

**The Recovery of Cultural Heritage Objects
as a Source of Soft Power in China**

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Chapter 1: Introduction

One million six hundred forty thousand Chinese cultural objects are supposedly held in 200 overseas museum collections in 47 countries.¹ On top of that a few more millions are held in private collections abroad. This number might seem probable, however, there is no evidence confirming this data. This number allegedly comes from a UNESCO estimate, has been widely cited in press, but the number has not been confirmed. Such a figure inspires to think that China might like to reclaim a portion of the collections as a big part comes from looting and unethical trade.² Moreover, in the common imagination of the Chinese nation, the loss of heritage objects symbolizes the “Century of Humiliation” which still stands in the way to fully cherish the economical and other successes of China in recent years.³ Therefore, cultural heritage objects are not meaningless in China.

This thesis examines the following question: How did China use the recovery of cultural objects from abroad to increase its soft power between 2009-2019? The aspect of recovery of heritage objects from abroad has been neglected while analysing cultural politics and soft power of China. As illustrated later in this thesis, art historians concentrate on famous art works, archaeological findings or promotion of art and culture both domestically and abroad. However, the political dimension of cultural object recovery is marginal or non-existent in most of the recent research. It is crucial to stimulate the scholarly community inside and outside of China to gather and analyse resources on the topic of cultural objects recovery. It will provide support for the Chinese government and academic institutions, as well as educate the international communities on the problem of illicit art trade and the importance of heritage.⁴

1. Bahn, *The History of Archaeology*, 143.

2. Hevia, “Looting Beijing, 1860, 1900,” 193.

3. Williams, “110 Years of Humiliation,” 29.

4. Liu, “Take the Long Way,” 397.

Repatriation of cultural heritage objects is not unique to China. Conflicts and unstable domestic situations cause plunder and devastation of historical sites all over the world. The German pillage in Poland⁵ or Greece⁶ during the Second World War, the looting of the Bagdad Museum during the Iraq War⁷ or ISIS's demolition of historical sites in Syria⁸ and many more cases constantly call for the creation and improvement of regulations that prevent further destructions of human heritage and enable the repatriation of relocated objects.

In the 19th century, China was a target of exploitation. It was not colonized, but under strict control of various imperialist powers. Once subjected to the influence of others, in the post-colonial world China participated in numerous bilateral agreements, conventions and projects that provided protection against exploitation of others. Therefore, the balance of the world power had changed.⁹ China has not only dominated the world economy ever since regaining sovereignty, but also taken active efforts in recovery of its heritage by preventing smuggling, destruction and sale of its cultural heritage objects that left the country in the colonial era. Today China restores cultural sites and objects in its own territory and participates in protection projects all over the world, for instance in Southeast Asia¹⁰ or Africa.¹¹

Considering China's efforts in the protection of heritage, why is it occasionally critiqued? Some popular accusations are, for instance, the usage of heritage to support current political goals or the creation of hegemony. Although the government would like to be seen as peaceful and inclusive, Western media and human rights organizations keep pointing to severe human rights violations which strongly damage the desired image.¹²

5. Siegal, "Poland Urged to Look."

6. Papantoniou, "Greek Antiquities Pillaged."

7. Rothfield, "The Rape of Mesopotamia," 83-100.

8. Curry, "Here Are the Ancient."

9. Wang and Yi, "Peaceful Development," 20.

10. Belt and Road Portal, "Joint Statement Between the Government."

11. UNESCO, "Africa and China agree."

12. Blumenfield and Silverman, *Cultural Heritage*, 4.

The period examined in this thesis starts in 2009 and covers 10 years, to illustrate actions and consequences of the Chinese government's engagement in the recovery of cultural heritage objects from abroad. The starting point was chosen because of an event that took place in 2009 and commenced debate over sales of questionable objects to public attention. The event in question was the Christie's auction of two bronze fountain heads from the Summer Palace.¹³ Early 2010s were also a period of intensification of the usage of culture to increase soft power of China. Used phrases "cultural heritage objects" or "heritage objects" stand for various art, craftsmanship and other objects that are claimed to be a part of the cultural patrimony of China. Moreover, in this thesis, a phrase "art objects from China" is used instead of a commonly used "Chinese art", based on clarification made by Clunas in 2009.¹⁴

China increased its efforts in recovery of heritage objects and introduced a number of supporting policies and official approaches. Due to the length limit of this thesis, only cases where the Chinese government or its bodies were directly involved in recovery efforts were chosen. These cases will be examined in order to investigate how China has used recovery of cultural objects to gain tangible benefits of its soft power.

It should be noted that the phenomenon of Chinese citizens fleeing from China and smuggling heritage objects abroad during the late 1950s to 1960s, including culture or art objects, is not considered illicit traffic in this research. At that time, the Cultural Revolution was indeed threatening China's cultural heritage. Therefore, many Chinese emigrants decided to protect their culture by taking the objects abroad with them. Even if the objects were illegally transported from China and sold at a later point, the practice is not considered illicit in this particular study due to noble motivations of the people involved.

13. Wallace, Bandle and Renold. "Case Two Bronze Animal."

14. Clunas, *Art in China*, 9.

Without neglecting other cultural policies and projects, the working assumption of this thesis is that the retrieval of cultural heritage objects from abroad could be one of the best strategies that China chooses to enhance its soft power. China's dependence on its culture as a means to improve its soft power is commonly admitted, but there is a gap in research on how retrieval of cultural heritage objects from abroad serves the political agenda of the Chinese government. This thesis fills the existing gap in the research relating the recovery of cultural heritage and soft power. This particular political aspect of cultural policies is not analysed enough. Moreover, identifying obstacles in the recovery processes will be beneficial to preserve cultural heritage in China and other countries exposed to illicit art trade.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The term ‘soft power’ was created by Joseph Nye and describes the ability of a state to shape the preferences of foreign citizens and states.¹⁵ Soft power has three main sources: culture, political values and foreign policies, yet the behaviour of citizens has been identified as an additional source.¹⁶ Soft power stands in opposition to hard power and is currently preferred by most countries due to its non-violent character.

This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them. The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as an attractive culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority. If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to do what you do not want. If a country represents values that others want to follow, it will cost less to lead.¹⁷

Soft power is used to achieve goals not for philanthropic reasons, because it is the ability to take without coercion (force) or payment (money). While the traditional hard power role is decreasing, soft power is definitely on a rise.¹⁸ The soft power is not a form of idealism or liberalism. It is simply a form of power, one way of getting desired outcomes¹⁹.

Tools of soft power include official discourse, promotion of culture and trade²⁰ and foreign policies. Soft power theory has dominated the current discourse of international politics. Yet the theory has its limitations. Nye’s definition concerns universal values, and every state is free to have its own values. Also, in his view, soft power concerns one country influencing another, yet in China soft power is also used internally.²¹

15. Barr, “Nation Branding,” 82.

16. Zhu, “A Critical Decade,” 277-278.

17. Nye, *Power in the Global*, 5.

18. Li, *Soft Power*, 25, 32.

19. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 82.

20. Lai and Lu, “China’s Soft Power,” 1.

21. Barr, “Nation Branding,” 82.

软实力(*ruan shili*), namely ‘soft power,’ has been popularized in China in the early 21st century, but has been present since the early 1990s.²² The concept has become a part of the official political discourse when President Hu Jintao announced country’s strive for soft power in 2007²³ during the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party²⁴ . The soft power strive was upheld by Hu’s successor Xi Jinping during the 18th session.²⁵ China reinforced the promotion and protection of its culture. Although the concept of soft power was described by Nye in 2004 and in the United States, Chinese officials and scholars promoted the vision that the traditional culture of China is a cradle of soft power as created by Confucius (551-479 BC) or Sun Zi (544-496 BC).²⁶

For China, culture is crucial since other components of soft power such as political values and foreign policies, in addition to the perception of countrymen abroad, are neither improving China’s image nor its soft power.²⁷ It is therefore comparatively easier for China to attract people to its rich culture, because it is a result of millennia of development and prosperity, especially when other countries with a comparable cultural heritage are successfully using it for national promotion.

Concentrating on ancient history and neglecting modern times, especially the Cultural Revolution period, brought critique on China.²⁸ Most countries have violent historical episodes, that should not be omitted in public discussion. Japan, for example, concentrated on the most recent history and has promoted its pop culture already since the 1980s, however, traditional

22. Li, *Soft Power*, 25.

23. Lai and Lu, “China’s Soft Power,” 2.

24. Barr, “Nation Branding,” 82.

25. Hu, “Report delivered.”

26. Ding, “The Dragon’s Hidden Wings,” 24-25.

27. Ding, “Branding a Rising China,” 295.

28. Phillips, “China breaks official silence.”

culture or violent history was not hidden, but projected with modern media, such as anime. Japan institutionalized its soft power policy.²⁹

As for channels other than culture, Chinese government planned to increase its global influence and soft power through global economic projects, such as the *One Belt One Road* initiative announced by Xi Jinping in 2013.³⁰ The results were yet not as positive as the projections, due to critique over inefficiency, cronyism, concentration of Chinese capital and indebting other participating countries.³¹ In this situation, culture helped to initiate a dialogue among countries and to counterbalance the critique.³² China promoted its culture heavily abroad, yet with an attached ideology, which to some extent limited the appeal of the culture itself. Therefore, despite significant efforts, intensive official propaganda and a strong economy, China's soft power and image abroad did not improve significantly, which led to a relatively low score in the soft power index in 2019.³³

The recovery of heritage objects from abroad was also a part of a rhetoric of 'national rejuvenation' endorsed in Xi Jinping's era.³⁴ Xi personally explained that the 'national rejuvenation' period succeeded the Century of Humiliation, during which China lost many treasures and self-esteem,³⁵ and expressed his gratitude to the Communist Party for the modern development path inspired by the ancient values.³⁶ In the same speech, Xi Jinping did not mention that the development had already started during the Century of Humiliation, when China became an independent republic, aiming to modernize, industrialize and improve standards of living of common people.³⁷ He also did not note that the period of development

29. Iwabuchi, "Pop-culture Diplomacy," 422.

30. Ministry, "President Xi Jinping Delivers."

31. Szechenyi, *China's Maritime Silk Road*, 8.

32. McClory, *The Soft Power* 30, 69-72.

33. McClory, 38.

34. Brown, *China's Dream*, 95-96.

35. Wang, "The China Order," 135.

36. Xi, "Inheriting the Past."

37. Wang, "The China Order," 135-142.

was intervened by the Cultural Revolution. During the republican times, China has progressed, introduced new scholarships and inventions, so it was not a stagnant period.³⁸ Yet, recalling positive aspects of the Century did not align with the Communist Party's thought promoted in the period of 2009-2019.

This single-track approach to the past demonstrates that the 'national rejuvenation' is a narrative that is constructed for the political purposes of the Chinese Communist Party. In fact, contrasting the two narratives, of prosperity overtaking humiliation, served the nationalistic purpose of framing its contact with the world.³⁹ As shown, Xi's administration upheld Hu Jintao's guidelines of Chinese ancient culture as the source of modern China's soft power.⁴⁰ The rhetoric was useful because creating one 'national' culture allowed the inclusion of minorities in the mainstream culture, and therefore, created a sense of belonging that to some extent tranquilized the domestic political situation, and provided a strong argument for reclaiming heritage objects plundered during the Century.

Material heritage objects are essential to better comprehend the past on a nation.⁴¹ China invested large sums into public museums⁴² as these institutions reinforced positive feelings towards the local culture and created an attachment to the place.⁴³ A new problem arose when China, supposedly, could showcase fewer objects of its heritage than museums and private collectors abroad.^{44, 45} This depicts the social impact of trading illicit antiquities – the absence of physical evidence of the historical narratives that drive social cohesion and cultural legitimacy, especially in the postcolonial world. The absence results in a 'symbolic domination',

38. Wang, 140-142.

39. Gries, *China's New Nationalism Pride*, 46-51.

40. Lai and Lu, "China's Soft Power," 2.

41. Liu, "Take the Long Way," 395.

42. Alberge, "China's Wealthy."

43. Zhou, et al., "Benefits of Visiting," 571-575.

44. Murphy, "Theft and Smuggling," 312.

45. Bahn, *The History of Archaeology*, 143.

even as far as ‘symbolic annihilation,’ through denying cultures their patrimony and whitewashing the historical narratives that are the mechanism for group identity.⁴⁶

While museums in China have been building their collections, objects from China are exhibited at the most important cultural institutions in the world, such as the Louvre or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Their recognition comes from the high artistic and historical value. Refined quality and uniqueness were also the factors leading to high prices in auctions or intensive illicit art trade from China.

International rankings can help to measure soft power, but the extent of China’s soft power abroad can also be illustrated with foreign media articles. The media release has been strongly biased, but the derived data can be separated from ideology. Therefore, to illustrate the state of China’s soft power, an international soft power index will be analysed in Chapter 3. The 4th Chapter will present context, protection infrastructure as well as reasons why many objects could be recovered from abroad. Chapter 5 will provide information on the recovery channels in the context of increasing soft power. To reflect if China increased its soft power thanks to the recovery of the heritage objects from abroad, international news articles and press will be analysed in that section. The discussion on the retrieval efforts and possible successes is enclosed in Chapter 6.

46. Campbell, “The Illicit Antiquities Trade,” 115.

Chapter 3: Soft Power of China

In the East Asian region, China falls behind its neighbours regarding the strength of its soft power. In recent soft power index, Japan (8th place) and South Korea (19th place) scored higher than China (27th place).⁴⁷ Despite popularity of the term “soft power”, it cannot be easily measured. Rankings like Index 30 have to take several factors into consideration and try to evaluate each country in terms of soft power and appeal to others. So-called objective data, derived from international resources in areas such as culture, education, engagement, digital [technology], enterprise and government, serves analytical purpose. Culture, engagement and government are chief sub-indices of this research.

In the mentioned ranking, “culture” stands for the ability of a country to attract interest with its high and popular culture; “engagement” measures the country’s input into global affairs through policies and diplomacy; whereas “government” examines the results of internal affairs. Since there is no universal standard for soft power, the index provides some subjective data to balance the study. The subjective data is derived from an international polling system engaging sample respondents from 25 countries, accounting 12,500 people, including 500 from China. The topics include global culture, luxury goods, technology products, cuisine, liveability, friendliness, and foreign policy.

According to the study, China’s culture was less appealing than the cultures of the US, Germany or Japan, but more appealing than the culture of the Netherlands.⁴⁸ Japan and Korea prove that soft power can be built on promotion of culture. While perceiving the culture of Japan and Korea as rather mysterious and unknown in the past, today the world wears Japanese inspired flip flops, loves anime, K-pop and kimchi or sushi⁴⁹. Both Korea and Japan found

47. McClory, *The Soft Power* 30, 37-38.

48. McClory, 62.

49. Valieva, “Cultural Soft Power,” 210.

ways to promote their culture in an orchestrated way.⁵⁰ Could retrieval of cultural heritage objects from abroad yield similar results for China? It is definitely worth considering. However, Japan and Korea were able to circumvent the ideological divide between them and other top soft power countries and at the same time stay true to the values in their societies, in opposition to China.

China needs soft power because, in the struggle to become a superpower, it does not want to be perceived as an “aggressive challenger,” as Sheng Ding pointed out.⁵¹ Political system in China allowed to greatly reduce poverty, achieve economic supremacy and bring many benefits to the Chinese society, yet it tolerates human rights violations, which makes it internationally unpopular. Furthermore, since China was increasingly depicted as a threat to the United States’ economy, culture has been used to balance that negative perception of its diplomacy and policymaking. Despite the efforts in the cultural area, occasional politics-related “incidents” like the Tiananmen Massacre or Uyghurs' rights violations severely block the way for China to win appreciation abroad.⁵²

The negative perception abroad pushed Chinese leaders to turn to soft power in the 21st century, hence the state support in the scientific approach, for instance through the China Soft Power Research Group.⁵³ Aside improving international relations, soft power in China is used to stabilise the multi-ethnic society because it provides a possibility to involve the minorities in the mainstream culture dominated by the Han majority.

In general, China’s efforts to promote culture have not been consistent. The retrieval of cultural objects from abroad could be serving a unifying purpose, if China would appreciate different elements of its culture equally. Yet China has simultaneously promoted and demoted

50. Valieva, 211.

51. Ding, “Branding a Rising China,” 293.

52. Ding, 294.

53. Barr, “Nation Branding,” 82.

different aspects of its culture. The government oppressed its critique in art, for example by persecuting Ai Weiwei (艾未未, b. 1957), which became an internationally famous case. The artist was targeted as enemy of the state despite his artistic appreciation abroad and efforts in promoting the Chinese culture.⁵⁴

Another inconsistency can be identified in the approach of Chinese people to their heritage. On one side, the government and citizens strive to protect China's heritage, on the other side, a considerable number of citizens and officials have been involved in illicit art trade. In the last few decades, more than 200,000 ancient tombs were looted in China. Looting historical sites is a relatively low risk crime and is difficult to prevent. Proving that an artifact was illicitly trafficked is even more challenging. Involvement of Chinese people in looting hurts China's image of a law-abiding nation caring for its past heritage. In 2009-2019, China has been a victim of the illicit art trade - the third most profitable criminal trade in the world, smaller only to the drug and arms trade, but often managed by the same criminal networks.⁵⁵

54. Barr, "Nation Branding," 83.

55. Gruber, "The fight," 343-344.

Chapter 4: Contexts and Political Infrastructure

China has been an attractive looting target. As the land of key inventions (the compass, gunpowder, papermaking, movable printing), extensive foreign trade, advanced military strategies or poetry, it has influenced the whole region. The impact of China's culture surpassed its borders. The ancient, five-millennia-old civilization left traces in various forms, such as complete cities, tombs, monuments, architecture, art and commodities. Unfortunately, a significant part of those traces have been looted and destroyed by now.⁵⁶

Plunder caused irreversible damage in China, but also supplied foreign markets with art and other objects otherwise unobtainable. Numerous artifacts were looted during the sacking of Beijing in 1860 and again in 1900, when important historical sites were plundered by the British and French armies, followed by armies and official residents, merchants and tourists from the United States, Russia, Germany, Austria, Italy and Japan.⁵⁷ Even during 2009-2019, these foreign markets were recognized as the most abundant in art and cultural objects from China. As the power-balance had changed in the 21st century and China surpassed the majority of these economies,⁵⁸ the retrieval of its heritage objects became also a dominance manifesto.

To evaluate the sociological impact of the 19th century lootings, a military point of view should be employed. The attack on the Summer Palace in 1860 served the purpose of humiliation of the Chinese emperor and his court, as the location of the palace had no military value. The attack was aimed at breaking the spirit of the people and creating a long-lasting psychological wound.⁵⁹ The ease of entering and the defilement of the palace grounds that had been sacred and inaccessible to common Chinese folk, crushed the morale and destroyed the

56. Lee, *An Overview*, 8-9.

57. Hevia, "Looting Beijing, 1860, 1900," 193.

58. BBC News, "China overtakes Japan."

59. Williams, "110 Years of Humiliation," 29.

sanctity of the Chinese Empire reflected in the heavenly figure of the emperor. From the perspective of the Chinese people, the Emperor's palace had been attacked by savages. The population felt not only as if they had lost a battle, but that “loot stood as material proof of British superiority over the Chinese emperor and his empire.”⁶⁰

Nowadays, the intensification of modern illicit art trade from China started in 1978 due to Deng Xiaoping's “Open Door” policy.⁶¹ The policy enabled China to actively participate in the world's matters once again after a period of isolation of the 1960s and 1970s. The opening of borders permitted the foreign trade, but also the cross-border trafficking became easier than before, leading to a new wave of illicit art trade. The illicit art trade occurs when: “Cultural objects [are] excavated contrary to the law or licitly excavated but illicitly retained [or transported].”⁶²

Illegal excavations and illicit art trade obliged the People's Republic of China to introduce laws of protection of cultural heritage. Since 1961, objects found in China's territory belong to China, and no private or public entity has been allowed to manage these objects without official permission.⁶³ To protect the cultural heritage within the territory and abroad, China has taken part in several multilateral agreements such as the 1970 UNESCO Convention, the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage and more. China also concluded the Memoranda of Understanding with 19 countries by 2016, implemented the domestic Law on Protection of Cultural Relics and established a State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH). Moreover, China cooperated with international agencies like Europol or the FBI.

60. Hevia, “Looting Beijing, 1860, 1900,” 196.

61. Liu, “Take the Long Way,” 381.

62. UNESCO, “International Code of Ethics,” 6.

63. Murphy, “Theft and Smuggling,” 312.

The 1970 Convention advised to recover heritage objects through diplomatic channels.⁶⁴ Despite that, private purchase of artifacts of Chinese origin abroad and donating them to state institutions, particularly objects believed to be trafficked illicitly, was popular among wealthy Chinese to the point of erecting numerous private museums in the early 21st century in mainland China.⁶⁵ The results of this kind of unstandardized recovery is hard to estimate, as most purchases were not made public.⁶⁶

Since the late 1960s, different regulations were introduced globally but not equally implemented in different regions. Regardless, all State Parties of the 1970 Convention are not only obliged to prevent the illicit art trade, but also to eliminate its causes.⁶⁷ In case of illicit excavations and smugglings, the main causes are not only the easiness of smuggling, but also the bad economic conditions and lack of perspective of people at the bottom of the crime networks.⁶⁸ Therefore, while analysing the illicit art and antiquities trade, researchers must link the global situation with the local contexts, especially to the microlevel dynamics of such crimes.

China has been increasingly successful in developing restitution policies. It ratified the 1970 Convention in 1985 and just two years later first heritage sites were listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Among the 55 sites in 2019 (cultural, natural and mixed), 19 of them had been listed since 2009, so more than one-third of those sites were listed in the last 10 out of 34 years total.⁶⁹ It has been proved that China pushed for adding new sites to the UNESCO list to protect them and also to stimulate tourism (which benefits the economy and funds the protection efforts).⁷⁰ However, not all sites were protected equally. The government

64. UNESCO, "Convention on the Means," Article 7.B.ii, p. 10.

65. Kiowski, "A museum a Day," 52.

66. Yu, "Approaches to the Recovery," 751.

67. UNESCO, "Convention on the Means," Article 2.2, p. 4.

68. Davis, "Supply and Demand," 156.

69. UNESCO, "Properties Inscribed."

70. Blumenfield and Silverman, *Cultural Heritage Politics in China*, 4.

has been proposing certain sites to the UNESCO list, while neglecting sites staying in the way of development or against the “national rejuvenation” rhetoric.⁷¹

China has been willing to join the UNESCO efforts as the institution was created from a need to protect the human heritage after the atrocities of the Second World War. Since its establishment, UNESCO has produced two crucial conventions in the field of cultural property protection. It has succeeded in spreading awareness among the general public of the dangers of unchecked industrialization; promotion of understanding of cultural diversity and transnational dialogue; protection of some extremely endangered cultural and historical sites, that would otherwise be lost. Thanks to the 1970 Convention the art trade and related processes became regulated, which marked a new era in the art world. The aim of the 1970 Convention was clear - preventing illicit traffic in cultural objects. In the East Asian region, all countries participated in the convention.

Although crucial, conventions and regulations did not eliminate the illicit art trade. In the late 1980s, the high amounts of illegal trafficking resulted in releasing a Notice on Suppression of Illicit Excavation and Smuggling of Cultural Objects by the Chinese government. The government’s efforts did not suffice and the illicit trade continued, supplied with artifacts from tombs, shipwrecks or simply stolen from museums. By 2009, more than 90% of significant tombs were already illegally excavated and two-thirds of objects were in foreign hands.⁷²

UNESCO has not been immune to critique. Meskell pointed to several problems preventing successful restitution. Mainly that UNESCO is subject to political pressure, and its academic contribution decreased in favour of economic and tourism related investments. Moreover, bureaucracy limits its efficiency in its protecting of heritage.⁷³

71. Huffington Post, “Ancient Chinese Tombs Destroyed.”

72. Lee, *An Overview*, 8.

73. Meskell, “A Future in Ruins,” 76-77.

Most countries in the world had joined the 1970 Convention, but even with the high participation rate, most of the countries had no real influence, unless they formed a transnational alliance such as BRICS. It is an alliance of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, enabling these states to cooperate and protect their shared interests, such as dominating the World Heritage Committee.⁷⁴ Despite the efforts, the dominance remained with Europe and North America.⁷⁵

In light of international regulations, trafficked objects are widely available on the market, while their origin is not questioned. The lack of standardized provenance regulations⁷⁶ or forged provenance⁷⁷ further stimulate the illegal trade and fakes production.⁷⁸ To combat that, a ban on publishing research on mysteriously resurfaced objects and a ban on accepting donations of objects without provenance have been introduced. Museums are no longer allowed to accept objects without provenance because when a donor donates the questionable object to a museum – his actions should be questioned and not rewarded with social prestige for his altruistic yet unethical act.⁷⁹

The academic voices are not unified on the provenance and regulations issues. Some scholars claim that regulations on the art trade should be relaxed, arguing that museums should be allowed to accept objects without full provenance to save them from the black market.⁸⁰ This seems to be the exact opposite to the commonly accepted thesis that it is the demand that stimulates the supply. The same front also supports museums' rights to ownership of objects looted in the past. Justification is then based on the claim that heritage of different cultures is

74. Meskell, 99.

75. Aygen and Logan, "Heritage," 410.

76. Gerstenblith, "Provenances," 287.

77. Schindler and Gautier, "Looting and Smuggling," 339.

78. Simon and Röhrs, "Between Fakes," 20.

79. Lundén, "Perspectives on Looting," 123-124.

80. Cuno, *Whose Culture*, 65.

gathered in one spot and objects are kept in good conditions. The source countries' argument of a 'lost heritage' is therefore rejected.⁸¹

It is worrying that collectors and academics underestimate the repercussions of purchasing or accepting donations of looted artifacts, not relating or intentionally rejecting the criminal character of the illicit trade. Illicit art trade is used for laundering profit from other illegal trades, drug and arms trades, and can even be used to sponsor terrorist organizations.⁸²

81. Cuno, *Museums Matter*, 55.

82. Gruber, "The fight," 347.

Chapter 5: Results

Between 2009 and 2019, China proactively sought retrieval of its cultural heritage from abroad. The Chinese government, through SACH and other national and provincial level cultural institutions, was improving the protection of heritage and promotion of heritage abroad. The accumulated data on recovery efforts was organized into categories representing areas used to increase China's soft power: through Auctions, International Law Enforcement Cooperation and Maritime Archaeology.

The first area – Auctions – illustrates how China attracted sympathy of the general public; the second area – International Law Enforcement Cooperation – illustrates why China is so active in the field of preventing illicit art trade; and the third area – Maritime Archaeology – showcases how repatriation efforts were used to achieve geo-political targets.

5.1. Auctions

In this study, I compared auctions of art objects from China of the same auction house that occurred in 5-year intervals, in September 2009, 2014 and 2019. September was chosen because it is a relatively busy period. Choosing one well-established international auction house seemed essential to show the progress of the trends in a global perspective, and Christie's fulfilled set requirements. It additionally provided a structured online database facilitating access to information. Therefore, the auctions were examined based on official auctions summaries from Christie's website.⁸³ To qualify for the study, an auction had to contain the adjective "Chinese" in the title, or the number of objects from China had to exceed the number of objects of other origins.

83. Christie's, "Auction Results."

Examined auctions:

#	Title	Date	Location	Total sales
1	Chinese Ceramics & Works of Art	10.09. 2009	London	\$427,756
2	Fine Chinese Ceramics & Works of Art Including Property from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections	14-15. 09.2009	New York	\$23,945,050
Total in 2009				\$24,517,294

1	Fine Chinese Paintings	16.09. 2014	New York	\$5,242,025
2	Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art	18-19. 09.2014	New York	\$22,422,000
3	Rivers of Color: Cloisonné Enamels from Private American Collections	18.09. 2014	New York	\$5,723,000
Total in 2014				\$33,387,025

1	Art of China: Featuring Arnhold Collection	29.08-5. 09.2019	Online	\$754,250
2	Fine Chinese Paintings	10.09. 2019	New York	\$2,341,750
3	Chinese Art from The Art Institute of Chicago	12.09. 2019	New York	\$5,004,250
4	Masterpieces of Early Chinese Gold and Silver	12.09. 2019	New York	\$12,163,750
5	Important Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art	13.09. 2019	New York	\$11,622,500
Total in 2019				\$33,549,262

Between 2009 and 2019, the total number of auctions increased and the monetary value of auctioned objects from China sold abroad rose, adding to the overall prestige of collecting art and high-quality objects from China. By 2014, the auction market for objects of Chinese origin stabilized, and maintained high volumes and prices. At least since 2009, Christie's dedicated a separate category "Chinese" to objects from China based on their origin and not on the type, style or epoch. A wide selection of objects was gathered in one category under the "Chinese tag," including various vessels, ritual objects, figurines, religious figurines, furniture, jewellery, tools, instruments, armours, armaments, and finally fine arts like paintings, scrolls, calligraphy and more.

Most auctions took place in New York, USA, yet online auction appeared in 2019 as well. Although online auctions are not a new phenomenon, in the previous years they have been less popular or occurred on a lesser scale. The majority of auctioned objects was not created for the art market, but rather for rituals or daily use. The same markets of Europe and North America presented a contrasting approach to art objects from China: in modern times treating commodities as expensive art, while in the past treating fine art as mere curiosities.

Each offered object was presented with pictures and had a short description, creation date, material, epoch and specifications, as well as short provenance information, many of which dated prior to 1970. The texts describing the objects for an auction were clear and standardized in style. There were some exceptions, for example, the 18/19th century Mughal white and green jade spoon from “The Art of China” auction in 2019.⁸⁴ The origin information was not provided and provenance was limited to one and not easily accessible position: Collection of the late Gerard Arnhold (1918-2010). In addition, there was no information on usage of the objects. The scarcity of information seems rather odd considering the bidding price of GBP 3,000.

The international press published large numbers of articles on the topic of expensive or controversial auctions,^{85, 86} especially in countries with big markets for objects from China.⁸⁷ The interest of the general public could have been pinpointed to specific objects by interfering in the auctions. This way, Chinese government could make a political statement without political repercussions because not many countries were willing to engage in international conflicts over art.

Moreover, the bigger the controversy and more objects to be verified, the more experts were needed in the field of Chinese art history. Therefore, China’s involvement in the private

84. Christie’s. “A Mughal White.”

85. ZŚ, “Rabbit and Rat Heads.”

86. Neuendorf, “A Rare 11th-Century Scroll.”

87. Spencer, “Chinese Collector.”

trade not only promoted Chinese culture as a whole, but also required extensive verification of objects which helped to fulfil one of the 1970 Convention recommendations, namely promotion of knowledge.⁸⁸ If there would be no involvement of the Chinese government in auctions of objects from China, the topic of Chinese art and its rich culture would not have grabbed as much of the public attention. Less people would have been interested in deepening their knowledge about Chinese arts and less scholars would have been invited to elaborate on the objects in media.

To further analyse how interference in auctions allowed China to increase soft power, I analysed multiple popular English and Polish articles on the topic of auctions of objects marketed as Chinese, selected from top finds in Google searches. Next, I identified several discourse frames in the articles, such as Communication, Message, Appreciation and Critique.

Communication

Foreign media cited various sources of information, from state news agency based in China (Xinhua), some less known such as Beijing Youth Daily, or regular citizens present on platforms such as WeChat. Much content on current events is sourced in China and not based on independent research done abroad. The source of information coming from China was usually clearly stated. WeChat is not regarded as an official platform, and common people can express their opinions more freely and it seems that foreign media appreciated these statements. Citing WeChat posts of Chinese people voiced popular opinions and shared the organic interest in the culture of their homeland.

"I think the head of the Buddha statue is an authentic one. And I think it is a stone sculpture from the Henan area in the Tang dynasty, which is quite similar in style to those in the

88. UNESCO, "Convention on the Means," Article 10.B, p. 12.

Longmen Grottoes, " Yang Xin, an amateur of ancient sculpture, wrote on his WeChat account.⁸⁹

It appears that the knowledge and opinions of common citizens were appreciated, because the citations were not corrected ostentatiously but rather left as they were. Direct communication channels, like interviews or social media were more appealing than official statements, also adding to the dynamism of the discussion: "In a new blow to troubled relations between China and France, the collector, Cai Mingchao, said he took the action in a protest against the sale of looted treasures."⁹⁰

Foreign media appreciated the organic interest of China's people more than the official propaganda, which is usually confronted with critique after official statements. This comparison shows that the appreciation of Chinese culture coming from the population is more appealing than the official promotion. However, thanks to governmental organizations such as SACH that aimed at the promotion of the Chinese culture, the media attention was directed to problematic auctions and the issues were treated officially: "The State Administration of Cultural Heritage said it would continue to take all necessary measures to retrieve cultural relics illegally obtained from China."⁹¹

Message

The messages transmitted through articles varied. Some articles were very biased and leaned towards either harsh critique or devoted appraisal. It should be noted that usually the tone of the title suggested the side the author supported. Yet there were also numerous balanced press releases, presenting different arguments and points of view and examining issues rather than judging them. Therefore, even if an article was biased, there was still a message conveyed that

89. Zinan, "Chinese Buddha Statue."

90. Spencer, "Chinese Collector Sabotaged."

91. BBC News, "Chinese Protests Fail."

could be analysed. In terms of the art of China, the message was mostly positive, in contrary to situation of art market.

Myth 3: China's collectors default on art payments left and right.
Reality: This isn't the whole story. Some of these collectors are just trying to avoid ending up with a forgery.⁹²

Whereas the art market in China and collectors of Chinese origin were on the one hand described as unreliable and unpredictable, on the other hand as philanthropists when donating to museums or institutions. The fact that some articles were based on the scheme of solving puzzles or mysteries shows that there has been a lack of knowledge among art amateurs, but also that there has been a demand for that knowledge.

In the articles, adjectives such as "looted," "stolen" or "plundered" were commonly used which spread the message that actions of multimillion companies can be questioned and that the companies such as Christie's or Sotheby's were not free from unethical actions.^{93, 94, 95} The general public was informed about the problems of illicit trade, recovery of cultural heritage and sales of controversially acquired objects.⁹⁶

Sotheby's has recently removed a head of Buddha on suspicion of being stolen from Longmen Grottoes, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Central's China Henan province.⁹⁷

Through the engagement in auctions of objects of Chinese origin, China gained sympathy from the international community because it was proven that China has a rich culture and was robbed of numerous cultural goods. This implication makes China more likable and admirable:

92. Gerlis, "The 5 Biggest Myths."

93. Zinan, "Chinese Buddha Statue."

94. Spencer, "Chinese Collector Sabotaged."

95. Antiques and the Arts Weekly, "Has Another Old Summer."

96. The Value, "Sotheby's Withdrew Chinese Buddha."

97. The Value.

“China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage condemned the auction saying the relic was taken illegally from the country in the 19th Century.”⁹⁸

The official engagement, hence, brought positive results by raising awareness of the scale of illicit art trade, proving that renowned art dealers or collectors were also part of the problem and not only closer unidentified criminal networks,⁹⁹ reminding that the objects were acquired in unethical ways and elucidating the significance of the lost heritage for source countries.

The involvement of Chinese government and regular citizens in the process of recovery of cultural heritage objects demonstrated to the general public abroad, that the Chinese community was strongly attached to their history, art and culture, and that they simply cared about these. As a consequence, foreigners felt that the China's heritage must be not only precious for these people but also generally valuable as the bidding prices were high and many people were ready to take actions to recover the objects for their homeland.

Auctions were occasions to share more inside knowledge about Chinese art history. The rivalry between China and the world was reinforced through constant comparison with Europe and the USA, not only in terms of art but also economically. Chinese masters have been compared to European masters to make them more familiar and comprehensible, and not necessarily to describe them as better or worse than the counter side.

Appreciation

The knowledge of Chinese culture and history spread thanks to auctions and recovery efforts, as well as stimulated appreciation abroad. The indirect results of China's official involvement in the auctions were: an increase in the volume of auctions, an increased numbers of objects

98. BBC News, “Chinese Protest Fail.”

99. Bannon and Stewart, “New York Art Dealer.”

and percentage of sold lots per auction, an influx of art history specialists in the field able to validate objects and set estimated price, and finally an increase in prices.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, China started creating a new label of Chinese art which embraced the universal Chineseness and shifted the attention away from controversial political issues. China was able to consolidate a more homogenic projection of Chinese culture, because carefully selected objects were constantly reappearing in the media and people unconsciously absorbed images of similar objects as one, unified vision of Chinese art.

An appreciation of the ancient art and heritage of Dunhuang along the Silk Road may ease fears of the "China threat" among Americans while building confidence among Chinese in being global players, a leading US scholar and philanthropist says.¹⁰¹

The artistic value of objects was clearly stated¹⁰² when they were finally “admitted” as fine art, even if some categories (for example calligraphy) were not traditionally seen as fine art in Europe and North America. Expressions such as “magnificent,” “world’s best” or “ancient” were used commonly in association with Chinese heritage objects.

"The map, with plenty of geographic information, proves that China had the world's best mapping techniques at that time," said Lin Meicun, a history professor from Peking University, at the donation ceremony on Thursday.¹⁰³

On top of that, the Chinese government funded new research in the art historical field¹⁰⁴ and promoted cultural and academic exchanges. In addition, more independent scholars of Chinese art history abroad were active.

100. Based on themed auctions of objects of Chinese origin at Christie’s on Septembers 2009, 2014 and 2019.

101. Chou, “Dunhuang Cave Art.”

102. Zinan, “Chinese Buddha statue.”

103. China Daily, “Ancient Silk Road Map.”

104. Christie’s, “5 Minutes with...”

Marco Almeida, Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art specialist at Christie's in London, explains why the craftsmanship, skill and dramatic detailed symbolism imbued in this magnificent three-coloured lacquer throne makes it fit for an emperor.¹⁰⁵

Since more people felt the attraction to the Chinese culture and foreign experts were invited to the public debate, the situation changed dramatically from the point of view of soft power. This is a direct link between the increase of soft power and the improvement of international relations between China and the world.

Critique

Ideology was constantly present in the debate. Despite the fact that China wanted to focus on its continuous ancient history with its rich and sophisticated culture, the foreign press did not accept that uncritically. Events of the Cultural Revolution stood in direct opposition to the traditional culture of dynastic China. Even though ancient values were praised, the current political party is an heir of the non-ancient system responsible for the destruction of considerable parts of ancient heritage.

Between 1966 and 1976, when the Cultural Revolution was in full swing, over 10 million households across China were ransacked by the Red Guards. Countless artifacts such as ancient paintings, books, porcelain and accessories were either burned or destroyed. (...)

Even after 1978, when China launched its far-reaching economic reforms, the deliberate and inadvertent destruction of cultural artifacts by illegal dealers and tomb raiders remained rampant across the country.¹⁰⁶

There is a discrepancy between the historical events recalled and the retrieval efforts. China wanted to focus on the high culture and the “national rejuvenation” whereas the foreign media clung to the destructive events of the Cultural Revolution. China wanted to build an

105. Christie's.

106. Man, “The Best Way.”

image on the history and at the same time omit a big part of the recent history. It did not succeed, in part, because 2016 marked the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

Collecting art and cultural objects of Chinese origin became a lucrative business, which entails negative side effects. Most of the auctioned objects remained outside of China and in private possession, the reputation of Chinese art buyers was harmed due to acts of a few individuals such as Cai Mingchao.

A Chinese collector deliberately sabotaged an auction of two 18th Century bronze animal heads by refusing to pay after 'buying' them at a Christie's sale in Paris last week."¹⁰⁷

Intensified surveillance and the monitoring of auctions led to the point where some of the remarkable illicitly trafficked objects could never resurface from the black market. Furthermore, the art market in China was often described as hard to predict.

5.2 International Law Enforcement Cooperation

The Peoples' Republic of China actively cooperated with the police and governments all over the world and participated in the creation of various international laws. China was obliged to cooperate with other countries due to the 1970 Convention, the UNIDROID Convention, the UNICLOS Convention, and the Memoranda of Understanding with more than a dozen countries to date. China has an account of successful collaboration with some of the top law enforcement institutions in the world, including the FBI¹⁰⁸, Europol¹⁰⁹, the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities.¹¹⁰ The main purpose of international conventions was to prevent dislocation of cultural objects. The efforts in this discipline were divided into Regulations based on official documents and Actions based on press release.

107. Spencer, "Chinese Collector Sabotaged."

108. Bongiovanni, "U.S. Returns Hundreds."

109. EUROPOL, "Agreement on Strategic Co-operation."

110. Zheng, "Italy Agrees to Return."

Regulations

Between 2009 and 2019, the Chinese government actively cooperated with the rest of the world to improve its domestic situation, but also to advance the world in matters such as eliminating crime or providing education: “Both sides recognised the special importance of strengthening culture, education and youth exchanges between China and the EU.”¹¹¹

China joined alliances such as BRICS, scientific cooperation programs and signed a great number of international commitments such as bilateral agreements. In addition, China launched projects such as One Belt One Road or Maritime Silk Road, which stressed the cultural dimension of economic cooperation.

China and the EU reaffirmed their commitment to deepening their partnership for peace, growth, reform and civilisation, based on the principles of equality, respect and trust, by comprehensively implementing the China-EU 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation.¹¹²

Efforts in recovery of heritage objects included cross-border and trans-national cooperation between foreign and Chinese law enforcement institutions outside of the Chinese jurisdiction. The main goals of international cooperation were prevention of illicit art trade and seizure of trafficked objects resulting in their return to their source country.

This Convention applies to claims of an international character for:

- (a) the restitution of stolen cultural objects;
- (b) the return of cultural objects removed from the territory of a Contracting State contrary to its law regulating the export of cultural objects for the purpose of protecting its cultural heritage (hereinafter "illegally exported cultural objects").¹¹³

The flow of objects usually occurred from China to markets abroad; therefore, China has been considered a source country. The need to prevent the illicit art trade came from the

111. Belt and Road Portal, “Joint Statement Deepening.”

112. Belt and Road Portal.

113. UNIDROIT, “Convention on Stolen,” Article 1, p. 2.

dedication to protect the culture. China paid significant attention to the role culture plays in bonding people and enabling citizens of various nations to cooperate.

The Recommendations call for greater cooperation between African and Chinese universities in the field of heritage, developing joint research on conservation, and promoting skills exchanges in thematic areas linked to sustainable development, urbanization, and traditional management systems of World Heritage sites in Africa and China.¹¹⁴

The government-to-government cooperation also intensified, not only between China and Europe or North America, but also with Southeast Asia and Africa.

Actions

In 2009-2019, the cross-border cooperation intensified and resulted in the recovery of more than a thousand objects alone in the first half of 2019, when 361 objects were returned from the USA¹¹⁵ and 796 from Italy.¹¹⁶

Through a long and effective collaborative effort between the FBI and our partners in China's National Cultural Heritage Administration, we were able to identify a total of 361 objects that rightfully belong to China," Johnson said.¹¹⁷

Interestingly, the intensification of cooperation was a direct result of expanding illicit art trafficking. The demand was pushed by renowned art dealers and connoisseurs, of whom some were charged and held responsible of illicit art trade and falsifying provenance.¹¹⁸ Some important dealers in the connoisseur circles have been charged, which has also been seen as a warning for others that nobody is immune to justice. Criminal networks operated mostly in antiquities trade and most objects were trafficked into the USA.¹¹⁹

114. UNESCO, "Africa and China Agree."

115. Zhang, "US Will Return."

116. Zheng, "Italy Agrees to Return."

117. Zhang, "US Will Return."

118. Bannon and Stewart, "New York Art Dealer."

119. Campbell, "The Illicit Antiquities Trade," 113-153.

China's economic position and business opportunities further influenced the willingness of foreign states and organizations to return objects illicitly acquired after 1970 by private collectors. The more economic relations China had or was willing to establish with a state, the bigger the willingness of that state to cooperate.^{120, 121} This trend of intensified cooperation was a direct result of Chinese foreign investment, such as One Belt One Road initiative in Europe, whereas in the United States it was acquainted with illicit trafficking and money laundering.

“We are proud to be able to return these pieces to our friends, as they are representative of the heritage and identity of the Chinese people,” Bonisoli said, according to a statement from the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities.¹²²

Law enforcement cooperation was strategically easier in case of art retrieval rather than prevention, because most objects were trafficked in recent years and could have therefore been subjected to the 1970 Convention and newer amendments. Retrieval from museums worldwide could only result in a fiasco, as most of the objects were acquired before 1970, hence the law would have not acted in retrospect. The prevention of illicit art trade is the most challenging among all efforts of recovery, due to an abundance of cultural heritage sites in China without solid protection, an ease of conducting that crime and a high demand in source countries. Illicit art trade was strongly targeted in official documents: “The other forms of serious crime mentioned shall be:

— illicit trafficking in cultural goods, including antiquities and works of art...”¹²³

International law enforcement cooperation greatly increased China's capacity to prevent illicit art trade and protect heritage objects. Successful law enforcement brought good PR for

120. Bongiovanni, “U.S. Returns Hundreds.”

121. Kang, “Interests, Values, and Geopolitics,” 254.

122. Zheng, “Italy Agrees to Return.”

123. EUROPOL, “Agreement on Strategic Co-operation.”

all sides involved. China was able to demonstrate the ability to follow international regulations, the willingness to cooperate and the appreciation of help. It also gained several opportunities to develop and create international laws, thus gaining more hard power in a long perspective. In addition, China benefited by acquiring advanced technology to fight and prevent illicit art trade, along with experience.

5.3 Maritime archaeology

Since the distant past, numerous maritime trade routes ran through the South China Sea, leaving countless shipwrecks on its bottom. To conduct the maritime archaeology, China invested significant funds into development of maritime archaeology through research projects, modern archaeological ships, museums, research institutions, lifting shipwrecks and even scholarships for foreign students. Maritime archaeology became crucial for preserving the underwater cultural heritage of China. It has been proven that ancient shipwrecks could contain rich and precious cargos; therefore, their value is both historical and economic, which unfortunately stimulates the illicit excavations and the illegal art trade. In this area, China's efforts were organized into the following categories: Infrastructure, Territorial Claims and History Promotion, all based on international news.

Infrastructure

China's efforts in maritime archaeology in the region made it possible to recover several historical vessels, which strengthen the popular interest towards Chinese maritime achievements.¹²⁴ China invested large sums into maritime archaeology projects in the South China Sea.

124. Walden, "Peaceful Explorer."

In 2014, China officially launched its first archaeological vessel, the 950-ton, 56 meterlong Kaogu-01. Originally commissioned by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) in 2012, primary construction on Kaogu-01 was completed by Chongqing Dongfeng Shipbuilding Corporation on January 24, 2014 at a total end cost of around 80 million yuan (\$12.9 million).¹²⁵

The number of recovered objects was usually counted in hundreds of thousands of objects per sank vessel: "Xinhua reports that more than 140,000 artifacts have been recovered from a Song Dynasty (A.D. 960–1279) shipwreck discovered in the South China Sea in 2007."¹²⁶ China did not only showcase its past achievements, but also used maritime archaeology to support its current policies.

Chinese archaeologists, who arrived in the African country this week, are hoping that the shipwreck could provide evidence of the first contact between China and east Africa.¹²⁷

The maritime archaeology was used to link the past glories to a new economic initiative that was based on ancient trade routes – the Maritime Silk Road. China aimed at benefitting from trade routes connecting the South China Sea region, of which the original Maritime Silk Road was a prototype.

Territorial Claims

While maritime archaeology is conducted all over the world without bigger controversies, in the South China Sea it has been more problematic due to numerous continuing territorial disputes.

On April 13 this year, Kaogu-01 began its second large-scale mission, departing Wenchang City in Hainan Province on a 45-day expedition to Shanhu (Pattle) Island in

125. Erickson and Bond, "Archaeology and the South."

126. Archaeological Institute of America, "Song Dynasty Shipwreck."

127. Murphy, "Zheng He: Symbol."

the Paracels, the site of a naval battle in the 1974 conflict between China and South Vietnam over the islands and still contested by Vietnam.¹²⁸

China's violations of surrounding states' sovereignty led to multiple conflicts, to the point that some were addressed in summits and international courts, such as in the United Nations Court in The Hague.

Up to 2019, China was in ongoing disputes over territorial claims with all of its neighbours, so in the area of the South China Sea with Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei: "The Philippines argues that the U-shaped boundary, which China set out based on "historical rights", encroaches on its territory under international law."¹²⁹

In this situation, it is not surprising that every argument supporting China's dominance in the territory would be used by the government. Maritime archaeology perfectly fulfilled that purpose. The Chinese government declared that ancient objects (dated long before the establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China) are valid as proof in modern territorial conflicts. This approach of China, to look for evidence of concrete hypothesis rather than to discover the history, provoked critique abroad.

While being a party to the 1970 Convention, which imposed the duty of cooperation with other state members, China actively cooperated in other aspects of retrieval and protection of cultural heritage, except from projects and policies in the South China Sea.

Take, for instance, the 2012 French-Filipino exploration of a 13th-century Chinese shipwreck in waters that the Philippines and China both now claim, which Chinese naval authorities drove the team from the area, saying the waters belonged to China.¹³⁰

Firstly, Chinese institutions have conducted archaeological research on disputed waters, while blocking others from doing so. Secondly, the Chinese government pushed for an invasive

128. Erickson and Bond, "Archaeology and the South."

129. Regencia, "Philippines Sues China."

130. Guilford, "Shipwrecks are China's."

approach in maritime archaeology outside of its official territory. Thirdly, China has declared that the presence of ancient Chinese shipwrecks within the disputed waters proved the validity of China's territorial claims.¹³¹

History Promotion

To counterbalance the negative image of invasive actions and aggressive territorial policies, China recalled the story of the ancient voyager Zheng He: “[Zheng] He was a six-foot-five Muslim eunuch who sailed from China to the coast of Africa. The greatest explorer you've never heard of.”¹³² The story was meant to support current political strategy, and tried to convince the world that as a nation it has long been peaceful and cosmopolitan in its maritime trade.

Pointing to the country's history, he added: "Leading the most powerful fleet in the world, Zheng He made seven voyages to the western seas, bringing there porcelain, silk and tea, rather than bloodshed, plundering or colonialism ... To this day, [he] is still remembered as an envoy of friendship and peace."¹³³

China's efforts in creating an image of a peaceful envoy and trader in the South China Sea were not successful, especially by praising a Muslim hero while being accused of violating the human rights of the Uyghurs in China (a Muslim minority), not respecting territorial sovereignty of its neighbours and altering the truth about the past. Moreover, the militarization of the South China Sea peaked in 2019 and the Chinese domination in the territory became indisputable. Therefore, suing archaeological findings as proof for the long-lasting presence of Chinese people was quite successful.

131. Regencia, “Philippines Sues China.”

132. Walden, “Peaceful Explorer.”

133. Branigan, “Zheng He: Messenger.”

Whereas the archaeological findings provided some historical evidence of continuing Chinese presence in this region in the past (the fact if it has any meaning today is a different matter), praising a Muslim heroism was too contradictory to the current policy in China. The fact that China tried to push such a bold narrative only shows the importance China pays to the domination in the South China Sea region.

Furthermore, the main flaws of the invasive tactic on the South China Sea include distorting the balance in the area,¹³⁴ increasing militarization leading to tensions and the destruction of the natural environment, to name only a few. By 2019, China's soft power acquired through maritime archaeology had already been translated into hard power resulting in domination in the South China Sea.

134. Dillon, "Countering Beijing."

Chapter 6: Discussion

Not many countries have a history as long as China and not many invoke the history as frequently as China does. As shown in Chapter 5, it is commonly admitted by scholars and repeated in mass media all over the world that current affairs in China are often legitimized based on ancient experiences, yet also a part of that history is created these days. Especially the national identity is constructed on the historical memory of the nation that is a sense of belonging to a most populous social group of that nation.¹³⁵

China's historical memory is not unified which harms its soft power and national branding, mainly because China was not consistent in its actions.¹³⁶ China did not have a persistent approach towards its own heritage and culture: it praised the Tibetan culture while condemning the Tibetan society, it promoted ancient artists while oppressing living ones or used a Muslim hero to promote peace while breaking the peace of the Muslim minority.¹³⁷ Consequently, historical examples have been ineffective in the face of current offences.¹³⁸ The reputation of a country that exercised strict public control over citizens and placed group responsibility over individual choices forced China to lean towards regionalisation, to uphold its methods of supporting national sovereignty, security management and strict social order.¹³⁹

Cultural heritage policies had implications for the Chinese economy, the policymaking and society, not omitting international relations. China has been a party to international conventions aiming at protecting and promoting culture, which directly increased China's soft power.¹⁴⁰ Compare to the American model, art diplomacy helped achieve the recovery of some cultural

135. Williams, "110 Years of Humiliation," 1.

136. Ding, "Branding a Rising China," 295.

137. Blumenfield and Silverman, *Cultural Heritage Politics in China*, 4.

138. Ding, "Branding a Rising China," 293-294.

139. Odgaard, "Peaceful Coexistence Strategy," 252-254.

140. Lai and Lu, "China's Soft Power," 2.

heritage objects through establishing relations and cooperation and thereby increasing China's soft power.¹⁴¹

Besides culture, other sources of soft power in China are still uncertain.¹⁴² This suggests that the uncertainty comes from the fact that China's soft power is not organic - it is orchestrated by the government and lacks a human element. Instead of government supporting citizens to freely share their love and knowledge to their culture, actions of citizens were still restrained and sometimes punished. In Japan, for instance, the behaviour of citizens is praised more than in China, also because of the values they transmit while abroad.¹⁴³ Another opinion is that China remained a weak soft power whereas its hard power increased rapidly, which created a discrepancy in foreign and domestic opinions on China, especially the feelings of threat to the world's status quo.¹⁴⁴

Being the second strongest economy in the world, China was able to invest substantial funds in the retrieval of art objects from abroad. These investments generated non-monetary profits, in this case soft power and recognition. Culture went hand in hand with economy and in China one was used to promote the other.¹⁴⁵ It can be argued that Chinese political elites have sent a message that in their opinion economic success granted China the right to be a decisive power in the international arena.¹⁴⁶

Soft power was used in the South China Sea to achieve geo-economic strategies requiring resources other than military and politics. According to the Sea Power Theory, China needs control over the sea to prove its super-power status and to gain more control over maritime trade, natural resources and the military situation in this region.¹⁴⁷ That is why the South China

141. Brown, "Arts Diplomacy," 57-59.

142. Li, *Soft Power*, 37.

143. Groot, "Cool Japan," 20.

144. Zhu, "A Critical Decade," 274.

145. Rawnsley, "China Talks Back," 283.

146. Zhu, "A Critical Decade," 274.

147. Yin and Jian, "Geo-Economic Strategy," 149.

Sea has been crucial¹⁴⁸ and China used culture and heritage to gain more influence there. To better develop its hard economic power, China invested in projects like the Maritime Silk Road,¹⁴⁹ which was not politically and militarily neutral.¹⁵⁰

The argument that a big proportion of the shipwrecks in the South China Sea are of Chinese origin was used by the Chinese government to back up territorial claims, which would profit the Chinese economy. Zheng He was symbolically marking the presence of China in the past,¹⁵¹ while official excavations of shipwrecks were meant to provide material evidence. China kept others from achieving the same by blocking any access to shipwrecks, not only on its official territory, but also in disputed waters. This is proof that China adhered to regulations that supported its economic interests, and ignored international court rulings whenever they were against its interest.¹⁵²

Another string of discussion connected to the recovery of heritage objects from abroad is the national humiliation.¹⁵³ It could be argued that the current government exploited the historical memory of humiliation, similarly, as when the National Humiliation Days were established in 1915. In the last 10 years, the Communist Party embraced the 1920s Guomindang's strategy – exploiting the memory of disgrace to demonstrate that only the current leadership can reverse the fate of the country.¹⁵⁴ China held others too often accountable for its misfortunes.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, since the looting was a valid proof of imperial colonial expansion in Asia and Africa, China could now overcome feelings of humiliation by

148. Yin and Jian, 148.

149. Li, *Soft Power*, 21-37.

150. Adams, "The Role of Underwater Archaeology," 262.

151. Ding, "Branding a Rising China," 293.

152. Cyranoski, "Ecosystem Fear in South," 334-335.

153. Cameron, "UNESCO and Cultural Heritage," 322.

154. Cohen, "Remembering and Forgetting," 235-239.

155. Gries, *China's New Nationalism Pride*, 51.

reclaiming its heritage.¹⁵⁶ In my opinion, this further embraced its soft power among ex-colonies and strengthened relations, for instance with Africa.

Despite considerable pitfalls, China as a state demonstrated the successful transformation from isolation and self-reliance to active cooperation in global affairs.¹⁵⁷ Its international presence has been boosted by bilateral agreements, which presented opportunities to demonstrate that by joining international art and culture-oriented programmes, China was able to keep up with other leading countries, respect regulations, propose solutions and achieve successes.¹⁵⁸

Yet international regulations cannot be imposed over national laws, of which China was both taken advantage of - when French museums rejected the request to return objects after they were catalogued,¹⁵⁹ but also took advantage - when China declined research requests in its maritime territory.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, maritime heritage protection laws were executed stricter than the laws on inland heritage protection. When it comes to the South China Sea, China claimed ownership of objects of Chinese origin even outside of its official territory, whereas for the inland archaeology, the location of objects within Chinese territory determines whether it is part of the Chinese cultural patrimony or not.¹⁶¹ Current expansions at the South China Sea have been masked with archaeology. In my opinion, if preservation of shipwrecks and other findings were the true target, China would cooperate with others to achieve a greater academic advancement.¹⁶²

To gain soft power, China has to present consistent policies domestically and abroad and adjust its culture to be more internationally appealing and accessible. Nevertheless, spreading

156. Hevia, "Looting Beijing, 1860, 1900," 192-193.

157. Odgaard, "Peaceful Coexistence Strategy," 234.

158. Lee, *An Overview*, 13-15.

159. Liu, "Take the Long Way," 394.

160. Perez-Alvaro and Forrest, "Maritime Archaeology," 395.

161. Perez-Alvaro and Forrest, "Maritime Archaeology," 392.

162. Blumenfield and Silverman, *Cultural Heritage Politics in China*, 5.

interest in the culture should occur organically and involve citizens voluntarily sharing their cultural affection with the world. To do so, China should have promoted more modern aspects of its culture and should have blended the ancient and the new to make it more natural and comprehensible for outsiders.¹⁶³ The promotion of modern culture is to some extent challenging to the current system, because contemporary art contains more critique than the ancient works, which the Communist Party did not greatly appreciate in the past 10 years. Therefore, the government prefers to “rejuvenate” the traditional culture and make it more compliant with the system.¹⁶⁴

Art and cultural heritage have undeniable historic value. Historic objects provide material evidence of bygone events. Knowing more about the history and art of China, the general public became familiarised and interested in the topic. The interest in art and culture also stimulated tourism in China and provided funds to further protection of heritage sites.

Having access to its own heritage allowed Chinese people to re-imagine themselves as a one united society and to consolidate social bonds between different social groups, much needed in modern nation states. For the minorities this is especially crucial, because they are often omitted in the public domain. Politically speaking, “Chinese” culture became an official source of soft power in that modern state dated back to 1945. More research should be dedicated to analysing the process of creating the modern Chineseness based on the selective valorisation of cultural elements.

Any rising power can be regarded as a threat, which holds true also for China, even though it has relatively small spending on military.¹⁶⁵ The actions of the Chinese government have been described as expansionist, devastating to the environment, inconsistent, and therefore, unpredictable. The government, however, aimed to be seen as peaceful, harmonious and as an

163. Dinnie, *Nation Branding Concepts*, 3-6.

164. Barr, “Nation Branding,” 92.

165. Robertson and Sin, “Measuring Hard Power,” 107.

heir to a long-lasting civilisation.¹⁶⁶ To counterbalance this, China desperately needed its culture to attract other states because its policies and values had not been widely appreciated. Since China has one of the longest and richest artistic traditions in the world, it has stressed its cultural revitalization. Thanks to the recovery of cultural heritage objects from abroad, both domestic and international goals can be achieved in the future. In 2009-2019, the efforts might have just started yet have already brought positive effects.

166. Adams, "The Role of Underwater Archaeology," 262-263.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Studies on the cultural aspects of China's soft power focus on the promotion of culture abroad. This thesis has shown that the recovery of Chinese cultural objects from abroad was a successful yet neglected model of increasing soft power used in numerous ways. Firstly, by engaging in auctions and selecting specific objects to recover and protect, China was able to project a uniform brand of Chinese culture that has become easily recognized and approachable by non-experts and as a result, popular and more esteemed. Secondly, by cooperating with foreign governments and law enforcement organizations, China was decisive in creating international regulations and directly influenced international order. Thirdly, by recovering heritage objects with the use of maritime archaeology, China has gained proof in territorial conflicts to strengthen its sovereignty and control in its desirable territory.

This thesis argues that the recovery of cultural objects from abroad was beneficial for China's soft power; therefore, China should increase its efforts in that field and improve the strategy. Particularly due to the need to counterbalance the negative perception of its ideology abroad. Important fallbacks have been identified and should be addressed to reduce their harmful impact. Furthermore, the recovery of cultural objects from abroad has been better accepted internationally than official propaganda in the promotion of culture.

As long as no organic interest in the Chinese culture will spread abroad on a bigger scale, official propaganda will not succeed in increasing China's soft power. There are obstacles to share a genuine interest in their culture for Chinese citizens, mainly due to heavy censorship and following official guidelines instead of using modern channels and media to voice personal interest of citizens. Some citizens (from wealthy art collectors to regular anonymous netizens) have been feeling obliged to "defend" their culture from foreigners' mistreat. Other citizens were seconding official cultural programs rather than share their organic interest in the arts and

cultures of China. Not many were able to present new aspects of the culture for it to reach the wider public or accept the constructive criticism.

The methods employed in this thesis provide a clear framework for a multilevel analysis, making this thesis a departure point to studying any government's official agenda. Studying political discourses enclosed in art and culture requires an understanding of the context, literal and hidden meanings and projected narratives. Therefore, searching for traits in history, political sciences and culture together is necessary for creating a complete understanding of the situation. The biggest limitations of this paper were the magnitude of the cases, sources, and opinions to study and the limitation on size. Selecting the representative cases was challenging, but in the end, I was able to present different aspects of one phenomenon leading to original arguments and conclusions.

The official propaganda of new Chinese culture showed how modern Chineseness has been and still is under construction. The cultural elements promoted by the government projected elements of the political culture. Studying modern culture from a close perspective, as illustrated in this thesis, makes the political agenda approachable and clear. One simple example is the cultural appropriation of minority culture, posing to include them in the mainstream but not caring to retrieve or protect much of their cultural heritage. Art retrieved from abroad is mostly made by court scholars or of Han majority origin and therefore in a unified style, which excludes the minority groups presenting their unique aesthetics. This makes them to some extent not a part of that new Chinese culture. This approach of the government to different aspects of its culture should be studied in-depth because it reflects upcoming political changes in the attitude towards different marginalized social and ethnic groups.

On China's side, the study of recovery of cultural objects from abroad contributed to the understanding of the modern essence of the Chineseness, and provided guidelines on more

effective ways to popularize the culture of China, thus, on solutions to further increase soft power. Usage of culture based soft power instead of hard power could be a method to prevent international and domestic conflicts, to the point of preventing violence.

On the international level, treating the illicit art trade as the violent crime and ostracising unethical behaviours normalizing it would benefit not only the art-world, but above all the people exploited by the crimes. In the near future, the best way for China to recover art from abroad is to prevent illicit trafficking, and to gain soft power, is to promote its culture but with respect to its diversity.

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