

# Repatriation from Another Perspective: Implications for Chinese Museums and Decolonization

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## Introduction

Repatriation is an attractive issue in China. Colonialism and invasion wars are attributed to be the main reasons for Chinese objects' removal (Fang, 2009). There were many Chinese cultural objects, such as the Admonition Scroll and the Old Summer Palace bronze heads, removed from their place of origin and sent abroad from 1840 to the mid-20th century. When the auction of the Old Summer Palace bronze heads took place in France in 2009, repatriation became the most popular social topic that year. According to Cao Bingwu (2009), the question of repatriating those bronze heads is not only a legal issue but also a moral one, which largely relates to national sovereignty and emotion. Wang and Zhang (2009) thinks that all similar Chinese cultural objects must be unconditionally returned to China to safeguard China's national sovereignty and dignity. Wang Kaixi (2014) points out that repatriation should be prioritized as a diplomatic issue between national governments. He continues that the heritage object is a vehicle of its nation's politics, economy, culture, ideology, value, and as such it cannot be well-valued abroad.

It seems that the Chinese's claims of repatriation for colonial reasons are not being seen in the context of decolonization. However, the picture of the Chinese understanding of repatriation is neither clear nor convincing enough because of the lack of empirical research on Chinese repatriation. My research questions aim to examine whether the repatriation claimed under the umbrella of colonialism in China stems from decolonization; whether the Chinese people's understanding of and attitude toward repatriation are following the spirit of diversity, inclusion, and equality; and whether Chinese museums are moving in the direction of decolonization.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative approach was chosen as the method for this research. Because of the lack of research into the ways that ordinary Chinese understand repatriation, a qualitative approach could help to explore existing opinions and reveal the overlooked dimensions of repatriation among Chinese people. In order to encourage a participant's willingness of expression, the one-to-one interview was selected to conduct this study. In this way, the researcher could create an in-depth conversation with the participants through which their opinions could be understood comprehensively.

### **Participants**

The 16 participants of this research were all Chinese, with fourteen from the Han ethnic group and two from minority ethnic groups. The age group of participants ranged from 18 to 48.

### **Interview**

Data collection took place in March 2020. Every participant was required to participate in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. Because of the stay-at-home order during the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews took place through a WeChat video call. All the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed into text in Chinese. All the questions were organized into a structured interview that comprised four parts.

The first part was about the participant's general impression of and preference for museums. This part included nine questions. No. 1 was about the motivation for visiting museums, No. 2 and No. 3 were about preferred kinds of museums, No. 4 was about the personal significance of visiting museums, No. 5 and No. 6 were about the authority of museums, and Nos. 7 to 9 were about the museum's mission and function.

There were a further nine questions in the second part about the participant's attitude towards colonial history, western culture, and Chinese culture. For example, "What is the influence of the colonization history of China to yourself and your life?", "Do you expect any change about that influence?", "Is it necessary to export Chinese culture abroad?"

The third part focused on the repatriation of Chinese heritage objects which were removed from China during the colonial time and are currently collected by public museums abroad. This part included eight questions: 1) Do you support repatriating those objects from their current museum to China? 2) What kind of heritage object should be returned to China? 3) What value and impact will the repatriation have? 4) Does the repatriation have personal significance to you? 5) Who should participate in the process of decision-making about repatriation? 6) Would you accept shared ownership and loans as alternatives to repatriation?

7) Where should the object be repatriated to? 8) Which part of the object's story do you prefer to see in museums after repatriation?

The fourth part was about the participant's understanding of decolonization. The three questions in this part were familiarity, personal understanding of decolonization, and the relationship between decolonization and museums.

## Data analysis

All the participants' responses were coded into five categories, including a powerful China, an influential China, Chinese-centralization, the national perspective, and the individual perspective. The participants' responses with the theme of China's national strength, making and proving a powerful China, were coded into the category of "a powerful China". The responses with the theme of improving China's global status, promoting China's influence abroad, and exporting Chinese culture were coded into the category of "an influential China". The category of "Chinese-centralization" comprised responses about prioritizing the Chinese perspective, emphasizing the Chinese value, and ignoring others' cultures. The category of "prioritizing national perspective" included responses with the theme of prioritizing the national or government's perspective and supporting the nation's possession of cultural objects. Finally, the responses with the theme of dwarfing individual perspectives and disrespecting private property were coded into the category of "dwarfing individual perspective".

## Results and Conclusion

The Chinese understanding of repatriation is the opposite of that emphasizing the principles of diversity, inclusion, and equality. Five characteristics were found in the Chinese understanding of repatriation of objects lost during colonial times. Firstly, the Chinese often associate the return of cultural objects lost during the colonial period with China's national strength. Many people believe that the reason for repatriation is a powerful China. At the same time, the return of objects from foreign museums to China appears to be strong evidence of China's increasing national strength. The Chinese always prefer strength rather than morality as their judgment code, which is essentially a distrust of and disrespect for an equal and open international cultural conversation. Secondly, from the perspective of most Chinese people, the value of repatriation is to prove China's increasing international influence and improve China's global status. At the same time, the returned objects are often perceived as a tool to attract more foreigners to come to China and receive Chinese culture, which will help China prevail in the world's cultural competition. Thirdly, the Chinese attention to the returned object is limited to the stories before it left China. At the same time, many Chinese people think that the object has lost its real value since leaving China. They rarely care about or acknowledge the foreigner's interpretation of an object, which is a Chinese-centralized and exclusive attitude towards the repatriated object. Fourthly, the Chinese always take a national perspective on

the return of cultural objects. On the one hand, the importance to the nation is the main and primary significance of repatriation. Many people think that objects which are valuable to the country should be considered for return first. On the other hand, the national and governmental organizations are the main stakeholders of repatriation and should participate in the decision-making process. This approach of prioritizing the national perspective has largely restrained the diverse value of cultural objects. Finally, Chinese people are used to ignoring and dwarfing the personal perspective in repatriation. On the one hand, personal property is not respected, as many Chinese do not support returning the object to its original owner and his or her descendants. On the other hand, people think that the return of cultural objects does not have personal importance to them. When their personal opinions conflict with the nation's will, they will hand the priority over to the nation. In this case, the personal connection between repatriation and each individual is weak in China.

Thus, repatriation for colonial reasons in China has almost nothing to do with decolonization, even though many Chinese experts and scholars regard colonial expansion and war as some of the main reasons for the loss of cultural objects. Chinese people also strongly demand the return of the objects. However, most people in China are unfamiliar with and even ignorant of decolonization. Decolonization has never been the purpose or motivation of the return of Chinese objects. Repatriation is a political issue, with the purpose of shaping a powerful and influential China. The Chinese understanding of repatriation is full of exclusiveness and inequality based on the national perspective and Chinese-centralization ideology. This kind of repatriation risks the loss of cultural diversity and is far from the value of decolonization. The essence of repatriation should be the canceling of inequalities and the promotion of diverse perspectives of knowledge. The process of repatriation is not equal to the task of prioritizing the source nation's interpretation and ideology. In that case, repatriation will lead to another kind of inequality. Instead of that, an object's return should commit as well to bringing people back to an equal conversation based on critical thinking, rational analysis, and self-determination.

Finally, Chinese museums are not on the path of decolonization now. In China, the museum is a national cultural propaganda institution promoting the nation's interests and prioritizing Chinese values. Its mission is to provide Chinese people with cultural and political education and export Chinese culture abroad. At the same time, the Chinese audience's participation in the museum is superficial. The audiences are excluded from the operation and decision-making systems of museums. There is only one voice in Chinese museums. Such museums are more likely to be on the path toward colonization rather than decolonization.

## References

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