

Mapping Chinese Antiquities in the United States

Ximeng(Simone) Deng
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Research Motivation

During my undergraduate Art History studies in China, I learned that many objects we studied—such as paintings, porcelain, bronzes, textiles, and Buddhist cultural heritage—are part of the collections in museums overseas, especially in Japan, the U.S., the U.K., and Europe. Research in these museums, typically focused on curatorial or educational aspects, often presents knowledge at a micro level, concentrating on individual objects or a few notable collectors. In addition to these detailed and rigorous academic publications, I aim to apply my [information organization](#) and [data analysis](#) skills to understand the broader context from a macro perspective.

Recently, scholars in London and Glasgow shared their projects on the “[history of collecting](#)” at the V&A Museum and the British Museum, focusing on both the overall museum and the East Asian department specifically. Their research, based on registration records and museum collection databases, was published in 2022 and 2023 and continues to evolve. This has inspired me to consider a similar approach with U.S. museums, exploring what insights might be gleaned from such a perspective.

Research Questions

- Which U.S. museums have notable collections of Chinese Art/Antiquites?
- What is the current status of digitization and open access (online databases, APIs) for these collections?
- What metadata are they recording?
- Which curatorial departments are supervising their collections?
- Across museums, how do the types, dates, and artists of the Chinese art collections compare? E.g., what makes the collections at places like the Nelson-Atkins Museum or the Cleveland Museum distinct from those at the MET or the Harvard Art Museum?
- Who are “the China collectors” - who have been the primary collectors and dealers contributing to the accumulation of Chinese art in these institutions? Are there patterns in the Credit Lines/Provenance among different museums? Beyond the well-known collectors and dealers in literature, who also collected Chinese art and deserve more recognition?
- Are there differences in the types of Chinese artworks acquired or accessioned by U.S. museums during various historical periods? How have these preferences or focuses shifted over time? Are there any objects that those institutions have deaccessioned?

Quantitative Methods

- Uncovering Sources:** I will compile a list of U.S. museums and art institutions with significant Chinese art collections from historical research books, identifying early players in the field.
- Social Network Analysis:** I plan to annotate sentences in the literature that depict interactions between two or more individuals to uncover the connections—both the frequency and attributes—between collectors in China, Japan, and the early collectors in the United States.
- Descriptive Statistics:** Some museums provide open access to their collection metadata via CSV or JSON files, often hosted on GitHub. For most museums, I will use online databases to collect as much statistical data as possible, similar to conducting a survey where the official museum websites serve as both respondents and data sources.

Qualitative Methods

- Focus group:** My target participants are art historians within academia, including professors and students specializing in Chinese art history. I plan to include both teachers and students in each discussion. My research topic, likely unfamiliar to traditional art history students, might encourage some to explore this field and possibly pursue further research and careers in it.
- Interview:** I intend to focus on the audience and users, rather than exclusively on museum professions. My interviewees will come from four different groups: audience at exhibition galleries in Chinese museums specializing in ancient art, regular museum visitors who hold museum passes, K-12 students and their parents, and digital users of museums.

Sources

[1] Clair, Michael S. *The Great Chinese Art Transfer: How so Much of China’s Art Came to America*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2016.

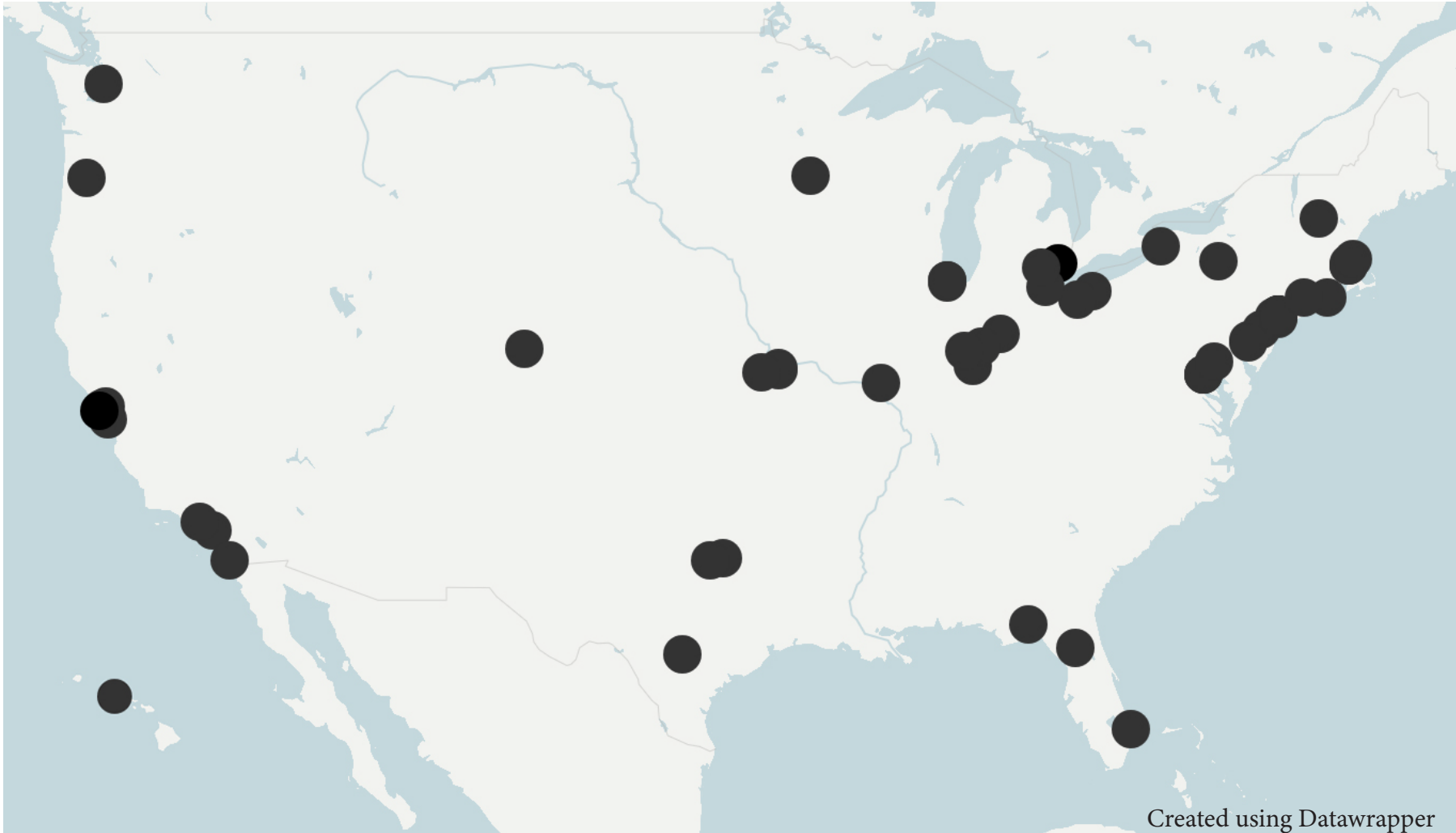
[2] Meyer, Karl E. (Karl Ernest), 1928-2019, and Shareen B. Brysac. *The China Collectors: America’s Century-Long Hunt for Asian Art Treasures*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015.

[3] Tomkins, Calvin. *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. [1st ed.] ed. E.P. Dutton 1970.

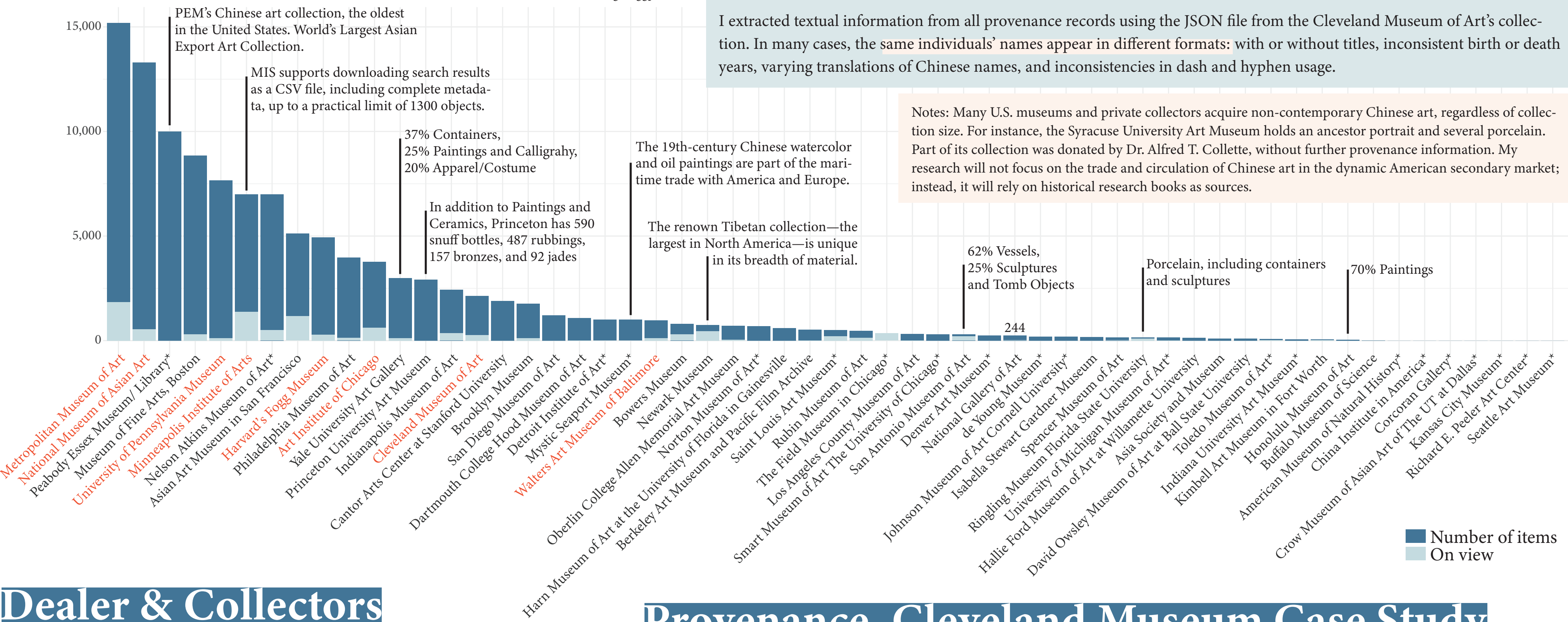
[4] Rujivacharakul Vimalin. *Collecting China: The World China and a History of Collecting*. University of Delaware Press, Newark Del, 2011.

[5] Steuber, Jason, and Guolong Lai, editors. *Collectors Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges*. University Press of Florida, 2014.

[6] Netting, Lara Jaishree. *A Perpetual Fire: John C. Ferguson and His Quest for Chinese Art and Culture*. Hong Kong University Press, 2013.



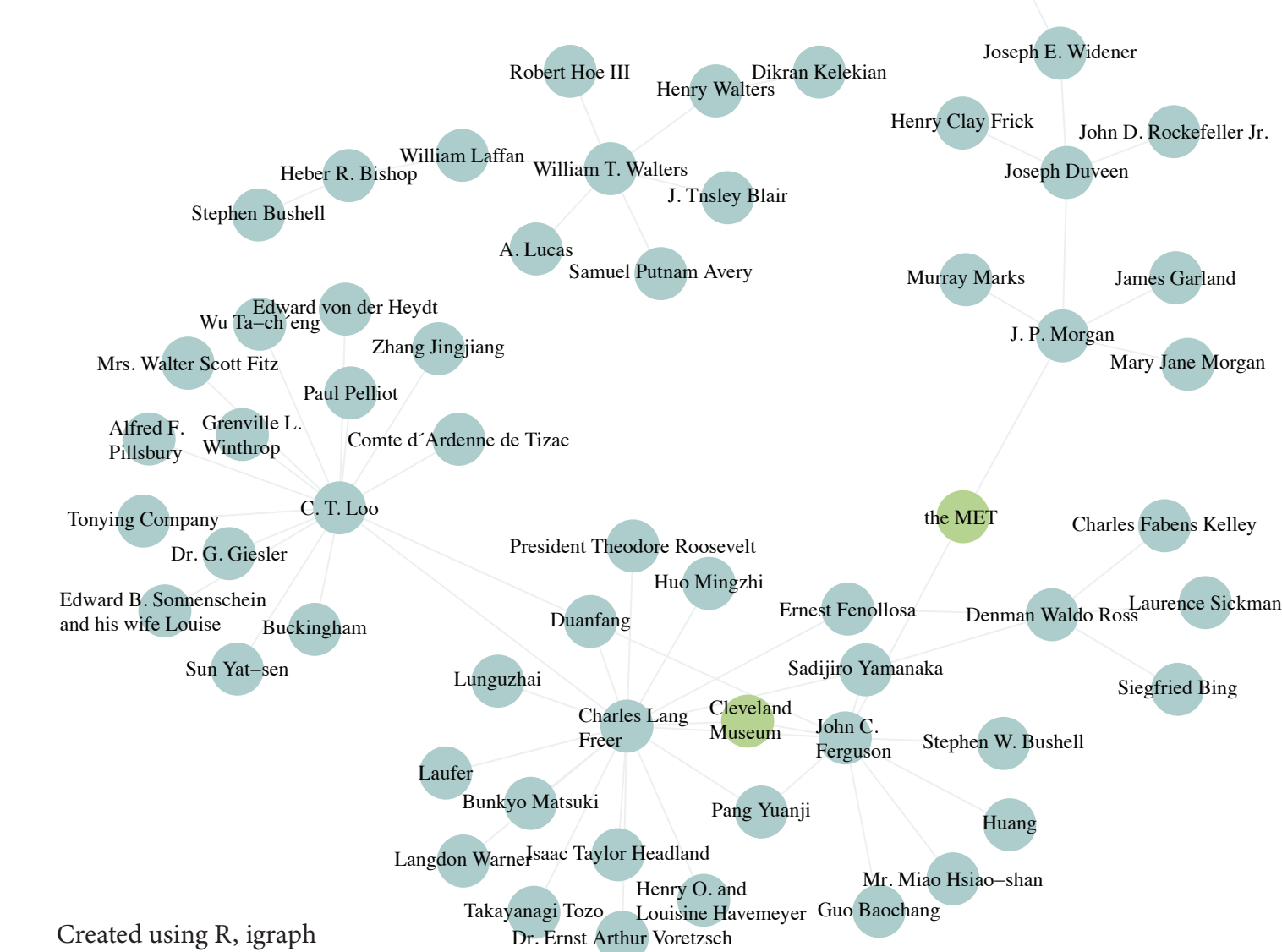
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Created using R, ggplot



Notes: Many U.S. museums and private collectors acquire non-contemporary Chinese art, regardless of collection size. For instance, the Syracuse University Art Museum holds an ancestor portrait and several porcelain. Part of its collection was donated by Dr. Alfred T. Collette, without further provenance information. My research will not focus on the trade and circulation of Chinese art in the dynamic American secondary market; instead, it will rely on historical research books as sources.

Dealer & Collectors

Using spaCy for Named Entity Recognition, I identified 1,560 unique names and quantified the frequency of co-occurrences for each pair of individuals within the same sentence. The NLP results, which positioned C. T. Loo and Morgan at the network's center, weren't entirely accurate and required significant manual cleaning of the original text. But they offered exploratory insights. I then conducted a more detailed search for personal relationships between several individuals within a limited scope. Future work will focus on manually coding the text to categorize relationships as buying and selling, teacher and student, friends or acquaintances, or professional, and assigning weights to depict the strength of these connections in the network graph. The text also reveals collectors' preferences, such as for bronzes, nephrite, or paintings.



Created using R, igraph

Museums in the U.S. with collections of Chinese Antiquities

I searched through the online collections of 57 museum websites, including 7 specializing in Asian art. Most are art museums, but also includes 20 university museums and 3 natural history museums with anthropological artifacts.

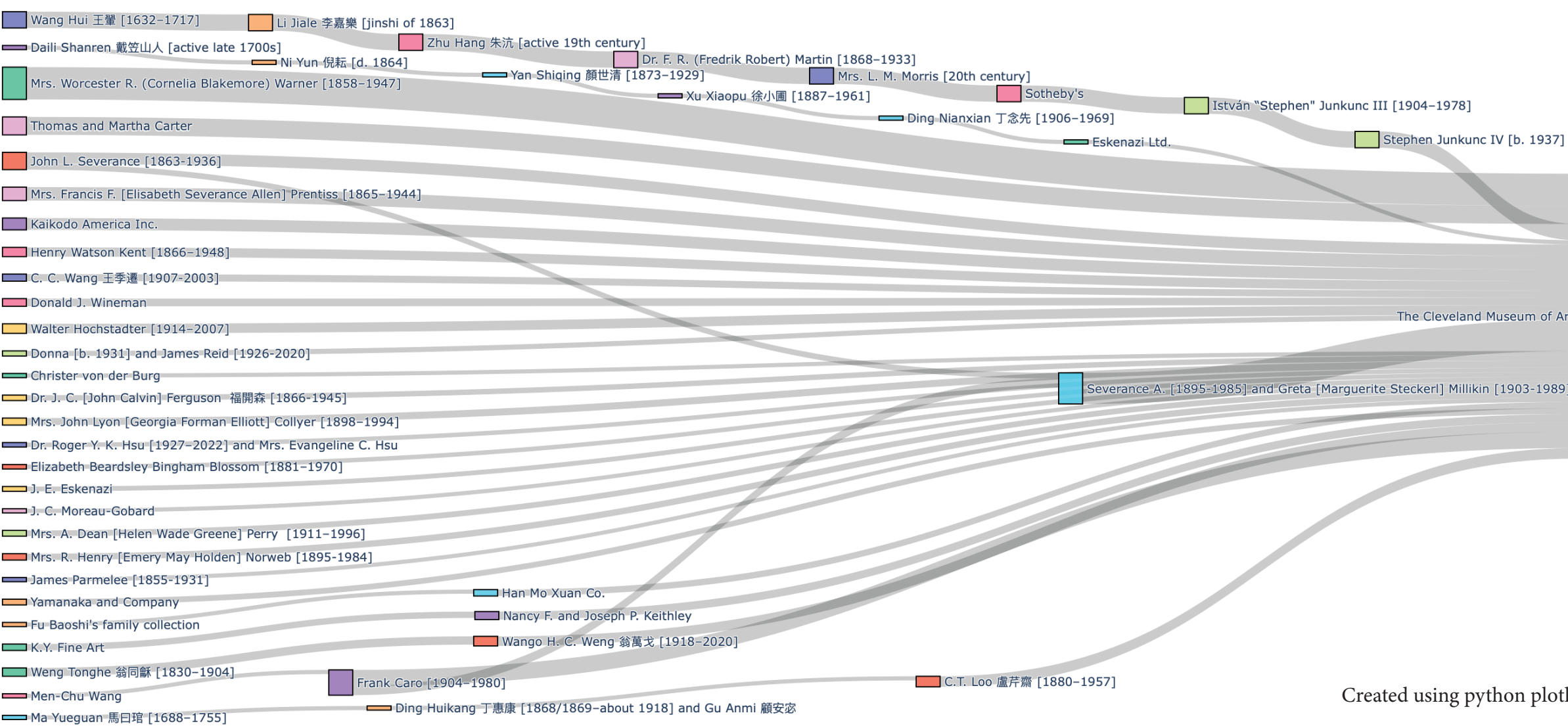
The museums' advanced search tools typically included fields such as Place, Country, Geography, Department, Collection Area, or Culture, specifically targeting “Chinese” or “China.” Additionally, I applied filters to exclude data after 1940. Museums marked with an asterisk (*) have limitations such as advanced searches that cannot filter Chinese artworks, keyword-only searches, incomplete collections, maintenance issues, or no online database. Museums in orange offer open access via GitHub or APIs.

Metadata & Data

Metadata recorded across museums is inconsistent and often not well-organized. For example, regarding the origin, some museums specify the creation place or geography as China, while others record it under the artist's nationality as Chinese and the object's culture as Chinese. Some may only use a tag saying “Chinese.” For attributes such as type, subject, classification, medium, material, and technique, records might include only one or a combination that overlaps. There are no consistent subject headings. For example, a bowl can be categorized as a furnishing, container, vessel, or as porcelain or ceramic.

I extracted textual information from all provenance records using the JSON file from the Cleveland Museum of Art's collection. In many cases, the same individuals' names appear in different formats: with or without titles, inconsistent birth or death years, varying translations of Chinese names, and inconsistencies in dash and hyphen usage.

Provenance, Cleveland Museum Case Study



Created using python plotly

Of the 2,474 items, 715 has no provenance information and 251 has 1. One item has the highest number of provenance descriptions at 11. Besides, 919 items has 2 provenance descriptions, 296 has 3, 98 has 4. I extracted pairs of adjacent provenance descriptions and selected those occurring more than 12 times to create the Sankey Diagram above. In addition to well-known collectors documented in historical research publications, several other prominent collectors contributed to the Cleveland Museum, including Thomas and Martha Carter, Severance A. and Greta Millikin, and Mrs. Worcester R. Warner, among others. Though not the focus of this project, data analysis could offer valuable guidance for future provenance studies.

This study is a preliminary exploration of my research questions and provides a reference for the public to understand Chinese collections in American museums. For museums, possessing and maintaining clean data is crucial for further research. Furthermore, museum and library professionals still face significant challenges in achieving consistent cataloging standards for Chinese antiquities.