


New Chinese Museum Policy?

A Conversation on the Role of Culture in Contemporary China¹

Minh An Szabó de Bucs and Jamila Adeli 

Edited by Jamila Adeli

Jamila Adeli In my postdoctoral project at Humboldt University Berlin, I am investigating what narratives exist about large, transnational infrastructure projects such as the BRI and what significance culture or art has in them. I believe in the potential of art to mirror society, to shape social discourses, and to produce different kinds of knowledge. When we talk about the New Chinese Silk Road, we often hear about how China is involving its neighboring countries financially or economically in major infrastructure projects. We learn little about the cultural relations between China and its partners. In the framework of the BRI, how relevant are such cultural relations? What is the role of culture? Is culture transforming into an instrument of politics and power?

I am particularly interested in how the state acts in the field of art and culture: in the context of the BRI, what is new about Chinese cultural policy? And what

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Podcast “Von neuen Korridoren und Seidenstraßen. Ein Podcast zu Kultur und Infrastruktur” by Minh An Szabó de Bucs and Jamila Adeli (in German) about cultural policy and the role of arts and museums in contemporary China.

is driving the Chinese state and its actors to become more involved with art and its policies? I invited Minh An Szabó de Bucs to talk about this topic. She is an expert in the field of Chinese cultural policy. Welcome, An.

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Thank you for the invitation, Jamila. I am looking forward to this conversation.

Jamila Adeli You studied Sinology, Art History, and English in Berlin. You can interpret Chinese. You lived in Taiwan. You are the author of a documentary film about Chinese super-collectors, which was shown two years ago on the German–French television channel ARTE. As an art and culture journalist, you write about the Asian and Chinese art market, among other things, and work as a freelance author for the NZZ, SZ, Tagesspiegel, Monopol, DIE ZEIT, and several art magazines.

Why are you interested in the topic of Chinese cultural policy?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs The topic of Chinese cultural policy has a significant historical and contemporary relevance that is constantly growing. A first keyword for cultural policy in China is certainly the so-called century of humiliation. From the middle of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century, the Chinese state was defeated several times by foreign or Western invaders. For about one century, the Chinese felt colonized and dominated by Western powers such as Great Britain, France, and Japan. The hundred years of national humiliation began with the two Opium Wars of the 19th century.² During the Second Opium War, British and French troops plundered and destroyed the Imperial Summer Palace in Beijing. Since then, many cultural treasures and, thus, Chinese cultural heritage have been kept in Great Britain and France, where they are presently stored and presented. UNESCO estimates that around 1.6 million artifacts are currently abroad. According to Chinese experts, the figure is significantly higher, as it doesn't include privately owned objects.

Jamila Adeli Do the artifacts looted back then play a role in current Chinese cultural policy?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes! The aim is to bring the looted cultural treasures back to China. And there are various attempts to accomplish this. One of them is going through international auction houses. China has actually called on its citizens to search for these objects—these artifacts, in other words—to look specifically for auction houses that are offering looted art from China. Those citizens were asked

² The First Opium War, against British troops, lasted from 1839 to 1842. The Second Opium War, against France and Great Britain, took place from 1856 to 1860.

to bid at auctions, buy back the artifacts and then donate them to a state museum. The National Museum in Beijing or the Poly Museum are examples for state museums that received back looted art through Chinese citizens. An interesting fact in this context is that both state museums and Chinese auction houses belong to the Chinese Ministry of Defense.

Jamila Adeli This is indeed interesting. Could you elaborate on this?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs The Poly Museum is a branch of the Poly Group. This, in turn, reports to the Ministry of Defense and is responsible for several areas and institutions in which it invests. One area is culture, which comprises theater, television, and film as well as art. Art auction houses have not been around for very long in China, and their history is still very young. The first truly internationally recognized auction house is the private auction house China Guardian, founded in 1991, merely 30 years ago. To put it in comparison: the renowned auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's are over 250 years old.

The state-controlled Chinese auction house Poly Auction belongs to the already-mentioned Poly Group and was only founded in 2005. Up until now, Poly Auction has risen to the number one auction house in China. Internationally, Poly Auction ranks third, right behind Christie's and Sotheby's, followed by China Guardian on rank four. Considering that the Chinese auction houses are that young, they have really made it to the top in a very short time. The success of Poly Auction results from its state funding. This indirectly applies to the private auction house China Guardian, since the Chinese government strongly supports and cooperates with the private-sector business.

Jamila Adeli Let's go back to the topic of looted art. How are the looted cultural assets from abroad being returned to China's state museums?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Various organizations around the world monitor which artefacts are offered at which auction house. Private individuals are asked to visit these auctions, usually wealthy Chinese who can financially afford such an undertaking. The state calls for their patriotism and their love of their country. They are asked to bid at the auctions and bring the art back to China. If they are successful and then donate the retrieved artifacts to the Poly Museum, for example, then of course they receive benefits, economic benefits: tax breaks or benefits for favorable real estate prices. For many, this is an attractive offer. What we can observe here is that the state provides its citizens with targeted incentives, economic incentives, to bring Chinese cultural heritage back from abroad.

Jamila Adeli That sounds quite like a new strategy within Chinese cultural policy, catering to both domestic and international audiences. How would you describe the

relationship between patriotism and Chinese cultural policy which you just sketched? How is it related to the Chinese Dream, referring to a reawakening of the power of the great Chinese Empire through art, so to speak? Does art play a role in this narrative? Is art—in your example, cultural heritage—a means of demonstrating power externally and, perhaps, a reawakening of a Chinese cultural identity internally?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes! I assume that one of China's major goals is to regain the former power or position of the old Chinese Empire and to stand out internationally as one of the great powers. So far, China has achieved quite a lot here politically and economically: China has developed into a serious competitor to the US and is constantly challenging the US and Europe. However, China still has some catching up to do in the area of culture due to the period of Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, when many cultural assets and structures were destroyed. With the destruction and looting of cultural assets, the belief in the importance of culture was also lost, and with it the cultural identity of the state. China is now realizing this in the course of this cultural race to catch up: the country has gained prosperity, the rice bowl is full, it can consume as it pleases, but something is still missing. And the Chinese state is currently trying to fill this void with the culture that it has lost over the centuries. By retrieving the looted artworks, China seems to work on bringing back and reviving its old cultural greatness. We can see this as an act of revenge for the experience of humiliations by Western powers. China is showing its new strength internationally through its ability to retrieve the looted cultural property—a clear demonstration of power.

The Second Opium War, with the destruction and looting of the Old Summer Palace, was not the only humiliation China suffered at the hands of the West. Somewhat later, around 1900, there were further humiliations by Western powers and their efforts to colonialize. European countries such as France and Germany and the US forced tribute payments and attempted to establish colonies. The Chinese fought back against this (and against Christian missionary work), which led to the so-called Boxer Rebellion and, ultimately, to war.

After their victory over the Boxers, the Eight-Nation Alliance³ once again wreaked havoc and looted art objects. That is considered the second humiliation. The third humiliation happened during the Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang and the Communists (1927 to 1949), when Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek had to flee to Taiwan. During his retreat, he took thousands of wooden crates on board, which contained a total of around 610,000 imperial artifacts. They

3 The nations that waged war against the Chinese Empire around 1900. They included Italy, the USA, France, Austria-Hungary, Japan, the German Empire, the United Kingdom, and Russia.

are said to be housed in the Palace Museum in Taipei today. This is a significant thorn in China's side, and the state requests their restitution, as they are regarded as imperial property and cultural heritage.

Jamila Adeli Speaking of demonstrating power: how do the impressive, numerous, and often private new museum buildings relate to the new power demonstration of China? To my knowledge, they are mainly internationally oriented. What role do these museums play? Does culture make politics?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes, museums do indeed play a major role in this cultural policy: it's part of catching up in terms of culture. There are not many museums in China, and their history is still very young. Art museums as we know them in the West—in the sense of a public place for art—didn't exist in China for a long time. Those who collected art were either wealthy people or the Chinese emperors. The Chinese word for collecting is *shōucáng* (收藏). And literally translated, *shōu* (收) means “to gather” and *cáng* (藏) means “to hide.” Earlier on, art was only presented when friends came to visit. Then the traditional scroll was taken out and rolled up very slowly. People would talk, philosophize, recite poems, and drink wine. That's how art viewing happened in China. It is the opposite of going to a museum and to look at art together with other people. This is certainly the Western model of viewing art or appreciating art, and as a practice, it arrived very late in China.

Jamila Adeli Is there a specific date?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs The opening to Western ideas and Western art came around 1979, with Deng Xiaoping and his policy of opening up to the West. Western art movements such as Expressionism, Impressionism, and Dadaism came to China. Chinese artists and cultural practitioners really embraced this opening and soaked up everything and applied it. That's one of the reasons why Chinese avant-garde art flourished in the 1980s: the Chinese avant-garde was a reaction to the opening up of China. Back then, Chinese artists had no sense of which trends, forms, and contents in Western art history led to one another. At an accelerated speed, they got into everything at once and worked with it from there. This period can be seen as a catalyst for artists and cultural practitioners in China; one could imagine that time of the 1980s and 1990s as a dried-up pond in which all these new ideas were absorbed and from which fresh ideas then unfolded anew. I cannot really pinpoint an exact timing, but the rise of the Western “museum culture” happened simultaneously with the opening up of China to the West.

Jamila Adeli How involved is the state with this new museum policy? It is said that those new big museums in China are often empty; how anchored are they in the Chinese or global art world?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs In 2011, the government's five-year plan called for the building of more museums. This was in fact another call to the Chinese people: 3,500 museums were to be built within five years. Only three years later, this target was achieved. There are now over 5,000 museums; 1,500 of them are private museums. It is mainly the private museums that appear empty. One is bigger and more spectacular than the other. Other than here in Europe, a private museum in China doesn't mean an exhibition area of 1,000 square meters, but 10,000 or 30,000 square meters. They often operate with two, three, four branches in different cities. These museums are completely different dimensions. They are built according to the Western model and often bring Western architects to China to attract attention. They usually exhibit Chinese and Western contemporary art.

Nowadays, Western art is also being collected in China to demonstrate that the Chinese have the money to buy Impressionists or a Gerhard Richter painting. China is now visible and active on the stage of global art; it experienced an upgrade: if you want to see a Modigliani, you can do so in China.

Empty museums are usually located outside major cities, in areas that hold enough space for 30,000-square-meter buildings. But many operators lack the know-how. How do I preserve the art? How do I ventilate? How do I humidify? Mistakes or inexperience quickly leads to mold growth. There is a lack of Western know-how on how to preserve the art objects. And often a lack of audience, as entrance fees are too high. These are two reasons to explain empty museums in China. Another is that Chinese businesspeople are encouraged by the government to build cultural facilities so that they can get tax benefits. If you open not only office buildings and stores in a real estate complex but also a theater, a cinema, or a small museum, then you won't have to pay as much tax. Or the property price is simply being reduced by half. I give you an example from Shanghai: Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei opened the Long Museum together. This museum was so successful that the local government approached them, offered them about 30,000 m² of land at a ridiculously low price in a prime location, and encouraged them to open a second museum there. Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei agreed and built a second museum, the Long Museum No. 2. And after a few years, they founded a third museum in Chongqing in a financial district. And a little later, the fourth museum in Wuhan. That's how it works in China.

Jamila Adeli Is that an example of socialism with Chinese characteristics?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes, this is the market economy that was introduced under Deng Xiaoping in 1979. The combination of market economy and socialism has worked well so far: economic growth is increasing, people have gained money. As a result, China witnessed the emergence of new middle classes, who are now spending their money. They are nowadays allowed to possess private property.

This is important when it comes to art because the state is not officially allowed to collect art. Currently, there is no state museum in China that collects contemporary art. Anything the National Museum of Art or the Poly Museum have in their buildings are imperial and historical artifacts, received through donation or endowment.

Jamila Adeli When we look at art in China, do you think we need to critically deconstruct our Western gaze?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes, certainly. In the German media, we focus mainly on human rights violations, dissidents, and the oppression of minorities; in other words, we have a very negative image. This naturally influences the way we look at Chinese art institutions or artists. We often suspect an agenda behind developments in the art world in China. But we overlook the fact that the Chinese art actors simply want to showcase the artistic directions that are currently emerging. We really need to overcome our prejudices and look at China in a more differentiated way—especially since the Chinese government negotiates art and culture with growing self-esteem. It is interesting to note here that, since the French president Emmanuel Macron gave his speech on the restitution of looted art to African states in 2017, the Chinese government is convinced that looted art shall no longer be “re-bought” and brought back to China but officially restituted without any further negotiations or expenses.

Jamila Adeli Could you elaborate on this?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs The most famous example is probably the case of the collection of Yves Saint Laurent, the great fashion designer, which was auctioned by Christie’s in 2009.⁴ After the death of Yves Saint Laurent, his partner at the time, Pierre Bergé, decided to give the large art collection into auction at Christie’s. Among that collection were two bronze heads of the Chinese zodiac signs, the hare and the rat. The two heads belonged to the Imperial Summer Palace in Beijing, which had been destroyed and looted by British and French troops during the Second Opium War in 1860. In the palace, there was a large fountain consisting of 12 bronze statues depicting the 12 zodiac signs. From each animal head, water gushed into a large water basin. Ironically, the fountain was designed and built by a Western missionary named Giuseppe Castiglione. He had had the heads of the animal statues cast in bronze in France and then brought them back to China.

4 For more information on this example, see Erling, Johnny. “Chinese blufft Christie’s und will nicht zahlen”. *Welt*, 2 March 2009. <https://www.welt.de/kultur/article3300077/Chinese-blufft-Christie-s-und-will-nicht-zahlen.html> (accessed 16 Feb. 2023).

Strangely enough, China's redemption of its humiliation at the hands of the West manifested itself in the retrieval of these 12 animal heads, which have been scattered all over the world since the looting of the Summer Palace. To date, China has retrieved seven of the 12 animal heads. Four of them are located in the Poly Museum, two in the National Museum, namely, the hare and the rat.

Let me now tell you how they got there: Christie's announced the auction of the Yves Saint Laurent collection in Paris, whereupon China, or more precisely, China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH), reacts and vehemently opposes the auction because the heads are considered cultural heritage. It should not be auctioned off, but returned. The case went all the way to the highest court in France. However, China loses in court. The auction goes ahead, and the animal heads are allowed to be auctioned. The auction happens on February 25 in 2009. There was a huge bidding war, and, after several minutes, an anonymous Chinese collector who had bid by telephone won the auction for around 31 million euros—and immediately refused to pay! This is an affront, causing a real scandal. For the logic of the auction house, the animal heads are now “burned” and cannot be auctioned again. In a press conference held in Beijing, the telephone bidder identified himself afterwards as Cai Mingchao, Chinese collector and businessman from Southern China. He argued that the animal heads already belong to China, so there is no need to pay for them. Cai is also an adviser to the National Treasures Fund, a government-affiliated NGO founded in 2005 with the mission of returning looted cultural artifacts to China.⁵

Shortly afterwards, the Chinese government issued stricter customs regulations against Christie's in China in response to the auction. A little later, Bergé tried one more time to offer the bronzes, but ties his offer in exchange to Tibet's freedom. This was seen as infringement upon “the Chinese people's cultural rights under the pretext of human rights” (cf. Erling 2009).

After that second attempt, the animal heads are stored for several years, until the French collector Francois-Henri Pinault buys them in April 2013. It is important to note that Pinault is the owner of the Christie's auction house. In a major bilateral state ceremony, he donated the heads to the Chinese government. In return, he is granted permission to do business with his Christie's auction house on Chinese soil. Previously, it was permitted for Western auction houses to operate in China without Chinese partners. As a result, Christie's has been allowed to hold its own art auctions on the Chinese mainland since 2013. A connection between Pinault's donation and Christie's Chinese presence is officially denied.

⁵ Cai described his final bid as a “protest action” made on behalf of the Chinese people (Erling, March 2, 2009).

Jamila Adeli Thank you, that was quite a vivid example of how the Chinese state considers art and culture as political tools. Based on your long-term engagement with Chinese cultural policy, what has surprised you repeatedly or most recently?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs First of all, I was surprised that China experienced being deprived of its cultural heritage due to colonialism, and that many national treasures are still abroad. I wasn't aware how many artefacts were stolen and placed in European museums and institutions. I didn't realize for quite some time what important functions were attributed to cultural heritage. After all, it's not just about getting the objects back, but ultimately about re-establishing identity, one's own culture, history, and self-confidence in China.

I was surprised at how symbolically charged this repatriation policy is. This policy is a reawakening of China's former strength and cultural greatness—and there has been already a great many works of artefacts restituted, roughly around 4,000. Two or three years ago, the National Museum in Beijing presented three floors of restituted looted art in an exhibition. The exhibition was celebrated as a triumph, with the individual objects being presented like trophies on pedestals. That was not just an exhibition but the demonstration and call for patriotism, greatness, and power of a new China.

Secondly, I was surprised that Chinese collectors are so incredibly young. They are in their mid-20s to 30s and got wealthy either through their family or through their own work. They have so much money that they can travel and buy at any international art fairs. They are also very interested in Western art. All that was quite eye-opening for me: these young people are culturally very engaged; they want to connect with art and be around art. They are not only investing in real estate or clothes but also in artworks.

Jamila Adeli How is this young generation of art collectors presenting their artworks? Do they also “collect and hide,” as you mentioned earlier?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs No, no, it's completely different if not exactly the opposite. Nowadays, this generation “collects and shows off.” These young collectors exhibit their art in the huge, spectacular, and very aesthetic private museums we mentioned before.

Jamila Adeli To conclude our interview, what else is there to say about new Chinese cultural policy?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs If you want to understand and learn about cultural policy in contemporary China, go and visit the country. Take a look at the museums, for example, at K11 in Hong Kong, which is a huge art mall. Its founder, Adrian Cheng, had the idea to bring art directly to the young people, to the sites where they spend their time: shopping malls. With K11, Cheng actually installed a work by

Minh An Szabó de Bucs and Jamila Adeli

Olafur Eliasson next to a Gucci or a jeans store. In order to bring young people into contact with culture and art, he placed art where young people spend a lot of time. It works very well. K11 has expanded, and there are about 12 museum branches throughout China, for example, in Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan. The slogan of his art malls is “in art we live,” indicating that the new generation of Chinese people should live side by side with the arts and embrace cultural education.

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