperor Qianlong (乾隆, 1711-1799, reigned 1735-1796), whose inscriptions added profound historical and cultural significance. This selection of porcelain received high praise, with Ye Gongchuo commending it as “complete.”³⁶⁵ In terms of quantity, the majority of the pieces were from the Ming Dynasty, totalling seventy-eight, followed by forty-three pieces from the Song Dynasty and fifty-two from the Southern Song Dynasty.

The selection of porcelain echoed the enduring Western affinity for Chinese art. Furthermore, it reflected the transformation in the collection, consumption, presentation, and utilisation of porcelain, which had a significant impact on shaping British aesthetic tastes and perceptions of Chinese porcelain. This shift was closely tied to the diplomatic, military, and cultural exchanges, as well as the conflicts, between China and Britain. In the initial phases of globalisation, Chinese porcelain, especially Ming pieces, was disseminated to various nations, leading to a re-examination and reinterpretation of these pieces in different cultural contexts. Conversely, the “functional objects made from a readily available, not inherently valuable, material” reshaped the fashion and

362 Gray, “The RA Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 20-1.

363 Jiehong, “Diyici yuanzheng”, 99.

364 Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums*, 66.

365 *Shun Pao*, April 9, 1935 3; Ellen Huang, “China’s china: Jingdezhen Porcelain and the Production of Art in the Nineteenth Century” (PhD thesis, University of California San Diego, 2008), 40.

appreciation, and power symbolism, and contributed to the rich tapestry of global art and transcultural communication.³⁶⁶

By 1935, porcelain was “the most advanced of studies in Chinese art.”³⁶⁷ This exchange of knowledge, facilitated by porcelain as a medium, highlighted the flow and return of knowledge, its translation, retranslation, and reinterpretation between Chinese and Western intellectual and cultural spheres. A centred figure in this process was Chinese antique porcelain expert and prominent collector Guo Baochang (郭葆昌, 1879-1942). He reintroduced Chinese Porcelain by British scholar Stephan W. Bushell (1844-1908) based on the original work of Xiang Yuanbian (项元汴, 1525-1590) to China, enriching the original work with annotations and detailed illustrations.³⁶⁸ He maintained an extensive network of porcelain experts, international researchers, and influential officials, including representatives from the NPM and NAM.³⁶⁹ For the 1935 Exhibition, Guo wrote “A Brief Description of Porcelain (*Ciqi gaishuo* 瓷器概說)” which was published in the Chinese Government’s bilingual catalogue. Guo gifted an inscribed copy, printed by his private publisher, Zhizhai Book House (*Zhizhai shushe* 觚斋书社), to George Eumorfopoulos and Percival David when they visited China with the British Committee.³⁷⁰ During this trip, the British collectors also inspected the remarkable collection of pottery and porcelain formed by Guo.³⁷¹

Song porcelain, which at the time was a relatively new genre to Western connoisseurs, captivated admirers with its understated elegance and enigmatic monochromatic palette. This stood in stark contrast to the bold colours and diverse shapes of Ming porcelain, exemplified by Jingdezhen (景德镇) blue-and-white ceramics, as well as the vibrant and intricate works of Famille rose from the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. The Song ceramics, hailing from various kilns, emerged as undisputed stars during the 1935 Exhibition. The exceptional pieces from the NMP, along with those from Western collections, notably those of the OCS members, ignited a surge of interest among Western institutions and individuals, continuing scholarly debates on Song porcelain that had initially ignited in the 1930s.³⁷² David praised the Song porcelain as a variety that was “more

366 Stacey Pierson, *From Object to Concept: Global Consumption and the Transformation of Ming Porcelain* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 2013), 14.

367 Gray, “The RA Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 21.

368 Guo Baochang 郭葆昌 and John C. Ferguson, *Jiaozhu Xiangshi lidai mingci tupu* 校注项氏历代名瓷图谱 [Noted porcelains of successive dynasties with comments and illustrations] (Beijing: Zhizhai shushe, 1931; reprinted, Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2011).

369 Fu Zhenlun, “Aicilu suibi” 爱瓷庐随笔 [Essay from the Love-Porcelain House], *Jingdezhen taoci* 景德镇陶瓷 3 (1993): 36-7.

370 Ellen Huang, “China’s china”, 40; Percival David, “A Commentary on Ju Ware,” *Transactions of the OCS 1936-1937* (1938): 53.

371 David, “A Commentary on Ju Ware,” 53.

372 Gray, “The RA Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 22-8.

peculiarly Chinese in taste.” The works “truly reflect the spirit and the ideals of their age” “in its dignity and austerity.”³⁷³ Another variety that he praised in the same article was the flamboyant *Guyuxuan* (古月轩) Style of the Qianlong.³⁷⁴

Ten wares from Ru kiln (*ruyao* 汝窑) were selected. They were all formerly owned by the Qianlong Emperor, with eight of them carrying his inscriptions. This kind of porcelain “has always been excessively rare.”³⁷⁵ Before the influx of imperial collections, Westerners possessed limited knowledge about Ru wares. And before their fieldwork on the research of Ru wares, the enthusiastic promoters of Ru wares from the OCS would only research this kind of exquisite porcelain genre based on historical materials and documentation.³⁷⁶ The earliest reference to Ru ware in English literature was made by Bushell in his 1898 book *Chinese Art*, where he described a “Ju Yao Kuan-yin Tsun (汝窑观音尊),” a Ru ware baluster vase.³⁷⁷ However, it was later proven to be a forgery.³⁷⁸ Top of Form On December 2, 1936, Percival David demonstrated a bibliographical review on the aesthetics and appreciation of the Ru ware in Chinese ancient material culture, and its reception in the British art market. Much of his knowledge of Ru ware came from the 1935 Exhibition. Regarding the mysterious cause and aesthetics of the cracks on Ru wares, David was inclined to believe that uncracked ware did not exist. But he was “by no means certain” after seeing China’s uncracked greenish-blue glazed “Narcissus Pot” (*qingci wuwen shuixianpen* 青瓷无纹水仙盆) (Lot 828), which was absolutely “an object of surpassing beauty” in the exhibition. (Figure 10).³⁷⁹ The exhibition of Ru wares greatly captivated British collectors and visitors, sparking widespread discussion about the enigmatic and subtle colour described as “sky after rain,” beautifully expressed in Chinese as “t’ien-ching (天青)” or “chi-ching (霁青),” seen in these refined early Chinese porcelain specimens.³⁸⁰

373 David, “The Chinese Exhibition,” 112.

374 Ibid.

375 David, “A Commentary on Ju Ware,” 49.

376 George Eumorfopoulos, “Ju, Ying Ch’ing and Yao Ch’ai,” *Transactions of the OCS 1922-1923* (1924): 24-28, quoted in Hsieh Ming-liang 谢明良, “Beisong guanyao yanjiu xianzhuang de xingsi” 北宋官窑研究现状的省思 [Reflections on the current state of research on Northern Song official kilns], *Gugong yanjiu jikan* 故宫研究季刊 27, no. 4 (2010): 13.

377 Nick Pearce, “Collecting, Connoisseurship and Commerce: an Examination of the Life and Career of Stephen Wootton Bushell (1844-1908),” *Transactions of the OCS 2005-2006* (2007): 21; Stephen W. Bushell, *Chinese Art*, Vol. 2 (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1910), v.

378 Pearce, “Collecting, Connoisseurship and Commerce,” 21.

379 David, “A Commentary on Ju Ware,” 33; *RA Catalogue*, 62.

380 Terms used to describe porcelain colours appear in literature on Song porcelains, including wares from Ru, Ding (*Dingyao* 定窑), and Jun (*Junyao* 钧窑) kilns, with R. L. Hobson as one of the earliest pioneers. Since then, Song porcelain has been highly sought after by British collectors. In a article on The Observer, the term is used to describe the rare Chai kiln (*Chaiyao* 柴窑) porcelain from the Five Dynasties, referred to as “the most precious treasure” in the Chinese Government collection. However, no Chai ware was featured in the exhibition. See E. A. Voretzsch, “Review of A Catalogue of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain in the Collection of Sir Percival David, by R. L. Hobson,” *Artibus Asiae* 5, no. 1 (1935): 85; “Priceless Chinese Art for London. Treasures on a Warship. A ‘Fabulous



Figure 9. Narcissus Pot with light greenish-blue glaze. Ru ware. Song Dynasty. Height: 6.8 centimetres, Length: 23 centimetres, Width: 16.4 centimetres. Source: NPM Collection.

The relatively unfamiliar realms of Chinese art also encompassed archaeological findings and ritual objects. In the category of bonzes, the Chinese Committee selected an array of treasures from the latest archaeological discoveries, including eight early Chinese bronzes of the Eastern Zhou dynasty excavated in Xinzheng (新郑), Henan province in 1923, and four bronzes from the third century BC discovered in Shou County (寿县), Anhui province in 1933.³⁸¹ China's modern archaeology, initially sparked by the quest to uncover "the origin of the Chinese race," bears a complex narrative influenced by Western colonialism and exploratory activities within China.³⁸² Archaeological excavations and explorations by Western figures such as Paul Pelliot, along with other European, American, and Japanese researchers, yielded significant discoveries of Chinese history. These efforts amassed collections and published resources that remain invaluable to world-class institutions and continue to profoundly impact global studies of Chinese history and culture.

Cargo'. 3000 Years of History. Scotland Yard Plans," *The Observer*, July 21, 1935; *Illustrated Catalogue*, Vol. 2; R. L. Hobson, *Chinese Pottery and Porcelain: An Account of the Potter's Art in China from Primitive Time to the Present Day*, Vol. 11 (London: Cassell and Company, 1915).

381 *Illustrated Catalogue*, Vol. 1, 92, 98.

382 Liu Chao, "Kaogu faxian yu minzu rentong," 24.

However, the removal of cultural treasures from their original contexts has sparked ongoing ethical controversies.³⁸³

Meanwhile, in a bid for modernisation and self-strengthening, the Chinese government embarked on a significant railway construction effort in the twentieth century, often involving foreign participation.³⁸⁴ The Republican government endorsed archaeology as a means to canonise the national historical narrative, shape national identity, foster collective national memory, and bolster Chinese national confidence.³⁸⁵ This expansion of the railway network inadvertently disrupted ancient relics and tombs, leading to serendipitous archaeological discoveries. For example, the remarkable unearthing of Peking Man's relics and bone fossils on the outskirts of Beijing during the construction of the Beijing-Hankou Railway (*Jinghan tielu* 京汉铁路) in the 1920s extended China's prehistory to several hundred thousand years ago, establishing it as "one of the oldest countries in the world."³⁸⁶ The discovery of Tang Sancai pottery figures and a wealth of pre-Song Dynasty fragments and objects in central China during the construction of the first section of the Lanzhou-Lianyungang Railway (*Longhai tielu* 陇海铁路).³⁸⁷ Simultaneously, the excavated Shang antiques illuminated the beginning of China's recorded history, tracing back some three thousand years.³⁸⁸ This transformative era of archaeological exploration, fueled by both Western and Chinese archaeologists and paleoanthropologists, laid the foundation for modern and contemporary Chinese historiography.

Yinxu (殷墟) near Anyang (安阳) in Henan, described as "the earliest site to possess the elements of civilization," was reportedly discovered by a Qing Dynasty official who found engraved writing on "dragon bones," believed to be used in Chinese medicine, from a village in Henan.³⁸⁹ Wang Guowei and Luo Zhenyu later recognised their historical significance as oracle bone scripts.³⁹⁰ A series of excavations were embarked from 1928 and lasted until the recent years.³⁹¹ The first phase

383 See Peter Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Treasures of Central Asia* (London: John Murray, 1980; reprinted, 2011).

384 See En-Han Lee, *China's Quest for Railway Autonomy, 1904-1911: A Study of the Chinese Railway-rights Recovery Movement* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1977).

385 Liu Chao, "Kaogu faxian yu minzu rentong," 24-5.

386 See Jia Lanpo 贾兰坡 and Huang Weiwen 黄慰文, *Zhoukoudian fajue ji* 周口店发掘记 [The excavation of Zhoukoudian] (Tianjin: Tianjin kexue jishu chubanshe, 1984).

387 See Qiqi Jiang, "Tang Sancai" (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2009).

388 Liu Chao, "Kaogu faxian yu minzu rentong," 27-8.

389 Tang Jigen 唐际根 and Gong Wen 巩文, "Yinxu fajue jijianshi" 殷墟发掘极简史 [An extreme brief history of the excavations at Yinxu] in *Yinxu jiushinian kaogu ren yu shi (1928-2018)* 殷墟九十年考古人与事 (1928-2018) [A brief history of the excavations at Yinxu (1928-2018)] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2018), 4. However, there is no conclusive evidence to support this claim.

390 Ibid.

391 Ibid. 8-10.

of excavation between 1928 and 1937 was directed by the Harvard-educated, first Chinese modern archaeologist and anthropologist, Li Ji.³⁹² Valuable relics, including oracle bone scripts, ancient house foundations, and ritual objects dating back thousands of years, were unearthed in large quantities by Li's excavation team, the first Chinese-led archaeological team in history.³⁹³ This approach presented an opportunity to revise and re-evaluate Chinese official history writing, especially during the radical cultural movements in the early years of the ROC.³⁹⁴

These Chinese archaeologists and scholars were inextricably linked to the 1935 Exhibition. Li was a Chinese committee in Shanghai, and Wang and Luo knew Pelliot in person. As such, the intricate interplay between Western influence and national commitment shaped the trajectory of Chinese archaeology, ultimately influencing the selection of the latest archaeological objects for the 1935 Exhibition. Conversely, the West's keen interest in Chinese archaeology also informed the exhibits featured in the exhibition, reflecting the dynamic evolution of this field in both global and national contexts. In this case, the Institute of History and Geology of Academia Sinica contributed a hundred archaeological objects "almost exclusively" from Yinxu which were begun to excavate in 1928, and "till the present with very interruption and is still kept going on."³⁹⁵ Additionally, at Pelliot's request, eleven additional archaeological items and two photographs from Academia Sinica were added.³⁹⁶

Promoted by a series of Chinese art exhibitions in the early twentieth century, Western audiences were introduced to the non-Western aesthetics of Chinese pictorial art. This challenged their previous dismissive perception of Chinese painting, which had been overlooked despite holding a revered position within Chinese culture.³⁹⁷ The 175 paintings from China, carefully selected from the NPM and NAM collections, celebrated the highest level of traditional Chinese aesthetics, spanning from the Tang Dynasty to the Qing. The majority of these artworks boasted an exceptional provenance, with their historical lineage and inclusion in imperial inventories documented throughout various dynasties, including the *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* (*Xuanhe huapu* 宣和画谱), *Treasure Boxes of the Stone Moat* (*Shiqu baoji* 石渠宝笈), its second compilation and so on. Many of them even bore inscriptions and seals from notable emperors, particularly those of Emperor Qianlong. However, differing viewpoints emerged between the Chinese and British

392 K. C. Chang, "Archaeology and Chinese Hierarchy," 164-5.

393 Lin Jian 林坚, "Li Ji: Zhongguo kaoguxue zhi fu" 李济: 中国考古学之父 [Li Ji: father of Chinese archaeology], Tsinghua University History Museum, May 23, 2014, <https://xsg.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/1004/1731.htm>.

394 *ibid.*

395 *Illustrated Catalogue*, Vol. 4, 120.

396 *ibid.* 150.

397 Vivian Yan Li, "Art Negotiations," 54; Stephanie Su, "Exhibition as Art Historical Space," 145.

committees when selecting paintings and calligraphy for the exhibition. Painting is “the supreme art” for the Chinese.³⁹⁸ The Chinese committee aimed to showcase the entirety of Chinese art history, but doubts arose due to challenges in the 1930s, limited museum infrastructure, and concerns about the quality.³⁹⁹ Ye Gongchuo even doubted whether the selected artefacts were representative of Chinese art. He worried that the Chinese selected might not be as good as the foreign ones, which to him “might be a loss of national dignity.”⁴⁰⁰ Similar questions to the quality of the selection of Chinese art to the 1935 Exhibition could also be found in other prominent Chinese scholars, including Xu Beihong, Lin Yutang (林语堂, 1895-1976), and Shen Congwen (沈从文, 1902-1988).⁴⁰¹

Confronting the focused criticism on the selection of painting, which did not occur in other categories, Wu Hufan explained that it stemmed from the limited representation of the NPM collection and the exclusion of national treasures for preservation.⁴⁰² He noted that this shift in selection criteria was due to China granting the British committee final selection rights during negotiations.⁴⁰³ As a result, British tastes significantly influenced the process, favoring works aligned with their preferences while excluding others. Wu lamented that some exceptional pieces were omitted from the 1935 Exhibition simply because they lacked Qianlong’s inscriptions and seals.⁴⁰⁴ Wu’s comments aligned with Basil Gray’s recollection, in which he admitted to having “seen too few good paintings” and was “amazed” that “Professor Pelliot appeared to look only at the seals and inscriptions on the paintings.”⁴⁰⁵

The disagreements over the selection of paintings revealed that the British Committee of the 1935 Exhibition was driven more by Western functional and figurative preferences than by the historical and aesthetic values esteemed in China. At that time, China had not yet established a comprehensive history of Chinese painting and calligraphy. Simultaneously, China’s burgeoning museums were facing increasing demands in terms of the organisation, management, and conservation of artefacts. This orientation was, in turn, closely linked to the evolving appreciation of Chinese classical painting in Britain, which had been developing since the late nineteenth century.

398 Laurence Binyon, “Introduction,” in *RA Catalogue*, xiii.

399 Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 33.

400 Ibid.

401 Ibid. 41; Huang Wen-Yu, “Shanghai yuzhan de yiyi,” 97.

402 Wu Hufan 吴湖帆, “Dui yuzhan shuhua bufen gejia piping zhi jieshi” 对预展书画部分各家批评之解释 [Explanation of critiques on the paintings and calligraphy Section in the Preliminary Exhibition], *Ta Kung Pao*, May 5, 1935, 9.

403 Ibid.

404 Ibid.

405 Gray, “The RA Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 14.

Taking the BM as an example, its journey from William Anderson's (1842-1900) collection as the foundation of its Chinese art collection, to securing one of the world's most significant Chinese artworks, the Admonitions of the Court Instructress (aka Admonitions Scroll, Nüshi zhentu 女史箴图), and culminating in the substantial acquisition of Frau Olga-Julia Wegener's (?-1938) extensive collection of Chinese paintings, reflected a profound transformation in the appreciation of Chinese art in Britain.⁴⁰⁶ This evolution saw not only a quantitative growth in Chinese art in Britain but also the shift from an initial "Japanese taste" to a more aesthetically diverse and culturally enriched perspective, facilitated by pivotal acquisitions and the BM's dedication to comparative study. Importantly, this transition exemplified an anthropological approach to collecting and presenting foreign cultures within the institution, showcasing the museum's commitment to fostering a deeper understanding of Chinese art and culture.

Jiang Jiehong attributed the differences in the perception of Chinese art between China and Britain to the divergent philosophical perspectives of the two cultures, therefore, the 1935 Exhibition opened up new horizons for Western comprehension of Chinese painting from three crucial perspectives, dispelling the generalisation of Chinese art as mere decorative art, facilitating a comparative exploration of diverse artistic techniques, and offering profound insights into China's freehand brushwork (*xieyihua* 写意画) tradition.⁴⁰⁷ Laurence Binyon, although still with a fantasised notion and from a Western centric perspective, described Chinese art as "no transient fashion" that "transcend[s] the world of sense and to speak in some subtle and secret way to the emotions of spirit" in the exhibition introduction.⁴⁰⁸ When the paintings were displayed at Burlington House, they piqued the interest of the British audience. In the subsequent decades, their impact continued to resonate, leaving an enduring legacy in shaping Western perceptions of Chinese painting.

Among all the Chinese paintings displayed, one piece particularly caught the attention of the British viewers. This artwork, titled "Herd of Deer in a Forest (*Qiulin luqun tu* 秋林鹿群图)" (Lot 755) of an unknown artist from the Five Dynasties, held a special place in their appreciation (Figure 11).⁴⁰⁹ David praised it as "one of the greatest Chinese paintings yet seen in the West."⁴¹⁰ Gray suggested

406 Michelle Ying-Ling Huang, "British Interest in Chinese Painting, 1881-1910: The Anderson and Wegener Collections of Chinese Painting in the BM," *Journal of the History of Collections* 22, no. 2 (2010): 279-87; Michelle Ying-Ling Huang, "The Acquisition of the Wegener Collection of Chinese Painting by the BM," *The Burlington Magazine* 115, no. 1324 (2013): 463-70; Shane McCausland, *First Masterpiece of Chinese Painting: The Admonitions Scroll* (London: The BM Press, 2003).

407 Jiehong, "Diyici yuanzheng," 99-101.

408 Binyon

409 RA Catalogue, 56.

410 Percival David, "The Chinese Exhibition," *Revue des Arts Asiatiques* IX (1935): 172.

“Iranian influence” and proposed that it hailed from “a time when China was influenced from the West.” He also referenced Olsvald Sirén who believed that this masterpiece, along with its counterpart, represented “a unique survivor of professional palace decoration” that had been passed down through generations since the Tang Dynasty.⁴¹¹ American art historian in Chinese art, James Cahill (1926-2014), who was responsible for the painting selection for the 1961 Exhibition of the NPM Taipei collections in the United States, echoed Gray’s perspective.⁴¹² This refined Chinese painting, evident in its colour palette, composition, and subject matter, bore a resemblance to the famous composition created by John Constable (1776-1837) in 1836. Constable’s work depicted the cenotaph dedicated to the memory of Joshua Reynolds in a forest, with a deer looking back meaningfully at the viewer (Figure 11). This painting marked Constable’s final exhibit at the RA before his passing. It would be intriguing to know: Whether the British visitors to the 1935 Exhibition, upon seeing this Chinese painting, were reminded of the first President of the RA, along with the Romantic painters and RA Academicians who were renowned for their depictions of the English countryside, and their significant contributions to the RA and British national art?

Additionally, the 1935 Exhibition featured two paintings by Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766). One painting, depicting a landscape, was sent from China (Lot 2041), while the other, illustrating a still life, came from the Percival David Collection. (Lot 2097) (Figures 12 & 13).⁴¹³ This Italian-born missionary and imperial painter to the Qing court, more commonly known by his Chinese name Lang Shining (郎世宁), resided in Beijing for decades. During his time there, he created a significant body of work, including portraits, animal paintings, depictions of imperial life, and military subjects for Qianlong and his family. Lang was renowned for skillfully blending Chinese and Italian artistic techniques in his creations. Regarding the Italian painter’s works, the British committee demonstrated a strong interest, while their Chinese counterparts held the opposite opinion.⁴¹⁴ The inclusion of Lang’s works illustrated the stronger voice of the British side in the selection of exhibits. This also likely stemmed from their intention to spotlight Chinese art’s historical interactions with Western art, particularly Italian art, which had been showcased at the same venue five years earlier. This strategic effort aimed to position Chinese art within the broader

411 Gray, “The RA Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 20.

412 James Cahill, “Some Thoughts on the History and Post-History of Chinese Painting,” *Archives of Asian Art* 55 (2005): 18.

413 *RA Catalogue*, 172, 178.

414 Guo Hui 郭卉, “Xin duixiang, xin lishi: Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui Shanghai yuzhanhui 1935” 新对象, 新历史: 伦敦中国艺术国际展览会上海预展会 1935 [New Objects, New History: The Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935]. *New Art Museum Science Series of Lectures* no. 12, Art Museum of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangzhou (online), November 29, 2020.

framework of global art history, emphasising its evolution and interconnectedness with diverse artistic traditions.

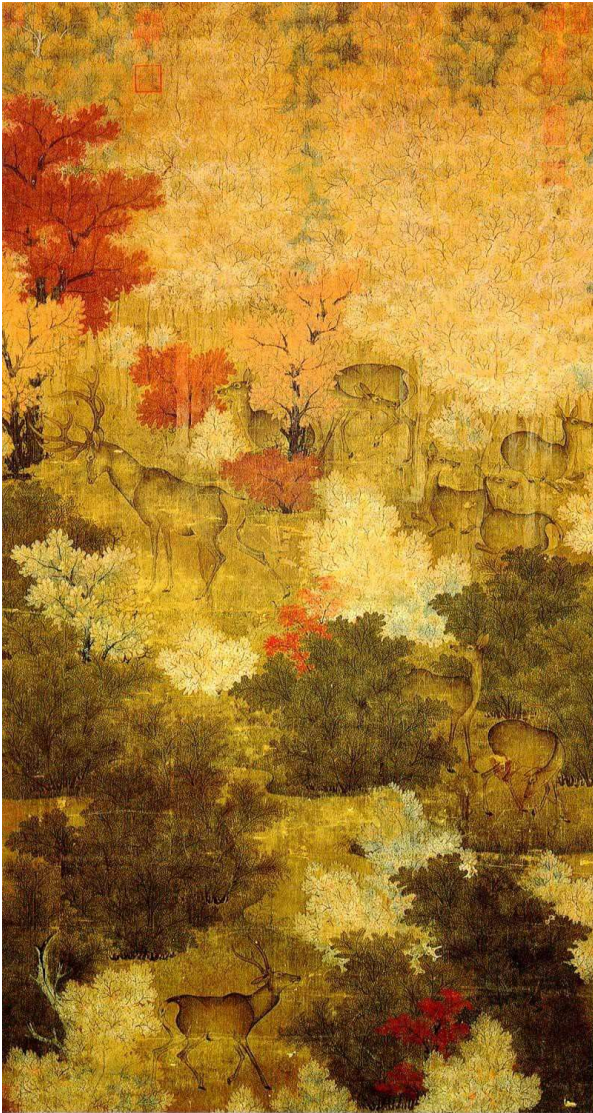


Figure 11. (left) Herd of Deer in an Autumnal Grove, artist unknown, painting in colour on silk, Five Dynasties, 118.4x63.8 cm. Source: NPM Taipei Collection.



Figure 12. (right) Cenotaph to the Memory of Sir Joshua Reynolds. John Constable, oil on canvas, 1836, 132x108.5 cm. Source: National Gallery.



Figure 13. Landscape, Lang Shining, painting in colour on silk, 143x89 cm. Source: NPM Taipei Collection.

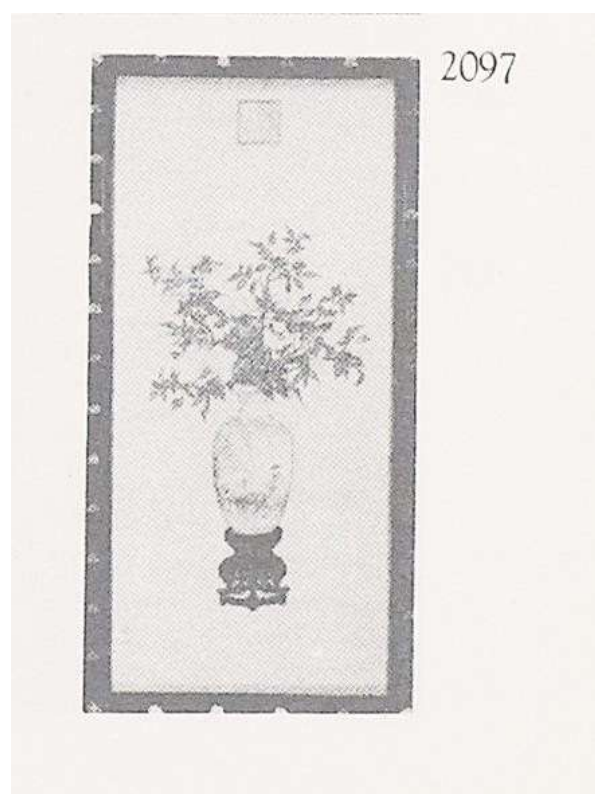


Figure 14. Flower Study. Lang Shining, painting in colour on silk, 125x57 cm. Source: Illustrated Supplement, 195.

Preparing for the 2019 Exhibition

With the influence of Western culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, museums were introduced into China as venues for promoting civil rights and democratic ideals, transforming into functional and political tools for shaping cultural identity and national culture.⁴¹⁵ The keywords of museums shifted from “preserving the palaces” and “public ownership of imperial private property” in the Republican era to “political construction” and “self-expression” in the PRC.⁴¹⁶ In this new context, museums utilised material culture in poetic or aesthetic ways to present, reconstruct, differentiate, and negotiate history and national identity. Yin Kai believes that the main framework for “political representation through history and national symbolism” in Chinese

⁴¹⁵ Selina C. F. Ho, *Museum Processes in China: The Institutional Regulation, Production, and Consumption of the Art Museum in the Greater Pearl River Delta Region* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 18, 30.

⁴¹⁶ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 14; Tamara Hamlish, “Preserving the Palace: Museums and the Making of Nationalism(s) in Twentieth-Century China,” *Museum Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (1995): 20.

museums took shape in the late 1950s and early 1960s, exemplified by the establishment of a series of state-led museums, such as the Museum of Chinese History (*Zhongguo lishi bowuguan* 中国历史博物馆, hereinafter MCH), Museum of the Chinese Revolution (*Zhongguo geming bowuguan* 中国革命博物馆, hereinafter MCR), and Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution (*Zhongguo renmin geming junshi bowuguan* 中国人民革命军事博物馆, hereinafter MMCPR), etc, which inserted official narratives by demonstrating different historical periods and ideologies.⁴¹⁷ As the museum boom continued, these developments persisted and evolved, resulting in transformations in the presentation and narration of history.

This section examines the establishment of the NMC, which was formed through the integration of several existing institutions. The NMC has since become a key instrument of state politics. As the analysis of the 2019 Exhibition unfolds in this and subsequent sections of the thesis, the museum's functions in participating in national initiatives, integrating cultural resources on a nationwide scale, consolidating national identity, and reinforcing state-endorsed interpretations of history are highlighted.

Museumification of China and the NMP

The establishment of the NMC coincided with a nationwide museum boom, driven by urbanisation, cultural modernisation, tourism expansion, and commercialisation. This era marked a significant rise in museums of diverse themes, spanning state-owned and private institutions, along with public cultural facilities at national, provincial, and municipal levels.⁴¹⁸ Initially conceived as a “politically motivated project,” museums evolved into popular tourist destinations, cultural landmarks, and monuments that define “the civic identities of new urban centers.”⁴¹⁹ Their cultural and political representations are manifested through strategic locations and thoughtfully designed spaces.

Officially opened in 2003, the NMC was formed through the merger of MCH and the MCR. Tracing back to the early Republican era, the MCH was originally named the National Museum of History (*guoli lishi bowuyuan*, 国立历史博物馆). Planned in 1912 and initially located at the former site of the Imperial College (*guozijian*, 国子监), the museum opened its doors in 1926 as

417 Yin Kai 尹凯, “Lishi yu minzu: Zhongguo bowuguan de zhengzhi biao Zheng” 历史与民族: 中国博物馆的政治表征 [History and nation: political representation of museums in China], *Wenbo xuekan* 文博学刊 2 (2021): 50.

418 Wei Jun 魏峻, “Zhongguo bowuguan de fazhan xin daoxiang” 中国博物馆的发展新导向 [New orientation for the development of Chinese museums], *Dongnan wenhua* 东南文化 2 (2019): 107.

419 Jeffrey Johnson and Zoe Alexandra Florence, “The Museumification of China,” *Leap* 12 (2012), archived May 10, 2013, accessed May 3, 2024, <http://www.leapleapleap.com/2013/05/the-museumification-of-china/>.

part of a broader transformation of Qing imperial properties. Its collection included antiques, books, educational and ritual objects, and documents. The museumification and exhibition practices of the National Museum of History paralleled those of other former imperial properties, such as the NPM and the NAM.⁴²⁰ After 1949, the museum was renamed the National Beijing Historical Museum (*guoli Beijing lishi bowuguan*, 国立北京历史博物馆) and placed under the Ministry of Culture.⁴²¹ Eventually renamed the MCH in 1960, the museum presented Chinese history from prehistory to the end of the Qing Dynasty. In the same year, it was combined with the Museum of Chinese Revolution, which narrated China's modern and democratic revolutions. Together, the two institutions inaugurated a shared venue on the east side of Tiananmen Square, forming the foundation of what is now the NMC.⁴²² Nine years later, in 1969, the MCH and MCR formed the Chinese Museum of Revolution within the discourse of the Cultural Revolution, reflecting the ideologies as priorities.⁴²³ Finally, the museum has been rebranded as the NMC since 2003.

The NMC is located on Tiananmen Square, a site of great historical significance. Positioned at the entrance to the Forbidden City, it was here that the founding of the PRC was proclaimed in 1949. The museum, situated at this iconic location, strategically combines the legacy of China's imperial past with the aspirations of a modern socialist state, symbolising the nation's transition from dynastic rule to a new era of socialist governance. On the other hand, the location witnessed a series of significant historical events from modern to contemporary China, bearing the marks of the nation's democratic struggles while reflecting the process of power centralisation. In this context, the museum's placement reflects deliberate urban and cultural planning, positioning it as an anchor within the symbolic geography of China's capital. Its proximity to other key landmarks, such as the Great Hall of the People (*renmin dahuitang* 人民大会堂) and the Monument to the People's Heroes, further amplifies its role as a site of historical representation and a medium for projecting the state's vision of national history and identity. This strategic location situates the NMC not only as a repository of artefacts but also as a monumental space where the past and present converge, reinforcing its role in shaping and presenting narratives of national identity and continuity. As a monumental structure and a prominent tourist site, the establishment of the NMC changes the landscape of central axis of the Chinese capital. Its imposing presence and integration within the

420 Wang Linlin 王琳琳, "Guozijian yu guoli lishi bowuguan" 国子监与国立历史博物馆 [Imperial College and National Museum of History], *Beijing wenbo* 北京文博 1 (2017): 81.

421 "About NMC," NMC, accessed September 19, 2023, http://en.chnmuseum.cn/about-the-nmc-593/about-the-nmc-594/201911/t20191122_173221.html.

422 Li Wanwan 李万万, "Zhongguo lishi bowuguan yu Zhongguo geming bowuguan kaiguan zhihou de zhanlan yanjiu" 中国历史博物馆与中国革命博物馆开馆之后的展览研究 [A study on the exhibitions of the Museum of Chinese History and the Museum of the Chinese Revolution after their opening], *Wenwu tiandi* 文物天地 2 (2017): 54.

423 Ibid.

political and cultural heart of the capital not only affirm its status as a symbol of national pride but also position it as a focal point for domestic and international visitors, reinforcing Beijing's image as a centre of historical continuity and contemporary progress.



Figure 15. The front façade of the NMC. Source: The Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

The first impression of the NMC is its sense of “grandness” (Figure 15). The museum is a seven-story, expansive complex that integrates a modern interpretation of traditional Chinese architectural styles, spanning 200,000 square meters of floor space.⁴²⁴ The construction reflects China's remarkable achievements in social openness and economic growth while retaining its foundational communist and revolutionary ethos. In 2004, a countdown clock for the Beijing Olympics was placed in front of the museum, symbolising the anticipation of a new era. Previously, the same spot had hosted countdown clocks for the reunification of Hong Kong in 1997 and Macau in 1999. The museum's significant renovation and expansion, tied to Beijing's successful Olympic bid, marked a new phase in its role as a custodian of national heritage and an instrument of state cultural and political narratives.⁴²⁵ The construction was led by the German architecture firm Gerkan, Marg & Partners, in collaboration with the China Academy of Architecture Research. The project optimised the internal and external spatial proportions, redesigned the linear visitor flow, and improved the

424 “About the NMC,” NMC, accessed May 1, 2022, https://en.chnmuseum.cn/about_the_nmc_593/.

425 “Guowuyuan pizhun guojia bowuguan gaikuojian gongcheng kexingxing yanjiu baogao” 国务院批准国家博物馆改扩建工程可行性研究报告 [State Council approves feasibility study on NMP renovation and expansion project], Ministry of Culture and Tourism, December 25, 2006, https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxgkml/qt/202012/t20201206_918483.html.

functionality of the space.⁴²⁶ One notable transformation during the renovation involved replacing the ornamented top floor with a minimalist bronze flying roof. Scholars have noted that this change allowed the interior spaces to be flooded with light, emphasising the museum's role as a public space, thereby "reducing the contrast between the exhibition spaces and their surrounding environment."⁴²⁷ This "bright aesthetic" of shared spaces differs from some conventional exhibition techniques that spotlight artifacts in darkened rooms, aiming instead to create a personal connection between the visitor and the artifact. The museum, however, transcends this individual-focused approach by functioning as a space that constructs and reflects social relationships, illustrating "the collective nature of the historical narrative."⁴²⁸ Consequently, the building of NMC has been transformed from a Stalinist-style structure into a modern architectural symbol, embodying both "China" and "the world," and "the state" and "the people," in its grand narrative. An enduring emblem of the museum's revolutionary roots, the ornament of yellow stars and red flag—a symbol of Communism—has remained on the roof since its establishment, reinforcing its connection to its revolutionary origins and serving as a defining feature to this day.

The NMC, one of the largest museums in the world in terms of area and collection size, consists of forty-eight galleries and houses more than 1.4 million items spanning prehistory to modern times, encompassing diverse types, materials, and origins within China.⁴²⁹ Its collection includes fine art, archaeological finds, decorative art, daily objects, ceramics, models, miniatures, documents, and manuscripts. The museum serves as a repository where official Chinese history is preserved, presented, and narrated through its major permanent exhibitions and thematic displays. The museum contains three main parts: (1) Ancient China, which covers the Palaeolithic era to the end of the dynastic history; (2) Road to Rejuvenation, showcasing the period from 1840 to the early 2000s with artefacts primarily from the former Museum of Chinese Revolution; and (3) Road to Rejuvenation, focusing on achievements during the Xi's era. The museum's exhibitions embody a linear narrative of Chinese history from one dynasty to another, reflecting the Marxist-Leninist vision of history as "a chronological succession of events and periods that indicate a linear ascent."⁴³⁰ The latter two exhibitions highlight "historical events and figures that suit the Communist project," creating a dichotomy between past struggles and present glory.⁴³¹ Thematic

426 Zhou Chunjiao 周春娇 and Wu Guoyuan 吴国源, "Cong jianzhu qikan shiye kan Zhongguo guojia bowuguan jianzhu chuanguo huayu de liubian" 从建筑期刊视野看中国国家博物馆建筑创作话语的流变 [The evolution of the discourse of architectural creation in the National Museum of China from the perspective of architectural journals], *Xueshu yanjiu* 学术研究 16, no. 309 (2019): 186-90.

427 Ibid. 187-8.

428 Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 65-6.

429 "About the NMC."

430 Varutti, *Museums in China*, 107.

431 Ibid.

and temporary exhibitions are also organised regularly, often featuring foreign museum tours, special moments in China's history, or significant anniversaries of the CPC. These exhibitions strategically utilise artefacts, objects, models, and replicas, diminishing their aesthetic value to emphasise their political and historical significance. The presentation and arrangement of the NMC reinforce the party-state's absolute control over the utilisation of exhibitionary space and historical narratives, establishing the museum as a key agent for state foreign and domestic policy.⁴³² Ultimately, the NMC functions not only as a guardian of historical artefacts but also as a cultural and political instrument to promote core socialist values and build a socialist cultural power.

The state control over museums is also evident in institutional management and resource integration, with “official support for cultural heritage focusing on elements that align with the CCP's priorities.”⁴³³ Oversight by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the NACH, and local authorities ensures that museums function within an ideological framework designed to reinforce national unity and the Party's vision of history and identity. The NMC lends and borrows exhibits from other institutions as part of its role in “supporting the work of the Party,” facilitating coordinated narratives that align with state objectives and enhance the overarching ideological framework.⁴³⁴ As 2019 marked the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, following the tradition of “a minor celebration every five years, a major one every ten,” the year was marked by various commemorative activities projecting the “new China.” With focuses such as books, overseas Chinese communities, and political party development—and with the 2019 Exhibition celebrating repatriated artefacts—several exhibitions in Beijing around the same time.⁴³⁵ These events combined festive commemoration with propaganda, reinforcing patriotism and national identity. Repatriated artefacts, through their journeys and recovery efforts, became powerful

432 Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 5.

433 Ai Jiawei, “‘Selecting the Refined and Discarding the Dross’: The Post-1990 Chinese Leadership's Attitude Towards Cultural Tradition,” in *Routledge Handbook of Heritage in Asia* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012), quoted in Helaine Silverman and Tami Blumenfield, “Cultural Heritage in China: An Introduction,” in *Cultural Heritage Politics in China*, eds. Tami Blumenfield and Helaine Silverman (New York: Springer, 2013), 4.

434 *2019 NMC Annual Report*, 24; *2022 Zhongguo guojia bowuguan shehui fuwu baogao* 2022 中国国家博物馆社会服务报告 [2022 NMC annual report on social service], (Beijing: NMC, 2020), 6.

435 At the NMC, “Seven Decades in Evolution of Editions: An Exhibition of the Editions of Books in New China (*Shuying zhong de qishinian: xin Zhongguo tushu banben zhan* 书影中的七十年：新中国图书版本展)” was open from September 19 to November 27, 2019, and “Journeying Together Towards a Shared Dream: A Special Exhibition on Overseas Chinese and New China (*Xingyuan tongmeng: huaqiao huaren yu xin Zhongguo tezhan* 行远同梦：华侨华人与新中国特展)” from October 30 to November 29, 2019. In addition, the Beijing Exhibition Centre also held “Great Journey, Glorious Achievements: A Grand Exhibition Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China (*Weida lichen huihuang chengjiu: qingzhu Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cengli 70 zhounian daxing chengjiuzhan* 伟大历程辉煌成就：庆祝中华人民共和国成立 70 周年大型成就展)” from September 23 to December 31, 2019.

symbols of collective identity, uniting historical memory with contemporary pride in China's cultural and political context.

Staffing the 2019 Exhibition

The 2019 Exhibition was jointly organised by the NMC, the NCHA, and the Art Exhibitions China (*Zhongguo wenwu jiaoliu zhongxin* 中国文物交流中心, hereinafter AEC), with the production team predominantly comprised of members from these three organisations (Table 3).⁴³⁶ All three institutions operate under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the PRC. This production team represent only the Beijing-based core decision-making and implementation team, identified as the “host institutions.”⁴³⁷ This selective representation excludes the extensive contributions of other museums and institutions, referred to as “supporting institutions” whose collaboration was essential for the event's realisation.⁴³⁸ The staff arrangement was a deliberate choice that ensured the exhibition maintained a consistent narrative aligned with the state's official historical perspective. The prominent involvement of these official organisations highlights the political significance of the exhibition, underscoring its role as a state-directed project. By emphasising the host institutions and core staff while downplaying the broader collaborative efforts, the exhibition reflects the highly centralised power and top-down decision-making that characterise the state's approach to such projects. This dynamic reinforces the exhibition's function as a carefully curated instrument of state narrative and soft power.

Table 3. Staffing of the 2019 Exhibition		
Chief Exhibition Planner	Liu Yuzhu	Head of NCHA
General Coordinator	Guan Qiang	Deputy Head of NCHA
Director	Luo Jing (罗静)	Director of Department of Museums and Socio-Cultural Heritage, NCHA
Coordinators	Tan Ping (谭平)	Director of AEC
	Liu Wanming (刘万鸣)	Deputy Head of NCHA
	Zhao Gushan (赵古山)	Vice Director of Art Exhibition of China

⁴³⁶ 2019 Catalogue, 7.

⁴³⁷ Ibid. 5.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

Producers	Deng Chao (邓超)	Director of Department of Cultural Relics and Historical Sites (Department of World Cultural Heritage), NCHA
	Jin Ruiguo (金瑞国)	Vice Director of Department of Museums and Socio-Cultural Heritage, NCHA
	Zhou Ming (周明)	Vice Director of Art Exhibition of China
Curators	Wu Min (吴旻)	Division Head of Department of Museums and Socio-Cultural Heritage, NCHA
	Yan Zichao (颜子超)	Department of Museums and Socio-Cultural Heritage, NCHA
	Shao Mingjie (邵明杰)	Department of Museums and Socio-Cultural Heritage, NCHA
AEC Team	Ten members ⁴³⁹	
NMC Team	Seven members	

The involvement of AEC highlights China's emphasis on international cooperation in cultural heritage repatriation. Originating during the period of "Ping-Pong diplomacy" in the 1970s, when China's international relations were normalising after the Cultural Revolution and the demand for international exchanges was increasing, the AEC was established in 1992, facilitates international cultural heritage cooperation and manages the import, export, conservation, and exhibition of museum resources and intellectual property.⁴⁴⁰ Over the years, the scale and number of international exhibitions coordinated by the AEC demonstrates a generally increasing trend, reflecting China's growing commitment to promoting its culture globally and its evolving political and diplomatic strategies.⁴⁴¹ This collaborative model strengthens China's leadership position in global cultural exchange while encouraging other countries and regions to reconsider the ideas of cultural ownership and shared heritage.

Selecting Objects for the 2019 Exhibition

The unavailability of archives prevents this thesis from offering insights into the selection process for the 2019 Exhibition, as well as the communication and negotiations between the institutions involved, unlike the detailed documentation available for the 1935 Exhibition. Drawing upon the

⁴³⁹ For names of the two working teams, see *ibid.* 7.

⁴⁴⁰ Cui Xinyuan 崔馨元, "Zhongguo wenwu jiaoliu zhongxin wenwu chujing zhanlan yanjiu" 中国文物交流中心文物出境展览研究 [Research on the Overseas Cultural Relics Exhibitions Hosted by Art Exhibitions China] (Master's dissertation, Northwestern University, 2020), 6.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.* 10.

exhibition catalogue and publications on Chinese cultural repatriation, Figure 4 demonstrates the items displayed in the 2019 Exhibition, detailing their names, materials, dates, original locations, the years they were lost and repatriated, and their current locations.

Table 4. Exhibits from the 2019 Exhibition and their Repatriation									
Item	Material	Date	Original Location	Year of Loss	Reason for Loss	Year of Repatriation	Repatriated from	Repatriation Method	Current Location
Bronze head of Rat	Bronze	Qianlong period	Yuanmingyuan	1860	Loot	2013	France	Donation [François-Henri Pinault (1962-)]	NMC
Bronze head of Ox						2000	Hong Kong	Purchase (Sotheby's)	PMA
Bronze head of Tiger						2000	Hong Kong	Purchase (Sotheby's)	PMA
Bronze head of Rabbit						2013	France	Donation (François-Henri Pinault)	NMC
Bronze head of Horse						2019 ⁴⁴²	Hong Kong	Donation [Stanley Ho Hung-sen (He Hongshen 何鴻燊, 1921-2020)]	Yuanmingyuan
Bronze head of						2000	Hong Kong	Purchase	PMA

⁴⁴² The bronze head was first purchased by Stanley Ho at Sotheby's Hong Kong in 2007.

Monkey								(Christie's)	
Bronze head of Pig						2003	United States	Donation (Stanley Ho)	PAM
Flag of Boxer Rebellion	Textile	1899-1901		Early twentieth century		1955	German Democratic Republic	Donation (Government of German Democratic Republic)	NMC
Yongle Encyclopedia (永乐大典)	Book	1408	Imperial Library	Early twentieth century		1951-1958	Soviet Union	Donation (Soviet Union institutions)	National Library of China
Letter to Boyuan (伯远帖) by Wang Xun (王珣, 349-400)	Calligraphy	Fourth century	FC	After Qing Dynasty	Taken out of the palace	1951	Hong Kong	Purchase	NPM
Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋帖) by Wang Xianzhi (王献之, 344-386)	Calligraphy	Late fourth century	FC	1949	Taken out of the palace	1951	Hong Kong	Purchase	NPM
Five Oxen (五牛图) by Han Huang (韩滉, 723-	Painting in colour on linen paper	Eighth century	FC	1900	Lost	1952	Hong Kong	Purchase	NPM

787)									
Xiao and Xiang Rivers (潇湘图) by Dong Yuan (董源, ?-ca. 962)	Ink on silk	Tenth century	FC	After 1945	Lost	1952	Hong Kong	Donated [Zhang Daqian (张大千, 1899-1983)]	NPM
The Night Revels of Han Xizai (韩熙载夜宴图)	Painting in colour on silk	Song Dynasty ⁴⁴³	FC	After 1945	Lost	1952	Hong Kong	Donated (Zhang Daqian)	NPM
Auspicious Dragon Rock (祥龙石图) by Zhao Ji (赵佶)	Painting in colour on silk	Late eleventh to twelfth century	FC					Purchase	NPM
Ancient coins from Chen Rentao (陈仁涛, 1906-1968) Collection	Metal	Various periods				The 1950s	Hong Kong	Purchase	NMC
Antiques from Yang Quan (杨铨) Collection	Ceramics, jade, metal, bamboo, cinnabar	Various periods				1959-1964	Hong Kong	Donation	Guangdong Folk Art Museum (广东民间工艺)

⁴⁴³ According to the *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings*, the painting kept in the NPM is a Song copy. The author of the original painting was Gu Hongzhong (顾闳中, 937-975) from Southern Tang.

on	inkstick								博物馆)
Antique s from Hou Baozhan g (侯宝 璋) Collecti on	Ceramic s, bronze, painting	Various periods				1963- 1972	Hong Kong	Donatio n	NPM
Antique s from Ye Yi (Yip Yee, 叶 义, 1919- 1984) Collecti on	Rhinoce ros	Qing Dynasty				1984	Hong Kong	Donatio n	NPM
Window Frame	Bronze	1755	Bronze Pavilion (baoyun ge 宝云 阁), Yiheyua n Summer Palace	1900	Loot	1993	United States	Donatio n (Mauric e Greenbe rg, 1925-)	Yiheyua n
Two cranes	Bronze	1755	Bronze Pavilion	1900	Loot	1975	Britain	Donatio n (Anbulu osi Hading) ⁴⁴⁴	Yiheyua n
Archaeo logical and antique objects	Various material s	Various periods	Various sites, mainly in Shanxi, Shaanxi, Henan	1993	Smuggli ng	1998	Britain	Internati onal lawsuit	NMC
Calligra phy and painting s from	Calligra phy and painting s	Song Dynasty to Modern				2000	The Philippi nes	Donatio n	Shangha i Museum

⁴⁴⁴ According to the 2019 *Catalogue* and news coverage, the name is recorded in Chinese as the donor. However, the original name and biography are unknown.

Zhuang Wanli (庄万里, 1899-1965) Collection		China							
Stone relief	Stone and colour	923	Tomb of Wang Chuzhi, Quyang (曲阳), Hebei	1994	Stealing	2000	United States	International enforcement	NMC
Stone relief	Stone and colour	923	Tomb of Wang Chuzhi	1994	Stealing	2000	United States	Donation [Robert H. Ellsworth (1929-2014)]	NMC
Buddha heads	Stone	Northern Wei	Longmen Caves, Luoyang, Henan	Early twentieth century	Stealing	2005	United States	Donation [Chen Zhejing (陈哲敬)]	Longmen Cave Academy (龙门石窟研究院)
Stone relief of Luohan	Stone	Tang Dynasty	Longmen Caves	Early twentieth century	Stealing	2001	Canada	Donation (Canadian government)	Longmen Cave Academy
Iron Bell of Daguforts	Iron	1884	Daguforts (大沽口炮台), Tianjin	1900	Loot	2005	Britain	Donation (City of Portsmouth)	The Daguforts Museum, Tianjin
Standing bodhisattva wearing a hat with cicada ornaments	Stone	Northern Dynasty	Shandong	1994	Stealing	2008	Japan	Negotiation (Miho Museum)	Shandong Museum

t									
Antique objects	Various materials	Various periods		2006	Smuggling	2006	Denmark	International lawsuit	Hainan Museum
Bronzes from Fan Jirong (George Fan, 范季融, 1936-) Collection	Bronze	Western Zhou to Spring and Autumn Period	Tomb of Duke Qin (秦公墓), Shaanxi, and Tomb of Marques Jin (晋侯墓), Shanxi	The 1990s	Stealing	2009	United States	Donation (Fan Jirong)	Shanghai Museum
Stone coffin and murals from Jingling Tomb of Tang Dynasty (唐敬陵)	Stone	737	Xi'an, Shaanxi	2004-2005	Stealing	2010	United States	Negotiation	Shaanxi History Museum
Lacquer wares from Cao Qiyong (曹其鏞, 1941-) Collection	Lacquer	Yuan, and Qing Dynasties				2012, and 2014	Hong Kong	Donation	Zhejiang Museum
Body of Minfang lei (皿方罍) vessel	Bronze	Shan Dynasty	Taoyuan (桃源), Hunan	After 1919	Lost	2014	United States	Purchase	Hunan Museum
Gold ornaments from tomb of Duke of Qin	Gold	Spring and Autumn Period	Li County (礼县), Gansu	The 1990s	Stealing	2015	France	Donation [François-Henri Pinault and	Gansu Museum

								Christia n Deydier (1950-)]	
Stone tower	Stone	720	Dengyu (邓峪), Shanxi	1998	Stealing	2016	Taiwan	Negotiat ion [Chung Tai Chan Monaste ry (中台 禅寺)]	Shanxi Museum
Bronzes	Bronze	Western Zhou to Spring and Autumn Period	Wenxi (闻喜), Shanxi	The 1990s– 2018	Stealing	2018	Various countrie s	Internati onal Enforce ment	Shanxi Museum
Bronze tiger ying (虎 荳) vessel	Bronze	Western Zhou	Yuanmi ngyuan	1860	Loot	2018	Britain	Negotiat ion	NMC
Archaeo logical and antique objects	Various material s	Neolithi c to Tang Dynasty		2014	Smuggli ng	2015, and 2019	United States	Internati onal Enforce ment	China (Hainan) Museum of South China Sea [中 国 (海 南) 南 海博物 馆]
Antique objects	Various material s	Neolithi c to Modern era	Sites in Gansu, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Sichuan, Henan, Jiangsu	2007 ⁴⁴⁵	Smuggli ng	2019	Italy	Internati onal enforce ment	NMC
Bronzes of Earl Kefu of Zeng	Bronze	Spring and Autumn Period	Siuzhou (随州), Hubei			2019	Japan	Internati onal enforce ment	NCHA

445 In 2007, the Carabinieri Art Squad of Italy found suspected illegally displaced Chinese artefacts in the local art market.

State (曾伯克 父)									
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The exhibition featured a diverse range of artworks, encompassing calligraphy, paintings, bronzes, sculptures, lacquerware, textiles, and archaeological objects, spanning Chinese history. Some significant exhibits were highlighted in the exhibition, for example, the objects and ornaments from former imperial constructions such as Yuanmingyuan and Yiheyuan, Buddhist sculpture fragments from Longmen Caves, and some genuine specimens of early bronzes and ritual objects from famous ancient towns. However, the 2019 Exhibition did not prioritise factors such as form, craftsmanship, technique, or presentation as the primary criteria for selection. Some of the works included could even be considered mediocre in quality. Instead, the exhibition served a more profound purpose: to highlight the “great progress” of the PRC through the lens of Chinese cultural heritage.⁴⁴⁶ The selected artefacts were chosen not for their artistic merit but for their symbolic significance as part of twenty-five cases of overseas Chinese heritage repatriation. The twenty-five cases of over 600 items collectively illustrated the seamless development of the nation’s efforts in cultural repatriation, rather than presenting a coherent narrative of art history or the stylistic evolution of the works themselves.

The 2019 Exhibition placed a strong emphasis on the provenances, repatriation methods, and restitutions of representative cases, highlighting a compelling trend in China’s cultural heritage repatriation from the 1950s to 2019. Apart from the pause during the Cultural Revolution, China’s approach to cultural repatriation has significantly evolved, shifting from primarily relying on diplomatic gifts and costly purchases to adopting a multi-channel strategy that increasingly emphasises international collaboration and engagement (Figure 16). This trend, as showcased in the exhibition, closely aligned with Yu Meng’s observation on the developmental trajectory of the return of Chinese cultural relics since 1949.⁴⁴⁷

446 *The 2019 Catalogue*, 13.

447 Yu Meng, “Woguo haiwai liushi wenwu,” 110.

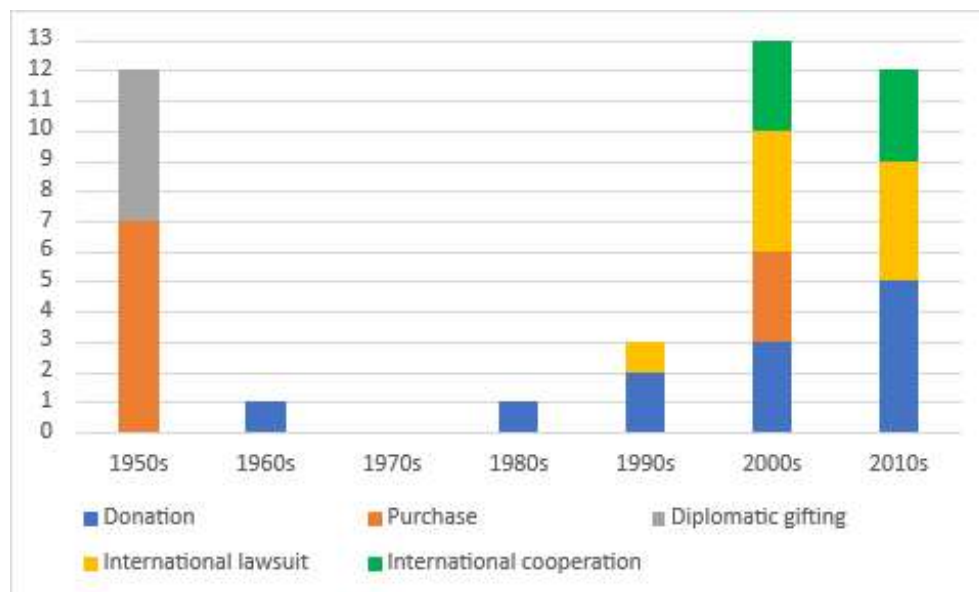


Figure 16. The number and repatriation methods of cases from different decades in the 2019 Exhibition.

Donations were the most prevalent approach. These ranged from diplomatic gifts from states with similar political ideologies, contributions made by patriotic overseas Chinese under the banner of “patriotism” and a strong sense of Chinese identity, to offerings from foreign friends who have a deep appreciation for Chinese culture. This effort underscored that repatriating artefacts through donations is one of the primary methods widely recognised by the international community and aligns with principles of justice.⁴⁴⁸ International lawsuits and cooperative enforcement mechanisms emerged as new repatriation methods in the twenty-first century, particularly during the Xi’s era, reflecting a more assertive and strategic approach to cultural heritage recovery.⁴⁴⁹ This collective endeavour claimed the PRC’s role as the legitimate heir to Chinese culture and its influence on the international stage.

The 2019 Exhibition, through its carefully curated selection of countries and regions represented, stood as a testament to China’s extensive global connections, highlighting both the historical depth and contemporary relevance of its relationships with other nations (Figure 17). This selection of artefacts not only highlights the significant historical exchange of culture and art but also underlines the complex and multifaceted relationship China has had with these countries. The quantity of Chinese art that has ended up in these countries is large, due to various historical reasons, including

448 Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, “A Plea for the Return of An Irreplaceable Cultural Heritage to Those who Created it,” *The UNESCO Courier* 31, no. 7 (1978): 5.

449 Yu Meng, “Woguo haiwai liushi wenwu,” 111.

colonialism, war looting, as well as smuggling and illegal trading. Many of these artefacts, after being taken from China, found their way to Western countries like Britain, the United States, and Japan. These nations, once part of the “Century of Humiliation,” caused deep emotional and historical wounds in China’s society and national memory. Additionally, these countries are developed nations that, in contrast to China’s past as an underdeveloped country, now coexist with China as an equally strong nation. China is also likely to become a future powerhouse. This shift in power dynamics further enriches the exhibition’s significance. The artefacts, once symbols of China’s subjugation and the cultural appropriation of its treasures, can now be seen as a form of reclaiming agency. The exhibition becomes a statement of China’s resurgence, transforming from a victim of exploitation to a nation asserting its cultural identity and strength on the global stage. In this light, the exhibition of these artefacts could be viewed as a manifestation of China to reclaim its past, reassert its place in the world, and reshape its historical narrative. It represents not only the physical repatriation of art but also a reassertion of cultural and national pride, sending a message of recovery and strength from a nation that was once at the mercy of colonial powers.

Figure 17. Countries and regions that returned Chinese artefacts on display at the 2019 Exhibition.

On the other hand, the exhibition aligns with contemporary international relations and China's socio-political objectives. Many of the highlighted countries are part of the Global North and developed nations, emphasising their historical roles as destinations for Chinese artefacts and their current positions in global diplomacy. Italy, prominently featured in the exhibition, became the first

Western European nation to sign a “One Belt One Road” cooperation agreement with China during Xi Jinping’s visit in March 2019, a partnership rooted in their shared cultural heritage, deep historical legacies, and significant historical encounters.⁴⁵⁰ This partnership was grounded in the richness of cultural heritages and deep historical legacies of the two country, and historical encounters between them. Shortly after this diplomatic milestone, the NMC hosted “The Journey Back Home (*Guilai* 归来)” exhibition, showcasing 796 artefacts repatriated from Italy, an outcome of this strengthened bilateral relationship. Some of these artefacts were later integrated into the 2019 Exhibition.

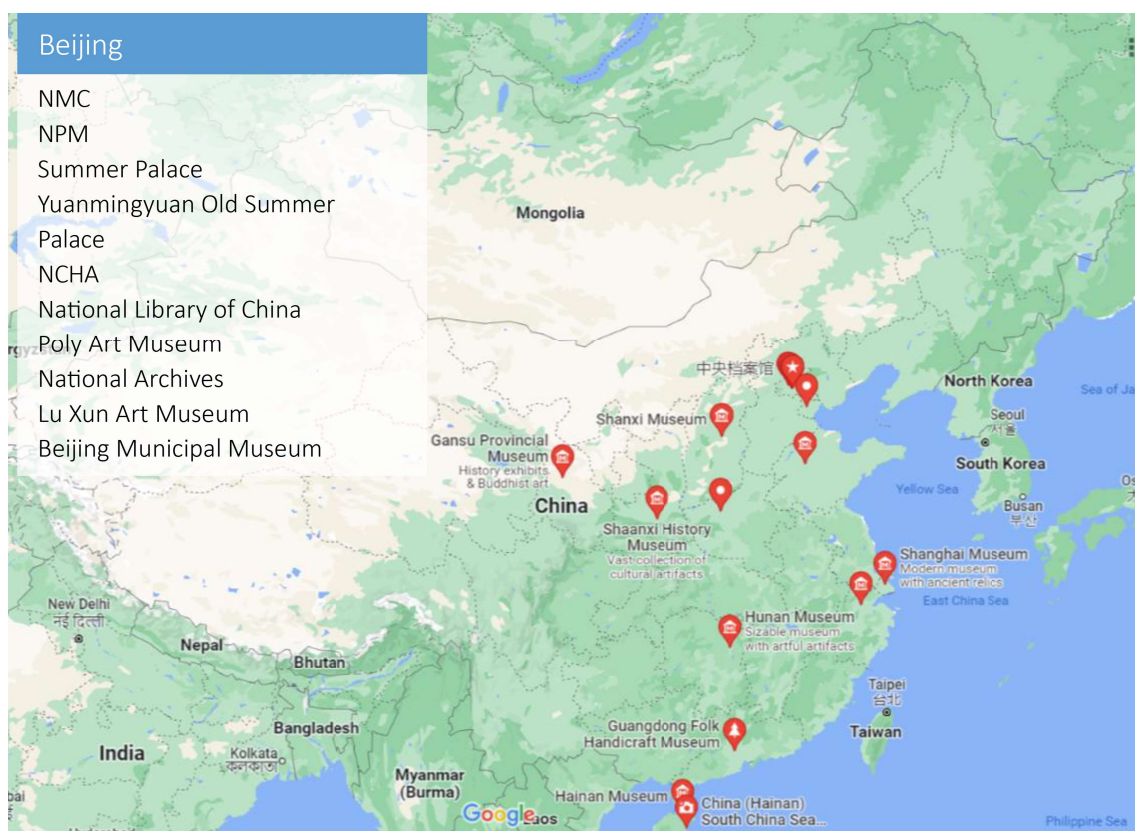


Figure 18. Map of the museums participating in the 2019 Exhibition.

Another geographical aspect to consider is the distribution of the museums of the chosen artefacts (Figure 18). The over 600 artefacts featured in twenty-five cases were loaned by eighteen institutions representing twelve provinces across China. Most of the participating institutions were based in Beijing, with many being national-level institutions. In addition, several of China’s most

450 Wang Likang 王沥慷, “Zhongguo yu Yidali quanshu ‘yidai yilu’ hezuo wenjian” 中国与意大利签署“一带一路”合作文件 [China and Italy signed the BRI cooperation document], Belt and Road Portal, March 24, 2019, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/83639.html>.

celebrated regional museums were involved, such as the Shanghai Museum, as well as the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Yungang Grottoes. These institutions play important roles in safeguarding national cultural legacy and history, and also serve as living testaments to the nation's historical journey, encapsulated within their own founding histories and rich collections. The 2019 Exhibition as a theatre demonstrated China's growing influence and position on the global stage. The repatriation from various countries and regions highlighted China's ability to assert its cultural heritage and historical significance on an international scale. Moreover, the inclusion of museums from different provinces in the exhibition emphasised the country's rich cultural diversity and historical depth. However, it also highlighted Beijing's centralised role in culture and politics.

The seven bronze heads of the Chinese zodiac from the Yuanmingyuan were perhaps the most eye-catching pieces in the exhibition. Their inclusion at the start was motivated by their profound significance in China's public discourse, as an integral part of traditional culture, and as some of the most iconic lost heritage items and symbols of the traumatic past. The repatriation of the bronze heads, spanning from the early 2000s to recent years and involving multiple countries and through diverse channels, has been a testament to the development of China's cultural heritage preservation efforts. It demonstrated the unwavering commitment of the Chinese Government to reclaiming artefacts through various methods, aligning seamlessly with the core concept of the 2019 Exhibition. They symbolise not only the return of cultural heritage but also the government's determination and achievements in repatriation, highlighted through advancements in cultural management, financial investment, and diplomatic efforts.

The selection of the Chinese zodiac heads also reflects their continued presence in contemporary art and mass media, where the bronze heads and the Yuanmingyuan Palace serve as sources of inspiration. In 2010, Ai Weiwei created *Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads*, an installation based on the bronze heads of the Yuanmingyuan. There are two series of this artwork, the gold series and the bronze series; both have been exhibited in public venues and galleries around the world (Figures 19 & 20). By reimagining China's history and transforming a symbol of ancient elite society into public art, the artist sought to engage in a discourse on nationalism in China, drawing attention to sensitive issues related to economics, politics, and art collecting.⁴⁵¹

451 See Susan Delson, ed., *Ai Weiwei: Circle of Animals* (Munich: Prestel, 2011).



Figure 19. The bronze series of Circle of Animals displayed in front of the Pulitzer Fountain, New York City, the United States, 2011. Source: Zodiac Heads.



Figure 20. The gold series of Circle of Animals displayed at Arken Museum of Modern Art, Ishøj, Denmark, 2013. Source: Zodiac Heads

Films and television works about the Yuanmingyuan and the bronze heads of the Chinese zodiac have been produced in both China and Hong Kong. These range from the media interpretation “The Burning of the Yuanmingyuan (*Huoshao Yuanmingyuan* 火烧圆明园)” to the documentary “The Yuanmingyuan” which explores the imperial garden from a historical perspective, covering its establishment to its eventual destruction. The 2012 Hong Kong action-adventure comedy film “CZ12: Chinese Zodiacs (*Shi'er shengxiao* 十二生肖)” begins with the history of the looting of the Yuanmingyuan, the film shows JC, starring Kung Fu star Jackie Chan (Cheng Long, 成龙, 1957-),

who ventures in different parts of the world in search of the six lost zodiac heads with his friends (Figure 21). The film combined patriotism and entertainment, which made it gain considerable popularity among the Chinese audience, and win remarkable commercial success.⁴⁵²



Figure 21. Film poster of CZ12: *Chinese Zodiacs*. Source: Sohu.

Summary

Although both the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions played significant roles in asserting China's cultural identity and international standing, their specific aims, narratives, and curatorial approaches reveal distinct differences, shaped by the political and historical priorities of their respective eras. The 1935 Exhibition, which originated from the personal interests of a small group of Western intellectuals, was then officially recognised by both the British and Chinese governments. It served dual purposes: promoting Chinese art and culture to a Western audience and strengthening Sino-British relations through cultural diplomacy. At the time, China was in the midst of internal political turmoil, facing external threats, and striving to solidify its identity on the world stage. The exhibition's selection of artworks aimed to showcase the long history and continuity of Chinese civilisation, as well as the nation's emerging modernity through its latest archaeological discoveries. Similarly, the 2019 Exhibition also made notions on China's diplomacy. However, its core emphasis lay in domestic affairs. It operated within a context of China's rising political and economic power, shifting focus to cultural heritage reclamation and national identity. Unlike its predecessor, this exhibition underscored China's efforts to recover looted artefacts, framing their repatriation as a

⁴⁵² The box office of the film was 880,000 RMB, ranking the third highest grossing film of the year in Chinese cinema, see Box Office CN, accessed January 6, 2023, <http://www.boxofficecn.com/boxoffice2012>.

triumph of national sovereignty and cultural rejuvenation. This modern narrative aligned with China's broader strategy of asserting its global influence, portraying itself as a guardian of its ancient civilisation and an advocate for historical justice. Put together, the two exhibitions showed how art, politics, and diplomacy have evolved together, highlighting China's journey from establishing itself on the global stage to reclaiming its cultural heritage as a symbol of strength and pride.

A key difference between the two exhibitions lies in the staffing and curatorial approaches. The 1935 Exhibition positioned China as a new and active participant in global dialogue, while the 2019 Exhibition was more of a "monologue," despite involving many countries. The 1935 Exhibition was realised through Sino-British collaborative efforts. The committees, representing both nations and coming from international backgrounds, were largely composed of professionals in the fields of art and museums, or individuals with a certain level of expertise in Chinese art and culture. The selection of objects encompassed a wide range of materials, themes, styles, and periods, aiming to provide a comprehensive perspective on Chinese art. The artworks were carefully curated to highlight China's cultural diversity and historical continuity, especially by introducing to Western audiences some previously unfamiliar yet authentic and essential genres of Chinese art. This helped promote a broader understanding of Chinese art in the West. Despite differences in understanding of Chinese art history among Chinese and Western curators, and even occasional disagreements and disputes, they ultimately reached a unified narrative through negotiation. In the process, the exhibition also fostered international cultural exchange. The diversity in both art forms and curatorial perspectives underscores the exhibition's dual mission: showcasing China's cultural legacy while engaging with Western art and historical narratives.

By contrast, the staffing of the 2019 Exhibition was more centralised and uniform, with personnel drawn within the same overarching administrative sector. Their official status was emphasised rather than their artistic or professional backgrounds. Although the exhibition showcased a range of ancient Chinese artworks and archaeological objects, it placed less emphasis on presenting Chinese art as a continuous evolution. Instead, it focused on the symbolic significance of the repatriation in reinforcing the official historical narrative of China's rise. Historical objects were used to underscore contemporary themes, serving primarily as an internal reaffirmation of national pride and the government's agenda.

Both exhibitions reflect the changing role of Chinese art in shaping national identity and political discourse, with their origins traceable to the "Century of Humiliation." The 1935 Exhibition,

occurring just decades after those traumatic events, marked China's efforts as an emerging nation-state to reshape its international image and "claim its seat at the table" as an equal partner, challenging colonial narratives and asserting its rightful place on the global stage. Sending Chinese art out symbolised the country's desire to engage with the world on equal terms and to present its cultural heritage as a cornerstone of its national identity. In 2019, with China having risen from the ashes of past humiliation to become a powerful nation, the exhibition's focus shifted to a different form of reclamation. In its presentation of the restoration of lost cultural treasures, the exhibition reclaimed China's historical narrative, repeatedly invoking colonial victimisation. By drawing attention to past wounds, the exhibition emphasised the contrast between history and the present, highlighting the country's contemporary resurgence. This exhibition adopted a more introspective, nationalistic narrative, presenting a vision of strength, sovereignty, and a reaffirmed cultural identity.

The development of China's museum industry and cultural policies across different historical eras played a crucial role in shaping both exhibitions and the differing historical narratives they presented. The establishment of institutions such as the NPM during the Republican era and the NMC amidst the contemporary museum boom reflects a shifting political climate. Museums, as custodians of cultural heritage, have become vital instruments for constructing and preserving national memory, serving as platforms to define and project collective identity. Through the intersection of museum practices and state policies, they have played a pivotal role in articulating a vision of the nation's past and its aspirations for the future.

Chapter 6. Chinese Art *en Route*

The journey of Chinese art reflects cultural policy, global interconnectedness, and international relations. The movement of the artefacts highlights how logistics, diplomacy, and cross-cultural exchanges have transformed art into a symbol of national identity and international collaboration. As these artefacts crossed borders, their representations shifted, reflecting different and evolving cultural and political contexts while emphasising their role in shaping China's cultural identity and global standing, linking art with nation-building and diplomacy. This chapter examines the journeys of the artworks featured in the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions, whether leaving China or returning home. It examines the political and cultural dimensions of these artefacts and delves into the motivations behind their retention and display. Through the lens of “travelling and displaced objects,” it investigates how these artefacts have shaped national identity and contributed to global conversations on cultural preservation. Additionally, exploring the personal experiences and emotions of individuals involved in these journeys enriches and enlivens the historical narrative.

The 1935 Exhibition relies on historical documents, reports, photographs, and correspondence to reconstruct the majestic transport of national treasures to London. However, due to limited information on the logistics of the exhibits between their home museums and the NMC, the 2019 Exhibition adopts a broader historical perspective. It traces the trajectories of these artefacts from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, focusing on their loss and eventual repatriation. This approach helps to understand the significance of repatriation and the meaning behind their inclusion in the exhibitions, situating the artefacts within wider historical narratives and revealing how they have embodied national identity across different periods.

In particular, I place special emphasis on the fate of the Yuanmingyuan since the late nineteenth century, exploring how narratives surrounding this renowned imperial garden complex have evolved over time and across different spaces to reflect China's changing social contexts. The artefacts, therefore, serve as symbols of China's resilience and cultural continuity. Through their journey and eventual reintegration, they illuminate how cultural heritage shapes collective memory, affirms national identity, and asserts a strong presence in global cultural discourse.

From Shanghai to London in the 1935 Exhibition

Before the Chinese national treasures were sent to London, a Preliminary Exhibition was held in Shanghai from April 8 to May 5 1935.⁴⁵³ This decision was influenced by the location of the artefacts and the imperative to minimise transportation risks.⁴⁵⁴ It was for the consideration of the safety of these valuable objects and to demonstrate their status and highlight their significance. Cai Yuanpei emphasised that the British Government should “fully guarantee the safety of the objects from the point of shipment” and that the Chinese Committee “reserve the right to withhold” particularly important object from overseas exhibition.⁴⁵⁵ Seeing the event as an opportunity to showcase national treasures to the Chinese public, Cai also proposed holding exhibitions both before the departure of the artefacts and after their return, ensuring public appreciation, safeguarding the artefacts, and “keeping the public informed.”⁴⁵⁶ Never before had such a large selection of ancient artworks been displayed publicly in China. The organisers used the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition as an opportunity to systematise and modernise Chinese art history and to use the event as a platform for public education.

Highlighting Shanghai’s contribution, the Preliminary Exhibition celebrated the convergence of China and the West, symbolising a dynamic relationship of both collision and cooperation that fostered mutual learning and recognition. The journey of Chinese art from Shanghai to London unfolded against the backdrop of mutual admiration between these two metropolises, each serving as a key urban and cultural hub in their respective countries. This shared appreciation was rooted in

453 Zhongguo yizhan chouweihui zhi Beiping gugong bowuyuan lishihui gonghan 伦敦中国艺展筹委会致北平故宫博物院理事会公函 [Letter from the Preparatory Committee of the London Exhibition of Chinese Art to the Board of the NPM, Beiping], signed by Wang Shijie, February 21, 1935, quoted in Liu Nannan, “Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia,” 9.

454 Huang Wen-Yu, “Shanghai yuzhan de yiyi,” 94.

455 “如英国政府对于物品之安全，自起运之地点起能负责充分保障，则可赞同。” (If the British government can fully guarantee the safety of the objects from the point of shipment, then approval may be granted.) Beiping gugong bowuyuan lishihui zhi jiaoyubu gonghangao 北平故宫博物院理事会致教育部公函稿 [Official letter from the Committee of the NPM Peiping to the Ministry of Education], signed by Cai Yuanpei, May 26, 1934, quoted in Liu Nannan, “Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia,” 6; “关于特殊重要物品，本会有保留不予出国展览之权。” (Regarding objects of particular significance, the Committee reserves the right to withhold them from the overseas exhibition.) Beiping gugong bowuyuan lishihui zhi Lundun Zhongguo yizhan chouweihui qianhangao 北平故宫博物院理事会致伦敦中国艺展筹委会笺函稿 [Letter from the Committee of the NPM Peiping to the Preparatory Committee for the London Exhibition of Chinese Art], signed by Cai Yuanpei, December 22, 1934, quoted in Liu Nannan, “Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia,” 9.

456 “选送物品运英展览前，应在上海开一预展会，时间拟定明年三月间；物品回国后，并应在南京展览一次，以昭明信。” (Before the selected items are transported to Britain for the exhibition, a Preliminary Exhibition should be held in Shanghai, provisionally planned for March of the following year. Once the items are returned to China, they should also be displayed in Nanjing, to publicise and highlight their significance.) Xingzhengyuan mishuchu zhi Beiping gugong bowuyuan lishihui jianhan 行政院秘书处致北平故宫博物院理事会笺函 [Letter from the Secretariat of the Executive Yuan to the Committee of the NPM Beiping], signed by Chu Minyi, December 22, 1934, quoted in *ibid.*

advancements in infrastructure, urban culture, and national significance, reflecting the prominent roles of these cities on opposite ends of the Eurasian continent. The process, characterised by negotiation and rapprochement between China and Britain, was also framed by both nations as a performative act of diplomacy.

After the exhibition, the artefacts were carefully packed into ninety-three steel crates for shipment. However, the journey of Chinese art at sea was far from smooth. The first journey of Chinese national treasures going abroad was marked by controversies, disagreements, and risks, which not only shaped early ideas about heritage conservation in China but also highlighted the fragility of such endeavours. The transportation process involved negotiations and cooperation between the Chinese and British authorities, highlighting the complexities of international cultural exchanges. At the same time, both British and Chinese governments sought to frame the event as a display of diplomacy and international prestige, reinforcing the political stakes of the exhibition. This complex dynamic symbolised a vibrant exchange where China and the West converged, embodying a relationship of both collision and cooperation that fostered mutual learning and recognition between two diverse worlds.

Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition as Mutual Admiration

Since becoming a treaty port in 1842, Shanghai transformed with the establishment of foreign concessions, beginning with Britain and later joined by other European nations. This hybrid environment shaped Shanghai into a hub of international commerce, cultural exchange, and a unique point of convergence for Western and Chinese communities.⁴⁵⁷ As the significance of cities like Beijing, Guangzhou, and Wuhan decreased due to political instability and the looming threat of war, Shanghai's prominence in China's urbanisation and economy grew, particularly after Nanjing was established as the capital. The Nanjing Government's implementation of the "Greater Shanghai Plan" (*da Shanghai tebie jihua* 大上海特别计划) aimed to diminish the dominance of the International Settlement and French Concession, introducing a new administrative framework under Chinese control.⁴⁵⁸ This initiative sought to assert national sovereignty, modernise urban governance, and integrate the fragmented cityscape. The creation of the Shanghai Special Municipality (*Shanghai tebieshi* 上海特别市) on July 7, 1927, further accelerated urbanisation,

457 Fairbank, "Introduction: Maritime and Continental in China's History," 20.

458 Ma Xueqiang 马学强 and Song Zuanyou 宋钻友, *Shanghai shihua* 上海史话 [History of Shanghai] (Beijing: shehui kexue wenxia chubanshe, 2011), 108-11.

leading to significant improvements in infrastructure, public facilities, and transportation networks. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, Shanghai had emerged as the economic, cultural, and commercial heart of Chinese modernity.⁴⁵⁹ Its capitalist elite played a crucial role in both financial and political spheres, and the government sought to consolidate economic power through measures such as currency unification and greater control over state and semi-governmental banks.⁴⁶⁰



Figure 22. The Bund in 1930. Source: F. L. Hawks, *Shanghai of To-day: A Souvenir Album of Fifty Vandyck Gravure Prints of "the Model Settlement,"* 1930.

Even though the financial reforms and urban planning initiatives by the Nanjing Government were not completed, Shanghai continued to grow, with the authorities portraying the city as a window for the foreign world to understand China's modernisation (Figure 22). The urban area expanded, population increased, and living standards improved. These developments helped bridge the gap between the Chinese communities and Western concessions, promoting cooperation and integration.⁴⁶¹ In 1930, American missionary and educator Francis Lister Hawk Pott (Bo Fangji 卜

459 Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Shanghai Modern: Reflections on Urban Culture in China in the 1930s," *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 75.

460 Parks M. Coble Jr., *The Shanghai Capitalists and the Nationalist Government, 1927-1937* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1994), 1-2, 7.

461 *Da Shanghai dushi jihua zongtu cao'an baogaoshu* 大上海都市计划总图草案报告书 [Greater Shanghai urban development general plan draft report] (Shanghai: Shanghai Urban Planning Committee, 1946), 3.

舫济, 1864–1947), published an album titled *Shanghai of To-day* (*Jinri zhi Hujiang* 今日之沪江), which featured notable buildings and landscapes along the Huangpu River. In it, Pott offered high praise for “the city above the sea”:

this wonderful meeting place of East of West...a modern city on the fringe of a country renowned in the past for its conservative civilization...If one takes thought of future world movements, he will view Shanghai as an entering wedge into the immovable East, or, to change the figure, as one of the goads that has pricked China and led to the genesis of a national consciousness.⁴⁶²

Shanghai in the 1930s, a bustling cosmopolitan metropolis where many forces and cultures intersected, with Leo Ou-fan Lee (李欧梵, 1939-) describing its “monstrous appearance” that “exuded a boundless energy: LIGHT, HEAT, POWER and NEON.”⁴⁶³ Interestingly, today’s Shanghai, characterised by its prosperity, internationalisation, and futuristic skyline interwoven with a mix of Western and Chinese, traditional and contemporary architecture, as well as the complex human experiences amid the challenges of urbanisation, is often playfully referred to as “the City of Magic (*Modu* 魔都).”

The venue of the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition was No. 23 Renji Road (仁记路, today’s Dianchi Road 滇池路), formerly the site of the German Club, which had occupied the building since 1907.⁴⁶⁴ It was a three-story building in the European eclectic style, located in the International Settlement area. After World War I, this property was confiscated as enemy assets from the government, and sold to the Bank of China (Figures 23 & 24).⁴⁶⁵ After moving its headquarters from Beijing to Shanghai in 1928, the Board of the bank in 1934 decided to build a new building that would “symbolise modernity, soundness and international credit,” ensuring it was “strong enough” to “compete with those European and American banks on the Bund.”⁴⁶⁶ The new Bank of China, completed in 1937, was designed collaboratively by Chinese architect Lu Qianshou (陆谦受, 1904–1991) and Hong Kong-based British-owned Palmer and Turner (*Kung Wo Yeung Hong* 公和洋行),

462 F. L. Hawks Pott, *Shanghai of To-day: A Souvenir Album of Fifty Vandyke Gravure Prints of “The Model Settlement,”* 3rd ed., rev. (Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore: Kelly and Walsh Limited, 1930), 1.

463 Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Shanghai Modern: Reflections,” 75; Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999; repr., 2001), 4.

464 The Shanghai German Club, established in 1866, moved into its own building on Renji Road in 1907. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, foreign countries established clubs in Shanghai’s colonial areas, serving as hubs for knowledge exchange, business opportunities, and leisure activities, while also preserving their cultural traditions. See Yuezhi Xiong, *Shanghai Urban Life and Its Heterogeneous Cultural Entanglements*, trans. Lane J. Harris and Chun Mei (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), 103–6.

465 “Bank of China Building at the Bund Rivalling Foreign Banks (1930–1937),” Bank of China, accessed January 20, 2023, https://www.boc.cn/en/aboutboc/ab7/200809/t20080926_1601875.html.

466 Ibid.

and constructed by the Shanghai-native company Dao Kwei Kee (*Taoguiji* 陶桂记).⁴⁶⁷ The building seamlessly blended the modern skyscraper style with traditional Chinese cultural elements and symbols emblematic of the Republic. As the only Chinese-made building on the Bund facing the Huangpu River, it stood among foreign-owned structures. This new headquarters of Chinese finance became a powerful symbol of the emerging sense of national identity and pride in an early age of the Republic. The evolution of the building itself served as a testament to the profound transformations taking place in the country during this period. Therefore, hosting such a grand exhibition at this historically significant location in the culturally hybrid concession area highlighted China's rising national consciousness and its growing sense of identity.



Figures 23 & 24. Transformation of 23 Renji Road: German Club (left), Oliver Hulme Collection OH02-03, and Bank of China (right), Sources: Historical Photographs of China Project, University of Bristol; Bank of China.

Meanwhile, London was also experiencing unprecedented “fungus-like growth” in the 1930s, witnessing a surge in residential construction, the expansion of utilities, electrification, and the

⁴⁶⁷ “Bank of China,” Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://travel.whlyj.sh.gov.cn/buildings/1a007.html>.

development of advanced traffic and transportation systems.⁴⁶⁸ The development of London reflected the spirit of the times and encapsulated the essence of an era marked by both optimism and challenges. With its diverse population, rich history, and iconic landmarks, London served as a hub of artistic expression, political activism, and social transformation. As the capital of the British Empire and one of the largest cities in the world since the nineteenth century, London was home to more than eight million people.⁴⁶⁹ With rising traffic on the city roads leading to the creation of the world's first metro system, the city was a vibrant and dynamic city that bore witness to significant social, cultural, and political changes. Overcrowding led to the renovation and expansion of the capital's underground train system since the 1920s, through governmental authorisation and financial support.⁴⁷⁰ Particularly, Piccadilly Line stations in central London, including Piccadilly Circus near the Royal Academy, were modernised with the installation of escalators.⁴⁷¹

After the First World War, the League of Nations tried to seek peace and cooperation among the nations of the world in internationalism, with Britain as a leading force. The sense of internationalism was palpable in the bustling streets of London, as the city transformed into a vibrant hub of diverse cultures and ideas. The modernist movement emerged in architecture and furniture making, aiming to produce designs suitable for mass production and for use in many different types of houses.⁴⁷² Within the houses, interior decorations reached their zenith, characterised by excitement and self-conscious modernity, featuring styles and products from other countries such as French Art Deco, German Bauhaus, Dutch "De Stijl," and the Finnish Aalto-designed furniture.⁴⁷³ The influence of Americanisation also reached London across the Atlantic, "mass-market commercial culture sprang up" and popular entertainment flourished.⁴⁷⁴ At the same time, big cities in other countries, such as New York, Tokyo, Berlin and Paris, rapidly emerged as strong competitors to London, but also engaged in cultural exchanges, learning from one another and exerting influence on each other's development.

Against the backdrop of internationalism, the influx of immigration from other cultures, international artists and intellectuals who made Britain their home in the early twentieth century infused the art scene with new inspiration, melding new cultural influences with the vibrant urban

468 Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2000), 372.

469 According to the 1931 census, the population of London was 8,098,206. "Total Population," A Vision of Britain through Time, University of Portsmouth, accessed May 30, 2023, http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10097836/cube/TOT_POP.

470 Oliver Green, *The London Underground: An Illustrated History* (Surrey: Ian Allan, 1987; repr., 1988), 36–9.

471 Ibid. 42.

472 Paul Greenhalgh, *Modernism in Design* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 10.

473 Alice Prochaska, *London in the Thirties*, (London: London Museum, 1973), 8.

474 Porter, *London: A Social History*, 394.

flourish of the time. By that time, London was home to the largest Chinese diaspora, primarily in Limehouse and Soho, and attracted many Chinese students. These young, promising individuals played a key role in fostering cultural exchange and building networks, promoting understanding between the two countries.

Despite the challenges posed by stereotypes and discrimination, particularly against Chinese Asians, often labelled as the “Yellow Peril,” the synthesis of diverse cultures remained a vital pursuit in the face of the ongoing influence of this discourse in the British consciousness.⁴⁷⁵ Some British artists and intellectuals actively engaged in the study and promotion of Chinese culture and art, emphasising the richness and value of Chinese culture, all in pursuit of facilitating crosscultural artistic exchange.

New social shifts brought fresh perspectives to art. As the Depression affected Britain and the threat of war loomed, the significance of international artistic networks grew, with art seen as a universal language to reject the past and envision a better future. Britain showed a keen interest in Chinese art and culture, which deeply influenced some of its artists. For instance, Joseph Southall (1861-1944), the Nottingham-born leader of the Birmingham Group of Artist-Craftsmen, although not well-versed in the field, idealistically said:

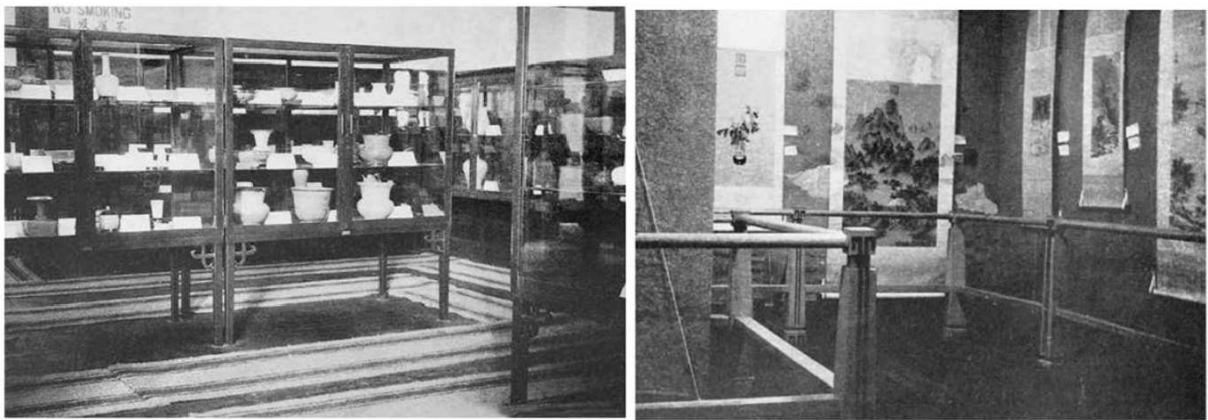
Art has this immeasurable advantage, that it is an international language...it oversteps all boundaries of speech, and freely imparts its message to all continents and people...I do not know a single character of Chinese, but the painters of far-off China speak to me freely, and I know that they are not heathen.⁴⁷⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter, the widespread recognition of Chinese art in Britain was shaped by several reasons. The growing presence of Chinese artworks in British museums and markets contributed to the development of a more comprehensive, though sometimes misunderstood, aesthetic appreciation of Chinese art. The increasing scale and influence of exhibitions reflected a rapidly growing interest in Asian cultures, building on a long-established tradition of showcasing Chinese art to European audiences.

475 “Editors’ Introduction: Chiang Yee and His Circle: Chinese Artistic and Intellectual in Britain, 1930-50,” in *Chiang Yee and His Circle: Chinese Artistic and Intellectual in Britain, 1930-50*, eds. Paul Bevan, Anne Witchard and Da Zheng (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022), 5.

476 Joseph Southall, “Art and Peace,” in *Towards Ultimate Harmony: Report of Conference on Pacifist Philosophy of Life* (Ashford: Headley Bros. for the League of Peace and Freedom, 1915), quoted in Grace Brockington, “Introduction: Art and Internationalism,” in *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Grace Brockington (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 16.

In turn, the 1930s art scene in Shanghai as China's modern art centre was marked by the harmonisation of traditional and contemporary elements, the exploration of national identity, and the assimilation of Western artistic ideas, all of which contributed to the development of new art movements.⁴⁷⁷ This shift was facilitated by intellectual elites and returned students, and through their efforts in modernising Chinese art. Their efforts included translating theories and introducing works from abroad, establishing art groups, manifesting movements, and participating in international exhibitions.



Figures 25 & 26. Views at the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition. Source: NMP Beijing Collection.

The Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition was unique. First, it was held not in conventional art venues but in the storage rooms of a bank. Second, although serving as a preview for the 1935 Exhibition in London, it was entirely managed by Chinese native curators. The exhibition, the first large-scale, systematic display of national art treasures, marked one of the early instances of curatorial practice in China. The objects were placed in six galleries: paintings and calligraphy, fans and embroideries of Ming and Qing Dynasties in Gallery 1, paintings and calligraphy from Tang to Yuan Dynasties in Gallery 2; bronzes in Gallery 3; porcelain in Gallery 4 and 5, and rare books, jade, cloisonné and lacquer objects in the Gallery 6 (Figures 25 & 26).⁴⁷⁸ This arrangement corresponded categorisation in the Chinese-published catalogue: bronzes, porcelain, paintings and calligraphy, and miscellaneous objects. The exhibition showcased the development of each art genre in

⁴⁷⁷ Zheng Gong 郑工, *Yanjin yu yundong: Zhongguo meishu de xiandaihua (1875-1976)* 演进与运动: 中国美术的现代化 (1875-1976) [Evolution and movement: modernisation of Chinese art (1875-1976)] (Nanning: Guangxi yishu chubanshe, 2002), 80-8.

⁴⁷⁸ Xu Wanling, "Guozhijiao zaiyu minxiangqin;" Huang Wen-Yu, "Shanghai yuzhan de yiyi," 95.

chronological order, with the paintings and calligraphy displayed in the first room, highlighting their significance in Chinese art history.⁴⁷⁹

In order to facilitate the appreciation and protect the exhibits, several measures were implemented. For example, paintings and calligraphy works were hung on wooden shelves covered with greyish yellow clothes, with wooden fences that were set up about two feet in front of the works so that the viewer was not too close.⁴⁸⁰ Fans, embroideries, bronzes, porcelain, books, and other art objects were placed in glass cabinets with iron frames which were specially made for the exhibition.⁴⁸¹ This solemn display, with a sense of distance, demonstrated the significance of the exhibits, at the same time was in line with early Chinese ideas of heritage protection and “national treasures” as “public property” just as it was stipulated when the NPM was founded.

Secretary of the Chinese Committee Xue Quanzeng praised that the exhibits had been carefully selected and organised and “were all displayed systematically based on the development of Chinese art history,” so that the viewer can realise “the origin of the establishment of [Chinese] art and its general development.”⁴⁸² Wu Hufan was outspoken in encouraging the authorities to hold more art exhibitions like this, saying that it would be “a blessing to the world art” to revive “the art of our nation that has not yet died.”⁴⁸³ The exhibition successfully attracted approximately 60,000 visitors.⁴⁸⁴ A Taoist visitor appreciated the display of the exhibits, rather scientific, which “made it easy to see the evolution” of Chinese art.⁴⁸⁵

Sending Chinese National Treasures Uninsured

Sending Chinese national treasures to Britain caused great concern among Chinese intellectuals, fraught with the rising nationalism in the early twentieth century. Progressive newspapers of the time became platforms for intellectuals to express their opinions, question the officials, and receive responses. The credentials of the British committee as the final decision maker in the selection of

479 Huang Wen-Yu, “Shanghai yuzhan de yiyi,” 95.

480 Xu Wanling, “1935 nian Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui”, 18.

481 Ibid.

482 “经慎重审选，并加以整理.....悉各依其发展之次第，作有系统之陈列.....艺术成立之渊源，发展之大程序。” (After careful selection and arrangement... each item is systematically displayed according to the order of its development... illustrating the origins of art and the major stages of its evolution.) Ibid.

483 “将我国断此未泯之艺术，重加振扬，亦未始非世界艺术之幸也。” (It would indeed be a blessing to the world art to revive the art of our country that has not yet died.) Ibid.

484 Ibid.

485 “...使人容易看到吾国艺术演进的阶段。” (... to make it easy for people to see the evolution of our national art.) Ibid.

the artworks were questioned, especially as David and Eumorfopoulos were of “merchant origin,” and Pelliot “robbed” China’s Dunhuang.⁴⁸⁶ Other concerns included the quantity and fragility of the artworks, as well as the considerable distance of the journey.⁴⁸⁷

This opposition stemmed from a deep-seated concern regarding the historical exploitation of China by major world powers, dating back to the First Opium War. The historical traumas, which at the time were only a few decades in the past, have not only eroded China’s national identity but have also resulted in the loss of invaluable cultural artefacts. Twenty-eight scholars, including Xu Beihong, Zhu Ziqing (朱自清 1889-1948), Liang Sicheng (梁思成 1901-1972), Lin Huiyin (林徽因 1904-1955), and so on, jointly published an article on the World Morning Post to express their concern for sending Chinese national treasures to exhibit in Britain and three reasons against it.⁴⁸⁸ Chen Yinke (陈寅恪, 1890-1969) and his colleagues at Tsinghua University criticised the act of sending national treasures, which the Chinese people had been unable to visit since the September 18 Incident, as merely a celebratory gift for the English King. They viewed this action as pleasing Westerners, prompting questions about the significance and fairness of their involvement in the exhibition.⁴⁸⁹

The RA agreed to cover the transportation costs of the Chinese Government Loan from Shanghai to London. However, the artworks were left uninsured, with the rationale being “to keep costs down.”⁴⁹⁰ In response, the NPM Committee held the view that the exhibition should prioritise “practical safeguards” and should not be limited by insurance considerations.⁴⁹¹ At the early stage of the preparation, Wang Shijie mentioned that in the six previous foreign art exhibitions at the RA, there were very few accidents during transport, storage and exhibition, and “only minor damage to the frames was compensated by the RA, which had no difficulty in doing so.”⁴⁹² Quo Tai-chi conveyed to Lamb the Nanjing Government’s decision not to insist on insurance for the antiquities,

486 Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 31-2.

487 Fu Zhenlun, “Gugong bowuyuan guwu diyici chuguo zhanlan shimo” 故宫博物院古物第一次出国展览始末 [The first overseas exhibition of antiques of the NPM], *Zijincheng* 1 (2014): 77.

488 “Xueshuji fan dui guwu yunying zhanlan lieju sanxiang liyou xiwang zhengfu jinshen xingshi” 学术界反对古物运英展览列举三项理由希望政府慎重行事 [Academics oppose the exhibition of antiquities in Britain, three reasons listed urging the government to act cautiously], *Shijie ribao* 世界日报, January 20, 1935.

489 *Beiping chenbao* 北平晨报, January 27, 1935; Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 29.

490 Letter from the British Committee to Chinese Ambassador, signed by George Hill, Neill Malcolm, Percival David, George Eumorfopoulos, R. L. Hobson, and Oscar Raphael, June 8, 1934, RA Archives, London.

491 Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 30.

492 “证诸过去六次国际展览会经验，在运输、存储及展览期间极少意外之事件发生，仅有关于框架器具之细微损伤，经付赔偿，此项赔偿毫无困难云云。” (Based on the experience of the past six international exhibitions, incidents during transportation, storage, and display have been extremely rare. There have only been minor damages to frames and equipment, which were compensated for without any difficulty.) Wang Shijie, *Lundun zhanlanhui choushua baogao*, quoted in Liu Nannan, “Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia,” 8.

stressing that “a definite plan should be presented by the promoter regarding the protection of the treasures during the transportation and exhibition, in order to strengthen the confidence of the general public” in China, and that “all necessary facilities for transportation and co-operate with officers of exhibition” should be extended by the British Government.⁴⁹³

The decision to send the Chinese national treasures to London without insurance angered Chinese intellectuals. Xu Beihong published on *Shun Pao*, sarcastically calling this practice of not ensuring such important large-scale cultural relics to be exhibited abroad “a genius creation (*tiancai zhi chuangzao* 天才之创造),” thus questioning the qualifications of the British committees who came to China to select the exhibits for the exhibition.⁴⁹⁴ In the expression of some scholars, the national treasure was linked to the gradual strengthening of the cultural identity of the Chinese and, to some extent, to notions of cultural universalism:

With our nation’s rare and priceless treasures being transported by land and sea, journeying tens of thousands of miles across the ocean to reach Britain, if they are not insured and any mishap should occur, not only would our country lose national treasures that carry the ancestral and cultural spirit of the Chinese people, but it would also constitute a great loss to the cultural heritage of the world. The implications are significant and must not be overlooked.⁴⁹⁵

China’s first modern Antique Preservation Law (*guwu baocunfa* 古物保存法) was published in 1930, followed by the establishment of the Central Committee of Antique Preservation (*zhongyang guwu baoguan weiyuanhui* 中央古物保管委员会) in 1932. These developments were accompanied by the introduction of a series of laws, regulations, and organisations aimed at protecting cultural heritage, regulating archaeological excavations, and overseeing foreigners’ activities in China.⁴⁹⁶ In January 1935, the Central Antique Committee drafted regulations governing the export of antique objects. These regulations established rules for the photography, transportation, inspection, and academic oversight of such objects, with passports issued by the Ministry of Interior and the

493 Letter from Quo Tai-chi to Walter Lamb, November 14, 1934, RA Archives, London.

494 *Shun Pao*, April 6, 1935.

495 “以吾国稀世奇珍，播弄于舟车之上，辗转于数万里之外，远涉重洋而至英国，若不予保险，万一稍有意外，不但吾国失去祖宗遗传民族精神所寄之国宝，即在世界文化上亦为一大损失，关系重大，不容忽视。” (If our nation's rare and precious treasures are to be transported across thousands of miles by land and sea to Britain without being insured, then should any mishap occur, it would not only mean the loss of national treasures that embody our ancestral heritage and national spirit, but also a major loss to world culture, which is an issue of great significance that must not be overlooked.) *Ta Kung Pao*, January 20, 1935, 3.

496 Ma Shuhua 马树华, “Zhonghua minguo zhengfu de wenwu baohu” 中华民国政府的文物保护 [Cultural heritage preservation by the government of the ROC], (Master’s dissertation, Shandong Normal University: 2000), 20-1.

Ministry of Education.⁴⁹⁷ The Executive Yuan approved and enacted the new regulations in March.⁴⁹⁸ Sending Chinese art to London for the 1935 Exhibition was a practical application of these measures.⁴⁹⁹ However, the regulations overlooked insurance and failed to establish effective mechanisms for prohibiting looting, preventing unauthorized excavation, or ensuring the proper handling of cultural objects.

The choice to forgo insurance coverage for the Chinese exhibits was both imprudent and unusual. Firstly, it carried significant risks associated with the long-distance overseas transportation and installation of these artworks. Most of the previous foreign art exhibitions at the RA were of art from Europe, and the furthest away was Persia. Among the collections were fragile porcelain and jade objects, ancient paintings, and calligraphy, all susceptible to damage such as smudging, tearing, and peeling. This was compounded by the immense monetary value and historical significance of the Chinese national treasures.



Figure 27. Template of Insurance Certificate for the 1935 Exhibition. Source: RA Archives.

497 Ibid. 23-4.

498 Ibid. 24.

499 Ibid. 46.

The RA Archives contains documents shedding light on the insurance issue for the 1935 Exhibition. I found an insurance certificate template for the 1935 Exhibition (Figure 27). This document, issued by the RA, certified that the exhibits from lenders were covered by the insurance company Lloyd's of London. It outlined the coverage details, as well as the start and end dates of the insurance policies. Furthermore, the archives held a telegram dated November 12, 1935, just two weeks before the exhibition's opening, sent from an institution in Vienna, Austria, to the RA in London. It communicated an insurance cost of 730 Austrian schillings for lending three underglaze Ming porcelain bowls from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.⁵⁰⁰ The RA swiftly agreed to the cost, urging the museum to "please send the exhibits immediately" as the opening date was soon.⁵⁰¹

All Chinese objects were meticulously photographed in Shanghai before departure to examine their condition, create catalogues and merchandise for the exhibition, and facilitate the handover between different parties. For artefacts of particular cultural significance—those bearing signatures, inscriptions, or engravings—multiple photographs from various angles were taken to capture their details comprehensively. These visual records served not only as vital tools for preservation and safeguarding but also as a bridge to the past for future generations, offering insights into the context, craftsmanship, and cultural importance of each piece. In addition to preservation, the photographs played a crucial role in education, research, and internal exchange, allowing national treasures to transcend physical and temporal boundaries. Through these images, appreciation, scholarship, and creativity were inspired, ensuring the enduring legacy of these treasures within humanity's shared heritage.

To ensure the safe return of national treasures and address the exhibition in London, the Chinese Committee documented specific details for each item. This included information such as size, condition, any damage, and its affiliation with a Chinese institution. Alongside photographs, these details were published in the illustrated catalogue produced by the Chinese. For example, items from the NPM were marked with "院 (*yuan*)," and those from the NAM with "所 (*suo*)," followed by brief descriptions. These efforts marked China's early initiatives in cultural conservation and provenance research. In contrast, the RA catalogue labelled the exhibits simply as "Chinese Government Loan," providing no details beyond the lenders' names, which left provenance research incomplete. The widespread practice of provenance checking in the West evolved after World War II, when looted artefacts were returned, and has since become a standard part of museum loan

500 Telegram from Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna to the RA, November 13, 1935, RA Archives, London; *RA Catalogue*, 161-2.

501 Telegram from the Secretary of the RA to the Director of Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, November 13, 1935, RA Archives, London.

procedures. In an email, archivist Mark Pomeroy notes that the lack of such records for the 1935 Exhibition may be because the curators of international exhibitions at the time were not RA employees, and as a result, their papers were not preserved in the archives.⁵⁰²

National Treasures on the Sea

It took nearly one month and three weeks, from June 6 to July 25, 1935, for the Chinese national treasures to be transported from Shanghai to London (Figures 28 & 29). Accompanying the artworks on board were Zhuang Shangyan from the NPM and Tang Xifen from the Ministry of Education, appointed as Chinese representatives to inspect the status of the artworks with the British. Transportation was supervised by Paul Pelliot, with the artworks being carefully transported to England under the vigilant protection of personnel from both Chinese and British authorities.⁵⁰³ At departure, the artworks were carefully packed in brocade bags and boxes in an exquisite manner for diplomatic protocol and protection purposes, then sealed in ninety-three steel chests, getting ready for their journey to London.⁵⁰⁴ They were transported by vans to the harbour:

Along the way to the harbour, there were police guards for security...The artworks were kept in the cabin storage of Suffolk, tied with thick ropes and sandwiched by thick plates so as not to move. Then the door was locked. The key was handled by Lieut. Commander I. H. Vennill, who was appointed by the captain. Both parties inspected the warehouse daily to ensure careful handling.⁵⁰⁵

The carrier used for transportation was H.M.S. Suffolk, a 630-foot-long, 9800-ton Country-class heavy cruiser of the Royal Navy. Firstly launched in 1924, H.M.S. Suffolk became the flagship of the China Station in 1934.⁵⁰⁶ Upon entering the China Station in September 1933, the cruiser embarked on a journey around China, including the Changjiang River, Hong Kong, Japan, and Southeast Asian islands.⁵⁰⁷ During its time in Hong Kong in mid-May 1935, it received the special

502 Email from Mark Pomeroy to author, June 22, 2022.

503 Gray, "The RA Exhibition of Chinese Art," 11.

504 Xingzhengyuan mishuchu zhi Beiping gugong bowuyuan lishihui han 行政院秘书处致北平故宫博物院理事会函 [Letter from the Secretariat of the Executive Yuan to the Committee of the NPM Beiping], signed by Chu Minyi, February 25, 1935, quoted in Liu Nannan, "Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia," 7.

505 "沿途警备，一路安全.....物品在库，系以巨绳，夹以厚板，使不动摇，库门封锁，钥由舰长指定 Lieut. Commander I. H. Vennill 掌管之，双方每日入内查看一次，以昭慎重。" Zhuang, "Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji," 117.

506 "HMS Suffolk. History of the cruiser HMS Suffolk, including, photographs of the ship and crew, as well as crew lists and cruise details," Battleship-Cruisers, accessed August 9, 2022, https://www.battleships-cruisers.co.uk/hms_suffolk.htm.

507 Ibid.

mission to transport Chinese artworks to London for the 1935 Exhibition, covering a daunting 11,000-mile journey.⁵⁰⁸ H.M.S. Suffolk, a ship historically involved in British colonisation in the Far East during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, now played a role in a different narrative: one of Sino-British friendship and the early history of Chinese cultural diplomacy. While China had previously been a victim of art plundering by the British military, the arrival of Chinese artworks on this ship marked a significant shift. The warship, now used to protect and transport China's national treasures, symbolised not only the beginning of a long celebration of Chinese art in Britain but, more importantly, a new chapter in Sino-British relations. This time, there was no plunder, no war, only equality and cooperation.



Figure 28. Transporting the Chinese artefacts for the 1935 Exhibition in Shanghai, June 1935. Source: NPM Beijing Collection.

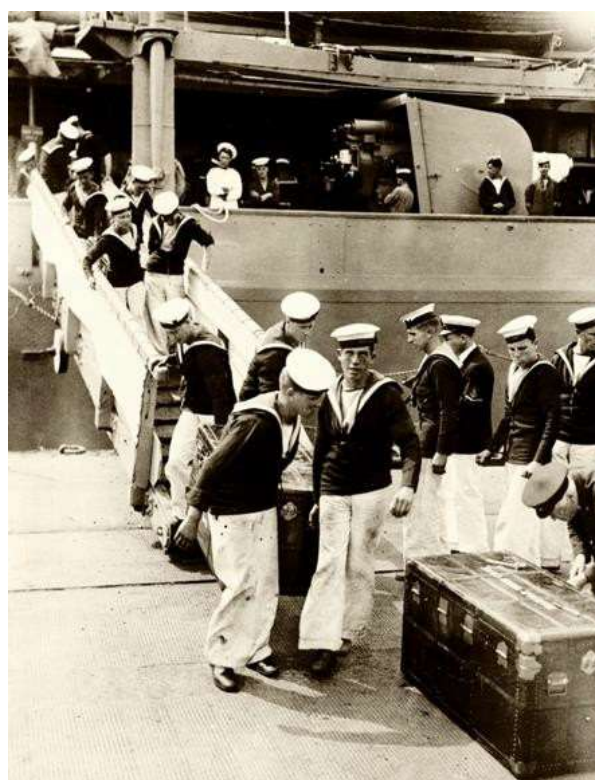


Figure 29. Unloading the Chinese artefacts for the 1935 Exhibition at Portsmouth Harbour, July 1935. Source: RA Archives.

The 1935 Exhibition was a carefully and majestically staged event that celebrated internationalist cooperation.⁵⁰⁹ The transportation process, stretching from one end of the continent to the other, and

508 Zhuang, "Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji," 118.

509 Scaglia, "The Aesthetics of Internationalism," 115-6.

from one major city to another, was rich with political semiotics. Every aspect of the journey, from the logistics to the symbolic gestures, reflected deeper political messages, underscoring the exhibition's larger significance in terms of ideological and diplomatic narratives. For China, the 1935 Exhibition was an opportunity for the KMT-ruled Chinese government to merge itself on the international stage and at the same time strengthen its control in the country. On the other hand, the British Foreign Office used the 1935 Exhibition to foster its policy in Asia.⁵¹⁰ In British discussions about its diplomacy in Asia in the early 1930s, "strong naval presence in the East" was emphasised as a necessity for the British Empire "to maintain its status as a world power."⁵¹¹ Therefore, a warship was chosen to not only protect the Chinese treasures, but also "of a conspicuous fashion."⁵¹²

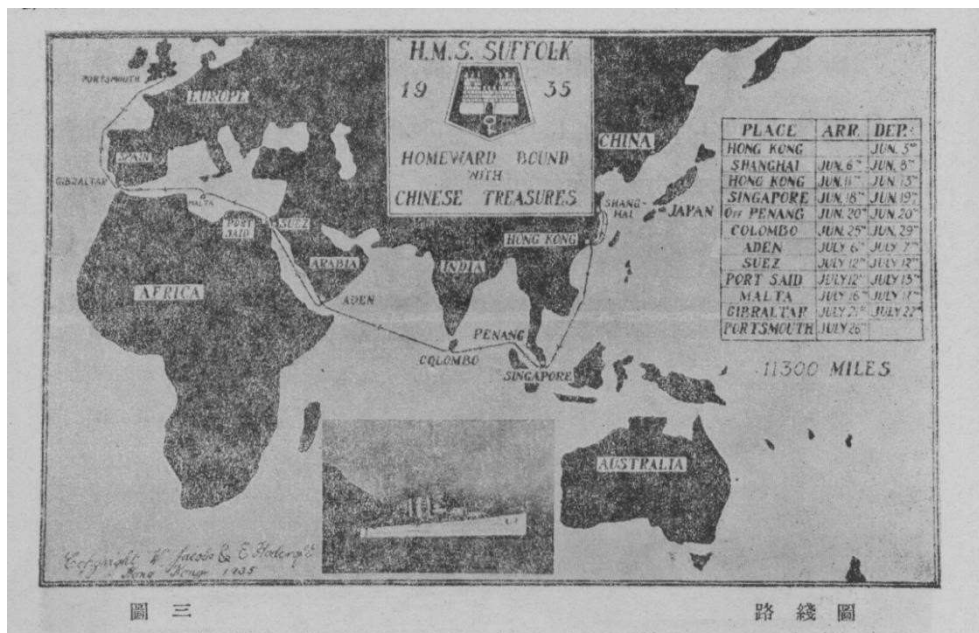


Figure 30. Route and timeline of Chinese national treasures going to London for the 1935 Exhibition. Source: *Bulletin of the NPM Beiping*, 1936, 118.

Over the course of the journey, H.M.S. Suffolk made several stops at British colonies along its way back to London (Figure 30). At each stop, the British warship carrying China's national treasures became a newsworthy event covered by the local media. For Britain, the trip was more than just a transport, it constituted a substantial maritime endeavour with the primary objective of expanding and subtly asserting Britain's enduring presence and formidable influence. Each of these stops

510 Ibid. 117; Best, “‘To Contemplate the Soul,’” 292-306.

511 Scaglia, "The Aesthetics of Internationalism," 117.

512 Ibid. 119.

symbolised British domination, as well as showing the world a symbol of its military and economic power. While aboard, the Navy adhered to strict discipline, maintained a regular schedule, and performed daily rituals of raising and lowering the national flag accompanied by the military anthem.⁵¹³ They showcased the British national image to their Chinese colleagues on board and people along the route, while also fostering internal cohesion.

China seized the opportunity to present its image to the world. As reflected in earlier chapters, the country carefully selected artworks that represented the highest levels of Chinese craftsmanship, highlighting the richness and sophistication of its cultural traditions. What is more, to manage the collection and assist with the exhibition setup, the NPM appointed four curators—Na Zhiliang, Lu Zhenlun, Niu Deming (牛德明), and Song Jilong (宋际隆)—who travelled to Britain on another ship shortly afterwards. They, averaging around thirty years of age, were equipped with modern education and armed with extensive knowledge. Their image embodied the spirit of “youthful China (*shaonian Zhongguo* 少年中国)” proposed by Liang Qichao (梁启超, 1873-1929) at the turn of the century, that envisioned a revitalised, dynamic, and reform-oriented nation to replace the “old, big empire (*laoda diguo* 老大帝国).⁵¹⁴ During this transcontinental journey, the young travellers had the opportunity to tour around different countries. Wherever they went, they immersed themselves in local societies, learned about local customs, and networked with local Chinese communities.

In Fu Zhenlun’s travelogue, one can see his keen interest in overseas Chinese and matters related to Chinese culture abroad. His observations reflect an appreciation for the celebrations of Chinese people venturing abroad and the growing strength of the Chinese nation. This also reflected that in the era of “maritime China” and against the backdrop of the early stage of globalisation, the Chinese searching for national identity, making efforts toward national strengthening, and the formation of international connections. During his visit to Singapore, Fu admired the modern urban development, the success of Chinese people in local industries, and the deep influence of Chinese culture on society. He noted how, despite lacking government support and facing discrimination, the Chinese had succeeded through individual effort and enterprise. Fu also observed that Chinese pioneers had established a presence in the region long before Western colonists, leaving a lasting impact on its development. Reflecting on these achievements, Fu remarked:

Our people’s spirit is not only one of perseverance and decisiveness, simplicity and diligence, but also one that conquers nature and adapts to the environment...These

513 Zhuang, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji,” 120-1.

514 Liang Qichao 梁启超, “Shaonian Zhongguo shuo” 少年中国说 [On young China], in *Yinbingshi heji* 饮冰室合集 [Collected works from the Ice-Drinker’s Studio] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 7.

inherent virtues should be carried forward, glorified, and preserved forever without change.⁵¹⁵

In this context, it is not difficult to imagine that as Fu and his colleagues drifted across the vast ocean, watching the rising red sun cast its brilliant light, their hearts stirred with the same ambitious vision evoked in Liang Qichao's words: "The red sun rises—its path shines brightly. The river bursts forth from its hidden depths—rushing vast and unbounded"—a vision of youthful hope flowing endlessly into the open sea of national revitalisation and self-determination.⁵¹⁶

The Chinese national treasures arrived in Portsmouth to a warm reception from locals and the media. Zhuang Shangyan's report captured the lively atmosphere of the day, with thousands gathered to greet the cruiser. Key figures included Counsellor Chen Weicheng from the Chinese Embassy, Sir Steven Gaselee from the British Foreign Office, and Walter Lamb from the RA. After lunch, the cases of Chinese art were carefully unloaded by British soldiers and transferred to four vans, which then headed towards the city centre of London.⁵¹⁷ For protection purposes, the British government waived customs inspections, opting for joint inspections with Chinese representatives at the exhibition venue. Steel seals were affixed to the cases as official proof.⁵¹⁸ Escorted by Zhuang, Tang, and two British police officers, the Chinese art finally reached Burlington House in the early afternoon.⁵¹⁹ Zhuang and Lamb worked together to oversee the handover (Figure 31). Then, the cases were stored in Burlington House's warehouse "under a close guard," awaiting unpacking by both committees in September.⁵²⁰

The unpacking took place from September 17 to 26, 1935, as a collaborative effort between Chinese and British staff (Figure 32). The items were "handed over to the RA for safekeeping, and the boxes were returned to their original cases," with a detailed record being kept, noting the number of boxes opened each day and the signatures of those present.⁵²¹ Spendlove was responsible for tallying the receipts.⁵²² Scholars, officials, collectors, and museum staff from both countries worked together to unpack the boxes, examine art pieces, verify photographs, and meticulously document every aspect

515 “吾族精神不特弘毅果决，俭朴勤劳，且能战胜自然，适应环境……此种固有美德，当发挥光大，永保勿替。”“Fu Zhenlun Travelogue 2,” *Zijincheng* 2 (2004): 152.

516 “红日初升，其道大光。河出伏流，一泻汪洋。”Liang, “Shaonian Zhongguo shuo”, 12.

517 Zhuang, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji,” 121-2.

518 Letter from the British Committee to Chinese Ambassador, June 8, 1934, RA Archives, London.

519 Zhuang, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji,” 122.

520 “Art Cargo in Warship. Priceless Exhibition from China,” *Daily Sketch*, July 22, 1935.

521 “Fu Zhenlun Travelogue 4,” *Zijincheng* 4 (2004): 150.

522 Zhuang, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji,” 122.

of the process.⁵²³ This significant moment, marked by the opening of heavy iron boxes, symbolised the unveiling of millennia of rich Chinese culture and represented a heartfelt gesture of goodwill from China to Britain. It also marked the commencement of a new chapter in international cooperation between the two nations.



Figure 31. Chinese art arriving at Burlington House. Zhuang Shangyan (standing left) and Walter Lamb (standing right) supervised the handover. Source: RA Archives.

523 Beiping gugong bowuyuan zhi gaiyuan lishihui gonghan 北平故宫博物院致该院理事会公函 [Official letter from the NPM Beiping to its committee], signed by Ma Heng, November 1, 1935, quoted in Liu Nannan, "Beiping gugong bowuyuan canjia," 13-4.



Figure 32. Unpacking the Chinese art. From left: Walter Lamb; Zhuang Shangyan, F. T. Cheng, Percival David, Chen Weicheng, Tang Xifen, Fu Zhenlun. Source: RA Archives.



Figure 33. George Spendlove and F. T. Cheng examining bronzes. Source: RA Archives.

Jiang Jiehong observes that the distinction between Chinese and Western ways to artistic appreciation hinges on the profound intimacy that Chinese have with their art, a practice

characterised by “handling and playing (*bawan* 把玩).”⁵²⁴ Such a traditional, interactive, and intimate ritual for art appreciation from China forges a unique bond between the appreciator and the artwork and a form of communication that is reserved exclusively within circles of friends, instead of mere observation (Figure 33). Preparing for the 1935 Exhibition in such a manner that highlighted the traditional Chinese approach to artistic appreciation and the exclusivity and privilege inherent in it demonstrates the following key points. First, the pursuit of Chinese art was still a captivating endeavour within the circles of intellectuals and urban bourgeoisie for both China and Britain. Committee members from both China and Britain together engaged in this intimate examination of Chinese art, effectively selecting masterpieces in such *bawan* manners, which were originally limited to friends, for a collaborative international public cultural event. It could be seen as mutual recognition and admiration between the two countries. What they handled were not just artworks; they were national treasures from China, dispatched across oceans to London, imbued with diplomatic and cultural significance that deepened the bonds between these two nations.

The transportation of Chinese artworks by British warships symbolised the end of Western exploitation and plunder of China. The act of opening the boxes containing these national treasures, with experts from both countries involved, marked a new chapter in Sino-British relations. This exhibition, which embodied Internationalism and celebrated peace and cooperation, positioned China’s national art as a political symbol within the framework of a new Chinese cultural diplomacy. It sought to project a refreshed image of China to the world. Ultimately, by showcasing a rich and venerable cultural heritage, the exhibition demonstrated that China’s emerging modern identity would be rooted in an enlightened civilisation, “not made with the bayonet, but...founded upon peace, virtue, and affection.”⁵²⁵

Loss and Return of Chinese Art in the 2019 Exhibition

In 2019, China’s cultural heritage repatriation efforts reached a historic peak, marked by the return of artefacts from countries such as the United States, Italy, and Japan.⁵²⁶ These artefacts ranged from

524 Jiehong, “Diyici yuanyzheng”, 102-03.

525 F. T. Cheng, *East & West: Episodes in a Sixty Years’ Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), 219.

526 Qian Yihui 钱益汇, Xie Yuting 谢雨婷, and Wang Liduo 王立铎, “2019-2020 nian Zhongguo bowuguan fazhan xianzhuang, wenti ji duice fenxi” 2019-2020 年中国博物馆发展现状、问题及对策分析 [Analysis of the current situation, issues, and countermeasures for museum development in China (2019–2020)], in *Bowuguan lanpishu: Zhongguo bowuguan fazhan baogao 2019–2020* 博物馆蓝皮书：中国博物馆发展报告 2019-2020 [Museum blue book: report on the museum development in China 2019-2020], ed. Qian Yihui (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2021), 24.

archaeological relics and ancient bronze vessels to mural fragments, mid-imperial tomb figures, and significant historical correspondences related to the early preservation of Chinese cultural heritage. These repatriations were made during Xi Jinping's state visits and were represented as a part of broader diplomatic achievements. Xi's emphasis on safeguarding a nation's civilisation highlights the cultural and political dimensions of these efforts, presenting China as a responsible and rising global power in an era of internationalism.

Despite its prominence, the 2019 Exhibition, with limited documentation on the logistics of transporting exhibits or mobilising personnel, appeared to emerge suddenly. To address this gap, this chapter adopts a broader historical lens, tracing the journeys of the artefacts selected for the exhibition—from their initial removal from China during the traumatic “Century of Humiliation,” marked by widespread looting and the dispersal of Chinese art, to their eventual return. For China, they represent more than the recovery of cultural heritage; they embody a strong state-led assertion of national identity, a deeply politicised endeavour symbolising the nation's strength and its elevated status in international diplomacy. In the global discourse, repatriation is closely tied to the ongoing discussion and debates over the legitimacy of universal museums and the proper approaches to cultural heritage preservation.⁵²⁷ The growing trend in recent years of returning artefacts from Western countries to former colonies is also seen as part of the decolonisation process. The act of repatriation is considered an act of “righting wrongs,” undertaken despite inherent difficulties and challenges.⁵²⁸ China has played an active role in advocating for this process, positioning itself as both a former victim of cultural loss and a current rising cultural power.

Chinese Cultural Heritage Loss in “Century of Humiliation”

According to UNESCO statistics, over 1.6 million cultural objects from China are estimated to be housed in two hundred museums across forty-seven countries, with millions more held in private collections.⁵²⁹ The identification and tracing of these objects are challenged by their sheer volume, complex dispersal, ambiguous ownership, lack of information transparency, and the urgently underdeveloped state of provenance research. Some of the objects may only come to light again

527 Magnus Fiskesjö, “Global Repatriation and ‘Universal’ Museums,” *Anthropology News* (March 2010): 10, 12.

528 Julia Willén, “Do Objects Have A Home? Repatriation Discourses from A Critical Perspective” (Master's dissertation, University of Gothenburg, 2011).

529 UNESCO, *The Fight against the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Objects. The 1970 Convention: Past and Future. Information Kit* (Paris: UNESCO, 2013), 3; Ling Ji, “The Two Zodiacs: Possible Methods for Returning Lost Relics to China,” *Art, Antiquity and Law* 14 (2009): 168.

when they reappear at auctions or sales. Many of these Chinese artefacts were largely removed from their original locations during the period referred to as the “Century of Humiliation”, driven by factors such as wars, looting, cultural exploitation, excavation, smuggling, illicit trade, and deliberate destruction.⁵³⁰ Figures involved in this process included foreign soldiers, officials, missionaries, merchants, scholars, explorers, etc. It also included some Chinese officials and civilians who, driven by opportunism or economic hardship, sold or transferred these invaluable cultural relics abroad. The vast quantity of Chinese art provides immense aesthetic and academic value to the world, while also raising important legal and ethical questions.

The loss of Chinese cultural relics is closely related to the social turmoil within China and the inequities of the international order at the time. In the context of colonialism, the discovery, circulation, and trade of these artworks promoted the recognition and popularity of Chinese art in the global market. Many of these Chinese relics, along with artefacts from other non-Western countries such as Egypt, the Middle East, and African nations, were collected by Western museums. They were incorporated as part of the “integrity” of “universal museums,” which granted them Western historical contexts and academic value. These museums claimed to collect for “the sake of all humankind,” yet, in reality, they underscored and reinforced the desired image of Western progress and superiority.⁵³¹ The excavation and interest in Chinese artefacts by Westerners also spurred the development of indigenous Chinese archaeology, driven by their quest to uncover “the origin of the Chinese race.”⁵³² However, the activities of prominent Western archaeologists and explorers in China, such as Aurel Stein (1862-1943) and Paul Pelliot, along with their successors in Dunhuang, cannot mask the ethical controversies sparked by the removal of cultural treasures from their original locations. The loss of cultural heritage involves not only the physical relocation of objects but also the erosion of cultural identity, historical value, and social memory. It is not only a loss of history but also an affront to the dignity of nations in a disadvantaged position at the time. The trauma was both immediate and enduring, leaving an impact on the historical narrative and challenging the ethical principles and legal frameworks for cultural heritage protection in the local and international community. As these cultural relics were dispersed, the loss of these relics reveals historical issues, how to balance global cultural exchange with historical justice, and how to ensure the ethical return and protection of cultural heritage, has become a pressing issue for scholars and governments today.

530 For a brief history of cultural heritage loss in China by different means, see Zuozhen Liu, *The Case for Repatriating China's Cultural Objects*, 1–22.

531 Fiskesjö, “Global Repatriation,” 10.

532 Liu Chao, “Kaogu faxian yu minzu rentong,” 24.

War loots during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exemplified by the plundering of Yuanmingyuan by Anglo-Franco troops during the Second Opium War and the occupation of Beijing by the Eight-Nation Alliance during the Boxer Rebellion, resulted in the extensive destruction of Chinese cultural heritage and the displacement of countless artefacts.⁵³³ The events did not only result in the physical removal of heritage, but also symbolised the broader subjugation of the country by foreign powers. This devastating act not only obliterated a symbol of imperial sophistication but also marked the beginning of a painful legacy of cultural loss. This loss reflected a profound imbalance of power between nations, as colonial powers redefined the significance of looted artefacts, stripping them of their original narratives and embedding them within a Western-centric framework of cultural value.

The Yuanmingyuan was plundered, desecrated, and ultimately burned in October 1860. The Western Mansions (*xiyanglou* 西洋楼) of the imperial summer garden hold an important place in the historical narrative of the looting, despite the fact that, during its existence, it did not receive significant attention from the Qing emperors, including Qianlong.⁵³⁴ Typically used to receive foreign guests, the Western Mansions, designed by the Italian Lang Shining and French missionary Michel Benoist (Jiang Youren 蒋友仁, 1715–1774), featured European architectural styles with baroque ornaments. They reflected the Qing emperor's interest in Western culture, a Sinocentric worldview, and a desire to showcase national power and global mastery (Figure 34).⁵³⁵ During the looting, the imperial gardens suffered significant destruction. The water-clock fountain in the courtyard, along with other marble constructions, was reduced to rubble, with ruins scattered across the grounds. The twelve Chinese zodiac heads, originally designed as decorative elements and water spouts for the fountain, were cut off and removed from the site. As the twelve pieces were dispersed and their whereabouts became uncertain, they emerged as potent symbols of cultural loss and imperial aggression.

533 Ruida Chen, "Healing the Past: Recovery of Chinese Cultural Objects Lost During the Colonial Era," *Santander Art and Culture Law Review* 2, no. 8 (2022): 210-1.

534 Wang Kaixi, "Yuanmingyuan Changchunyuan Xiyanglou jianzhu shi qingdai zhongxi wenhua jiaoliu de chanwu ma?" 圆明园长春园西洋楼建筑是清代中西文化交流的产物吗? [Are the Western Mansions of Changchunyuan in the Yuanmingyuan the product of the Qing Dynasty Chinese and Western cultural exchanges?], *Xuzhou gongcheng xueyuan xuebao* 徐州工程学院学报 34, no. 4 (2019): 23-5.

535 Ibid. 22-3.

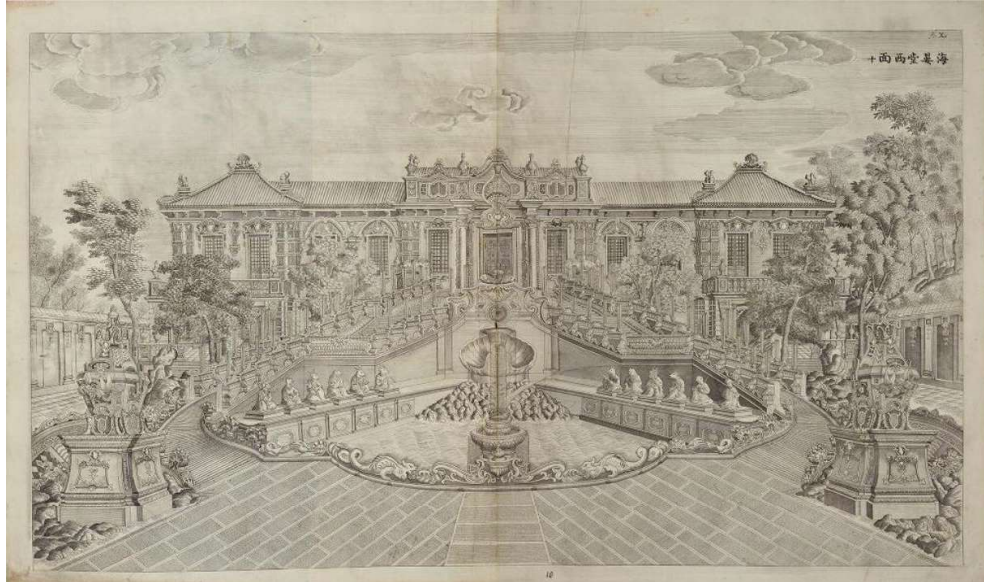


Figure 34. Western façade of Hall of Ocean Pleasure (*Haiyantang* 海晏堂) of the Western Mansions. Copperplate engravings by Yi Lantai (伊兰泰), 1781-87. Source: Manchester Digital Collections.

The objects from Yuanmingyuan were either sold locally or taken abroad to fulfil royal palaces, museums, or private collections.⁵³⁶ The French loot, for instance, after being temporarily displayed at the Tuileries Palace from February to April 1861, was divided into two main collections. The military items were stored at the Musée d'Artillerie (part of today's Musée de l'Armée), while the rest, predominantly decorative arts, were amassed by Empress Eugénie of France (1826-1920) in her salon at the Château de Fontainebleau. These objects, mingled with diplomatic gifts and collections from other Asian countries, eventually transformed the empress' salon into the Musée Chinois, an additional public attraction at the Fontainebleau.⁵³⁷ The arrangement of the former empress' private space in the French summer palace reflected the enduring chinoiserie taste in Europe, and through a feminised, orientalist lens, it added a new layer of political and cultural prestige to the objects, symbolising the grandeur of the French Second Empire.

The geographical shift of the Yuanmingyuan underlies structural similarities in court societies and art systems between these two powers, allowing for the transformation of exotic cultural elements into meaningful constructs within each local context.⁵³⁸ Using Yuanmingyuan and Versailles as a parallel pair due to their similarly intricate architectural and decorative designs, embodiment of monarchic ideologies, and visual articulation of imperial authority, Greg M. Thomas argues that the mutual influence between these two sites reflects both the phenomenon of “chinoiserie” in the West

⁵³⁶ Tythacott, “Trophies of War,” 469-88; Howald and Saint-Raymond, “Tracking Dispersal,” 1-23.

⁵³⁷ Thomas, “The Looting of Yuanming Yuan,” 38, 41.

⁵³⁸ Thomas, “Yuanming Yuan/Versailles,” 115.

and what he terms “européennerie”—the Western taste expressed in Chinese architecture.⁵³⁹ This rhetorical pairing creates an ironic reversal of chinoiserie within the Chinese context. The dynamic exchange went beyond mere admiration of foreign aesthetics, with both cultures appropriating elements from each other. However, with the shift of these objects from Beijing to European museums and private collections, their representation underwent a profound transformation. Once symbols of Oriental imperial power, these artefacts were reframed within Eurocentric museological and ethnographical contexts. This re-contextualisation often celebrated Western conquest and dominance, portraying China as a defeated and inferior nation while glorifying the power of colonial aggression. This exchange, seemingly driven by curiosity, was realised through unequal and illegitimate means, as it was rooted in imperial conquest and colonial domination. Yuanmingyuan in Chinese history is not merely a historical footnote; it remains a powerful emblem of the exploitation and forced redefinition of cultural narratives under colonialism.

The uprooted fate of the Yuanmingyuan highlights the dilemma of the lack of legal protection and the ambiguous resolution of cultural heritage mistreatment during the colonial era, prior to the publication of the Hague Convention in 1899.⁵⁴⁰ As a result, calls for the repatriation and restitution of looted materials from this period are often framed as “moral rather than legal claims,” much like the appeals made by many former colonies for the return of looted art from their former colonizers. In this context, such objects have become potent symbols of national self-determination and resistance against external intervention.⁵⁴¹ Behind the high-profile campaigns for the nationalisation, restoration of the palace, and repatriation of its lost artefacts lies China’s desire to assert its growing economic, political, and cultural power both domestically and internationally. As the most iconic representation of the “Century of Humiliation,” the restoration, reconstruction, reproduction, and commercialisation of Yuanmingyuan reflect its evolving and complex role as a site of cultural historical reinterpretation. Within the currents of modern consumerism and globalisation, the Disneyisation of this ruined imperial garden has transformed it into a complex cultural space—one that functions simultaneously as a locus of patriotic sentiment, a symbol of resistance and trauma, and a commodified site that is reconstructed, replicated, and consumed.⁵⁴²

539 Ibid.

540 Derek Gillman, “The Old Summer Place and the Rhetoric of National Treasures,” *Santander Art and Culture Law Review* 2, no. 5 (2019): 237.

541 Ibid.

542 Erik Ringmar observes the connections between the Yuanmingyuan—understood as a dislocated, highly idealised, ideologically charged, and subjectivised morphological structure of Qing sovereignty—and Disneyland in the United States. Although brief, the last part of his article reflects on the significance of the current state of the imperial gardens within the historical narratives of Communist China, and how their replication in Zhuhai (珠海), Guangdong province, and Dongyang (东阳), Zhejiang province for entertainment and media purposes functions as a site offering “ontological reassurance” to the people. Furthermore, the contemporary development of the

In the colonial context, the loss of cultural artefacts reflects an imbalance of power between nations, where knowledge production and cultural discourse were dominated by colonial powers. This imbalance involved not only the material plundering of artefacts but also the redefinition of their cultural significance and the stripping away of their original narratives. In the postcolonial context, reflections on this history involve critiquing and deconstructing these imbalanced relationships, emphasising not only the pursuit of restitution and cultural justice but also the restoration of agency to the cultures from which these artefacts were taken. Repatriating looted artefacts is a crucial step in reassigning their original cultural significance and reclaiming ownership over the narratives they embody. Moreover, postcolonial discussions challenge Western-dominated systems of knowledge production, seeking to uncover hidden power structures and promote a more equitable and diverse framework for cultural exchange and understanding.

The search for the Yuanmingyuan began in the early twentieth century, initially driven by individual efforts, small groups, academic interest, or patriotic sentiment among Chinese intellectuals. Cheng Yansheng (程演生, 1888-1955) and Teng Gu (滕固, 1901-1941) played key roles in this endeavour. Through their academic activities and network, Cheng located and published the historical imperial images from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, while Teng uncovered photographs of the ruins taken by Ernst Ohlmer (1847-1927) in German archives, contributing to the preservation and scholarly study of its history.⁵⁴³ With the public exhibition of the fragments and the erection of a monument commemorating the Beijing March 18 Massacre (*sanyiba can'an* 三一八惨案), the Yuanmingyuan was further strengthened as a site of nationalism and patriotism.⁵⁴⁴ The specificity of the Yuanmingyuan in China's historical narrative lies in its dual significance: it serves both as a display of ancient history and as a testament to the painful legacy of imperialism in modern times.

Yuanmingyuan, along with its semiotic transformation, exemplifies the logic of Disneyisation. In both the ruins and their replicas, the historical site is reimagined as a consumable attraction, blending spectacle, entertainment, and nostalgia. This process flattens historical complexity into marketable experiences, turning national memory into performative and commodified heritage. Erik Ringmar, "Imperial Vertigo and the Themed Experience: Yuanmingyuan and Disneyland Compared," *Human Geographies* 7, no. 1 (2013): 5-19; Alan Bryman, "Disneyization," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, eds. George Ritzer, Chris Rojek, and J. Michael Ryan. Wiley Online Library, accessed September 9, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosd075>.

543 Chen. Shiqiang 陈世强, "Teng Gu yu Yuanmingyuan lishi tuxiang—'Yuanmingyuan oushi gongdian yiji' dui jianzhu jiaohu yingxiang de xueshu kaocha" 滕固与圆明园历史图像——《圆明园欧式宫殿遗迹》对建筑交互影像的学术考察 [Teng Gu and the historical images of Yuanmingyuan Garden: An academic investigation of the interactive influence of *The Remains of the European Palaces in Yuanmingyuan Garden* on architecture], *Meishu yu sheji* 美术与设计 4 (2021): 8-10.

544 Liu, Zhonghua 刘仲华. "Minguo shiqi Yuanmingyuan de chenfu jiqi jiazhi chonggou" 民国时期圆明园的沉浮及其价值重构 [The rise and fall of Yuanmingyuan during the ROC period and its value reconstruction], *Anhui shixue* 3 (2022): 55.

Chinese Cultural Heritage Repatriation and Its Importance in a Global Discourse

The repatriation of the Yuanmingyuan began in 2000 when the bronze heads of ox, tiger and monkey surfaced at auctions in Hong Kong. The Chinese state-owned China Poly Group (*baoli jituan* 保利集团), under the commission of the Chinese government, pursued them at significant cost.⁵⁴⁵ However, it was the 2009 appearance of the heads of rat and rabbit from the Yves Saint Laurent Collection at Christie's Paris that elevated the Chinese public interest and engagement to unprecedented levels. This occurred at a critical moment—one year after the successful Beijing Olympics and one year before the Shanghai Expo—when national pride and confidence were at a peak. The auction's association with a luxury designer and the seemingly righteous yet controversial words by “Chinese patriotic” buyers, combined with the Chinese government's consistent emphasis on the return of cultural relics, further amplified the public discourse surrounding the event.⁵⁴⁶

Despite their symbolic resonance, some experts in Chinese ancient architecture argued that the zodiac heads' artistic significance was relatively modest, with their importance lying more in their political symbolism as “witnesses of national humiliation.”⁵⁴⁷ The case of the Yuanmingyuan bronze heads exemplifies how the return of looted artefacts is “a symbolic issue with deep emotional resonance and political implications.”⁵⁴⁸ It carries a three-fold meaning that transcends time and intrigues among Chinese public: pride in ancient Chinese civilisation, shame over historical abuses, and a sense of superiority in contemporary achievements. In the Chinese official historical narrative, the “Century of Humiliation” is often interpreted as a watershed. The cultural relics that were lost and returned materialised this period, bridging time and geography to connect the past with the present, China with foreign countries. They have also become an important medium for the construction of cultural identity in the post-colonial context.

Repatriation also reflects evolving attitudes toward heritage and its role in cultural diplomacy. The case of the Yuanmingyuan bronzes illustrates a broader trend where repatriation is not merely about the return of physical objects but also about the symbolic reclamation of cultural identity. The

545 Richard Kraus, “When Legitimacy Resides in Beautiful Objects,” in *State and Society in Twenty-first Century China: Crisis, Contention and Legitimation*, eds. Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 199-200.

546 Kraus, “The Repatriation of Plundered Chinese Art,” 837-8.

547 “Wenwu zhuanjia: Yuanmingyuan shoushou juefei guobao, shi guochide jianzheng” 文物专家：圆明园兽首绝非国宝，是国耻的见证 [Cultural heritage experts: Yuanmingyuan zodiac heads are not national treasures, but witnesses of national humiliation], China News, November 21, 2008, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/news/2008/11-21/1457719.shtml>.

548 Kraus, “The Repatriation of Plundered Chinese Art,” 837.

Chinese government's efforts via different methods demonstrates its commitment to this cause. The development of these actions aligns with the broader international movement for provenance research and the restitution of looted artefacts, which gained momentum in the latter half of the twentieth century.

China's pursuit of cultural relics is supported by both domestic laws and international agreements. Domestically, the Cultural Relics Protection Law, first passed in 1984 and amended in 2003, provides a legal framework for protecting and reclaiming cultural heritage. The NCHA oversees the protection of cultural relic sites and manages the repatriation of artefacts. The achievement is also attributed to the government's active engagement in international conventions, including the 1970 UNESCO Convention and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention, as well as bilateral agreements with foreign countries.⁵⁴⁹ These efforts reflect China's commitment to combating illicit trafficking and reclaiming lost cultural property. According to Xinhua, over 150,000 pieces of Chinese cultural relics have been repatriated in around 300 batches.⁵⁵⁰ High-profile successes are reported and celebrated in the media as demonstrations of the effectiveness of these efforts. More importantly, they affirm cultural repatriation as a state-led endeavour, while the discourse of "national treasures going home" portrays the PRC as the legitimate owner of these objects.

Law scholar Yu Meng studied the evolution of China's cultural repatriation efforts from 1949 to 2017, highlighting a shift from a single-channel approach to a more multifaceted one. This evolution occurred despite variations in the four primary methods of repatriation: donation, purchase, international lawsuits, and international joint law enforcement.⁵⁵¹ Initially, China's cultural repatriation efforts were driven by individuals or small groups motivated by patriotism and the determination to restore national treasures. Over time, this transformed into a national-led project, supported by international individuals and organisations, in the call of "international friendship" and "universal love for Chinese culture." The transition from the "Hong Kong Secret Acquisition Group" to a well-built legal system addressing cultural heritage protection and management marks a significant evolution in China's approach to its heritage policy and cultural governance. This shift also mirrored the ambitions of restoring past glories, which aligns with the vision of the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation.

549 UNESCO, *National Report on the Implementation of the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property: China* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011).

550 Li Xia, "Exhibition Opens to Showcase China's Retrieved Cultural Relics," Xinhua Net, September 17, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/17/c_138398678.htm.

551 Yu Meng, "Woguo haiwai liushi wenwu," 109-10,

However, China's strong stance on cultural repatriation has also sparked criticism from various perspectives. For example, James Cuno has opposed China's efforts to repatriate war-looted art and combat art smuggling, arguing that cultural repatriation in China is more about maintaining state nationalism than genuinely preserving and protecting cultural heritage.⁵⁵² He criticises the "nationalist retentionist" policies of modern states, which base their claims to cultural artefacts solely on the geographical coincidence of the artefacts' origin within current state boundaries, such as the claim to objects that once belonged to diverse peoples now considered part of Chinese territory.⁵⁵³

Cuno also questions the role of Chinese museums in promoting ethical practices, despite the belief among Chinese scholars in the importance of valid titles and due diligence in cultural preservation.⁵⁵⁴ Specifically, he refers to the controversial establishment of the state-owned Poly Museum of Art and its connections to questionable funding sources, viewing China's broader cultural repatriation efforts within the context of its ethnic minority policies, which have drawn international criticism.⁵⁵⁵ Although Cuno does not delve deeply into these issues, the underlying critique can be inferred from his research. Cuno suggests that the return of cultural objects should only be meaningful if certain conditions are met, such as when the object is central to the cultural or religious life of a community. In these cases, there is a human rationale for the object's return to its rightful place within its original community..⁵⁵⁶

From a global perspective, the repatriation of cultural relics is part of a movement toward cultural justice and decolonisation, which has gained increasing significance in recent years. For countries that have historically appropriated cultural objects from other countries, returning culturally significant artefacts offers an opportunity to enhance their international image and demonstrate a commitment to addressing their historical wrongs, even though sometimes the measures are merely symbolic. As a manifestation of cultural justice and museum decolonisation, the Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage (*Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain*) was completed by Senegalese scholar Felwine Sarr and French art historian Bénédicte Savoy in 2018 at the request of French President Emmanuel Macron. This report sheds light on the sad reality that ninety percent of African artefacts are held outside Africa, primarily in large museums in

552 Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?*, xxxii.

553 Ibid. 93.

554 Yu Meng, "Woguo haiwai liushi wenwu," 120-1.

555 Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?*, 95-103.

556 Cuno, *Whose Culture?*, 84.

Europe.⁵⁵⁷ In response, the French government agreed in December 2019 to return twenty-six looted works of art from Benin, with the commitment to do so by 2021, marking a significant step in the decolonisation of cultural heritage.⁵⁵⁸ Furthermore, this initiative is not limited to France; other countries have also taken steps to return looted cultural objects. For example, in March 2019, the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands returned ten artefacts to Indonesia and Sri Lanka, out of thousands that had been stolen.⁵⁵⁹

However, what should not be ignored is that the process of repatriation and restitution remains a complex and prolonged endeavour, involving international negotiation, legal frameworks, national power, and the balance between moral imperatives and museum policies. Moreover, the current wave of cultural repatriation, framed in the name of goodwill and cultural justice, still carries a degree of diplomatic and performative significance, considering the number of artefacts with problematic provenance that remain in foreign collections and the relatively small number that have been returned. The restitution of art looted by the Nazis during World War II further exemplifies this challenge, as investigations into the provenance of Nazi-looted art began immediately after the war and continue to this day through collaborations among governments, art institutions, civilian agencies, and private collectors.

Moreover, repatriation and restitution raise problematic discussions such as ownership, legalisation, and the debate between cultural nationalism and internationalism.⁵⁶⁰ A famous example is the Parthenon Marbles, where Greece's persistent demands for their return contrast with BM's retention. The tension lies in the dispute that the Greek classic sculpture has become "emblems of British national identity and has remained art objects allied to cultural nationalism in both Britain and Greece."⁵⁶¹ The historical and cultural context significantly influences the interpretation and representation of repatriated objects. In the West, museums such as the BM have historically framed looted artefacts as symbols of universal heritage, emphasising their educational and cultural value to global audiences. However, this perspective often clashes with the views of countries of origin, where such objects are seen as vital components of national identity and history.

557 Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*, (Paris, 2008), 61.

558 "Restitution of Twenty-six Works to the Republic of Benin," Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, accessed May 3, 2024, <https://www.quaibranly.fr/en/collections/living-collections/news/restitution-of-26-works-to-the-republic-of-benin>.

559 "Rijksmuseum to Start Talks about Stolen Art with Sri Lanka," Dutch News, March 12, 2019, <https://www.dutchnews.nl/2019/03/rijksmuseum-to-start-talks-about-stolen-art-with-sri-lanka/>.

560 Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?*.

561 Debbie Challis, "The Parthenon Sculptures: Emblems of British National Identity," *The British Art Journal* VII. no. 1 (2006): 37-39.

During a state visit to Greece in 2019, Xi Jinping expressed support for the return of the Parthenon Marbles, drawing a connection between Greece and China as former victims of cultural looting.⁵⁶² This shared experience underscores the global dimensions of repatriation and the role of cultural diplomacy in addressing historical injustices. The repatriation of Chinese cultural relics exemplifies the intersection of national pride, cultural diplomacy, and historical justice. It underscores the enduring significance of cultural heritage in shaping national identity and fostering international dialogue. As China continues to assert its global influence, the pursuit of cultural relics will remain a powerful symbol of its commitment to preserving its history and asserting its place in the modern world.

Summary

The Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition was more than a prelude to the first international journey of Chinese national treasures; it was a groundbreaking instance of China's self-led modern exhibition practices. It emphasised the collective ownership of cultural treasures, showcasing art as a symbol of the "nation" rather than merely its aesthetic value. It was a domestic affirmation of China's rich cultural heritage, modernised through public awareness and institutional frameworks, while also advancing the canonisation of Chinese artists. The London exhibition extended this mission internationally, introducing Chinese art to a global audience and asserting China's cultural identity amidst the geopolitical pressures of colonial dominance and rising nationalism.

The transportation of Chinese art to London encapsulated a delicate balance of pride and vulnerability. Sending Chinese national treasures by a warship illustrated China's limited autonomy in the shadow of imperial forces. Yet, this act subverted the warship's typical role, transforming it from a symbol of imperial might to a custodian of culture, safeguarding Chinese heritage on its journey to the international stage. It also embodied a quiet assertion of dignity and cultural pride. The debates surrounding the exhibition's legitimacy and the protective measures were part of a broader trajectory in cultural heritage preservation. This response to national crises laid the groundwork for modern museum practices and legislation, establishing a framework for safeguarding China's cultural heritage.

⁵⁶² Taylor Dafoe, "China's President Pledges His Support to Greece in Its Effort to Recover the Parthenon Marbles from the BM," Artnet, November 13, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/china-president-supports-parthenon-marbles-1702401>.

The Chinese intellectuals' concerns during the 1935 Exhibition about sending national treasures abroad were rooted in the traumatic memory of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This historical experience of cultural loss and subjugation made the idea of sending national treasures abroad fraught with anxiety. The fear was not only of physical loss but also of the erasure and recontextualization of Chinese culture in the Western environment.

Despite efforts in heritage protection during the ROC, these measures were mostly limited to artefacts that were still within the country. The state's weak power and complex domestic and international conditions hindered the effectiveness of these efforts. As a result, cultural preservation remained fragmented, lacking a unified legal framework, and could not compete with the resources and influence of Western nations, leading to the continued loss of valuable cultural relics.

Cultural heritage preservation in China began as a response to national crises, driven by cultural identity and pride, and influenced by populism.⁵⁶³ Early Chinese cultural heritage preservation developed from the "public collection (*gongcang* 公藏)" and "valuing antiquity (*chonggu* 崇古)" during the Beiyang Government, to the more institutionalised and legalised framework under the Nanjing Government.⁵⁶⁴ However, it was interrupted by the urgent "rescue (*qiangjiu* 抢救)" efforts during the Second Sino-Japanese War, along with the unavoidable destruction of cultural heritage.⁵⁶⁵ These struggles became a symbol of national unity in adversity. Therefore, with the establishment of the PRC, cultural repatriation became central to the country's post-colonial discourse, reflecting a shift towards reclaiming its historical and cultural dignity. Also, it underscores the superiority of the new regime compared to the old ones.

The 2019 Exhibition signified a transformed China, reclaiming its cultural sovereignty and directly addressing historical injustices stemming from the "Century of Humiliation," marking the decisive shift from passive cultural victimhood to active restitution. This initiative represented not only a redress of the historical flaws but also a demonstration that differs from Western museum practices. The journeys of Chinese art coming home through diverse methods underscore the country's transformation from a nation grappling with cultural crises to one actively shaping global heritage narratives, echoing its economic and state power growth.

Additionally, the 1935 journey of sending Chinese art to London highlighted a collective effort involving individuals from varied social backgrounds and nationalities. For the Chinese

⁵⁶³ Ma Shuhua, "Zhonghua minguo zhengfu de wenwu baohu," 47.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid. 4, 47.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid. 56.

participants, the event was a platform to assert China's cultural identity amidst colonial pressures. For some of them, the journey was a deeply emotional and personal endeavour, as they tried to navigate the tension between proudly showcasing China's heritage and confronting its vulnerabilities on the global stage. In contrast, the 2019 Exhibition downplayed individual contributions, emphasising a unified purpose and system under a collective framework. This shift reflects the evolving role of collective identity and centralised coordination in China's cultural heritage preservation, with the focus placed firmly on national strength and cohesive action rather than personal narratives.

To conclude this chapter, the repatriation of cultural objects is not merely a response to past injustices; it redefines China's role in the global cultural order, positioning the nation as both a custodian of ancient civilisation and an advocate for a more equitable heritage discourse. These efforts transcend individual cases, reflecting broader shifts in both national identity and international dynamics. While the 1935 International Exhibition of Chinese Art marked an early attempt to present Chinese cultural heritage internationally on China's own terms, contemporary repatriation initiatives focus on restoring historical justice and asserting sovereignty. Together, these efforts underscore a transformative journey, from showcasing cultural heritage to reclaiming it as a symbol of resilience and national dignity.

Chapter 7. Destination: Exhibiting Chinese Art

With the arrival of the artefacts, the exhibitions finally opened at their scheduled times and venues, offering a significant opportunity to reflect on the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of Chinese art exhibitions. This chapter delves into the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions, focusing on the presentation and interpretation of the Chinese artefacts to construct narratives of national identity, in order to understand how they were shaped by their respective political and cultural contexts, and the dynamics that affect them.

The 1935 Exhibition occurred during a period of modernisation and upheaval in China, as the country sought to assert its cultural identity while engaging with global narratives of art and civilisation. The exhibition aimed to present Chinese art as both unique and universal, highlighting traditional Chinese practices alongside the nation's ongoing modernisation process, while engaging with Western artistic concepts. Negotiations between the Chinese and British were not uncommon during the exhibition. Therefore, compromises needed to be made to accommodate both cultural perspectives. The most obvious one was the limited space available. While 786 items from the Chinese Government Loan were displayed, 165 items remained unexhibited.⁵⁶⁶ However, these compromises extended beyond logistical concerns. The exhibition space reflected the complexities of cultural exchange in the context of the early twentieth century, where global politics, national pride, and artistic diplomacy were closely intertwined.

The 2019 Exhibition at the NMC in Beijing, held more than eighty years later, offered a contrasting approach, deeply tied to the political and nationalistic context of modern China. Unlike the 1935 Exhibition, which sought to engage with Western audiences and highlight China's ancient artistic traditions in a global context, the 2019 exhibition placed a strong inward narrative. Via technologies and visual aids, the 2019 Exhibition utilised immersive visual strategies. The returned artefacts were framed as historical testament, nationalist embodiments, and resurgence trophies. In this instance, the display of these artefacts was highly politically charged, positioned not only as a celebration of China's historical achievements but also as a testament to the country's rising political power and cultural revival. In contrast to the 1935 Exhibition's diplomatic tone, the 2019 Exhibition was more focused on national pride and asserting China's global presence through the lens of cultural heritage.

⁵⁶⁶ Zhuang, "Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji," 124.

Staging Chinese Art in London, 1935



Figure 35. The courtyard of Burlington House in the summer of 1935, adorned with decorations for King George's Silver Jubilee, featuring the statue of Joshua Reynolds, which was erected in 1931. Source: RA Archives.

The destination of the Chinese national treasures in 1935 was the RA. This British institution, established in 1768 with the support of King George III (1738-1820), and the leadership of its first president, Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), was initially tasked with “establishing a school or academy of design for the use of students in the arts.”⁵⁶⁷ After relocating from Pall Mall to Burlington House in 1867, the RA grew into a prominent institution, playing a crucial role in shaping the British art scene by fostering artistic excellence and organising exhibitions (Figure 35).⁵⁶⁸ During William Llewellyn's presidency (1928-1938), exhibiting foreign loan art in the Winter Exhibitions gained prominence.⁵⁶⁹ These exhibitions, organised by special committees and

567 J. E. Hodgson and Fred A. Eaton, *The RA and Its Members 1768–1830* (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 11, 15.

568 Ibid. 13; “A Brief History of the RA,” RA, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/page/a-brief-history-of-the-ra>.

569 The RA's Winter Exhibition, which began in 1870, initially featured loaned Old Master works by recently deceased British artists. The tradition concluded in 1939. In contrast, the Summer Exhibition that started in 1769 continues

often politically charged, were seen as “good publicity for the countries in question,” with governments involved in one way or another.⁵⁷⁰ During the 1935 Exhibition, improvements in the modern museums management could be seen. In the RA Archives, I saw, for example, a variety of ticket prices for the exhibition. Special admissions were offered for specific groups. There was a refreshment area in the gallery, as well as city transportation, which also facilitates the visit.

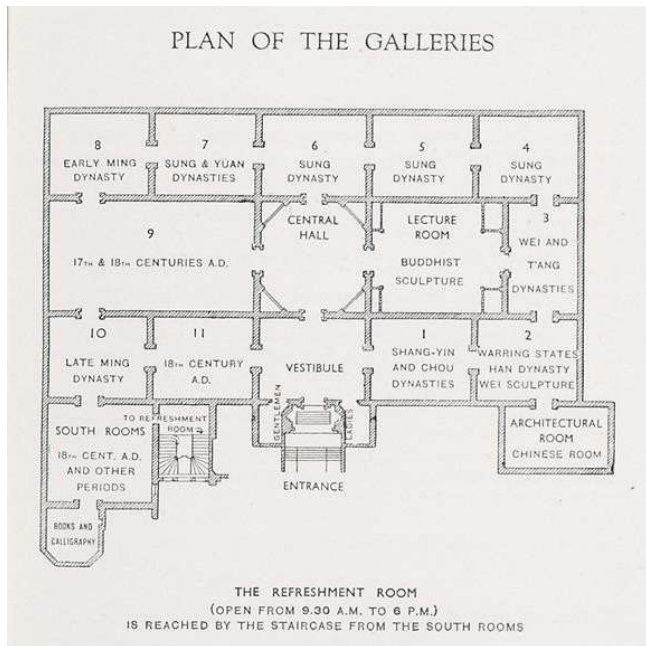


Figure 36. Plan of the 1935 Exhibition. Source: RA Catalogue, 16-17.



Figure 37. Vestibule of the 1935 Exhibition, with a view of the Buddha in the Central Hall. Source: RA Archives

The international exhibitions were a part of the broader internationalism that characterised British society during the interwar period. With the 1931 Statute of Westminster, which “seemed to promise the most sophisticated form of internationalism devised by modern man,” Britain found itself at the intersection of global transformation, cultural exchange, and political evolution.⁵⁷¹ Britain shifted towards a more inclusive and egalitarian approach to international relations, recognising nations as equal partners. The international exhibitions, therefore, were not just cultural events; they also served as a platform for Britain to express its political aspirations and project a certain national image. Considering China’s historical context at the time, holding an international exhibition of Chinese art at the RA in 1935 was more than an opportunity to showcase rich oriental cultural

annually to nowadays. Hutchison, *The History of the RA*, 169.

⁵⁷⁰ Fenton, *School of Genius*, 257.

⁵⁷¹ John Hayes, “Preface,” in *London in the Thirties*, by Alice Prochaska (London: London Museum, 1973), 3.

heritage. It was also a significant gesture within the evolving framework of global diplomacy and cultural exchange, reflecting the ambitions and interests of both nations.

The exhibition was finally opened on November 28, 1935. To highlight the collaborative nature of the 1935 Exhibition between Britain and China, a banner featuring the exhibition title in both English and Chinese, alongside the flags of the two nations, adorned the entrance of Burlington House.⁵⁷² Inside, the exhibition featured 3,080 exhibits from 246 private and public collections across fifteen countries, displayed in sixteen rooms under one roof (Figure 36). Surrounding the Central Hall, the galleries were arranged counterclockwise in chronological order, with three additional galleries dedicated to Buddhist art, books, calligraphy, and furniture. In each gallery, artefacts were arranged according to different categories, with objects of substantial artistic or historical importance and considerable size being prominently positioned in the centre. Visitors first entered through an elegant vestibule adorned with a structure crafted from Firth-Vickers stainless steel work of “European taste,” a legacy of the RA’s 1934 British Art Exhibition (Figure 37).⁵⁷³ Beyond this, catalogue-selling stands marked the transition point where visitors entered a world of Chinese art, immersing themselves in the exhibition’s carefully curated displays.

Presenting Internationalism of Chinese Art

As soon as visitors entered the 1935 Exhibition, the first thing that caught their eye was the largest and most striking object in the whole exhibition—a six-meter-tall Amitabha Buddha statue, crafted from marble in the sixth century (Figure 38). Originally located in a temple in Hebei province, the statue represents a transitional phase from Gandhara Buddhist sculptures, blending Indian stylistic influences with the emerging characteristics of early Chinese Buddhist art. With its elongated figure, flowing robes, rounded face, and downcast eyes, the statue vividly showcased classical Chinese aesthetics to all visitors. To mount this giant statue, special measures were taken, including the use of scaffolding (Figure 39). This process attracted significant media attention due to the striking contrast in size between the workers and the monumental statue.⁵⁷⁴ When moved to Beijing from its original location, the statue was cut into three pieces at the torso.⁵⁷⁵

572 Fu Zhenlun, “Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui canguan ji,” 157.

573 *RA Catalogue*, 196.

574 “A Twenty-Ton Buddha at Burlington House,” *Sketch*, November 13, 1935, 307.

575 Basil Gray and William Watson, “A Great Sui Dynasty Amitābha,” *The British Museum Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1951): 82.



Figure 38. View of Central Hall of the 1935 Exhibition. Source: RA Archives.



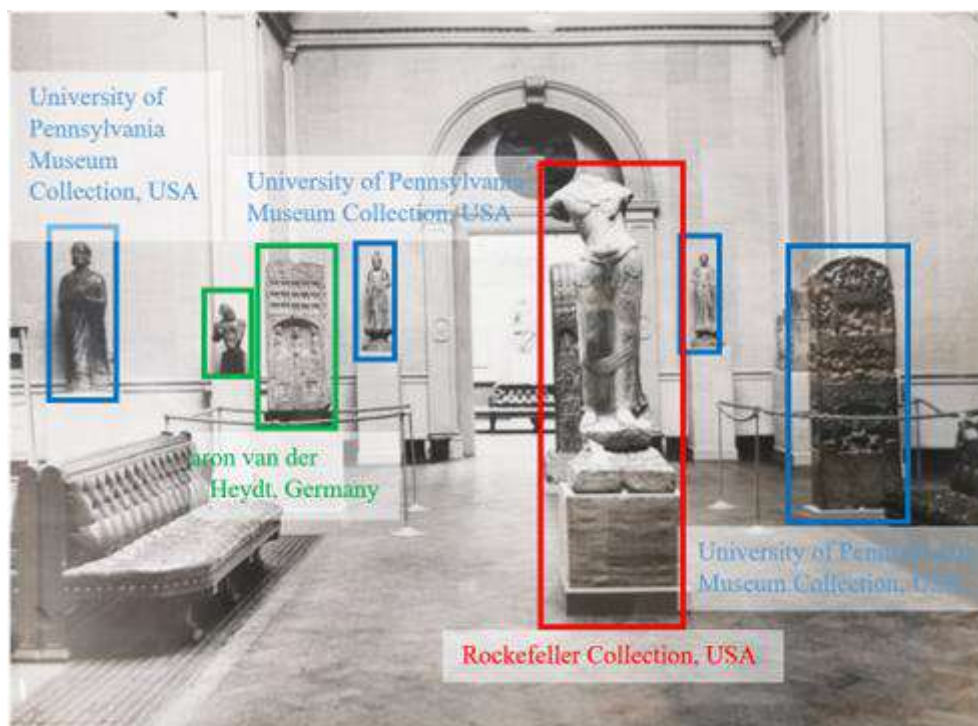
Figure 39. Installing Amitabha Buddha at the 1935 Exhibition. Source: RA Archives

The Amitabha Buddha was loaned from the prominent yet controversial Parisian Chinese art dealer C. T. Loo (Lu Qinzhai 卢芹斋, 1880-1957). Having devoted himself to offering “only real and refined pieces” of Chinese art to the West since the early twentieth century and participating in various European exhibitions of Chinese art, Loo played an active role in the 1935 Exhibition by providing exhibits and offering suggestions on their curation.⁵⁷⁶ Over the course of his career, he developed his business extensively across France, Britain, and the United States, establishing an extensive network of clients, including collectors, museums, and scholars. Loo’s rise to prominence reflected the growing internationalisation of Chinese art in Europe, as well as the globalisation of China’s domestic art market. One may argue that Loo’s dealings contributed to the significant outflow of China’s heritage during a period of political upheaval and economic instability.⁵⁷⁷ Loo, together with his network, facilitated the migration of Chinese art to Western collections but also underscored the complex dynamics of cultural exchange, commodification, and preservation that continue to shape discussions about the legacy of Chinese antiquities in the global context.

⁵⁷⁶ Steuber, “The Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 531; Na, *Wo yu gugong wushinian*, 87.

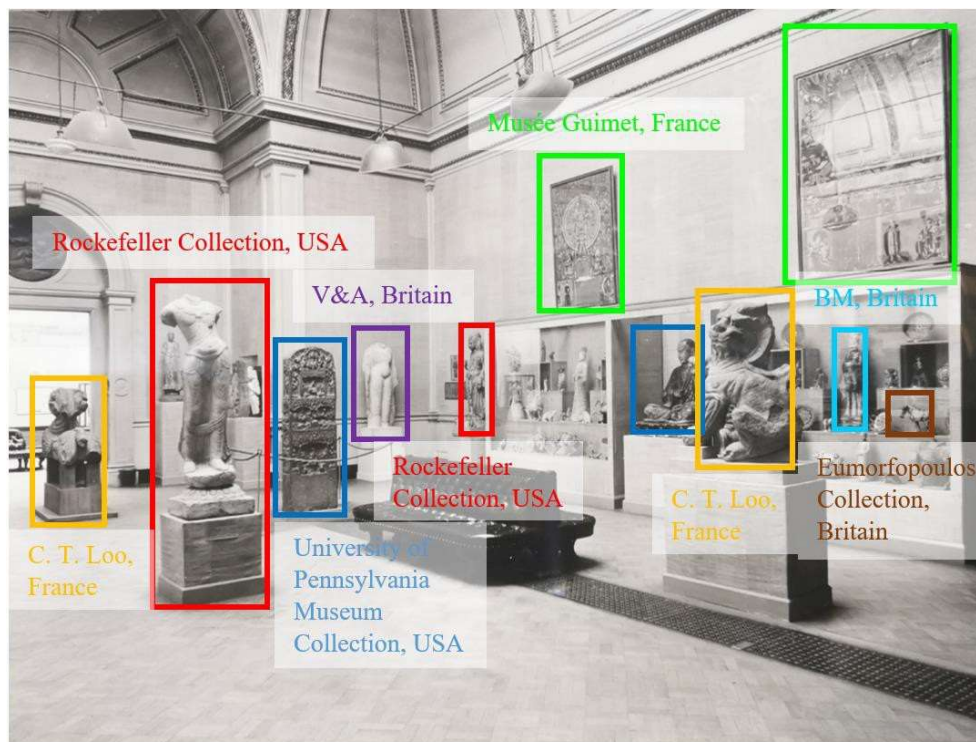
⁵⁷⁷ “C. T. Loo 1880–1957 Chinese Art Dealer,” Smithsonian Institution, February 29, 2016, <https://asia-archive.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Loo-C-T.pdf>.

Besides the giant Buddha, the Central Hall showcased a selection of Chinese artefacts that originated from the collections of British monarchs housed in their palaces (Figure 38). These objects primarily consist of porcelain wares and decorative art, often conventionally regarded as “curiosities” in Western collecting history. Notably, there were fifteen objects from King George V’s collection, with fourteen from Windsor Castle (Lots 2327, 2329, 2330a, 2332, 2333, 2335, 2336, 2339-2341, 2344-2347) and one from Buckingham Palace (Lot 2342). Simultaneously, his wife, Queen Mary contributed fifteen pieces from her collections at Buckingham Palace to the exhibition (Lots 2314, 2315, 2317, 2318, 2321-2326, 2328, 2331, 2334, 2338, 2343).⁵⁷⁸ Among the king’s objects, a bronze *gu* (觚) wine vessel (Lot 2342) from the Shang Dynasty was presented to Queen Victoria (1819-1901) by the Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧, 1835-1908).⁵⁷⁹ Thus, the theme of the Chinese art exhibition was established, highlighting Britain’s role as the host nation. The exhibition depicted the British monarchy not only as a symbol of tradition and authority but also as a collector and patron of diverse and culturally significant artefacts from other cultures. The Central Hall was connected to other galleries through doors, allowing viewers to see the hall’s contents from any gallery and access it easily. Placing the British monarchy’s collections in the centre symbolised the country’s global connections and its role in shaping international relations through cultural exchanges.



⁵⁷⁸ RA Catalogue, 198-201.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid. 200; Fu Zhenlun, “Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui canguan ji,” 158.



Figures 40 & 41. Views of the Lecture Room at the 1935 Exhibition, with artefacts from different collections marked in different coloured boxes. Source: RA Archives.

In the discourse of Internationalism, Chinese art from different countries was mixed and placed together. Taking the Lecture Room, which housed sculptures and ritual objects from the Jin to Tang Dynasties and Dunhuang collections, as an example, Figures 40 and 41 show the artefacts from various collections in the room.⁵⁸⁰ Important exhibits not shown in the figures include a stone relief of “Autumn Dew (*Saluzi* 飒露紫),” one of the six horses from Zhao Mausoleum (*Zaoling liujun* 昭陵六骏) of Taizong Emperor of Tang (唐太宗, 598-649, reigned in 626-649) from the University of Pennsylvania Museum Collection.⁵⁸¹ By mixing and placing these diverse collections together, the exhibition emphasised the universality of Chinese art, transcending geographical boundaries.

Wu Sue-Ying notes that Chinese committees once raised the idea of exhibiting the artefacts from Chinese collections separately from others. The contradiction was that the Westerners treat all exhibits equally, while the Chinese saw them as national treasures, national symbols, and having an aesthetic and historical value that is unrivalled in other collections.⁵⁸² Despite that, the final presentation was a mix of Chinese artworks regardless of the collections and national origins. The

⁵⁸⁰ RA Catalogue, 203-14.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid. 205.

⁵⁸² Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 53-4.

decision to showcase Chinese art in this manner could be understood as China's commitment to international cultural exchange. In the 1935 Exhibition, it was Chinese art that took centre stage. The role of China in this exhibition was a co-organiser and participant, just as the title of the Chinese-published catalogue told, "participating in the London Exhibition of Chinese art (*canjia Ludun Zhongguo yishupin zhanlanhui* 参加伦敦中国艺术品展览会)," which more accurately encapsulates China's role in the exhibition.

To better align with the Chinese atmosphere in the exhibition, the walls, staging, and interiors of the display cases were adorned with traditional garments from Jiangxi. The primary colour scheme was "beige," with the textiles' colours subtly adjusted according to the different galleries, such as the "dull gold of the Central Hall" and "the full but soft blue of the last room." Against these carefully chosen backgrounds, the exhibits of varying colours were showcased in such a way that they were "seen at their full value," enhancing their visual impact and cultural significance.⁵⁸³ The colour of the walls caused some debate amongst British audiences.⁵⁸⁴ Despite that, the overall display was "simple and lovely, and the antique colours of the artworks are a delightful contrast."⁵⁸⁵

Negotiating Chineseness in a Western Discourse

Given the limitations of the era and its environment, the 1935 Exhibition faced challenges in representing Chinese identity, requiring Chinese art to compromise with Western-centric expectations. The exhibition, despite its grandeur, reflected a persistent Orientalist paradigm, where Chinese art, stripped of its original significance, was reduced to timeless, decorative forms or ethnographical artefacts originating from "The Other." Firstly, misjudgments in artefact selection, coupled with staff knowledge gaps, further compounded these issues, and errors in identifying the purpose or significance of certain objects led to inaccurate displays. For example, the absence of detailed exhibition labels or explanatory texts often left Western visitors with an incomplete understanding of the artefacts' cultural and historical contexts.⁵⁸⁶ Zhuang Shangyan, in his report, highlighted the imbalance in representation. The British Committee changed the descriptions of some Chinese objects without the Chinese Committee's consent, even though the latter providing

583 "At Burlington House. The Art of China. A Revelation of Form and Colour," *The Times*, November 28, 1935.

584 F. Howard, "Chinese Art Exhibition: To the Editor of the Times," *The Times*, December 18, 1935, 13; "Chinese Art: The Colour of Background," *The Times*, December 28, 1935, 13; L. Ashton, "Chinese Art Exhibition: To the Editor of the Times," *The Times*, December 21, 1935, 11; "Background of Chinese Art Exhibition," *The Times*, January 13, 1936, 8.

585 "朴素可爱，与古色古香之艺术品，交映成趣。"Fu Zhenlun, "Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui canguan ji," 157.

586 Lu Yangkun, "Yuanjing chenggou yu zhishi shengcheng," 35-6.

bilingual descriptions.⁵⁸⁷ While the Chinese meticulously documented each artefact's size, condition, and institutional affiliation in the Chinese- published catalogues, the RA Catalogue labeled most objects broadly as "Chinese Government Loan," omitting detailed provenance information. This lack of specificity limited the audience's understanding of the cultural significance of these treasures.

The 1935 Exhibition took into account the Western audience's customary approach to appreciating Chinese art. Laurence Binyon, in his introduction to the exhibition, linked Chinese art to "an expression of a philosophy of life" and the Chinese people to "a literary nation."⁵⁸⁸ However, this appreciation was tainted with exoticism, presenting Chinese art as something magical, spiritual, and beyond reality. For instance, some metalworks were associated with "the fairyland of the Taoists," and certain landscape paintings, featuring "a fantastic element," might "disconcert" viewers, reflecting an Orientalist perspective that imbued Chinese art with a sense of the otherworldly.⁵⁸⁹

In planning the presentation of Gallery IX, the largest gallery in the exhibition, Percival David and Leigh Ashton emphasised the need to cater to Western preferences, avoiding an overabundance of scrolls and instead incorporating diverse objects to engage the audience (Figures 42 & 43).⁵⁹⁰ Despite being titled "Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries A.D.," Gallery IX featured not only furniture, porcelain, cloisonné, and lacquer screens from the Kangxi to Qianlong periods but also textiles and objects from earlier dynasties like Ming and Song. The display of smaller porcelain figurines of people and animals, centrally arranged, echoed paintings, embroideries, and objects depicting Chinese landscapes, birds, flowers, and mythological creatures, portraying China as a fantasized nation in "intimate companionship with Nature."⁵⁹¹ While the photographs are in black-and-white, one can imagine the vibrant colours characteristic of Qing porcelain. Among the 216 exhibits, only twenty-six were from the Chinese Government Loan, with the rest sourced from European and American collections, underscoring Western preferences for Chinese art. The majority of the exhibits emphasised decorative value and timelessness, catering to Western aesthetics.

An imperial throne with a screen of Qianlong, sent by the Chinese Government, was exhibited in Gallery IX, accompanied by a pair of porcelain lions on the sides and a hanging carpet in the

587 Fu Zhenlun, "Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui canguan ji," 124-5.

588 Binyon, "Introduction," xiii, xv.

589 Ibid. xiv.

590 Percival David and Leigh Ashton, "The Exhibition of Chinese Art," *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 68, no. 395 (1936): 103.

591 Binyon, "Introduction," xiii.

background, both from London collectors. (Lots 1822-1825) (Figure 44).⁵⁹² Porcelain pieces included a pair of towers from Kenneth Clark (Lot 1826) and large fish bowls jars, and vases were placed surrounding the throne.⁵⁹³ A photograph of Chinese staff installing the throne was published as they prepared for the exhibition (Figure 44).⁵⁹⁴ The presentation followed the Western symmetry, however it was “in fact vulgar and unreasonable” in Chinese aesthetics.⁵⁹⁵ Such an unrealistic and contradictory display showed the sacredness of the imperial power in historical China, while at the same time portraying the country as a vulnerable, delicate, and compassionate traditional civilisation. Considering that one of the exhibition purposes was to celebrate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the coronation of the British king, displaying the throne in a monarchy country might help establish a certain cultural connection and serve as a diplomatic gesture of goodwill.



⁵⁹² *RA Catalogue*, 153.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁴ *Observer*, November 24, 1935.

⁵⁹⁵ “左右对称陈列，英人最易为得计，实俗陋而最不合理者也！” (Symmetrical display is most easily accomplished by the English, yet it is in fact vulgar and the most unreasonable of all!) Fu Zhenlun, “Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui canguan ji,” 157.



Figures 42 & 43. Views of Gallery IX “Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century,” with Qianlong’s throne (below). Source: RA Archives.



Figure 44. (From left to right) Chinese staff Niu Deming, Na Zhiliang and Song Jilong installing Qianlong’s throne. Extract from Observer. Source: RA Archives.

The 1935 Exhibition echoed similar curatorial approaches seen in the 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art, also held at the RA (Figure 45). Curated primarily by American art historian Arthur Upham Pope (1881-1969), the Persian Art Exhibition offered a panoramic showcase of Persian art history but similarly extracted objects from their original contexts. The display emphasised purity in decorative forms, creating what one critic described as “a timeless, undifferentiated blaze of sense-dulling bedazzlement.”⁵⁹⁶ Such presentations detached artefacts from their functional and historical roots, constructing an exoticised image of Persia as a timeless and mystical culture.



Figure 45. Gallery view at the 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art. Source: RA Archives.

In both the display of Chinese and Persian art at the RA’s international exhibition, there was a common tendency to decontextualise objects from their original cultural settings, reinforcing the Orientalist narrative. Presenting non-Western art in a Western museum setting mirrored the

⁵⁹⁶ Barry D. Wood, “‘A Great Symphony of Pure Form’: The 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art and Its Influence,” *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000): 113-30.

concept of the “encyclopaedic museum,” similar to renowned institutions like the British Museum and the Louvre. This practice can be traced back to the European aristocrats’ *kunstammer* or “cabinets of curiosity” during the Enlightenment, which housed a range of exotic objects, ancient artefacts, and natural specimens. Though often superficially understood and immaturely interpreted, these cabinets were regarded as symbols of knowledge, wealth, and power, reflecting the early European worldview and cosmology.⁵⁹⁷

The increasing presence of Chinese art in Europe at the turn of the century prompted the establishment of Asian art museums and Asian art departments in public museums. These institutions were strategically positioned to facilitate cultural exchange and knowledge dissemination, with carefully chosen locations and deliberately staged events aligning with political, cultural and official objectives.⁵⁹⁸ They showcased the latest acquisitions and archaeological discoveries from Asia, serving academic purposes while demonstrating the extent of Western exploration and cultural engagement. These trends, although some can criticise them from the perspectives of colonialism and cultural imperialism, marked a commendable effort to foster transcultural understanding. Yet, their presence underscored the ongoing challenge of countering prevailing Orientalist and exotic narratives that continued to influence perceptions of Asian cultures in the West.

Glass showcases and frames were employed to display and protect fragile artefacts, such as bronzes, porcelain, and paintings, while sculptures made of stone and marble were positioned in open spaces. Other items, such as tapestries, silk embroideries, reliefs, and archaeological fragments, were hung on the walls. Although glass showcases were a common exhibition method by this time, as seen in previous exhibitions at the RA, they presented certain challenges. The potential glare on glass could affect the viewer’s experience, but with the use of angle-adjustable lights for illumination, the benefits of using glass displays were undeniable. Glass cabinets, as noted by Cheng-hua Wang in her research on the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, helped to enhance

597 Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (London: House of Stratus, 2001).

598 In 1889, the Musée Guimet was nationalised and moved from the founder’s hometown Lyon to the Place d’Iéna, Paris. This relocation was significant as it transformed the Champ-de-Mars, previously used for Universal Expositions in the late nineteenth century, into a symbol of modernity and internationalism, fostering the exchange of knowledge. In 1914, the BM unveiled its new north wing, King Edward VII Galleries, showcasing Chinese artefacts from the Neolithic period to the present. The inaugural exhibition featured Aurel Stein’s collection during his first two expeditions. It was attended by King George V and Queen Mary. In 1992, the Gallery of China and South Asia (Hotung Gallery) was opened and later reopened in 2007 after renovation, with Queen Elizabeth II attending both ceremonies. For the display of Chinese art in the two institutions. Yuet Heng Wong, “Beyond Imperialism: The nineteenth-Century Display of Chinese Art at the Musée Guimet,” *Arts Asiatiques* 74 (2019): 69-86; Jessica Rawson, *The BM Book of Chinese Art* (London: BM Press, 1992; repr., 2007), 7.

the lightness and elegance of displays. This design featured multiple glass cabinets that created a sense of lightness, enhancing the elegance of the exhibits. The spatial arrangement was characterised by the cabinets, allowing the audience to view the displays from a distance while still maintaining a clear, immediate glance. This approach, “with a particular emphasis on a bright and tidy style, positioned Britain as the foremost champion of modernity at the fair.”⁵⁹⁹ The cohesive and modern presentation contrasted sharply with the more cluttered and chaotic displays from other participating nations, like China, whose lavish traditional pavilion was filled with an overwhelming assortment of decorations, models, furniture, porcelain, pagodas, textiles, and so on.⁶⁰⁰ The display of Chinese pavilion stereotypically fell into ethnographic or anthropological patterns, presenting a simplified and exoticised form of the “Chinese shop” that needed to change.

During the 1904 World’s Fair, Chinese newspapers in Shanghai and Beijing reported extensively, with Chinese participants analysing the pros and cons of exhibiting China at such international events, linking the exhibition to nationalism, compared China’s display to other countries, and suggested improvements for future trade and exhibitions.⁶⁰¹ In this regard, the 1914 World’s Fair and the 1935 Exhibition shared similarities. The positive role of exhibitions in promoting the transcultural exchange of people, goods, and cultures was undeniable. When the Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition of the 1935 Exhibition was held, the use of glass showcases for displaying items marked a proactive step for Chinese art towards embracing Western modernity.

However, the application of this display method in the 1935 Exhibition posed some challenges for presenting Chinese art. Due to a lack of financial resources, the exhibition organizers were unable to provide frames for all the works, so those from the Ming period onward were hung high on the wall to avoid direct contact with viewers, while works from before the Ming Dynasty were placed in glass cabinets or frames.⁶⁰² This setup led to a problem: viewers were too distant to fully appreciate the details of the artworks.⁶⁰³ For the handscrolls, which are typically long and narrow, some were placed in glass cabinets. Due to the limited space in the cabinets, only the central portion could be displayed, and the annotations or inscriptions were overlooked.⁶⁰⁴ This method of display also altered the traditional way handscrolls were appreciated within their original cultural context in China. Instead of being slowly unrolled among a group of literati, where the movement

599 Cheng-hua Wang, “Chengxian ‘Zhongguo,’” 467.

600 Ibid. 471.

601 Ibid. 474-5.

602 Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 52.

603 Ibid.; Fu Zhenlun, “Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui canguan ji,” 152; Jiehong, “Diyici yuanzheng,” 102; Lu Yangkun, “Yuanjing chenggou yu zhishi shengcheng,” 36.

604 Lu Yangkun, “Yuanjing chenggou yu zhishi shengcheng,” 36.

of the artwork, its storytelling, and the touchable act of *bawan* were all part of the experience, the intimate and close way of viewing Chinese art was replaced by the openness and publicness of the exhibition with a sense of distance.

One remarkable example was “A Myriad Miles of the Yangtze (*Changjiang wanly tu* 长江万里图)” (Lot 1127) by Song painter Xia Gui (夏圭, 1195-1224), measuring over ten meters in length. Although a special case was made for this work in the 1935 Exhibition, the entire painting could not be displayed. To compensate, the painting was photographed and made into a film.⁶⁰⁵ The emerging technology of the time revealed new possibilities for artistic research, with “the camera revealed to them many things which had been previously unnoticed: to everyone’s amazement the water appeared to be moving!”⁶⁰⁶ The omission of the equally crucial textual aspect of Chinese pictorial culture in the 1935 Exhibition altered the distinctive Chinese visual culture and its modes of appreciation. This led to the intimacy and interactivity inherent in the traditional Chinese painting appreciation process being eliminated, which in turn, resulted in the erosion of the emotional bonds among Chinese literati that these artworks traditionally conveyed.⁶⁰⁷

Figure 46 is Chen Shizeng’s (陈师曾, 1876-1923) painting, which depicts a real-life art exhibition held in Beijing in 1917. In the scene, painting scrolls are displayed on the walls and on a table, accompanied by small-sized booklets. Visitors crowd the room, viewing the artworks from a respectful distance and refraining from direct interaction. This portrayal reflects how Chinese urban citizens had already begun adopting Western exhibition methods and ways of appreciating art. According to the inscription, the exhibition was organised by a small group of collectors as a public event, with artworks rotated daily, showcasing a modern curatorial approach. The exhibition also generated profits, which were designated for charitable purposes, highlighting public awareness and the role of art in reflecting social reality.

605 *RA Catalogue*, 90.

606 *Daily Sketch*, July 22. 1935.

607 Jiehong, “*Diyici yuanzheng*,” 102-03.



Figure 46. Viewing Paintings, Chen Shizeng, ink colour on paper, 1917, 87.7 x 46.6 centimetres. Inscription: December 1, 1917, Ye Yufu, Jin Gongbei, Chen Zhongshu, and others gathered the collectors' collections in Beijing for an exhibition at Central Park for seven days. The exhibits, totalling six or seven hundred items, were changed daily. The proceeds from the viewers' fees were used to aid the relief of the water disaster in the Beijing area. A painting was made to commemorate this grand event. (丁巳十二月一日，叶玉甫、金巩北、陈仲恕诸君集京师收

藏家之所有于中央公园展览七日，每日更换，共六七百种，取来观者之费以振京畿水灾，因图其时之景以记盛事)。 Source: NPM Beijing Collection.



Figure 47. The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1787, After Johann Heinrich Ramberg (1763-1840), 1787, line engraving. Source: RA Archives.



Figure 48. Gallery IV “Sung Dynasty” at the 1935 Exhibition. Source: RA Archives.

Lu Yangkun compares the arrangement of paintings at the 1935 Exhibition to a “salon-style hanging,” with artworks closely arranged in rows across the walls (Figures 47 & 48).⁶⁰⁸ Originated in the seventeenth century within the French royal artistic community, from the Salon Carré in Louvre, art salon became public after the French Revolution but remained under government control, with exhibitions and art form being canonised and regulated by the French Académie des beaux-arts. Salon gradually became “the dominant public entertainment” in for Parisians and Parisians from “a broad mix of classes and social types.”⁶⁰⁹ High art, monopolised by the elite, tightly controlled the general public’s exposure prior to the Art Salon, which then provided a “regularly repeated, open, free” opportunity for broader access to contemporary art.⁶¹⁰ The Salon created a public space where audiences were treated to “share in some community of interest,” despite their heterogeneous social classes and cultural identities.⁶¹¹ This transformed the relationships between artworks, viewers, and patrons, challenging the idea that art was exclusively reserved for the privileged. Consequently, it also facilitated a more diverse range of themes, compositions and presentation in art creation. The tradition of the Salon disseminated throughout the continent, as art academies flourished across European nations in the nineteenth century.⁶¹² From the late nineteenth century, the academies were challenged by what would later be seen as the avant-garde movement, with fearless and talented artists seeking change from within, exhibiting their radical works in these official institutions.⁶¹³ This included shifts in artistic ideas, aesthetics, techniques, as well as exhibition selection and presentation, although none of these were easy.

The crowding of Chinese art might have been acceptable for average viewers, but it was inadequate for those with a deeper knowledge of Chinese art. William Wilberforce Winkworth (1897–1991), son of Stephen D. Winkworth (1865–1938), co-founder of the OCS, and a collaborator with Hobson at the British Museum in the 1920s, criticised the 1935 Exhibition for

608 Lu Yangkun, “Yuanjing chenggou yu zhishi shengcheng,” 36.

609 Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985; reprint, 2000), 1.

610 Ibid. 2.

611 Ibid. 3.

612 Jason Rosenfeld, “The Salon and the Royal Academy in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2004, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/sara/hd_sara.htm.

613 Ibid.

its paintings being hung too high and too crowded.⁶¹⁴ In response, David and Ashton clarified that 125 out of the 176 Chinese painting scrolls were initially displayed at a higher level, in consideration of the strength of their design. However, they assured that these paintings would be moved to “eye level” during the second half of the exhibition.⁶¹⁵ Fu Zhenlun observed notable discrepancies in opinions between the Chinese and British staff, and discussed this topic in his article recounting the exhibition visit.⁶¹⁶ Nevertheless, as the final decision-making authority rested with the British contingent, the Chinese staff cooperated.

The compact arrangement of artworks in the 1935 Exhibition might find a parallel in Liulichang (琉璃厂), “the empire’s premier book emporium.”⁶¹⁷ Originally a glaze factory located in southern Beijing, Liulichang became a vibrant social hub and marketplace by the mid-Qing Dynasty. Its growth, spurred by China’s intellectual awakening and the increasing wealth of the Qing dynasty, was supported by both the imperial government and the acquisition of official texts.⁶¹⁸ Over time, Liulichang evolved into a cultural, commercial, and manufacturing center, symbolising the intellectual integration of Manchu political dominance within the broader Chinese society. The prosperity of Liulichang has been well documented. For instance, the eighteenth-century writer Pan Rongbi (潘荣陛) described the bustling scene during the New Year, highlighting the very packed display of the market:

Numerous goods are gathered. Lanterns, screens, and glazed ornaments, ten thousand of them, are hung in the rooms. There are jade scrolls and ivory chopsticks. Numerous shops bustle with activity, libraries brim with books, and precious treasures line the streets.⁶¹⁹

Also, Korean scholar Hong Daeyong (홍대용, 1731-1783), during his visit to Beijing in 1765 and 1766, witnessed a similar scene in the market:

614 David and Ashton, “Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 103; “W. W. Winkworth,” BM, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG81526>; “Stephen D. Winkworth,” BM, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG15519>.

615 David and Ashton, “Exhibition of Chinese Art,” 103.

616 Fu Zhenlun, “Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui canguan ji,” 168.

617 Christopher A. Reed, “Dukes and Nobles Above, Scholars Below: Beijing’s Old Booksellers: District Liulichang 琉璃厂, 1769-1941 and Its Influence on Twentieth-Century Shanghai’s Book Trade,” *East Asian Publishing and Society* 5, no. 1 (2015): 80-84.

618 Ibid. 79.

619 Pan Rongbi 潘荣陛, “Dijing suishi jisheng” 帝京岁时纪胜 [Festival customs of the imperial capital] (1768), in *Dijing suishi jisheng · Yanjing suishi ji* 帝京岁时纪胜·燕京岁时记 [Festival customs of the imperial capital · Yanjing chronicles], by Pan Rongbi and Fucha Dunchong 富察敦崇 (Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 1981), 9.

...offering a variety of books, stone steles, bronzes, and antiques...rare and peculiar, overflowing with abundance, positioned with ancient elegance. Walking slowly along the path, it feels like entering a Persian bazaar.⁶²⁰

Beijing's art market experienced rapid expansion between 1912 and 1927, fueled by infrastructure developments such as the introduction of electricity and the market's spread across various locations. The southeastern side of the city, particularly Liulichang, emerged as the focal point, cementing its role as a vibrant hub for art and cultural commerce.⁶²¹ The prosperity of the antique market can be attributed to various factors, including the outflow of former imperial treasures, the sale of belongings by old aristocrats, foreign plunder, archaeological discoveries, and local trade. Additionally, development in transportation made the market more accessible to the outside world, further promoting its growth. Filled with antiques, curios, artworks and books, Liulichang remained a central hub in the Beijing art market, serving as a cultural and intellectual centre for the gentry lifestyle and a key location for book publishing and academic dissemination.⁶²²

Liulichang featured a range of business models, with shops differing in size, scale, and the quality of goods they offered.⁶²³ Among the well-known establishments were antique shops such as *Rongbao Zhai* (荣宝斋), *Baowen Zhai* (宝文斋), *Bogu Zhai* (博古斋), which originated in the Qing Dynasty and continue to operate today. The shops were overflowing with objects, with items filling shelves, tables, walls, and even the ceiling, highlighting the rich variety available (Figure 49). Another unique business model in Liulichang was the *guahuopu* (挂货铺), or stalls selling hanging products. These stalls offered a wide range of items, including paintings, calligraphy, antiques, and everyday necessities, casually hung or piled and displayed together, with objects compactly arranged on tables (Figure 50). The overall quality of these goods tended to be lower,

620 “市中多书籍、碑板、鼎彝、古董。凡器玩杂物.....珍怪奇巧，充溢罗积，位置古雅，遵道徐步，如入波斯宝市。” Hong Daeyong 홍대용, *Eulbyeong yeonhaenglog* 을병연행록 [Travel essay of Yanjing in 1765 and 1766] (Seoul: Sungkyunkwan daehakgyo, 1962), quoted in Liu Bojun 刘泊君, “Qingmo minchu xifangren zai jing goucang yishupin de zhuyao changsuo yanjiu” 清末民初西方人在京购藏艺术品的主要场所研究 [A study on the main places where Westerners purchased and collected artefacts in Beijing in the late Qing and early republican period], *Yishu xuebao* 艺术学报 9 (2021): 78.

621 Wu Mingdi 吴明娣 and Chang Naiqing 常乃青, “Minguo Beijing yishupin shichang de chanbian” 民国北京艺术品市场的嬗变 [Transformation of the art market in Beijing in republican era], *Zhongguo shuhua* 4, (2020): 128; Xiang Wang 向往, “20 shiji zaoqi Beijing yishupin shichang de kongjian yu jiegou (1911-1937)” 20 世纪早期北京艺术品市场的空间与结构 (1911-1937) [The space and structure of the Beijing art market in the early twentieth century (1911-1937)], (Master's dissertation, Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2021), 29-33.

622 Reed, “Dukes and Nobles Above,” 74; Qin, “1909 nian Beijing xuejie gongyan Bo Xihe,” 46; Wu and Chang, “Minguo Beijing yishupin shichang,” 128.

623 Wu and Chang, “Minguo Beijing yishupin shichang,” 128; Xiang, “20 shiji zaoqi Beijing yishupin shichang,” 29.

with prices reflecting this distinction, making them more accessible alternatives to conventional shops.⁶²⁴

The prosperity of Liulichang was acknowledged by foreign residents, tourists, and Chinese individuals with Western connections in the early twentieth century, establishing it as a “must-see” tourist destination.⁶²⁵ Some antique shops even specialised in serving foreign customers to maximise profitability (Figure 51). They were strategically located in Beijing’s foreigner neighborhoods or near hotels, with some employing staff fluent in foreign languages and well-versed in Western etiquette.⁶²⁶ Foreign clients’ purchasing behaviors in the antique market were shaped by factors such as class, gender, nationality, and their varying familiarity with Chinese art and language, which influenced the diversity and fluidity of their buying patterns.⁶²⁷ Seasoned collectors and dealers, both Chinese and foreign, typically favored renowned antique shops celebrated for their superior quality artwork, mirroring the preferences of their Chinese counterparts. Frequent foreign visitors to Liulichang, including Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919), and John Calvin Ferguson (1866-1945), who lived or travelled in China, were drawn by its renowned antique shops and connections with local literati circles.⁶²⁸ In 1909, Pelliot went to Beijing with the purpose of “purchasing Chinese books for France,” which likely led to his visits to Liulichang, where he likely shared information about his acquisitions, including Tang dynasty manuscripts.⁶²⁹ Many foreign scholars, dealers, Chinese art enthusiasts, and individuals within their networks, who played important roles in organising and presenting exhibits at the 1935 Exhibition, likely witnessed the bustling activity of Liulichang during their time in Beijing. From this, it is reasonable to assume that when other foreign collectors, scholars, and dealers in Beijing visited the art market. Therefore, Liulichang was more than just a marketplace for books, antiques, and artworks; it served as both a hub of intellectual and cultural immersion, a nexus of global cultural exchange where individuals from diverse backgrounds gathered to appreciate and acquire Chinese art and literature. Much like the crowded presentation in the 1935 Exhibition, Liulichang embodied a convergence of intellectual and material culture, offering an eclectic mix that bridged tradition and commerce.

624 Xiang, “20 shiji zaoqi Beijing yishupin shichang,” 15, 22.

625 Marcus R. Ogden, *Peking for the Army and Navy: Notes on Sightseeing and Shopping in Peking*, 2nd ed. (Peiping: The Standard Press, 1937), 14.

626 Xiang, “20 shiji zaoqi Beijing yishupin shichang,” 33.

627 Susan Naquin, “Paul Houo 霍明志, A Dealer in Antiquities in Early Twentieth Century Peking,” *Études chinoises* XXXIV, no. 2 (2015): 210-11.

628 Liu Bojun, “Qingmo minchu xifangren zai jing,” 83; Xiang, “20 shiji zaoqi Beijing yishupin shichang,” 55-56.

629 Qin, “1909 nian Beijing xuejie gongyan Bo Xihe,” 46.

On the other hand, guahuopu or open-air stalls, being more grassroots and closer to the locals, attracted foreign visitors. Bargaining was also seen as an intimate interaction with the local community during travel. American nurse-journalist Ellen La Motte (1873–1961) recounted her shopping experience at the open-air market at Longfu Temple (隆福寺) in eastern Beijing, where she attempted to purchase a pair of small stone lions, said to be from the Ming Dynasty, with the determination of “indefatigable bargain hunters.”⁶³⁰ Such activities not only emphasised the interactions between cultures but also satisfied tourists’ desire for exoticism, shaping their understanding of foreign countries, even though this understanding is sometimes incorrect, but rather superficial or stereotypical. Common Western buyers gravitated towards items like traditional costumes, textiles, carpets, toys, and ethnic objects conventionally categorised as “curios” or “decorative arts,” reflecting their subjective preferences aligning with the long-lasting Eurocentric chinoiserie aesthetics.⁶³¹

“Curio-hunting” in a “curio-shop” where travellers sought “unfamiliar, memorable, and entertaining objects” was one of popular activities for foreign visitors in Beijing at the time.⁶³² During tourism, people often seek to immerse themselves in local culture and acquire souvenirs or artworks that embody the cultural essence of the place. The purchased artefacts, as souvenirs, materialised the visitors’ intangible experience and memory in a foreign culture or entertained their family and friends back home.⁶³³ Despite the challenges of navigating a “tourism-driven” and “aggravated” commercial atmosphere with varying levels of authenticity and quality, as such La Motte’s lion later turning out to be “of the purest plaster,” tourists were drawn to guahuopu and other shops in the local art market such as Liulichang, as these places provided a closer connection to local culture and offer unique souvenirs that “indicative of the local merchandise” of the place they visited.⁶³⁴

The development of Liulichang in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, building on its Qing Dynasty heritage, transformed it from a cultural hub linked to officialdom into an art market and tourist destination. Attracting individuals of diverse nationalities, occupations, and expertise, it reflected the urbanisation, modernisation, commercialisation, and gentrification trends characteristic of Republican-era Chinese metropolises. While symbolising the decentralisation of

630 Ellen La Motte, *Peking Dust* (New York: The Century Co., 1919), 193.

631 Liu Bojun, “Qingmo minchu xifangren zai jing,” 83.

632 Naquin, “Paul Houo”, 217.

633 Ping Yin, “Tourism Commercialization and Perciveived Authenticity,” Scholarly Community Encyclopedia, last modified June 22, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/11105>.

634 Ibid.; Dallen J. Timothy, “What Tourists Buy: The Ubiquitous Souvenir,” in *Shopping Tourism, Retailing and Leisure* (Clevedon: Channel View Publications Limited, 2005), 101.

society during the transition from monarchy to republic, Liulichang faced new challenges, including concerns over the authenticity of artworks and pricing disputes with foreign clientele. The perceived authenticity and cultural heritage tourism fostered in Liulichang further reinforced its identity as a hub of “Chinese cultural tourism” and a key player in the “Chinese art market.”⁶³⁵ Liulichang served as a prototype for later cultural and tourist-focused streets and districts in other major Chinese cities.



Figure 49. Interior of an antique shop in Liulichang in the Republican era.

Source: Sohu.



Figure 50. A temporary stall for artworks during the Spring Festival in Beijing in the 1930s Source: Sohu.

635 Reed, “Dukes and Nobles Above,” 77.



Figure 51. Antique Shop *Yigu Zhai* (怡古齋) in Liulichang, with its sign in English. Source: *Beijing ribao*, February 24, 2023.

I concur that the 1935 Exhibition, like other Western exhibitions of its era, would have perpetuated a sense of Western superiority during a period when Orientalist discourse was dominant. Due to the inclusion of Chinese employees and the relative equality extended to them during the exhibition, as well as the significant progress in Western research on Chinese art and China's modernisation of its national art, this exhibition represented a great effort in the international cultural exchange and diplomacy through art as the medium. Notably, it played a role in mitigating the impact of both "political" and "cultural" imperialism. Furthermore, in terms of "intellectual imperialism," the individuals involved in the 1935 Exhibition appeared to adopt a more humble attitude toward knowledge, compared to previous exhibitions. However, due to the still limited understanding of Chinese art by Western scholars and the overly idealistic portrayal of Chinese culture of the time, further modifications in the categorisation and terminology of Chinese art were still needed.

The 1935 Exhibition excelled in presenting the comparability and the historical interactions between Chinese and Western arts and cultures. Furthermore, it presented a proactive commitment to inclusivity by involving the Western public in the knowledge construction process, consequently enriching their comprehension of Chinese art and culture. In retrospect, the 1935 Exhibition, substantiated by abundant historical photographs and preserved archives, emerged as

an influential initiative in Sino-British cultural exchange and diplomacy via art as an agent. It also contributed to a profound understanding of Chinese culture and the nation's modernised cultural policies among the Western audience. This multifaceted approach exhibited transformative potential, reshaping the landscape of public knowledge construction on both sides of the continent and heralding an era of critical cross-cultural engagement.

Chinese Art as Diplomacy

I second Stephanie Su's idea that the exhibition space served not only an artistic purpose but also ideological interests, aligning with political and diplomatic programmes and aiming to promote ideological goals alongside artistic endeavours.⁶³⁶ During the 1935 Exhibition, luncheons and receptions were organised, attended by prominent political, diplomatic, academic and artistic figures, turning the exhibition into a social elite gathering.⁶³⁷ Antony Best argues that the exhibition reflected British foreign policies, helping sustain Britain's commercial presence in China and balance its interests in East Asia.⁶³⁸ Official support for the exhibition reflected the state's new cultural policy, which believed international exhibitions could foster mutual "artistic understanding" and yield "political dividends," even though these benefits were often short-term.⁶³⁹

For the Chinese government, the 1935 Exhibition provided a crucial opportunity to project a favorable image of China, using the event as a platform to garner support from the West by showcasing the grandeur of Chinese art and culture. Through the exhibition presentation, China promotes its cultural image. For instance, the poster of the 1935 Exhibition was designed by Lin Huiyin, the so-called "first female architect" and "most famous talented woman" in the modern China. This poster was inspired by Han brick engravings, emblematic of China's ancient civilization and reflective of the ROC's archaeological interests (Figure 52). Its design echoed the idiom "Qin brick Han tile" (*qinzhuan hanwa* 秦砖汉瓦), symbolising both a deep cultural heritage and the spirit of modern nation-building. By blending elements of antiquity with modernity, the poster captured the continuity between the past and the emerging national identity. The RA Archives also keep another version of poster, which features a portrait of Emperor

⁶³⁶ Stephanie Su, "Exhibition as Art Historical Space," 131.

⁶³⁷ "Sixty-Second Luncheon, Thursday December 19th, 1935," RA Archives, London; "Reception. The Royal Academy," *Daily Telegraph*, January 19, 1936.

⁶³⁸ Best, "'To Contemplate the Soul,'" 293.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.* 297.

Taizong of Song (宋太宗, 939- 997, reigned in 976- 997), a piece (Lot 2296) from the Chinese Government Loan displayed in the Central Hall (Figure 53).⁶⁴⁰ Given the resemblance in design composition to posters of previous exhibitions at the RA, it is reasonable to infer that the poster was designed by the RA. However, the final choice was Lin's design. As part of the fashion presentation at the 1935 Exhibition, two young Chinese women were sent to London to sell exhibition catalogues while dressed in modernised Chinese national attire—the *qipao* (旗袍) (Figure 54).⁶⁴¹ Their appearance served to project an image of China's cultural refinement and aesthetic sophistication.

F. T. Cheng, owing to his knowledge, experience, official position, and reputation, became a right person for the task of promoting Chinese national image. Confronting the threats and challenges China faced, Cheng aptly stated that the exhibition was not only about appreciating Chinese art but also about understanding “how Chinese culture and its people have survived,” emphasising the nation's resilience and continuity.⁶⁴² During the 1935 Exhibition, twenty-four lectures themed on Chinese art from different eras and subject matters, in line with the exhibition's contents, were held at Burlington House, and several more at the University of London, and Morley College.⁶⁴³ Led by Percival David, the lectures were delivered by mostly British and European scholars, collectors and amateurs, Cheng was the sole Chinese member. In his lecture titled “Some Cultural and Historical Aspects of Chinese Art,” delivered on December 6, 1935, Cheng—despite making some generalisations—effectively conveyed the concept of “perfect beauty” in Chinese art. through music, poetry, painting, calligraphy, and decorative art, highlighting the “peace, virtue, righteousness, and love” embodied in them—values he described as “the sure corner-stones of Chinese civilization and culture.”⁶⁴⁴

On November 12, F. T. Cheng delivered another lecture titled “Civilization of China as Illustrated by her Classics,” before the China Society in Rhodes House, Oxford. He started with his personal experience as a Chinese coming to the West to introduce “the civilization of [his] nation,” calling himself “an unpaid agent” “in the promotion of Anglo-Chinese friendship.”⁶⁴⁵ Although not much contents were said related to the 1935 Exhibition or Chinese art, in this lecture Cheng introduced the formation of Chinese civilisation and classical philosophies in Chinese politics and family life

640 *RA Catalogue*, 197.

641 *Daily Mail*, November 28, 1935.

642 London International Exhibition of Chinese Art, 137/1488, Academia Sinica Archives, Taipei; *Ta Kung Pao*, January 24, 1935, 3; Wu Sue-Ying, “Zhanlan zhong de ‘Zhongguo,’” 2.

643 *RA Catalogue*, xi-xii.

644 F. T. Cheng, “Some Cultural and Historical Aspects of Chinese Art,” in *Reflections at Eighty* (London: Luzac, 1967), 70.

645 F. T. Cheng, “Civilization of China as Illustrated by her Classics,” in *Reflections at Eighty*, 48-49.

via Confucius, Mencius and other ancient philosophers and sages, portraying China as a nation with 4000-year civilisation that “stands for peace, righteousness, and universal brotherhood.”⁶⁴⁶ At the end of the lecture, said he:

Before I leave the platform may I say how happy I am to be able to speak to you on the subject of “Civilisation of China” on a day which happens to be the birthday of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Founder of our Republic.⁶⁴⁷

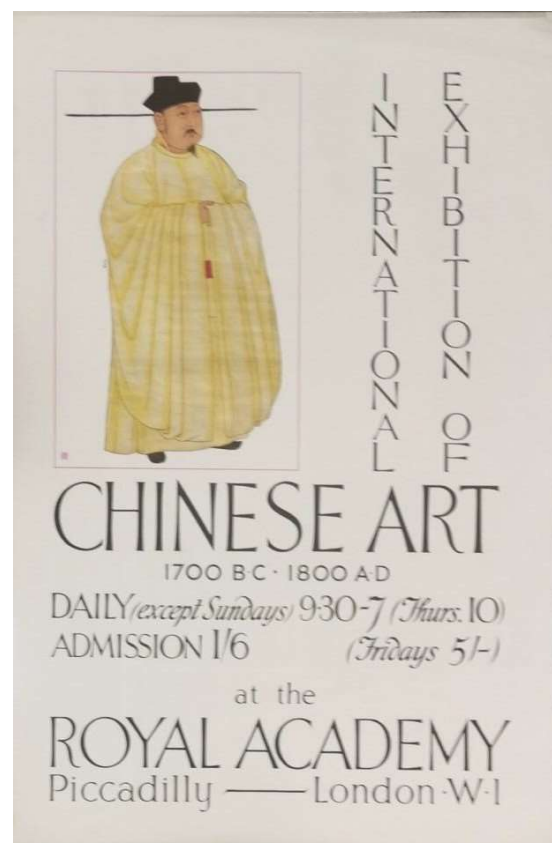
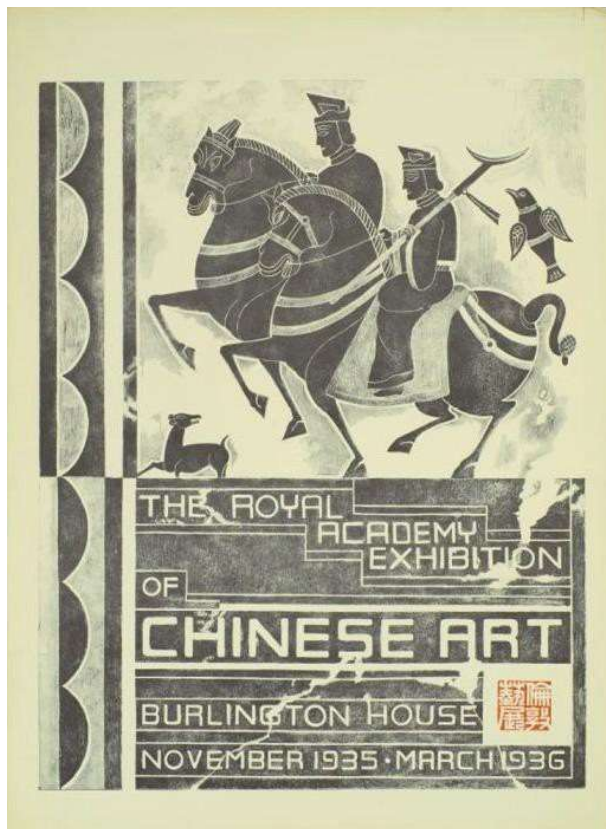
Cheng connected ancient Chinese civilisation with a young Republic, transforming a public lecture into a celebration for the sake of an individual, albeit an individual of great importance to the ROC and the entire Chinese history. Cheng’s professional performance at the 1935 Exhibition allowed him to establish a favourable personal image among people in both countries. During the event, Cheng was invited by King George V and Queen Mary to discuss Chinese antiques. “As a sign of respect for him,” Queen Mary gifted him signed photographs and books.⁶⁴⁸ Taking advantage of the popularity of the 1935 Exhibition, exhibitions of ancient Chinese art were held in the City Art Gallery of Manchester and the V&A in London in 1936, with Quo Tai-Chi and F. T. Cheng in attendance at the opening ceremony, although the Chinese Government Loan had already returned (Figure 55).⁶⁴⁹

646 Ibid. 56.

647 Ibid. 58.

648 Wong Chun Wai, *Fanshu yu huanglong*, 435.

649 The Chinese Art Exhibition in Manchester, held from April 3 to May 16, 1935, exhibited objects lent to the 1935 Exhibition by British collectors, as well as pieces from collections in Lancashire and Cheshire. From April 17, 1936, the V&A exhibited 2,500 pieces of Chinese porcelain, bronze and jade from the Eumorfopoulos Collection. “Chinese Art: Exhibition at the City Gallery,” *Manchester Guardian*, April 3, 1936; Pierre Jeannerat, “£100,000 Chinese Art on Show To-day,” *Daily Mail*, April 17, 1936.



Figures 52 & 53. The posters of the 1935 Exhibition, with the left one being the final version used. Source: RA Archives.



Figure 54. Chinese catalogue sellers in qipao with Percival David. Source: Daily Mail, November 28, 1935.



Figure 55. "His Excellency Comes North." Source: *Manchester Evening News*, 3 April 1936.

The Chinese government, by using art, this universal language, as a political token, turned this exhibition into a diplomatic occasion. Its endeavour got well-recognised. In an article published on *The Times*, China and Britain, the two cultures were connected and compared; moreover, China, as an old civilisation and a young nation, had managed to show its charms on an international stage:

Behind every treasure the Chinese Government had sent to the exhibition, they had all the good will to the Chinese nation...(The good will is) abundantly reciprocated in the enthusiasm of the British public's response to the manifestation of China's artistic eminence.⁶⁵⁰

Besides officially organised events, some "unofficial ambassadors" also promoted the image of China. For example, Madame Quo Tai-Chi, the wife of the Chinese ambassador, contributed an article to *The Queen*, an English magazine targeting aristocratic women. In the article, she

⁶⁵⁰ "Chinese Art. Complementary to European. A Revelation to Britain," *The Times*, December 3, 1935.

introduced Chinese art and expressed the Chinese people's deep love for art, describing it as "something to be cherished as we would a valued friend." Madame Quo emphasised that the Chinese pursuit of art persisted despite "political and other troubles," just as people could still "shop for the beauty of art in Shanghai." She optimistically reassured readers, "If much of Chinese art is lacking today, it is lost, only sleeping. Someday we shall carry on a tradition which has made the world marvel."⁶⁵¹ Through this feminine, soft, and subtle approach, Madame Quo complemented the official narratives by portrayed China as an art-loving and friendly nation. Even amid current difficulties, its dedication to its artistic heritage persisted, offering a hopeful and enduring image to the international audience.



Figure 56. "Chinese Season 1936." Source: Daily Mail, December 18, 1935.

⁶⁵¹ Madame Quo Tai-Chi, "Treasure from China: Forty Centuries of Oriental Art," *The Queen*, n.d.

The political and diplomatic significance of the 1935 Exhibition in China was limited by the outbreak of the war, which also changed the fate of Chinese art. However, the exhibition played a crucial role in fostering cultural exchange between China and Britain and significantly enhanced the visibility and influence of the Chinese community in Britain. During the exhibition, Britain saw a flourish of Chinese influence in fashion, design, interior decoration, and the textile industry, with Chinese art from the exhibition serving as a vital source of inspiration (Figure 56).⁶⁵² Articles and comics about Chinese culture and history appeared in newspapers, reflecting growing curiosity and engagement with China among the British public. However, stereotypes persisted, and some content was little more than anecdotes or humorous tales lacking authenticity.

Chiang Yee's first book published in Britain, *The Chinese Eye: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique*, coincided with the 1935 Exhibition.⁶⁵³ Published by Methuen & Company, the book was "a considerable hit, both commercially and critically," capitalising on the exhibition's popularity and the growing demand among London publishers for literature on Chinese art.⁶⁵⁴ Two years later, under the pen name "The Silent Traveller," Chiang depicted Western urban and natural landscapes by using traditional Chinese art techniques during his travels to the Lake District, London, Edinburgh, Paris, and San Francisco. His unique perspective as both an artist and historical observer significantly enhanced international appreciation of Chinese art, earning him a place among Western intellectual elites.

While participating in the 1935 Exhibition, the Chinese staff had the opportunity to explore London and major cities in France and Italy. They visited popular tourist sites, particularly museums with Chinese collections, viewed impressive collections from notable collectors, and networked with local Chinese communities. Fu Zhenlun, on his first journey abroad, meticulously observed Western society, documenting a wide range of intriguing encounters in his travelogue. These serve as valuable reference materials for my work.

Fu's reflection on his visit mirrored the surge of nationalist sentiments and modernisation of the time. According to his account, at Madame Tussauds in London, Fu saw a figure of Sun Yat-sen displayed alongside Napoleon, Washington, and Hitler. He intervened, leading to the removal of

652 For example, "Colours for 1936. Influence on Chinese Exhibition," *The Times*, October 17, 1935; "Chinese Season 1936," *Daily Mail*, December 18, 1935.

653 Chiang Yee, *The Chinese Eye: An Introduction to Its Aesthetic and Technique* (London: Methuen & Company, 1935; repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964).

654 Chiang, *Chongfang Zhongguo*, 26; Craig Clunas, "Chiang Yee as Art History," in *Chiang Yee and His Circle: Chinese Artistic and Intellectuals in Britain, 1930–50*, eds. Paul Bevan, Anne Witchard, and Da Zheng (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022), 19.

Hitler's figure.⁶⁵⁵ On September 12, 1935, Fu Zhenlun visited the V&A and its Indian art department, where he found Tibetan bronze Buddhas, paintings, and harnesses in the Indian collection. He described the scene with sharp disapproval: "The inclusion of our cultural relics in the Indian collection is a blatant example of imperialist encroachment, a deeply detested and unjustifiable practice."⁶⁵⁶ As a young Chinese intellectual, Fu's indignation reflected a growing nationalist sentiment against cultural dispossession. In contrast, the 1935 Exhibition marked an early effort by China to reassert its cultural agency on the international stage, presenting itself to the world on its terms and receiving favorable recognition.

On February 4, 1936, students from the Association of Chinese Artists in France crossed the Channel to visit the 1935 Exhibition, where they were received by staff from the Chinese Embassy and F. T. Cheng. In a photograph of their visit, taken by the Topical Press Agency, Chinese students and officials stand confidently in front of the Royal Academy entrance, dressed in fashionable Western attire, with Lin Huiyin's poster prominently displayed on a pillar behind them (Figure 57).⁶⁵⁷ These students had previously exhibited their modern Chinese artworks at the 1933 Paris Exhibition. Upon this point, the two grand exhibitions—one in London showcasing the ancient and enduring legacy of traditional Chinese art, the other in Paris presenting the dynamic innovation of modern Chinese art—somehow converged and resonated with each other through the journey of these Chinese students. Furthermore, assimilated into the Western environment, these students used the universal language of art to represent their Chinese cultural identity. Their presence challenged conventional Orientalist epistemology, overturning the dichotomy of East and West, self and other, observer and observed.⁶⁵⁸

655 "Fu Zhenlun Travelogue 3," *Zijincheng* 3 (2004): 151.

656 "竟以我文物列入印度，帝国主义侵权之举，习以为常，殊堪痛恨！" *Ibid.* 153.

657 "Chinese Students," Getty Images, accessed May 22, 2024,

<https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/group-of-chinese-students-from-paris-during-a-visit-to-the-news-photo/3093465?adppopup=true>. I thank Mark Pomeroy for providing an unwatermarked version of the photograph.

658 Ting Chang, *Travel, Collecting*, 73; Stephanie Su, "Exhibition as Art Historical Space," 127.



Figure 57. Chinese students from France visited the 1935 Exhibition. February 4, 1936. Source: Getty Images.

Staging Chinese Art in Beijing, 2019

In contrast to the 1935 Exhibition, which subtly embedded political and diplomatic intentions beneath the glamour of art, the political resonance of the 2019 Exhibition was straightforward and undeniable. With over six hundred pieces of art installed in the Galleries North 2 and North 3 of the NMC, the exhibition was saturated with an array of symbols, colours, and fonts, all meticulously chosen to convey explicit political messages (Figure 58). The exhibition's political overtones were evident right from the entrance throughout the entire exhibition narrative, where an oversized red panel boldly displayed the exhibition's title (Figure 59). Red, a colour deeply symbolic in Chinese culture, representing celebration, the national flag of the PRC, and the essence of Communism, set the tone for the entire exhibition. The title was inscribed in striking yellow, with the main title rendered in traditional characters and calligraphy, while the subtitle was presented in simplified characters and printed font. This deliberate juxtaposition of traditional and simplified characters, coupled with the colour symbolism tied to the national flag, ingeniously established a connection and contrast between the past and the present right from the exhibition's outset.



Figure 58. Plan of the NMC. Galleries hosting the 2019 Exhibitions are shown in red boxes. Source: NMC



Figure 59. Entrance of “The Journey Back Home.” View at the exhibition. Image credit: PAM, 2019

Ceremonial Dimensions of Repatriation

The opening of the exhibition highlighted a poignant chapter in modern Chinese history. Among its most significant and meticulously curated displays was the collective presentation of the Yuanmingyuan zodiac bronze heads, which had been repatriated to China. Positioned as the centrepiece of the exhibition, these heads were solemnly displayed on red stands within glass

cases, arranged in their original Yuanmingyuan order: pig, rabbit, ox, rat, tiger, and monkey (Figure 60). The horse head held special significance, having been donated by Pansy Ho Chiu-king (He Chaoqiong 何超琼, 1962-) on behalf of her father, Stanley Ho.⁶⁵⁹ Ho had acquired the head before its scheduled auction at Sotheby's Hong Kong in 2007 and subsequently transferred ownership to the Chinese government, while the artefact remained in Hong Kong and Macau for public display.⁶⁶⁰



Figure 60. Bronze head of Chinese Zodiac from Yuanmingyuan at the 2019 Exhibition. Source: NMC.

The donation ceremony, held on November 13, as part of the 2019 Exhibition, saw Luo Shugang receiving the horse head on behalf of the Chinese government. The ceremony, in its performative grandeur, emphasised the repatriation of overseas Chinese artefacts as a national endeavour, showcasing contributions from both individuals and the collective. This act of restitution not only reclaimed the artefact's legal ownership but also reinforced the government's leadership in cultural recovery. Finally, 159 years after their looting, the repatriated Yuanmingyuan zodiac bronze heads were collectively displayed for the first time. After the exhibition, the head of horse was eventually returned to Yuanmingyuan as the first bronze head to truly return "home."

659 Wang Ying 王莹, "Mashou tongxiang chonghui Yuanmingyuan" 马首铜像重回圆明园 [Bronze head of horse returned Yuanmingyuan], Xinhua Net, November 13, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-11/13/c_1210352593.htm.

660 Xin Dingding, "Tycoon buys looted treasure for nation," China Daily, September 21, 2007, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-09/21/content_6123298.htm; "Zodiac Animal Heads," Lisboaeta Macau, accessed December 10, 2024, <https://www.lisboetamacau.com/en/art-neighbourhood/zodiac-statue/>.

Behind the bronze heads of the Chinese zodiac stood a coloured restoration image of Haiyantang, the original location of the heads, celebrating the historical architecture in its full, vibrant glory. Opposite this stood a stark black-and-white image of the present-day Yuanmingyuan ruins that were broken and cluttered (Figure 61). This deliberate juxtaposition of past grandeur with current devastation created a powerful emotional impact, evoking a sense of *déjà vu* and awakening patriotic sentiments. By vividly contrasting what was once magnificent with what remains today, the exhibition stirred a collective longing for cultural restoration and national revival. Set within the context of National Day, this compelling display resonated deeply with audiences, celebrating the nation's determination, its commitment to preserving cultural heritage, and its ongoing efforts to address the legacies of colonial-era plundering, while fostering a strong sense of unity and pride.



Figure 61. Yuanmingyuan now and then at the 2019 Exhibition. Source: NMC.

Recreating historical scenes has been employed as both a visual strategy and an artistic expression in today's exhibitions and artistic practices. Such recreations go beyond the boundaries of conventionally-defined "historic" exhibitions, transforming them into representations of historical narratives and creators of "alternative histories."⁶⁶¹ Taking the Yuanmingyuan bronze heads of the Chinese zodiac as an example, displayed against the contrasting images of the heritage site in its glorious past and its present-day ruins, the exhibition provided an immersive experience that

⁶⁶¹ Catherine Spencer, "Making It New: The Trend for Recreating Exhibitions," *Apollo*, April 27, 2015, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/making-it-new-the-trend-for-recreating-exhibitions/>.

combined vivid visual stimuli with an evocative narrative. The displays, described as “offering fleeting emotional thrills,” encouraged the audience to engage with the history presented, fostering emotional engagement and promoting reflection on cultural memory among the audience.⁶⁶² Especially placing it at the beginning of the exhibition amplified its symbolic potency. From media coverage and photos taken on-site, it is evident that this section of the exhibition captivated many visitors, who stopped to observe and take pictures as souvenirs (Figure 62). In a highly mediated society like today, the spread of emotions elicited by exhibitions becomes a critical means of connecting audiences to history, extending the impact of cultural memory and the narratives on display.

Another installation of historic recreation was the display of two bronze cranes, which were lost in 1900 during the invasion by the Eight-Nation Alliance and repatriated in 1975 (Figure 63). These delicate cranes, once symbolic ornaments representing good fortune in the pavilion, were displayed in glass cabinets. The backdrop featured a historical photograph of the pavilion taken by Scottish photographer Donald Mennie (1875-1944) during the early years of the Republic.⁶⁶³ By the time of this photograph, the pavilion was already looted, leaving only the structure standing, with its windows and ornaments removed. The combination of the cranes and the photograph portrayed the vulnerability of history. In front of the photograph, small stairs were installed, visually inviting visitors to the Bronze Pavilion (*Baoyun ge* 宝云阁) on the Longevity Hill (*Wanshou shan* 万寿山) of the Yiheyuan Summer Palace. The stairs also invited visitors to step into and engage with this chapter of history. Nearby, the window frames of the Bronze Pavilion, which were returned in 1993, were also displayed, further reinforcing the theme of historical fragmentation and gradual recovery (Figure 64).

⁶⁶² Ibid.

⁶⁶³ “The Bronze Pavilion, or Pavilion of Precious Clouds (宝云阁), Summer Palace, Beijing,” Historical Photographs of China, University of Bristol, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://hpcbristol.net/visual/Bk04-35>.



Figure 62. Visitors taking photographs of the bronze heads of Yuanmingyuan at the 2019 Exhibition, Source: China News.



Figure 63. Bronze cranes at the 2019 Exhibition, with the historical photograph of their original location, the Bronze Pavilion of the Yiheyuan Summer Palace. Source: *2019 Catalogue*, 102-03

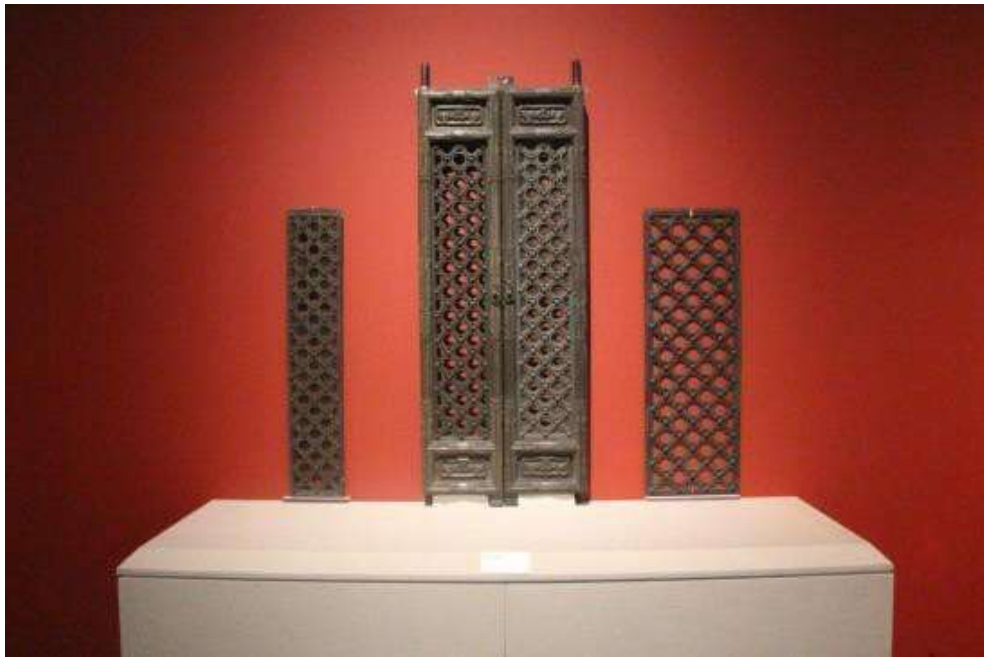


Figure 64. Bronze window frames from the Bronze Pavilion at the 2019 Exhibition. Source: CCTV.



Figure 65. Gallery view of the 2019 Exhibition. Source: NMC.

The search for and return of looted objects from Yuanmingyuan and the invasion by the Eight-Nation Alliance, as well as other incidents during the “Century of Humiliation”, form a central narrative of the 2019 Exhibition, with these artefacts prominently displayed in the most visible

sections. Although the exhibition showcased ancient artefacts spanning thousands of years, encompassing various regions, materials, and styles, the presentation of Chinese art history was fragmented. Rather than presenting a cohesive narrative of artistic evolution, the artefacts were politicised, becoming symbols within a narrative that underscored the development of the CPC since 1949. This emphasis shifted the focus away from China's broader cultural history, reframing the artefacts as tools to affirm contemporary political achievements and ideals. In the discourse of “lost” and “return,” the 2019 Exhibition connected the brilliance of ancient culture with the rising power of contemporary China in its narrative. In doing so, the exhibition aligned with the rhetorical strategies of many previous politics-oriented exhibitions in China, reinforcing the notion of the “historical inevitability of choosing the CCP and the socialist road.”⁶⁶⁴ It transformed the artefacts into vehicles for a larger political message, highlighting the CCP's role in reclaiming and preserving cultural heritage while asserting its legitimacy and authority in shaping modern China's identity.

The arrangement of the gallery rooms for the 2019 Exhibition was the same as the layout of the “Ancient China” section of the NMC. In a dark environment, glass cabinets were placed to showcase the highlighted exhibits, such as bronzes like the minfanglei and the tiger ying vessel (Figure 65). Each display cabinet was equipped with lighting at the bottom, which not only highlighted the beauty of the objects but also facilitated the audience in viewing the details. Long cabinets were installed along the walls. According to Denton, the measures of exhibiting ancient objects in a dark environment started since the renovation of NMC, while the parts on modern Chinese history and the revolution history adopt the bright lighting.⁶⁶⁵ In modern exhibition design, lighting technology not only renders, but also becomes part of art interpretation. Lighting in exhibitions harmonises the art-audience relationship, highlights the materiality of the pieces, and aligns with art theory.⁶⁶⁶ The dark environment with individual lighting for artworks “creates an impression of night time in which the light beams bring the art to life; the contrast “exerts a sense of fascination akin to a stage performance.”⁶⁶⁷ With the glass walls, like the walls in theatre, a sense of distance is created. This theatrical and distanced presentation can also be interpreted as an act of self-exoticism. The setting in the 2019 Exhibition reflects the perception of China as a millennia-old continuous civilisation, while against a red background, “the government

664 Beijing Museum Association, ed., *Beijing bowuguan nianjian 1992–1994* 北京博物馆年鉴 1992–1994 [Yearbook of Beijing Museums 1992–1994] (Beijing: Beijing yanshan chubanshe, 1995), 150; Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 65.

665 Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 65–66.

666 Thomas Schielke, “Interpreting Art with Light: Museum Lighting between Objectivity and Hyperrealism” *LEUKOS* 16, no. 1 (2019): 8. .

667 Ibid. 15.

control[led] museum discourse to uphold the legitimacy” and presented “the CPC as the keeper of Chinese cultural, historical, political, and moral heritage.”⁶⁶⁸

For artefacts that were repatriated in large batches, they were mostly accumulated without deliberate and aesthetically considered curation (Figure 66). This display approach eschewed categorisation or systematisation of the artefacts. Instead, it used a collective showcase of objects in large quantities to underscore the significance of the events they represented. In this arrangement, the artistic or cultural value of individual objects was downplayed, with the focus on the overall impact of the exhibition. This non-systematic display strategy aimed to present a broader and more coherent narrative through a large-scale presentation, highlighting the interconnectedness and historical significance of the artefacts, beyond their individual artistic or cultural value.

A few months before the 2019 Exhibition, the NMC presented another exhibition titled “The Journey Back Home (*guilai* 归来)” from April 24 to June 30. This exhibition enjoyed similarities in its title, theme, layout and presentation to the 2019 Exhibition (Figure 67). It displayed 796 repatriated Chinese artefacts from Italy, celebrating Xi Jinping’s diplomatic success during his March visit to Italy. During this visit, Xi received the smuggled artefacts and signed several bilateral agreements on heritage protection and cultural cooperation with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.⁶⁶⁹ Displaying all the repatriated items indiscriminately emphasised the scale of the repatriation effort and its significance in politics and diplomacy, rather than focusing on the curatorial selectivity or artistic hierarchy.

The overwhelming display of collective triumph emphasised the scale and success of China’s cultural heritage reclamation efforts. This mirrored the Chinese government’s large-scale repatriation initiatives, which were highly celebrated, extensively mediated, and framed as central themes of the exhibition. Through photographs, we can see that in the repatriation event, these objects were displayed on the ground (Figure 68). Repatriation achievements were portrayed as a government-led spectacle, underpinned by a progressively consolidated governance system and broad social mobilisation, highlighting the nation’s strength and its diplomatic capabilities.. They shift China’s image from a nation that suffered due to weak national power and flawed legal

⁶⁶⁸ Varutti, *Museums in China*, 159.

⁶⁶⁹ “Guilai—Yidali fanhuan Zhongguo liushi wenwuzhan” 归来——意大利返还中国流失文物展 [The Journey Back Home: An Exhibition of Chinese Artifacts Repatriated from Italy], NMC, accessed April 4, 2023, <https://m.chnmuseum.cn/portals/0/web/zt/20190424guilai/>.

systems, which allowed its cultural heritage to be looted abroad, to one of growing strength and cultural pride.



Figure 66. Gallery views of smaller-sized objects that were repatriated in large batches at the 2019 Exhibition. Source: NMC.



Figure 67. “The Journey Back Home: An Exhibition of Chinese Artefacts Repatriated from Italy,” View at the entrance and gallery. Source: NMC.



Figure 68. China's first large-scale repatriation of cultural relics, from the United Kingdom in 1998. Source: *2019 Catalogue*, 104.

The 2019 Exhibition attracted mainly a domestic audience. While the exhibition showcased China's connections to the world, both culturally and diplomatically, it was not truly international in scope, despite its global cultural references. Instead, it is part of a narrative constructed within a globalised framework about China. By prominently displaying repatriated artefacts that had been removed from China due to colonial and illicit activities, the exhibition highlighted the successful return of these cultural treasures. It emphasised both their historical significance and their symbolic role in shaping the identity of the PRC. These artefacts were framed as political vessels that conveyed China's confidence in its cultural heritage and fostered a sense of cultural identity among its people.

The exhibition served a political purpose by evoking memories of China's historical suffering, particularly during the "Century of Humiliation," while simultaneously celebrating contemporary triumphs. By showcasing symbolic objects and carefully crafted narratives within a politicised framework, the exhibition fostered emotional connections to the nation, its culture, and its global standing. The repatriated artefacts not only represented a triumph over historical wrongs but were also framed as symbols of China's resurgence as a global power. Through this framing, the exhibition effectively merged diplomatic strategy with nationalist sentiment, positioning the state as the steward of its cultural heritage.

The chronological arrangement of the repatriated objects in the exhibition highlighted the leadership of the CPC, highlighting its authoritative role in the cultural industry, especially the heritage sector.. The curatorial choice underscored the power of the CCP in shaping both the narrative and the flow of information, reinforcing its dominant role in contemporary China. By presenting China's cultural journey through the lens of repatriation, the exhibition emphasised the importance of cultural heritage to national identity. It also highlighted the PRC's political power, reinforcing the central role of the CCP in crafting the nation's modern identity.

Within this highly charged political context, the 2019 Exhibition sought “to provide a comprehensive demonstration of the achievements in the repatriation of lost Chinese cultural relics,” showcasing “the historical background and process of repatriating various cultural relics, while outlining and depicting a magnificent picture of the seventy-year journey of returning lost cultural objects.”⁶⁷⁰ The exhibition highlighted China's development through the artefacts once wrongfully removed and later reclaimed in the regime of the PRC, portraying their return as a symbol of national strength and cultural revival, linking the millennia-long civilisation to the seventy years of the PRC's growth. This juxtaposition not only emphasised national pride and cultural continuity but also constructed a narrative of China's resurgence as a global power. By symbolising China's rising status on the international stage, the exhibition skilfully fused diplomatic strategy with nationalist sentiment, strategically positioning the state as a steward of cultural heritage.

However, this framing warrants critical examination, as it blurs the line between cultural celebration and political propaganda. It raises questions about how such narratives are leveraged to consolidate domestic support and project a curated image of China's role in the world. The exhibition's emphasis on China's cultural reclamation, presented as an unbroken narrative of triumph, also raises concerns about the homogenisation of cultural identity. The repatriation exhibition at the NMC reinforces the centralisation of Beijing as both a cultural and political hub, along with the centralisation of Han Chinese culture.⁶⁷¹ While this is not the primary focus of this

670 Liu Yuzhu 刘玉珠, “Zhici” 致辞 [greetings], in *2019 Catalogue*, 9.

671 In 2021, 2200 Sámi artefacts were repatriated from the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki to the Sámi Museum Siida in Lapland. Among these, 140 objects were displayed in an exhibition titled “Mäccmõš, maccâm, máhccan – The Homecoming,” at the National Museum from October 2021 to February 2022. The exhibition was realised with the participation of Sámi art professionals and activists, ensuring that the objects were handled and displayed according to Sámi cultural practices. The efforts marked a shift in the 170-year-long dominance of the National Museum of Finland in shaping the context of Sámi culture, which provided a form of repatriation that emphasised decentralisation, shifting control from national institutions to the Indigenous community. This exhibition not only facilitated the return of the artefacts but also empowered the Sámi community to take charge of their own cultural narrative, offering a powerful counterpoint to conventional state-centred exhibitions. “CLOSED: Mäccmõš, maccâm, máhccan—The Homecoming,” Kansallis Museo [National Museum of Finland],

analysis, it is worth noting how this exhibition marginalises other cultural narratives within China. The government-controlled discourse risks suppressing diverse voices, historical complexities, and cultural pluralism. By presenting a curated version of history, it marginalises the challenges China has faced in reclaiming its cultural heritage and excludes stories that do not fit within the dominant national narrative. This selective collective memory may shape the broader public's understanding of their own history, suppressing alternative histories and reducing the richness of cultural diversity.

Summary

The differences in presentation and narrative between the 1935 and 2019 Exhibitions can be attributed to the contrasting venues and the distinct institutional purposes that shaped them. Cultural institutions, through their construction and evolution, play significant roles in shaping national identities and reflecting the historical context of their times. The RA in London, as an independent, privately funded institution, has long been an important part of the British art scene. Over time, it evolved into a hub for British art canonisation, while also adapting to the growing discourse of internationalism during the 1920s and 1930s. In that period, the exhibitions, increasingly showcasing loaned foreign art, became a platform for Britain's international relations and diplomacy, politicising the context of the exhibitions and emphasising Britain's global standing. On the other hand, NMC, with its historical roots dating back to the early republican era, transformed the once-imperial collections into shared national treasures by making them publicly accessible—a revolutionary move that emphasised the collective ownership of China's cultural heritage. The establishment of the new building continues to reinforce political ideologies and to strengthen national identity and collective memory. This shift played a key role in fostering a unified national consciousness among the Chinese people.

Therefore, the 1935 and 2019 Exhibition demonstrated distinct approaches to presenting Chinese art and their broader cultural, political, and historical implications. The former introduced Chinese art to Western audiences, emphasising its connections to literature and philosophy. As Laurence Binyon, one of the introducers of the 1935 Exhibition, described Chinese landscape paintings as “fantastic,” and metalworks as originating from the “fairyland of the Taoists”—a perspective that

accessed December 18, 2024, <https://www.kansallismuseo.fi/en/exhibitions/maccos-maccam-mahccan-kotiinpaluu>.

reflected an Orientalist lens.⁶⁷² While this approach highlighted the uniqueness of Chinese art, it simultaneously risked reducing it to something otherworldly and disconnected from reality, framing it as exotic and mystical rather than grounded in the tangible cultural and historical context. Within the Western-dominated discourse, the curatorial strategies of the 1935 Exhibition demonstrated a very careful yet fragile balance between compromise and persistence: catering to Western audiences' imaginations of the East while simultaneously showcasing the profound cultural heritage and artistic achievements of Chinese art. By introducing new genres of art with indigenous aesthetics, Chinese curators approached the exhibition not only as a cultural negotiation but also as a defence and expression of Chinese identity—a young, modern, cultured state eager to participate on the international stage. Despite challenges, the event played a pivotal role in elevating the global understanding of Chinese art, blending diplomatic aims with artistic aspirations. Through this effort, the 1935 Exhibition became a tool of soft diplomacy, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and recognition.

In contrast, the 2019 Exhibition at Beijing's NMC represented a centralised and politicised narrative, shaped entirely by the Chinese government. Focused on the repatriation of looted artefacts, the exhibition celebrated cultural recovery as a symbol of national pride and resilience. The juxtaposition of artefacts with photographs set against a highly saturated background and fuelled by patriotic narratives evoked both loss and triumph, framing the return of these treasures as a significant achievement of the country, with the CPC as the leader. Immersive visual techniques, including dramatic lighting and theatrical displays, heightened the emotional impact of the exhibition. The narrative prioritised the role of the CPC in reclaiming cultural heritage and positioned these efforts within a broader framework of national rejuvenation, linking China's ancient civilisation to the contemporary regime.

While the 1935 Exhibition highlighted China's cultural contributions to the world, the 2019 Exhibition used art to evoke patriotic sentiment and reinforce narratives of resilience and sovereignty. Nevertheless, both underpinned the power of cultural institutions to shape collective memory and national identity, but they also reveal the evolving relationship between cultural heritage and political discourse. Where the 1935 Exhibition balanced art and diplomacy, the 2019 Exhibition blurred the lines between cultural celebration and propaganda, risking a homogenised view of Chinese identity that overshadowed the diversity of the nation's cultural history. Together, they illustrate how ancient Chinese art has been mobilised to serve different agendas, reflecting both China's changing international standing and its internal priorities.

672 Binyon, "Introduction", xiii, xv.

Chapter 8. Afterlife and Conclusion

Following the conclusion of both exhibitions—the artworks from the 1935 Exhibition once again set adrift across the sea before returning to China, and the 2019 exhibition in Beijing, after which the artefacts were reinstated in their respective national or provincial museums following repatriation—the journey of Chinese art did not end. Instead, these objects entered new phases of meaning, circulation, and political resonance. Through the lens of the Chinese cultural relics that are returned and unreturned, this chapter presents the afterlives of the two exhibitions, the personal and institutional networks they fostered, and the legacies they left for subsequent exhibitions of similar kinds. The movement of cultural artefacts, whether outward or homeward, has mirrored shifting narratives of national identity, cultural diplomacy, and historical trauma. By following the trajectories of these artworks after their display, this chapter considers how exhibitions function not as endpoints but as pivotal moments in longer histories of cultural exchange, repatriation, and political symbolism. Therefore, the journeys of the Chinese art presented in this thesis offer a historical thread and a critical framework for understanding how exhibitions, as transformative nodes, not only shaped the reception of Chinese art but also catalysed enduring debates around ownership, heritage, and cultural memory, allowing these objects to continue generating meaning far beyond the confines of their original displays and institutions.

(Un-)Returned Chinese Art

The closure of the 1935 Exhibition marked the end of its official run, but the friendship between British and Chinese staff persisted. Even decades later, those who had once shared in this cultural milestone remained connected through this unique experience. This bond transcended time and borders, forming an artistic and meaningful chapter in the history of international collaboration. On March 8, 1936, the day after the exhibition closed, the exhibition secretary Walter Lamb and his wife invited F. T. Cheng and the Chinese staff of the 1935 Exhibition to a day trip to the Royal Pavillion of Brighton as their last trip in Britain before returning to China (Figure 69).⁶⁷³ Despite the chaos and that China and Britain had to face in the 1930s, at this moment captured in the photograph in front of the Indo-Saracenic-style Royal Pavilion, in the seaside town of Brighton,

⁶⁷³ “Fu Zhenlun Travelogue 11,” *Zijincheng* 11 (2004): 148.

equality became a powerful symbol, not only in terms of nationality but also of gender. It carried the hope that society was gradually moving towards greater equality.

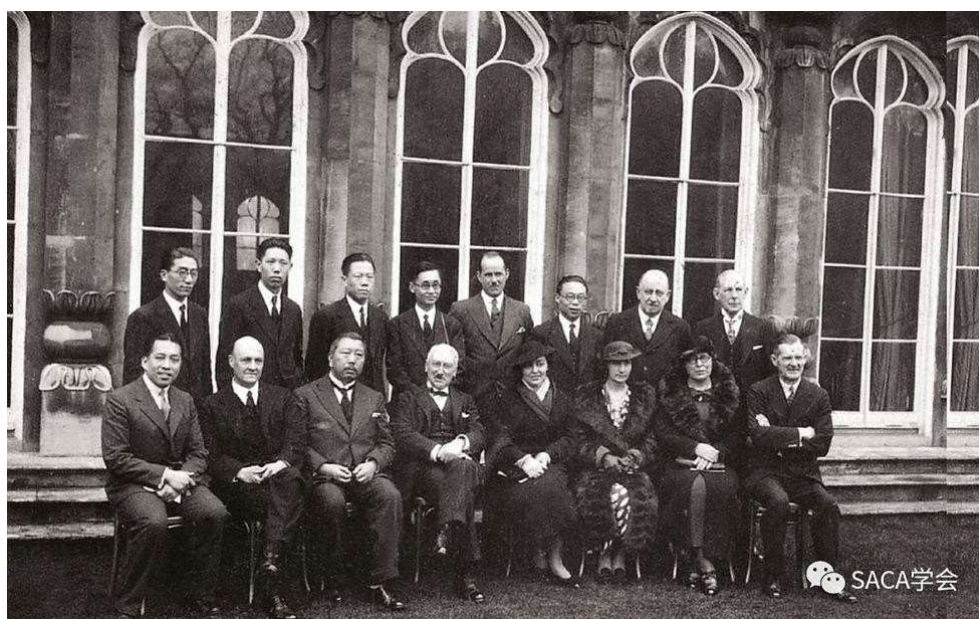


Figure 69. British and Chinese staff of the 1935 Exhibition and the local officials in front of the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, March 8, 1936. Walter Lamb, F. T. Cheng (the second and third from left in the first row) and Chinese staff, Fu Zhenlun, Na Zhiliang, Niu Deming, Zhuang Shangyan (the first to fourth from left in the second row) and Song Jilong (the third from right in the second row). Source: SACA.

Quo Tai-chi concluded his tenure as Ambassador in London in 1941 and returned to China to assume the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs. At the farewell party held at the embassy, many British dignitaries came to bid him and his wife farewell, and the British Pathé filmed the event.⁶⁷⁴ In 1946, F. T. Cheng returned to London to work as the last Ambassador of the ROC. The British individuals who had been “frequent” visitors to the 1935 Exhibition would surely have been familiar with this “China’s George Sainsbury,” due to his personal charm and wide-ranging interests.⁶⁷⁵ In 1957, Percival David visited Taiwan, where he met Zhuang Shangyan, who was, at the time, working on the establishment of the new NPM in Taipei. During their reunion, David presented Zhuang with a copy of *Transactions of the OCS 1936-1937*, which contained Percival’s analytical essay on Ju wares that were exhibited in the 1935 Exhibition. This book symbolised the enduring friendship between the Chinese curator and his “most active and enthusiastic character at

⁶⁷⁴ “Mr Quo Tai Chi Says Goodbye,” British Pathé, accessed May 24, 2024, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/66173>.

⁶⁷⁵ “Biographical Sketch of the New Chinese Ambassador,” *Sunday Observer*, July 28, 1946, 3.

the 1935 Exhibition” friend, spanning decades, countries, and languages, and rooted in their shared love for Chinese art and cultural heritage.⁶⁷⁶

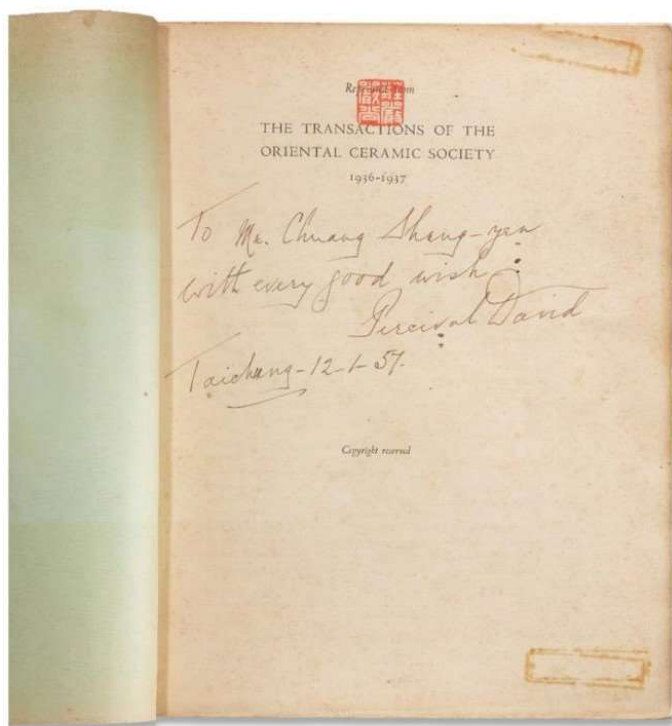


Figure 70. Preface of *Transactions of the OCS, 1936-1937*. Inscription: “To Mr. Chuang Shang-yen. With every good wish. Percival David. Taichung12-1-57.” Source: Christie’s

The Chinese exhibits for the 1935 Exhibition arrived Shanghai shore on May 17, 1936, “without a crack” after almost one month at sea. A little-known accident happened in the Strait of Gibraltar, when the ship was stuck due to the rough sea.⁶⁷⁷ Instead of being sent back by the same navy cruiser, the Chinese national treasures were carried by OSS. Ranpura, a steamer from Indian Mail and Passenger Service.⁶⁷⁸ Zhuang Shangyan, Tang Xifen, and four Chinese exhibition assistants, all the Chinese artefacts packed in steel cases, embarked in London. The four young men then transferred to another ship in Marseilles to return to China, leaving Zhuang and Tang on board to escort the national treasures.⁶⁷⁹ From June 1 to 21, 1936, the Chinese artefacts were sent to Nanjing for a three-week exhibition at the Examination Yuan (*kaoshi yuan* 考试院). Alongside the returned artefacts, there were 1360 photographs that illustrated overseas Chinese art collections. The aim of the exhibition, as cited by Xu Wanling, was “to allow the Chinese to visit and verify

676 Zhuang, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji,” 129; “A Very Rare Copy of A Commentary on Ju Ware Signed by Sir Percival David for Chuang Shang-Yen,” Christie’s, accessed September 29, 2023, <https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/pavilion-online-chinese-art/very-rarecopy-commentary-ju-ware-signed-sir-percival-david-chuang-3149/119467>.

677 Cheng, *Reflections at Eighty*, 45.

678 Zhuang, “Fuying canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu zhanlanhui ji,” 131-32.

679 Ibid. 132-33.

the returned antiques that had participated in the London Exhibition, and to learn about the circumstances under which our country's antiquities were handed over to foreign countries, as well as the places where they were collected.”⁶⁸⁰ The organisers, Lei Zhen and Teng Gu emphasised the significance of the Nanjing Exhibition in their speeches and articles:

When our country's antiques were exhibited in London, there were numerous foreign public and private collections in attendance, and all of these artefacts are precious relics from our country in history. Now, the display of the photographs allows us to deeply feel the infinite sorrow and thoughts about these ancient artefacts being scattered overseas. Therefore, this should awaken our compatriots' attention to the preservation of historical relics.⁶⁸¹

The 1935 Exhibition, as a precursor to Chinese art export exhibitions, embodied an experimental spirit and marked an era of openness. It provided a model for the organisation and aesthetics of future Chinese art exhibitions abroad, while laying a foundation for engaging international audiences and fostering foreign appreciation of Chinese art. In 1961, the touring exhibition “Chinese Art Treasures” was staged in the United States, featuring many of the artefacts that had captivated global audiences in 1935. Building on the experience of the 1935 Exhibition, this event, organised after the ROC relocated to Taiwan and the establishment of the NPM in Taipei, marked the museum's first overseas Chinese art exhibition. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, this exhibition presented NPM's Chinese artefacts as tools for projecting cultural identity and national imagery, under the name “Taiwan.”⁶⁸² While in the 1970s, the PRC also exhibited its newly unearthed archaeological objects during the Cultural Revolution period in London and Paris. These included several national treasures which symbolise the spirit of the Chinese nation, for example, the Flying Horse of Gansu (*mata feiyan* 马踏飞燕). This exhibition could be seen as a sign of China's effort to ease its tense and insular environment, signaling a gradual re-entry into the global community, followed by a series of international exhibitions of Chinese art.⁶⁸³ This exhibition was the predecessor of the AEC and marked the beginning of state regulation over the import and export of cultural relics in the PRC.⁶⁸⁴ Following the Reform and Opening-Up period,

680 “使国人对参加伦敦展览会古物重加印证，且借此得知吾国古物流传国外之情形及其收藏所在。” Xu

Wanling, “1935 nian Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui,” 18. Xu Wanling, “Guozhijiao zaiyu minxiangqin.”

681 “我国古物在伦敦展览时，国外公私收藏家参加者极多，均为我国历史上名贵古物。现经摄影参加陈列，可使吾人对古物流落国外，发生无限悲痛感想，而唤起国人保存古物之注意。” Xu Wanling, “1935 nian Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui,” 18. Xu Wanling, “Guozhijiao zaiyu minxiangqin.”

682 Jack Sewell, “Chinese Art Treasures: An Exhibition of Masterpieces from Taiwan,” *The Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1961): 62–64.

683 Cui, “Zhongguo wenwu jiaoliu zhongxin,” 11.

684 Ibid. 9.

the participation of Chinese art in an overseas exhibition became increasingly frequent, marked by a diversification of themes, perspectives, and curatorial strategies. Modes of organisation and collaboration also expanded. A notable example is the 2007 “Masterpieces of Chinese Painting” exhibition at the V&A, which showcased the canonisation and evolution of Chinese aesthetics. The exhibition notably used Western or universally recognised dating methods instead of Chinese dynastic markers, representing an effort to integrate classical Chinese art history into the global art historical narrative.⁶⁸⁵

Five Palaces Museums, A Battle over Legitimacy

After the exhibition in Nanjing, the Chinese national treasures were put back into their Shanghai storage. With these three connected exhibitions in Shanghai, London, and Nanjing, China’s artistic heritage was on public display on both a domestic and international scale never seen.⁶⁸⁶ However, this odyssey of Chinese art did not come to an end with the conclusion of the exhibition and the return of the national treasures to their homeland. On the contrary, history carried these Chinese artefacts to even more distant places.

Between 1937 and 1949, in order to avoid the scourge of the Sino-Japanese War and then the Chinese Civil War, the NPM collections were forced to be evacuated several times: from Shanghai to Chongqing and Southwest China, and back to Nanjing.⁶⁸⁷ It was not an easy journey for the Chinese national treasures, full of fatigue, anxiety, hardship, and the constant risk of war and pillage.⁶⁸⁸ China’s Civil War ended with the defeat of the KMT and their retreat to Taiwan. The 3,824 cases of Chinese national treasures, including those that participated in the 1935 Exhibition, were moved to Taiwan.⁶⁸⁹ The relocation started from 1948. Zhuang Shangyan and Na Zhiliang, thirteen years after escorting the national treasures on the sea to London, escorted them on the sea

685 See Zhang Hongxing ed. *Masterpieces of Chinese Painting: 700-1900 Exhibition* (London, V&A, 2013).

686 Guo Hui, “New Categories, New History: ‘The Preliminary Exhibition of Chinese Art’ in Shanghai, 1935,” in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence: The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress in the History of Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2009), 859–60.

687 Elliott and Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China’s Imperial Art Treasures*, 85–97.

688 Geremie R. Barmé, “The Transition from Palace to Museum: The Palace Museum’s Prehistory and Republican Years,” *China Heritage Quarterly* 4 (December 2005), accessed September 29, 2023, http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=004_palacemuseumprehistory.inc&issue=004.

689 Elliott and Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China’s Imperial Art Treasures*, 98.

again, with Ma Heng remaining in Beijing, continuing to work at the NPM until his retirement in 1952.⁶⁹⁰

After the establishment of the PRC, the collections of the NPM that remained in Nanjing were returned to the museum in Beijing in three installments, totaling 6,253 cases based on my calculations.⁶⁹¹ The relocation of these artefacts to Taiwan has transformed the two palace museums of Chinese art into a symbol of the complex mainland-Taiwan relationship. Through these art pieces, the history and culture of both sides of the Taiwan Strait are interconnected, highlighting potential issues related to the definition of Chinese art and repatriation and restitution. Every collaborative exhibition or effort to reunite artefacts that were separated or speculated upon for historical reasons tends to ignite passionate debates among people on both sides. Especially for mainland Chinese, every time the two Palaces collaborate on such events, it is always intertwined with mixed sentiments of separation, reunion, and the cultural connection between China and Taiwan that is inseparable. Born from the same mother museum, the strands of the NPM in Beijing and Taipei are intrinsically linked. They also bifurcated, each mirroring its respective states. Despite the fact that both museums claim their legitimacy as the real successor of the NPM, which was established in 1925. The differences between the two Palace Museums exist in their architecture, collections, and organisation. And the two museums have different attitudes towards their collections. The Palace Museum in Beijing, occupying the original site of the Forbidden City, focuses on the architecture and design of this imperial palace. A visit to the Palace Museum in Beijing is usually a garden tour. Especially in today's highly developed tourism and media, it is common to see many tourists dressed in traditional attire taking photos in front of palaces or the gardens. On the other hand, the National Palace Museum Taipei has probably the most important artefacts from the palace in a classical-styled contemporary building. Therefore, it attaches more importance to the display of artefacts, which reflects the true functions of a museum, i.e. collecting, preserving, displaying cultural objects, and passing on and promoting culture through education and research.

The museums hold a unique connection that mirrors the broader cross-Strait political tensions. The historical and cultural artefacts housed in these museums are more than just objects of

690 The Chinese objects that were transported to Taiwan came from the NPM, Beiping Library, Central Library Academic Sinica, and Preparatory Office of the Central Museum (*Zhongyang bowuguan chouweichu* 中央博物馆筹备处). For excavation history details, Song Zhaolin 宋兆霖, ed., *Beigou chuanqi: gugong wenwu qiantaihou zaoqi suiyue* 北沟传奇：故宫文物迁台后早期岁月 [The Beigou legacy: The NPM's early years in Taiwan] (Taipei: NPM, 2020), 13.

691 "Nanqian wenwu huigui gugong" 南迁文物回归故宫 [Relocated cultural artefacts returned to the Palace Museum], NPM, accessed April 25, 2025, https://www.dpm.org.cn/topic/party_building/north/detail/255724.html.

antiquity; they symbolise the complex relationship between mainland China and Taiwan, reflecting the historical, ideological, and political trends that have defined their interactions. As these museums curate and display their collections, they weave a narrative that showcases both the commonalities and the contradictions in the cultural and historical heritage of China and Taiwan. They convey a shared cultural identity while simultaneously highlighting the distinctive characteristics and divergent paths that the two regions have taken.

Now, there are five museums under the name “*gugong*.” Besides the two most important and largest ones discussed above, the Shenyang Palace (*Shenyang gugong* 沈阳故宫), built in 1625, served as the former palace of the Later Jin and the early Qing Dynasties before the Manchus entered Beijing. It preserves the more conservative traditions of Manchu architecture, with the imperial collections in it having been merged into the NPM Beijing after the fall of the Qing Dynasty. In 2015, the NPM Taipei opened its Southern Branch (*guoli gugong bowuyuan manbu yuanqu* 国立故宫博物院南部院区) in Chiayi (嘉义). Despite bearing the title of the NMP, the new museum features not only Chinese art but also local Taiwanese artworks and objects from various other Asian cultures. The ambiguous institutional role and unclear criteria for exhibitions and acquisitions raise concerns about its alignment with the museum’s name. Finally, the Hong Kong Palace Museum (*Xianggang gugong wenhua bowuguan* 香港故宫文化博物馆) was opened in 2022 in the vibrant West Kowloon Cultural District. Instead of developing its own collections, the Hong Kong Palace Museum mostly relies on loaned artworks from Beijing. As can be seen, the history of the division and relocation of the NPM in Beijing and Taipei stand as a poignant testament to the intricate tapestry of Chinese cultural identity. Through the tracing back of the historical journey of the Chinese national treasures and the development of the sibling institutions, it becomes evident that the complexities between these two museums are both captivating and emblematic of the broader political dynamics between mainland China and Taiwan. What further complicates this narrative will be if, including the three additional “*gugongs*” in the discussion, each with its own role, background, and purpose, adding yet another layer to the already complicated story. Perhaps, the Shenyang Palace carries the weight of past grandeur, yet today, as a site no longer serving its original function, it appears more like a frozen moment in history. In contrast, the museums in Chiayi and Hong Kong offer a different reflection of the distinct historical trajectories and cultural contexts of each region.

An Emerging Form of International-Contexted Exhibition

After the 2019 Exhibition ended, the exhibits returned to their home institutions. In recent years, these items, along with some newly repatriated artefacts, have been featured in several exhibitions on a similar topic. Often staged on special anniversaries or occasions at carefully selected locations, not only in national museums but also in regional museums, exhibitions of repatriated artefacts have increased and become a regular trend in China. The new exhibition model has increased public focus on relic protection and repatriation, laying a foundation for continued engagement and policy support. These exhibitions not only highlight the transnational movement of cultural relics but also underscore China's growing role in cultural diplomacy. Although set within an international context, showcasing China's international discourse power and diplomatic strength, the narratives of these exhibitions are soft power directed at the domestic audience, demonstrating international perspectives to the Chinese public and using art to intervene in politics.

The “outbound” and “return” journeys of these Chinese cultural relics are not only about the transnational movement of cultural heritage but also reveal the complex historical, political, and social backgrounds. Especially in the context of decolonisation, these exhibitions have also become an opportunity for China to reflect on its history and examine colonial legacies. Through the exhibitions of returned relics, China is progressively challenging the conventional Eurocentric narratives and reconstructing and restoring the significance of Chinese culture in a global context.⁶⁹² Celebrating the achievements of repatriation represents a rethinking of China's approach to the protection and restitution of cultural relics. These exhibitions not only reflect China's evolving cultural policy but also offer strong support for the country's cultural revival and national identity-building efforts. Through presenting, narrating, and connecting with the “Century of Humiliation,” these exhibitions further reinforce China's cultural confidence and sovereignty, highlighting the Chinese government's firm narrative as the sole legitimate owner of these artefacts. The exhibitions mirror a powerful response, heightened nationalism, and increasing government regulation of cultural and artistic expression. The reinterpretation of historical trauma plays a central role, positioning repatriated cultural relics as powerful symbols of China's suffering. This emphasis transforms these relics from mere objects of historical interest into potent symbols of resistance and recovery. The exhibitions evoke a mixed emotion of traumatic collective memory caused by the loss of cultural heritage during foreign occupation and colonial

692 “About,” ECHOES, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://projectechoes.eu/about/>.

exploitation, and the proud sentiment of the contemporary China's resurgence and an international image that gets stronger.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the journey of two exhibitions of Chinese art—the 1935 Exhibition and the 2019 Exhibition. Through detailed archival research and documentation analysis, I have examined how Chinese cultural artefacts have travelled across borders and undergone transformations in meaning, context, presentation, interpretation, and ownership. By using “cultural travel” as the framework, this study examines exhibition journeys as dynamic processes that link China to the world and history to the present. It highlights how art functions as an agent in shaping historical narratives, connecting them to contemporary identity, and mediating the movement of people, power, ideologies, and economic resources.

Through the comparative analysis of exhibition purposes, institutional roles, curatorial practices, political implications, and social motivations, this research reveals how the movement of Chinese art reflects broader political, social, and cultural shifts within China and globally. The 1935 Exhibition marked a pivotal moment in China's engagement with the Western world, presenting Chinese art as a product of ancient traditions while also serving as a tool of cultural diplomacy. The exhibition's placement within an international context reflected China's desire to project itself as an emerging nation-state, anticipating global affairs, seeking international sympathy, and asserting its role in world history. Art, as the driving force in this diplomatic exercise, was employed as both a cultural and political tool to shape and promote China's image abroad. In contrast, the 2019 Exhibition showcased a return journey for artefacts, emphasising the governmental endeavour to reclaim cultural patrimony, and assert its rising influence on the global stage. The artworks were once again mobilised as symbols of national pride, sovereignty, and political authority, recontextualised in a new geopolitical climate.

In comparison, the two exhibitions functioned as staged narratives—“miniature theatres” through which China crafted and projected its national image to the targeted audience. They worked as platforms for negotiating cultural diplomacy, articulating identity, and responding to historical trauma. The 1935 Exhibition marked an early attempt at decolonisation within the constraints of imperial power, reflecting China's aspiration to reassert cultural autonomy and negotiate

recognition within a Eurocentric world order. In contrast, the 2019 Exhibition represented a more confident reclaiming of cultural legacy, recontextualised within a new geopolitical framework, though it also risked amplifying nationalist sentiment. As sites where international and domestic perceptions collided, both exhibitions revealed the asymmetries and complexities of cultural exchange, illustrating the evolving interplay between China and the broader world. Seen from the perspective of 2019, the 1935 Exhibition emerges as a precursor to the modern vision of China, an early act of cultural self-positioning that laid the groundwork for more assertive expressions of national identity in the twenty-first century.

The aesthetic choices of both exhibitions also mirror the prevailing political climates of their respective times. The 1935 Exhibition portrayed a feminised, graceful image of China to solicit empathy and solidarity from the West. Conversely, the 2019 Exhibition projected a masculinised and assertive vision of strength, reflecting the nation's rising geopolitical ambitions. These representations of national identity, embedded in curatorial strategies and public messaging, reveal the performative nature of exhibitions as cultural spectacles shaped by political imperatives.

The exhibitions also highlight the politicisation of art, as objects of cultural significance were presented through state-driven agendas—either promoting diplomatic engagement and cultural exchange or reinforcing nationalism and sovereignty. In the 1935 Exhibition, the artworks were not merely displayed for their intrinsic artistic qualities but were used as instruments of cultural negotiation, reflecting China's aspirations to redefine its place in the world. Similarly, the 2019 Exhibition's focus on the return of cultural artefacts—many looted or displaced during foreign occupation—was framed as an act of political and cultural reclamation, symbolising China's resistance against historical injustices.

In the process of this politicisation, one crucial question arises: Does the emphasis on political implications overshadow the essential aesthetic value of the art itself? In both the 1935 and 2019 exhibitions, the artworks were not selected solely for their intrinsic artistic merit but were deeply imbued with political meaning. The 1935 Exhibition sought to demonstrate the sophistication and richness of Chinese culture to a Western audience, using art as a diplomatic tool and instrument of cultural negotiation aimed at gaining international respect and support. While aesthetic value was acknowledged, it was often secondary to the political purpose of projecting China's civilisational legacy. Similarly, the 2019 Exhibition presented repatriated artefacts as potent symbols of resistance, national pride, and historical rectification, framed within a concentrated nationalist discourse. In both cases, the exhibitions served as platforms for asserting China's cultural identity

and state sovereignty, shaped by their respective historical contexts. As a result, the political narratives became central to the curatorial strategies, sometimes overshadowing the aesthetic appreciation of the artworks in favour of their symbolic and rhetorical significance.

Crucially, both exhibitions underscore the role of museums and cultural institutions in shaping national identity. In 1935, the exhibition aimed to engage in cross-cultural dialogue by showcasing Chinese art travelling outward, crossing cultures, and being presented in a global context. This corresponded to China's burgeoning museum sector, which was heavily influenced by Western models in its early stages. On the other hand, the 2019 Exhibition focused on artefacts that had previously been forcibly taken from China and later returned, thus emphasising national unity and pride through their repatriation. The NMC, as a site of institutionalisation and canonisation of the official historical narrative, played a key role in this process. After the Cultural Revolution, in the face of neoliberalism and the failure of democratisation, China abandoned its original Marxist-Leninist revolutionary narrative in favour of a new narrative centred around "ancient Chinese culture" and "modern progress." Repatriated artefacts, fittingly, embody both dimensions, reflecting China's evolving historical consciousness and cultural identity.

The realisation of the two exhibitions was not without the involvement of the government, which played a crucial role in shaping the exhibition's agenda and framing the art as part of a larger state-driven narrative. The emphasis on the politicisation of art also underscores the evolving nature of cultural diplomacy. In the 1935 Exhibition, the presentation of Chinese art to a Western audience was framed within the context of modernisation. Although China was still under the shadow of imperialist powers, the exhibition aimed to assert China's cultural relevance within the Eurocentric international discourse, highlighting the nation's ancient heritage as a sign of its rightful place in world history. At the same time, it faced the challenge of Orientalist stereotypes and Western perceptions that sought to exoticise and simplify Chinese culture, presenting it as a timeless relic rather than a dynamic, evolving entity. This early attempt at decolonisation was limited by the power imbalances of the time, but it nevertheless marked a critical step in China's engagement with the West and its struggle to reshape its cultural narrative.

Finally, both exhibitions serve as crucial sites for reflecting on historical trauma and the politicisation of cultural heritage. While the 1935 Exhibition engaged with China's modernisation in the face of Western imperialism, the 2019 Exhibition dealt with the reclamation of cultural heritage, addressing issues of rightful ownership and national pride. However, the overemphasis on historical trauma in the 2019 Exhibition could risk fostering excessive nationalism and

potentially hinder broader cultural exchange and international understanding. As such, these exhibitions reflect the evolving nature of China's national identity and its complex relationship with the rest of the world. They demonstrate how art, as an agency of cultural diplomacy, not only shapes but also redefines China's role on the global stage, offering new narratives for understanding its past, present, and future.

The 2019 Exhibition provided a new approach to how exhibitions can engage with the notion of decolonisation. The repatriation of Chinese artefacts—many of which were looted or displaced during periods of foreign occupation and colonial exploitation—symbolises a definitive response to historical injustices. Here, decolonisation manifests not only in the return of physical objects but also in the reclamation of narratives. The 2019 Exhibition goes beyond simply showcasing these objects as material artefacts; it presents them as symbols of national resistance, imbued with semiotic and rhetorical significance. Once dispersed and subjected to foreign interpretations, these objects are now returned to their homeland and recontextualised within a national framework, highlighting the postcolonial reclamation of cultural heritage.

Although the 1935 Exhibition took place under the shadow of the “Century of Humiliation,” with many participants of the cultural event having experienced that painful history, due to China's internal and external crises and the urgent need for diplomatic support at the time, as well as the optimistic expectations of the authorities regarding the exhibition's outcomes, the curatorial framework tended to suppress these painful histories. By contrast, the 2019 Exhibition highlighted the nation's historical suffering, reinterpreting and amplifying it within the context of China's national resurgence and rising nationalist sentiment. In this framing, the past is not silenced but strategically mobilised to support a state-sanctioned narrative of cultural rejuvenation and historical justice. The exhibition of repatriated artefacts not only addresses the issue of rightful cultural heritage ownership but also carries deeper historical and political significance. The language and context used—incorporating elements of historical injury, cultural rejuvenation, and national identity—align with China's current cultural policies and national narrative. However, it is important to note that an overemphasis on historical suffering could provoke excessive nationalist sentiment, potentially hindering cultural exchange and mutual understanding both domestically and internationally. Within the context of these exhibitions, there remains a need to balance reflection on the past with openness to the future, in order to foster broader international dialogue and cooperation.

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