

## Commentary VI: The Lost Treasures of China

When we turn to China, we find far less of a disconnect in the cultural realm. For the Confucian elite subscribed to a perception of cultural continuity that encouraged constant engagement with the material remains of the ancient past. In fact, our primary source dates to the Song dynasty (960-1279)—no other country in the world had elites engaging with art and antiquities in the way that these Chinese elites were doing at this early date. But how did they engage this art? The answer: in a private, exclusive manner. Art was reflective of the moral character (“virtue” in Confucian parlance) of the individual owner who bought it, created it, found it, or received it as a gift. It was not representative of an abstract collective “Chinese nation”—a concept that did not exist until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We see this clearly in the first primary source. The author of the diary, Guo Bi, talks about all the private meetings he has with friends and acquaintances—all privileged and wealthy, all discussing art, history, and philosophy over tea and cakes. Guo Bi is invited to see someone’s ancient bronze, he gives a gift of his own calligraphy to someone else, etc. There are some lines from his diary that clearly illustrate these deeply personal interactions: “That day, Mr. Zhan showed us an ancient bronze vessel with a horse on top and two lines of text under it: ‘Worthy elders - good sons and grandsons’” and “Zixiang dragged me to his place for lunch. He showed me a purple bull painted by Xu Xi and a few other specimens of painting and calligraphy.” Crucially, Guo Bi does NOT identify with any collective national conception of China. A very telling quote that supports this point comes when he takes a boat ride one day, then later observes that “all the riders were common people, so there was no one to talk to.” In other words, he thinks of people in terms of *class*—and “his” people are other privileged elites who interact with art and antiquities just like he does: as personal emblems of privately held virtue, not symbols of the nation. When China was effectively synonymous with the known world (at least in the eyes of the Chinese themselves), this posed no problem for the retention of Chinese antiquities in East Asia. Even though it was totally okay to trade and give away and purchase antiquities—no need for a museum to preserve stuff—the new owners would also be located somewhere in East Asia, even when they weren’t Chinese. Manchus, Mongols, Japanese, Koreans—all of them would preserve whatever art they acquired within East Asia. But when Westerners arrived and the floodgates of antiquities opened after the revolution of 1911, this became a problem. The Chinese were committed believers in private ownership of art, and they were willing to sell art to Westerners just as they previously had done with one another. But the difference was that now these things would end up in a Western museum halfway around the world, never to change hands again. Why? Because the Westerners now viewed these artifacts as emblems of nations, and these nations had become the basis for political legitimacy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such, their value was priceless, because they represented the very right to rule a given nation and “own” its history.

Now, by the 1920s a generation of Westernized Chinese scholars had come of age who fully subscribed to this Western view of nations (i.e., nationalism). They, too, now believed that art and antiquities represented the Chinese nation, and that anyone who wanted to rule China must safeguard this material heritage as if it was priceless. Thus we see the transformation of the Forbidden City into the National Palace Museum in 1925 and “nationalization” of its art from the private possessions—reflecting the private virtue—of the emperor to the collective heritage of the Chinese masses writ larger. Now it’s priceless, because the right to rule China derives from the protection of this heritage. As a result, the Nationalist party under Chiang Kai-shek undertakes what eventually becomes a 10,000-mile odyssey over 15 years to move these treasures around the country during the war with Japan and then over to Taiwan during the civil war with the Chinese Communists. However, it is important to remind ourselves that the actual number of true believers in this new discourse is still quite small—small but influential. It

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consists of a handful of Westernized Chinese scholars and the politicians who are beholden to their definition of the Chinese nation and the right to rule that derives from protection of the heritage of this nation. But it doesn't mean that all Chinese actually believe in the new priceless valuation of these works of art. In fact, we know that Buddhist monks in the interior province of Sichuan—who are certainly educated—didn't subscribe to this view of the treasures from the Forbidden City. On the contrary, when asked to store some of these “national treasures” in their monastery to protect them from Japanese air raids, they said that the monastery is a “‘sacred and pure’ place,” and that it should not be sullied by the secular matters of the “Chinese nation.” We might say that these Buddhists saw themselves as beholden to a different type of community, one that transcends national boundaries—sort of like Islam in Egypt and the Middle East. Now let's take this one step further. That is to say, if educated Buddhist Chinese monks can express such divergent responses to the supposedly “priceless national heritage of the Chinese nation,” what do you think the majority of illiterate and poor Chinese masses think of it? Just like the Muslim Brotherhood, they will reject it. And indeed, tomb raiding continues to occur across the Chinese countryside today, as it does in the rural poor areas of many countries with rich archaeological heritages. And that is because the discourse of nationalism in China—just like everywhere in the world—is subscribed to mostly by educated and financially secure elites and middle-class folks. If you are a poor and less educated peasant or someone living at the margins of society, you will not view these things in the same way. In other words, we all have to be trained and educated—ahem, brainwashed—to subscribe to nationalist ideologies and the valuation that these ideologies infuse into artifacts from the distant past. The big difference between a place like China and the Middle East, however, is that China's growing wealth has placed a much larger percentage of its population into an economic and educational tier that makes them more sympathetic with elite discourses about the priceless nation than we see elsewhere (making it more on par with general attitudes toward such things in Europe, the U.S., and other developed countries). In poorer countries, the elites will have these views but most of the rest of the country will not.

I also asked you to take a quick look at the website of the Chimei Museum in Taiwan. What I think is so fascinating about this museum is that it seems to show that there are no inherent barriers to non-Westerners collecting Western art—if a wealthy Chinese elite decides that he wants to use his fortune to acquire works of European and American art on the international auction circuit—legally—then he can indeed do that. Do you think that anyone would levy an accusation of theft against the Western works of art that hang in the Chimei Museum, assuming of course, that they were indeed purchased at international auction or received as gifts? It's an interesting thought, and a reminder that we need to remember that the works of art and antiquities in any given museum come from many different contexts, with each circumstance being unique. Some may indeed have been “stolen” or acquired as the result of military plunder, but most were likely acquired in situations that might best be described as morally ambiguous gray areas in which “theft” was not perceived as an accurate descriptor of what occurred by anyone involved in the transfer. Personally, I would love to know more about the Chimei Museum and how it acquired all its Western art, but since it is a privately owned museum and not under the Taiwanese government's control, there is little chance any outsider can study its archives (unlike many democratic governments, private institutions are under no obligation to grant access to their administrative files). But it stands as a useful corrective to the idea that only Westerners try to collect the art of other people throughout the world, and that what we see in a museum is not always the simple result of “theft.” Once we dispense with nationalist discourses, we often realize that the truth is much more complicated and the “good guys” and “bad guys” harder to identify with precision.