



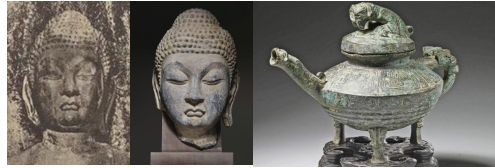
# The Restitution of Chinese Cultural Heritage

## Reexamining Chinese Art Collecting from 1860 - 1949 through the Lens of the Sarr-Savoy Report

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### Introduction

During the tumultuous 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, thousands of priceless antiquities were shipped out of China and acquired by prominent Western museums. Through the lens of the 2018 Sarr-Savoy report on African art in French collections, this project dives into the ethicality of these acquisitions of Chinese art and seeks to answer the broad question “What should museums do with contested objects and why?”



### Background on the Sarr-Savoy Report

Originally titled “The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics,” the report was commissioned by French president Emmanuel Macron in 2018 in order to establish a plan for French restitution of African objects. The paper was controversial because it proposed relatively low qualifications for objects to be considered for repatriation. If instituted and abided by, thousands of objects would be returned. Although Sarr and Savoy state that their research only concerns Sub-Saharan Africa under French rule due to Africa’s unique “cultural impoverishment,” other scholars have raised issues with this disclaimer. It is possible that the qualification was a political move to prevent repatriation conversations about other geographical areas. Similarly, Sarr and Savoy tend to use universally applicable language, and many have interpreted their ideas as suggesting that all objects taken during colonization can be considered for restitution. Lastly, regardless of intended region, the groundbreaking ideas set forth by Sarr and Savoy are an important road map for interrogating collections and decolonizing museums.

### Conclusions

#### Rejecting the Universal Museum and a Defense of Repatriation

Many contested objects today are held in “universal museums,” a museum that houses objects from all around the world under the idea that art belongs to everyone. Although the idea is romantic conceptually, it fails in modern-day practice. Most of the largest universal museums today (the Met, the British Museum, etc.) are in the west, leaving their rich collections inaccessible for a large portion of the world. Similarly, many of their exhibitions of non-western artifacts are skewed towards an explicitly western perspective, often perpetuating western exceptionalism. Therefore, arguments against repatriation under the guise of preserving the “universal museum” are fundamentally flawed.

#### Sarr-Savoy Qualifications of Repatriation

Sarr and Savoy’s qualifications for an object to be considered for repatriation were used as the basis for comparison.

Qualification	Examples from China (1860 – 1949)
Objects acquired during aggression/war are, today, symbols of resistance against the colonial aggressor = must be returned because of their specific importance	Today, the loss of “national treasures” has continued to be a painful point of contention in China; they have waged widespread campaigns to retrieve their cultural heritage. Specific instances of violent conflicts that resulted in the loss of antiquities: looting of the Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) and Battle of Peking
Any objects donated by military personnel connotes a lack of consent in the acquisition because of the inherent pressure of arms.	During the Spheres of Influence period, there was a foreign military presence in China that increased as the Qing dynasty fell. Various sources have suggested that soldiers would take advantage of the politically unstable situation to acquire loot.
Objects collected during scientific “exploratory” missions relied on a colonial system of intimidation.	There was a known archaeological boom in China in the early 1900s. Many of these expeditions resulted in the illegal removal of thousands of cultural relics which left the original positions of these objects scarred and disfigured.

#### Areas of Complication

As expected, regarding the colonial experience and the illegal art trade, there are several differences between Sub-Saharan Africa and China. These specifications would complicate the repatriation discussion and further research is required to see their specific impacts on the theoretical underpinnings of Sarr and Savoy’s proposals.

1. Imperialism in Sub-Saharan Africa is typically considered “high imperialism;” whereas, imperialism in China consisted of spheres of influence and was highly variable
2. Many Chinese peoples participated in and benefitted from the illegal sale/removal of antiquities. Some major players in the art trade like C.T. Loo were even considered to have assimilated into the West.
3. There is considerable difference between the cultural power of China on the global stage vs. the cultural power of Sub-Saharan Africa. Like the disclaimer that Sarr-Savoy included in their report, China is not typically considered “culturally impoverished.”

### Next Steps

Due to the broad nature of the topic, the research project is still unresolved. The project plans to continue throughout the 2021-2022 academic year and into the Summer of 2022. Specifically, an analysis of Columbia’s art collections will be conducted as well as a completion of the initial research paper. For the Summer of 2022, the project will hopefully continue in a field-capacity at a museum with an extensive East Asian collection and a provenance research initiative. Other potential areas of research include analyzing the display of repatriated Chinese objects, tracking the dissemination of the infamously liquidated Duanfang collection, investigating the Western outrage over the looting of Chinese art, diving deeper into any of the aforementioned areas of difference, and a discussion of digital repatriation of Chinese art, specifically vandalized grottoes.



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