Artifact Preservation
Shŏugōngyìpín wénwù bǎocún
手工艺晶文物保存

Artifacts from Chinese history were preserved in Chinese personal and court collections prior to the eighteenth century. After that time foreign contact, wars, and social upheaval meant removal from China and destruction of artifacts. Since Mao’s death, Chinese officials have sought to recover Chinese cultural artifacts and to preserve them from pressures of modernization and an expanding population.

China’s seven thousand years of cultural and historic artifacts represent the development of one of the world’s ancient cultures, but these artifacts have been at risk for many reasons. Age is an obvious threat, but expropriation by foreigners, political upheaval, the illegal sale and export of antiquities, and nature itself have put the physical artifacts of China’s history at risk. Only recently has the Chinese government begun to fully address the need for preservation of these artifacts and historical sites.

Dynastic Period
The emperors of the Tang 唐 (618–907 CE), Yuan 元 (1279–1368), Ming 明 (1368–1644), and Qing 清 (1644–1912) dynasties valued relics and artwork and kept these items for the use by special members of their courts. As early as the Song dynasty 宋 (960–1279), libraries for the collection of books had been established. Such collections were examples of the wealth of the Chinese empire, and also served to provide the educational materials necessary to provide the opportunity of education for purposes of social advancement within the Confucian meritocracy.

The Ming dynasty enjoyed great prosperity acquired through the Tributary States system and trade. The Ming was the first regime encountered by European explorers and traders, and most Chinese trade with these Western countries was in commodities (silk, cotton goods, tea, and ceramics). Because the Western traders were limited in their commerce, widespread expropriation of Chinese artifacts did not take place at first. Many of what are now seen as valuable artworks (Ming vases, etc.) were, in fact, common trade goods.

In the seventeenth century, art collection by the Chinese elite had become common. This was not done for purely aesthetic reasons; in the Chinese cosmological view of a universe based on “circular time” which repeats itself, possession of artwork from earlier dynasties gave the collector a link to the earlier era. Furthermore, the possession of an artifact owned by earlier owners could hold as much meaning as the object itself. This is similar to the quasi-religious view that an object (icon or talisman) would receive some additional meaning from an external source rather than simply having its own intrinsic value. This was evident in the Qing dynasty when replicas of artwork were common; even though the replicas were of superior quality to the original pieces, the originals were valued because of the qi 气 (life force) they held.
As the European powers undermined Chinese authority in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Western desire for fine Chinese goods increased, and more of them were taken out of the country. To the Westerners this was simply trade in another commodity, not different from much of the other expropriation which has filled European and American museums and private collections. While this was a continuation of the superior status that Westerners felt they had, it would actually help to preserve much Chinese art and artifacts from the destruction they might have faced in the twentieth century.

**Republican China**

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were violent for China. Following a military defeat by Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895–1896, the Chinese government had to deal with the Boxer Rebellion against foreigners, the subsequent humiliating Boxer Protocol that required China to pay reparations to those foreign countries, a rising nationalist movement led by Sun Yat-sen, and subsequent military action to suppress the feudal actions of warlords in northern China. Occupation by Japan followed, and, before the twentieth century was half over, a civil war ensued as well. Cultural upheaval was capped by the Cultural Revolution, during which destruction of pre-Mao artifacts was accepted as patriotic.

**Chinese Civil War**

The greatest threats to Chinese art and artifacts came with the general destruction resulting from the Japanese invasion of 1931 and the subsequent periods of war. During the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949), the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek had many of the greatest classical treasures removed from museums on the mainland and taken to Taiwan for "safekeeping." The government in Beijing continues to see this as a theft of cultural antiquities; the government in Taiwan counters that if the pieces had not been removed from the mainland, they might have been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In any case, much of the greatest artwork created in China is held in the National Palace Museum 国立故宫博物院 in Taipei, Taiwan.

The claim that the artifacts might have faced destruction is a valid one. Although a State Bureau of Cultural Relics had been established by the victorious Communist government in November 1949, only superficial attempts at preserving historical sites and artifacts were made. The thirty-three sites identified under the Provisional Regulations on the Management of Heritage Conservation of 1961 were "revolutionary sites and buildings to commemorate the revolution."

**Cultural Revolution**

The social upheaval from 1966 to 1976, which resulted from an extreme antiforeigner, anticlassical, and pro-Mao

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**Bronze vessel from the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), in the collection of the Shanghai Museum. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**
viewpoint, was directed at placing Chairman Mao Zedong and his political philosophy above all others, including those of classical China. At the direction of the Gang of Four 四人帮, which included Mao’s wife Jiang Qing 江青, much of this was done through the destruction of historical and cultural artifacts that did not reflect Maoist thought. Items which reflected the “Four Olds” 四旧, which were old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas, were destroyed to keep them from corrupting the new direction of Chinese politics.

**Post-Mao Era**

Following Mao’s death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 sought to renew Chinese pride in their society by allowing a resurgence of traditional forms of art, including Chinese opera. The destruction of artifacts during the Cultural Revolution was seen as an attack on Chinese culture, and renewed efforts to preserve what was left were undertaken.

The post-Mao era has brought about the establishment of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage 中华人民共和国国家文物局 under the Ministry of Culture whose function is to identify and protect both movable and unmovable historic items and sites. In 1982, China issued the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics, which was revised in 2002. Despite these administrative movements, the protection of historic Chinese artifacts is underfunded given the hundreds of thousands of sites and items that require protection.

One of the greatest regions under threat of destruction or theft is the area of the Three Gorges Dam 长江三峡大坝, a massive engineering project to build a hydroelectric facility and inland waterway stretching westward from Hubei Province 湖北 to Chongqing 重庆 on the Yangzi (Chang) River 长江. Hundreds of historic sites
that will be flooded by the project, such as monasteries, cemeteries, and villages, have been identified, but funding for their relocation has been insufficient to protect them. Many of these sites have been looted, with their contents being sold on the black market.

One non-governmental effort to protect and reclaim historic artifacts from China is the Lost Cultural Relics Recovery Program, a non-governmental organization (NGO) under the auspices of the China Foundation for the Development of Folklore Culture. This group attempts to find and purchase historical items taken from China by foreigners. This movement has goals similar to that of Greece in trying to reclaim the marble sculptures taken from the Parthenon which are currently on display in the British Museum. However, because of the high profits which might be gained on the black market, some preservationists fear that offering to purchase artifacts taken illegally might encourage even more illegal trading.

Another aspect of artifact preservation is that of buildings and neighborhoods in historic cities. The movement for economic modernization has placed old, unused buildings at risk in areas scheduled for modernization. Chinese shikumen 石库门 (row houses) in cities like Shanghai are not truly traditional, but were built in the early twentieth century as housing for the growing population in major cities. Because they are generally small and low (one or two stories), they occupy land which could be used more productively for high-rise buildings. In Shanghai, some of the shikumen neighborhoods have been converted into Western-style restaurants and other commercial establishments, preserving the exteriors of the buildings while making more profitable use of them.

In May 2008, the Chengdu 成都 earthquake in Sichuan Province 四川 damanged hundreds of sites and artifacts, including the famous terracotta warriors at Xi'an 西安. One outcome of this cultural damage, as well as the damage to other structures, has been a greater commitment by the Chinese government to establish better construction standards for risk abatement.

From acts of nature, foreign expropriation, purposeful destruction, illegal sale and export, to the needs of an expanding population, ancient Chinese artifacts face many threats. Recent governmental and nongovernmental groups have attempted to develop an official structure to preserve and restore China’s cultural heritage.

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Further Reading


