


# From Trash to Treasure: Salvage Archaeology in the People's Republic of China, 1951–1976

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## Abstract

Since 1951, salvage archaeologists in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have retrieved tons of ancient artifacts from municipal scrapyards, refineries, and industrial development sites. They evaluated the artifacts for quality and distributed them to Chinese museums, libraries, hotels, restaurants, and art dealerships, which promoted the objects as representative of China's ancient past. This article examines the salvage archaeology program in Shanghai, one of the largest in the country. Shanghai evaluated metal and paper scrap from collecting stations throughout China. Salvage archaeologists in this program benefited from movements such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), as these movements allowed them to collect unprecedented quantities of ancient coins, standard weights and measures, weapons, agricultural implements, and ethnic minority artifacts. The program created museum and library collections across the PRC, and changed the distribution of bronze artifacts both in China and overseas. Covering the history of salvage archaeology in Shanghai over four decades, this article argues that “trash picking” increased the availability and visibility of bronze and textual artifacts throughout the PRC. It further argues that salvage archaeology shaped what Chinese people regard as relics of Chinese civilization.

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The Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) and Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), two monumental turning points in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC), have often been evaluated as disastrous for the preservation of ancient Chinese artifacts. While the Chinese state instated programs and directives that expressly protected cultural relics—objects the state perceived to be representative of Chinese civilization—the specific categories of objects that fell under the purview of cultural relic protection, as well as the physical effort that state-employed preservationists put into salvaging those objects, shifted with each campaign. The general perception is that the misappropriation of precious resources compounded the Great Leap Forward disaster, while Cultural Revolution campaigns literally sought to obliterate cultural relics bearing any association with the ancient past (Andrews, 1995: 314–76; Dikötter, 2010: 67–115). Recent research on cultural preservation in the PRC, however, has shown that state-funded protection of antiquities persisted despite infamous campaigns such as the Four Olds (Chan, 1985: 53–67, 212–15; Ho, 2006; Ho, 2011). These studies confirm similar findings in Iraq and the former Soviet Union, which suggest that salvage archaeology projects, especially those integrated with politically motivated projects of industrial development, expand in both scope and impact during periods of political turmoil (Bernhardsson, 2005: 130–63; Karlsgodt, 2011: 143–294; Masson, 1989).

Archival and oral historical data on Shanghai's salvage archaeology program show that by targeting specific categories of bronzes and texts, and enabling Chinese museums to collect and display them, these items became inseparable from the kind of Chinese identity that the PRC was trying to create.<sup>1</sup> Salvage archaeologists in China actively participated in both the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution campaigns, retrieving so many artifacts that they reported their achievements by the ton.<sup>2</sup> Not only did these men and women distinguish trash from treasure, they taught scrapyards and refinery workers to do the same. Some of the paper and scrap metal objects that PRC salvage archaeologists retrieved were incorporated into China's national museum and library collections, while others became sales inventory for the international art market. Many bronze artifacts in the Shanghai Museum collection, as well as genealogies and gazetteers in the Shanghai Library collection, exist because of salvage archaeology programs initiated by the PRC state during the early 1950s.

This article begins in 1951, when the State Cultural Heritage Administration created Shanghai's first salvage archaeology program. Newly recruited salvage archaeologists collected ancient bronze mirrors, coins, and weapons, as well as genealogies, gazetteers, and stele rubbings from municipal metal and paper refineries. They distributed these objects to commercial and noncommercial work units that could utilize them throughout China. By 1958, the program came under the management of Shanghai's flagship cultural institutions, the Shanghai Museum and Shanghai Library. This administrative transition significantly expanded the program's resources at a critical time: it was then that Shanghai's industrial refineries processed much of the PRC state's scrap metal and paper as part of the Great Leap Forward. As a result, the number of artifacts salvaged in Shanghai increased sharply, which in turn expanded collections at the Shanghai Museum and Shanghai Library. In the late 1960s, the Cultural Revolution campaign expanded the scope and impact of Shanghai's salvage archaeology program yet again. The program's long-standing jurisdiction over paper and metal allowed employees to preserve artifacts of local religious and commercial history, such as Shanghai's bronze temple bells and family genealogies.

This article shows that salvage archaeology increased the availability and visibility of bronze artifacts and ancient texts, both in China and overseas.<sup>3</sup> It also demonstrates how and why the program targeted different categories of bronzes and texts over time. The PRC's strategic prioritization of bronzes and paper shaped our conception of the relics that make up China's cultural heritage. Furthermore, this strategic prioritization was *not* a short-lived event. It persisted despite difficult political vicissitudes and made a lasting contribution to cultural preservation in the PRC.

## **A New Depository, 1951–1957**

The nine employees who reported to work at Shanghai's first salvage archaeology office, the Cultural Heritage Rescue Depository, thought they had a great deal. They were paid generous salaries: an average of 50 RMB per month, when most civil service jobs paid 30 or 40 RMB (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1956–1957). Their office occupied a central location on Wuding Road, the major thoroughfare that crossed prosperous Jing'an district.<sup>4</sup> Plus, the East China branch of the State Cultural Heritage Administration funded their work unit, which meant the employees focused on objects that "are our people's cultural inheritance, with historic, scholarly, and aesthetic value" (Wenwu cankao ziliao, 1950). In short, the job offered high pay and influence in one position.

The municipality recruited this first generation of salvage archaeologists from Shanghai's used book stores and art dealerships. These employees had extensive experience with evaluating books and curios. They never expected to spend much time sorting trash. Nevertheless, on their first day, Shanghai's salvage archaeologists were sent to the scrapyards in South Huangpu district, a working class industrial neighborhood that fueled commerce on the Bund. Those who knew books sorted waste paper at the sales offices of the Shanghai Paper Industry Board on Huangjia Pier. Those who had sold art sorted scrap metal for the East China Industrial Waste Metals Warehouse, near Rihui Harbor.

Shanghai's refineries supplied raw material for China's industrial supply chain. They got these raw materials—scrap—from recycling stations across the PRC, which encouraged people to sell unneeded household paper and metals for national industrial development. Light and heavy manufacturers throughout China bought the refineries' scrap to make cardboard and print paper, as well as steel and other metal alloys (Wenwu cankao ziliao, 1953a).<sup>5</sup>

The salvage archaeology program framed itself as a rescue operation (Huadong wenhua bu, 1952–1953). Employees described their work, sifting through scrap piles at smelting pits and pulp mills, as “emergency rescue” 抢救. Their job was to integrate themselves into the factory production cycle—retrieving valuable cultural relics before, and even after those objects were considered the property of light and heavy industries. This was a difficult job, as the PRC's industries had priority access to the country's raw materials throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, industrial enterprises had to negotiate with employees of the salvage archaeology program. Indeed, a salvage archaeologist's job was, in large part, to keep select resources from industrialization (Wenwu cankao ziliao, 1952).<sup>6</sup>

State cultural relics laws, created in 1949 to distinguish nationally significant objects from mere curios, set the guidelines for what resources could and could not be used for industrialization (Wenwu cankao ziliao, 1952). Salvage archaeology focused on three categories of objects:

1. Ancient books and objects that predated 1795 (the last year of the Manchu emperor Qianlong's reign)
2. Artifacts related to post-eighteenth century Chinese revolutionary movements
3. Artifacts with aesthetic or historical value—at least, valued beyond recyclable trash

The first two of these criteria underlined the PRC's self-identification: a revivalist state with links to China's ancient past, especially the heterodox

forces that shaped dynastic change. The laws purposefully left the third category of value—artifacts with historical or aesthetic significance—ambiguous. This ambiguity enabled Shanghai to add miscellaneous artifacts, such as reproductions that resembled pre-1795 artifacts, to its salvageable priorities list. The program’s designers reasoned that distributing reproductions for sale in the domestic and export art market would return a higher profit than processing reproductions for scrap (Lu, 2013).

Shanghai’s first generation of salvage archaeologists described their work as part connoisseurship and part manual labor. Scrap sorting was a difficult job. According to Lu Songlin, the team leader for scrap sorting, “unless the grounds were flooded, as long as we could get to the factories we went” (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009; Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1955–1957). Lu shared that this level of discipline was true in all seasons, including Shanghai’s difficult winters and summers. Transporting salvaged artifacts proved so physically demanding that the municipality divided work by gender: men carried metal and women moved paper (Huadong wenhua bu, 1952–1953). “Factories didn’t have anyone allocated to these jobs. . . . We went by ourselves [and] we brought those things out on our shoulders; there were no big machines” (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009). During their first two years on the job, Shanghai’s salvage archaeologists retrieved 150,000 books and more than 15 tons of bronze artifacts (Wenhua bu, 1957).

The work’s physically taxing nature prompted older salvage archaeologists to pair up with younger colleagues. Younger employees hauled packages and climbed scrap piles using wooden planks (Wenwu cankao ziliao, 1953b). Older employees, who had more experience identifying artifacts, evaluated what their younger colleagues retrieved.

Salvage archaeologists also paired up to prevent theft. The cost of acquiring ancient coins, bronze artifacts, and imperial-era books was minimal when requisitioned through the salvage archaeology program. The work unit paid for it by weight, as scrap. Like many other Chinese cities, however, Shanghai maintained an active secondhand market where antiquities sold for much more (Dong, 1999). “It was really easy to just put a coin in your pocket, who would know” (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009). Thus, on every “rescue mission,” inspection partners scrutinized each other as much as they did the scrap.

In accordance with the PRC’s nationwide system for evaluating and identifying cultural relics, Shanghai’s salvage archaeologists cataloged their inventory into three tiers. First-tier meant “important cultural relics worthy of preservation” (Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955). These objects were given accession numbers and kept in custody until the Shanghai Cultural Heritage Administration identified a museum willing to acquire them. Second-tier

artifacts were mere reference material and allotted to local film production companies, theaters, foreign dignitary reception centers, art schools, and state-owned restaurants, which used them as props and decorations (Shanghai shi renmin zhengfu, 1954). Third-tier artifacts were no different from scrap and got sold back to refineries and processing plants.

In January 1953, Shanghai's salvage archaeology office distributed its first inventory catalog, which listed salvaged artifacts available for museums, libraries, hotels, and restaurants across the country (Wenhua bu, 1957; Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955). According to the Ministry of Culture, the quantity and quality of what the program collected stunned catalog recipients, which included administrators at national and regional departments of culture, as well as museums and libraries across the country (Wenhua bu, 1957). The catalog featured twelve containers of first-tier artifacts, including 579 objects and 0.2 tons of ancient coins. It also featured 577 second-tier artifacts, as well as 10,443 third tier objects and 0.08 tons of miscellaneous fragments, which filled 93 additional containers (Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955).

The 1953 catalog gave detailed information on the estimated age, authenticity, and condition of 594 bronze artifacts, which salvage archaeologists considered the best of the best in their custody (see Table 1) (Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955).<sup>7</sup>

Table 1 shows that the majority of first-tier artifacts retrieved by the Shanghai salvage archaeology office were museum-ready. Only 12%, or 72 items, in the program's custody needed extensive repair. The rest required cosmetic fixes, but were neither broken nor oxidized beyond recognition. Bronze relics made during the late imperial era dominate the total number of artifacts accounted for in Table 1 (195 from the Ming dynasty, 101 from the Qing). A third of the artifacts were of indeterminable value: 122 were recent forgeries and 68 could not be reliably dated (Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955).<sup>8</sup>

The economic instruments of ancient Chinese states, such as a standard mint and the coins it produced, featured prominently. The 1953 catalog underscores Shanghai's impact on the institutional preservation of these objects. Prior to the nationwide proliferation of salvage archaeology offices, numismatics had a negligible presence at PRC museums and libraries. Ancient coins were not considered in the same category as paintings, calligraphy, and stele rubbings. The Ministry of Culture, however, envisioned museums and libraries as institutions that presented the broader material history of the past 5,000 years. Cultural heritage laws specifically named coins as part of China's cultural heritage and encouraged cultural institutions to acquire them whenever the opportunity arose. In this new model, coins

**Table 1.** First-Tier Bronzes Gathered by the Cultural Heritage Rescue Depository, 1951–1953.

Estimated time of creation	No. of artifacts in good condition	No. of artifacts in damaged condition
Zhou	11	3
Warring States		1
Qin	1	
Han	39	28
Three Kingdoms	1	
Tang	14	1
Song	3	
Yuan	3	
Ming	189	6
Qing	100	1
Republican	3	
No date	36	32
Forgery	122	
Totals	522	72

Source. Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955.

marked Chinese civilization's progression from one stage to another. They also garnered attention for the administrative prowess that underlined mint creation and dissemination.

According to its inventory catalog, the salvage archaeology office retrieved 11,452 independent pieces of ancient coins, 65 strings of attached ancient coins, and 22 kilograms of copper coins during its first two years of operation. This was enough to create several museum collections, if not a comprehensive numismatic museum. In fact, salvage archaeologists noted that the city's scrapyards yielded too many coins to count by the piece—they measured their findings by weight. According to Chen Peifen, the senior scholar of ancient bronzes at the Shanghai Museum, most of the program's salvaged coins were acquired by the Shanghai Museum (Interview with Chen Peifen, Feb. 1, 2010, and April 6, 2010).

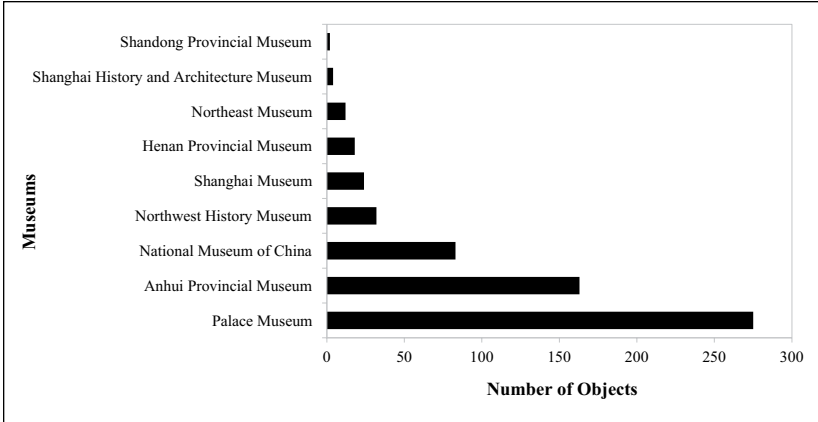
While only 18% of the first-tier artifacts in Table 1 predated the fourteenth century, those objects received extensive media fanfare. This is consistent with news coverage about salvage archaeology across the country, which tended to highlight the retrieval of ancient relics over more recent artifacts (Wenwu cankao ziliao, 1955a, 1955b, 1955c, 1955d, 1956b, 1956c). The featured items include wine vessels from the Zhou dynasty, drums, mirrors, and standard weights and measures from the Han dynasty, a dragon from the Qin

dynasty, as well as officials' badges from the Song dynasty (Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955). Objects with agricultural or military significance, especially those predating the fourteenth century, received extensive attention. Relics associated with heterodox uprisings, such as the Taiping Rebellion and the Small Swords Society, also received considerable media fanfare (Wenwu cankao ziliao, 1957). These reporting trends suggest that in addition to recovering material relics of the state economic infrastructure (standard weights and measures, and the like), the PRC's investment in salvage archaeology also reflected the larger state interest in using museums to reconstruct and promulgate a materially palpable narrative about the ancient past—one that integrated heterodox uprisings into state-building campaigns. The military and agricultural artifacts substantiated key elements of self-identification within the Chinese Communist Party. Indeed, the Chinese Communist Party portrayed itself as a revolutionary organization that rose to power by galvanizing the militant potential of an agrarian populace, and identified with individuals with “revolutionary” personal and historical backgrounds.

Shanghai is better known for its foreign rather than domestic markers. The city's International Settlement, French Concession, Jewish quarter, and sizable Muslim population made it one of the least likely sites for the preservation of Chinese civilization. Major journals such as the *Wenwu cankao ziliao*, however, wrote lavish reports praising Shanghai for recovering China's ancient agricultural, military, and administrative past (Wenwu cankao ziliao 1957; Wenwu cankao ziliao, 1951; Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1955–1957). Publications such as this underlined salvage archaeology's achievements and highlighted Shanghai as a hub of Chinese antiquities preservation and conservation. The methods Shanghai used to identify ancient artifacts became standardized as guidelines for salvage archaeology programs in other PRC cities and provinces (Wenwu cankao ziliao, 1956a). This role was unusual for the eastern Chinese city, which remains largely identified with foreign intrusion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The recovery of ancient relics, therefore, literally gave Shanghai a history. The objects connected Shanghai to a broader Chinese past that did not exist in its otherwise semi-colonial identity.

The salvaged artifacts directly benefited PRC museums, libraries, hotels, restaurants, and art dealerships. As a rescue operation that worked alongside industrial development, Shanghai's salvage archaeology office made its inventory available at cost—inventory that would have commanded hundreds, if not thousands of RMB on the art market. Internal transfers occasionally even eliminated cash from the exchange: eligible work units could also obtain salvaged artifacts by contributing the equivalent weight in scrap to the salvage archaeology program.





**Figure 1.** Number of salvaged cultural relics distributed to People’s Republic of China museums in 1953.

Source. Shanghai shi renmin weiyuanhui, 1955.

Museums across the country clamored for access to salvaged relics from Shanghai. Figure 1 shows the variety of institutions that acquired objects from the 1953 inventory catalog.

Figure 1 shows that Shanghai distributed 631 salvaged bronzes to museums throughout the country. The National Museum of China in Beijing and the Anhui Provincial Museum received more than fifty bronze relics each, enough to establish entire museum bronze collections. Even the Palace Museum in Beijing, the oldest and largest art collection in the country, got 275 artifacts (Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955; Shanghai shi renmin weiyuanhui, 1955). This level of interest confirms that Shanghai’s salvage archaeology office offered an invaluable resource: high-quality artifacts that public art collections could acquire despite limited budgets.

The 1953 inventory catalog did not provide item-level information on second-tier artifacts (Shanghai shi renmin zhengfu, 1954). Commercial film studios, theaters, and cultural centers, however, highly valued these as props and decorations (Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955). Even third-tier artifacts, such as antiquated cannons, generated strong demand among township and district-level history museums (Huadong wenhua bu, 1953–1955). The fact that even these artifacts, which according to ministry directives should have been slated for destruction, were absorbed into museum collections underlines the level of interest and visibility that salvaged scraps received.

The Ministry of Culture expanded Shanghai's salvage archaeology program after the 1953 catalog's successful release. The work unit received additional staff as well as jurisdiction over more scrapyards and processing plants in East China (Wenhua bu, 1957; Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1956–1957). These changes gave program employees better leverage over industry production managers. For example, municipal administrators began to notify salvage archaeologists about incoming scrap shipments in advance, which reduced the number of incidents where ancient artifacts were inadvertently dismantled, smelted, or pulped (Wenhua bu, 1957). The municipal museum and library also contributed conservation expertise, which restored damaged artifacts to exhibition standards (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1959–1960). In fact, when the Shanghai Museum got an opportunity to hire additional conservators in 1956, it recruited more bronze restorers than any other category of expertise, largely to support the metal salvaging program (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1956).

By the time Shanghai's salvage archaeologists released a second inventory in 1957, the program had become a sizable institution with well-established connections to the city's flagship cultural institutions (Shanghai shi renmin weiyuanhui, 1958). The office maintained thirty permanent employees plus numerous temporary contractors from Shanghai's newly nationalized art and book markets (Shanghai shi wenwu zhengli cangku, 1958). Each of these individuals focused on one or another of eleven categories of artifacts, such as bronzes, iron, precious metals (gold, silver, tin, and lead), fossils, hand-sewn books, printed books, foreign language books, and "artifacts of revolution" (Shanghai shi wenwu zhengli cangku, 1958).

The Shanghai salvage archaeology program's 1957 inventory catalog outlined its cumulative achievements since 1951. It had retrieved 591,117 ancient texts and distributed 465,955, or 79%, of these to libraries across eastern China. The office also salvaged 27,165 bronze relics, of which 7,518 artifacts, or 28%, were distributed to museums, hotels, and restaurants (Wenhua bu, 1956–1957b). The work unit gave credit to local and state-level administrative bodies for maintaining successful partnerships. For example, in 1954, advanced notification from the Ministry of Culture enabled Shanghai to intercept a key shipment from Xi'an to the municipal smelters, which yielded 89 bronze relics (Wenhua bu, 1957). Similar circumstances allowed the office to salvage 2,437 cultural relics, 88 arts and crafts objects, and 40 pieces of painting and calligraphy in 1955, as well as 4,353 bronze relics and more than 5 tons of texts in 1956 (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1955–1956; Wenhua bu, 1956–1957a). The salvage archaeology program even got hospitals to help. In 1957, the Sixth Hospital for the Disabled and Elderly in Zhejiang province gave Shanghai more than 3 tons of texts that it took out of circulation (Wenhua bu, 1957).

## The Great Leap Forward, 1958–1961

The Great Leap Forward campaign (1958–1961) altered both the infrastructure and practice of PRC salvage archaeology. The aggressive industrial growth campaign accelerated steel production and radically altered food distribution. While these changes caused disastrous famines in rural China, they proved advantageous for salvaging artifacts in Shanghai. As a national center for scrap processing, Shanghai got unprecedented numbers of ancient bronzes and texts from land-clearing projects, household rummaging, as well as unauthorized excavations (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009).

Art dealers noticed the Great Leap Forward's bounty first.<sup>9</sup> Jin Yuanyong and Huang Kangxiang, art dealers who did contract work at the Shanghai salvage archaeology office, tried to keep metal valuables out of the steel production cycle by traveling to Zhejiang, Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Hunan with cash in hand (Wenhua bu, 1958a). They outbid both scrapyards and local prices for bronze relics, which quickly incurred the ire of local provincial administrators. Shanghai soon received written complaints from these administrators, who claimed that unscrupulous dealers were encouraging locals to rob tombs (Wenhua bu, 1958a).<sup>10</sup>

Shanghai responded by placing salvage archaeology under the supervision of its municipal museum and library. Those who worked with metal objects became employees of the Shanghai Museum, while paper specialists went to the Shanghai Library (Shanghai shi renwei, 1958–1959). All the artifacts that the program held in custody soon followed, expanding municipal collections once again (Wenhua bu, 1958b). The Shanghai Library, for example, gained more than 640,000 volumes, which included 254,291 string-bound books, 42,973 foreign language monographs, 25,887 magazines, and 5,949 volumes of bound newspapers (Shanghai shi renwei, 1958–1959).

Overseeing salvage archaeology gave the Shanghai Museum and Library priority access to salvaged inventory. All work units in the PRC now went through these two institutions for salvaged artifacts. This gave the museum and library significant leeway to expand their own collections, as well as to establish partnerships with work units across the country. When the Luoyang Museum requested salvaged bronzes from Shanghai, for example, the Shanghai Museum proposed an exchange for ancient pottery from archaeological sites in Henan province. A similar deal with the Yunnan Provincial Museum gave Shanghai coveted ethnic minority artifacts, such as bronzes and jades (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1960). When the Cangzhou Restaurant and Liberation Mansion requested second-tier artifacts for interior decoration, they gave the Shanghai Museum access to luxury facilities for museum-sponsored events (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1960).

The nationwide focus on production soon prompted the Ministry of Culture to issue new criteria for salvageable artifacts (Wenhua bu, 1958a). Priority protection went to utilitarian metal objects that predated the Ming dynasty (Wenhua bu, 1958a). These included bronze military, agricultural, and administrative implements, such as arrowheads, chariot parts, food containers, and official badges and seals. Structural and decorative metal in ancient architecture also received protection. Objects that served less utilitarian functions, on the other hand, were relegated to satisfying industrial growth. That is to say, unless an ancient bronze Buddha, statue, lion, or incense burner had extraordinary aesthetic merit, salvage archaeologists left such objects for the smelters (Wenhua bu, 1958a).

The Great Leap Forward also scaled back preexisting temporal boundaries for artifact preservation. The blanket rule that protected anything created before 1795 from destruction was no longer in effect. Ming and Qing dynasty bronzes went to the smelters unless they bore unusually striking decorations, or casting marks by historically famous individuals. Only agricultural implements created before the Yuan dynasty, coins minted before the Tang dynasty, and official seals and badges created before the Republican era had guaranteed protection from industrial processing.

The criteria guiding salvation efforts, as described above, filled Chinese museum collections with ancient bronze weaponry and standard weights and measures. The PRC considered these objects instruments of political legitimacy—relics that demonstrate the administrative and military prowess of Chinese civilization (Wenhua bu, 1960). Dagger-axes, swords, knives, lances, ballistas, cannons, as well as all other weapons used in battle before 1949 were required to be salvaged. Ancient weights and measures, such as bronze qian, liang, and jin standards for weight, as well as fen, cun, and chi standards for length, received similar treatment, especially if the standards bore casting marks. State news media lavished attention on these finds. Not only did local and national administrative bodies receive notification whenever bronzes with casting marks were salvaged, the Shanghai Museum and Library regularly prepared lists that described the “Precious Cultural Relics That We Salvaged,” their various inscriptions and markings, as well as information regarding comparable objects in prominent museum collections (Wenhua bu, 1957; Wenhua bu, 1960).

Shanghai’s salvage archaeologists worked at a previously unprecedented pace and scale during the Great Leap Forward. Before the campaign began, these men and women held stewardship over five or six scrapyards, warehouses, and processing plants (Wenhua bu, 1957). In 1958, salvage archaeologists focusing on metal frequented 147 scrapyard warehouses, refineries, and bronze repositories. By 1959, the number of designated inspection sites

doubled to 294 locations (Shanghai shi disan jie, 1960). During the months of June and July, salvage archaeologists who specialized in paper retrieved nearly 6.5 tons of texts and sifted through more than 7,000 tons of waste paper (Wenhua bu, 1959b). The salvaged texts included old magazines and books; reference texts in sociology, the natural sciences, and foreign languages; and rare dictionaries, maps, deeds, genealogies, and stele rubbings. Metal specialists retrieved 10,804 artifacts, ranging from the Western Zhou through the Tang and Song dynasties (Shanghai shi disan jie, 1960). All the while, the number of employees dedicated to salvage archaeology remained unchanged, and in fact may have declined (Shanghai shi renwei, 1958–1959).

In order to cope with their vastly expanded workload, salvage archaeologists enlisted scrapyard workers to help identify and retrieve objects of value. This strategy took inspiration from the municipal museum and library's existing community-involvement projects, which used interactive displays to encourage participation. Salvage archaeologists put together boxes of reference-quality artifacts and used them to create pop-up exhibitions for scrapyard employees. The artifacts were all salvaged from local pulping and smelting pits, and contained labels describing the relics' known history (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009). Lu Songlin, who had worked in Shanghai's salvage archaeology office since the 1950s, recalled that his team tended to set up near work unit cafeterias, where a captive audience queued for meals. Their exhibition narratives focused on salvaging techniques, such as "how to use the artifact's components, quality, color, shape, and manufacturing to identify ancient bronze objects" (Wenhua bu, 1960). They also placed ancient bronze artifacts alongside recently made reproductions, to illustrate how to identify fakes (Wenhua bu, 1960). While not all scrapyard workers paid attention to these sessions, some gained enough knowledge to intercept specimens that dated to the Western Zhou, as well as coins minted by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1959–1960).

This new mass-involvement strategy also made use of photographs and posters. Initially, photographs stood in for artifacts deemed too valuable for public display (Wenhua bu, 1959a). As salvage archaeologists began to frequent several hundred sites, however, a few dozen photographs proved insufficient. The museum's reproductions department created posters instead. These illustrations juxtaposed multiple photographs with explanatory text, and proved inexpensive to reproduce (Wenhua bu 1959a; Wenhua bu, 1959b).<sup>11</sup> Lu's team distributed posters by the thousands, posting them at scrapyards, smelting pits, and refineries throughout the metropolitan area. Large metal repositories, such as the Fuxing Island warehouse, the municipal trash company warehouse, and the municipal metal industry warehouses got

concentrated doses of posters, exhibitions, and in-person training sessions (Wenhua bu, 1959b).

The posters' images and explanatory text focused on objects with military, agricultural, and revolutionary significance, such as blood-stained uniforms, military insignias, and ancient weapons. Poster designers were asked to refrain from long-winded explanations about aesthetic markers and historical significance (Wenhua bu, 1959b). Images depicting what a typical salvageable artifact would look like were considered more useful, especially when the target audience consisted of busy scrapyard workers who did not have time to examine scrap in detail. Training sessions followed a similar logic. Cafeteria displays included prototypical bronze relics as well as Communist Party flags, banners, and military uniforms (Wenhua bu, 1959b).

Salvage archaeologists relied on "socialist" methods of employee engagement to elicit popular participation (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1955–1957). Any scrapyard worker who retrieved valuable relics got honorable mention in municipal reports and won work unit-wide praise for heritage preservation. For example, Zhang Shouben, an older employee at the Changning district branch of the Shanghai Municipal Trash Company, got honorable mention for salvaging half a dozen bronze relics (Wenhua bu, 1957). He notified salvage archaeologists about Zhou dynasty bells, Shang dynasty dagger-axes, Han dynasty bells, and even found a dipper with Qianlong-era casting marks that had belonged to a Confucius temple in Taiwan. On another occasion, Zhang retrieved a large Ming dynasty vat with casting marks from the Jiajing reign (1521–1567), saving it from the smelting furnace just before the flames were ignited.

Formal and informal methods of praise were necessary, as scrapyard and processing plant managers often objected to salvage archaeology's disruption of production (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1959–1960). Some insisted on receiving payment for every artifact and required salvage archaeologists to work off-shift: early mornings or late evenings (Wenhua bu, 1960). Others refused to allow educational exhibitions, on the grounds that workers might pocket valuables after learning basic connoisseurship.

Integrating praise and heritage propaganda into salvage archaeology also had other advantages. Lu Songlin opined that the displays gave scrapyard workers a sense of immediacy. Workers learned Lu's name and stopped referring to him by the nickname "Old Antique" 老古董 (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009). Lu found himself being transformed from an unidentified nuisance to a familiar face at hundreds of processing plants across the city. His contacts reserved scrap for him, and shared valuable information about production cycles and negotiation techniques.

Extended involvement with bronze materials also had its costs. Salvage archaeologists soon found themselves overwhelmed by the metallic stench that permeated scrap repositories. They also found themselves inundated with bronze-related myths, such as the belief that bronzes belonged to the dead and working with netherworld property shortened lives (Zheng, 2003: 9–10). Some sought out qigong masters, to see whether breath-related therapy could mitigate the netherworld's impact on their health. Lu Songlin remembers that his colleagues could not decide which was worse: supervising a long table where everyone was sorting explosive devices from scrap, or dwelling on the long-term effects of working with graveyard remains (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009).

## **The Cultural Revolution, 1966–1976**

The Cultural Revolution shifted salvage archaeology's focus to the preservation of local history in Shanghai. It also marked the beginning of salvage archaeology's involvement with preserving public statues and monuments throughout the Shanghai metropolitan area. The shift began in late summer 1966.

One day that summer, Chen Peifen received a phone call about two bronze lions. This was not typical. Throughout the Cultural Revolution, the museum kept a hot line to receive calls regarding cultural relics that were in danger of destruction from raids and seizures (Lu, 2012: chaps. 3 and 4). Private citizens and work unit administrators alike called to report salvageable works of art, ancient texts, and other valuables. The lions, however, were neither relics nor revolutionary objects. They were decorative statues at the former HSBC headquarters.

The HSBC lions had stood on the corner of Nanjing Road and the Shanghai Bund since 1923. Cultural Revolution rhetoric portrayed them as remnants of “the British empire's colonial rule over China . . . squeezing blood and sweat from our great industrial and agricultural populace” (Shi wenhua ju, 1966). Chen's callers told her that if the Shanghai Museum did not want the lions, then they would bring the lions to a metal recycler. Chen, who had worked with the salvage archaeology program since the early 1950s, said “Well, don't do that. Don't melt it down. . . . If you bring them here, I can take them” (Shi wenhua ju, 1966)

The Shanghai Museum then authored a series of public announcements that turned Cultural Revolution rhetoric on its head. The announcements claimed that preserving the HSBC lions showed China's triumph over foreign imperialism. Artifacts like the HSBC lions needed to be preserved because “they will forever show our progeny the proof of imperialism's violation of China” (Shi wenhua ju, 1966). The announcements generated popular interest.

While interest in preserving Shanghai's semi-colonial past predated the Cultural Revolution, the success of this endeavor despite the tumultuous times was unusual. One would expect that objects recalling Shanghai's ties with foreign influence would see destruction first. The fact that the HSBC lions were preserved, however, suggests that the category of cultural relics was malleable even during the Cultural Revolution.

It is important to note that museum administrators created their preservation hotline as an ad hoc response to locals who called the museum as a last resort for saving objects they believed were culturally important. Shanghai's museum and library had no official support for their preservationist work during the first year of the Cultural Revolution. Veteran museum workers opine that they saw some success in preserving select bronzes and texts from destruction (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009; Interview with Chen Peifen, Jan. 25, 2010). Their initial efforts, however, lacked official support and therefore preservation remained ad hoc and reactive.

This changed in 1967. In February of that year, the Ministry of Culture gave its official support to salvage archaeology's expanded purview over objects. The ministerial directive forbade scrapyards from smelting regionally significant objects such as "bronze Buddha statues in temples and monasteries," even though the religious significance of those artifacts went against the Cultural Revolution's condemnation of "old religion" (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1967). Though the ministry itself was under attack by political radicals at this time, the mandate gave Shanghai's salvage archaeologists some leverage. They could hold locally significant artifacts in custody. Lu Songlin and his colleagues soon found themselves working overtime at destinations all over Shanghai. "We had to put out fires. . . . You have to protect cultural relics, so I was out protecting cultural relics" (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009).

This is not to say that the work of Shanghai's salvage archaeologists, roughly a dozen employees in all, nullified the extensive destruction that Cultural Revolution raids, seizures, and purges caused in their city. Often, preservation depended on the volunteer efforts of local caretakers, who notified salvage archaeologists or simply took it upon themselves to keep select objects and monuments from destruction. Even though the Ministry of Culture itself was under attack during the Cultural Revolution, its directives provided some level of official support. Yet much of the actual preservation work continued to be ad hoc, as it had been during the months before the directive was issued. Nevertheless, the directive gave Lu and his colleagues some authority to gather up artifacts that, before the Cultural Revolution, would not even have been recognized as relics.



The fate of Shanghai's Buddhist temples bears out the changes noted above. Lu got constant phone calls from Jia Jingsong, the caretaker of Jing'an Temple on Nanjing Road. The temple complex housed a large bell that resident monks had ordered during the Ming dynasty, as well as stone steles that recorded scriptures and donor names. The Shanghai Museum could not take the steles into custody, but produced a Ministry of Culture notification to ensure the preservation of the bell. Jia then whitewashed the steles and turned them around so they would be less noticeable to incoming Red Guards. Both the bell and the steles remain extant today (Interview with Lu Songlin, Sept. 24, 2009).

Salvaged materials aided in the restoration of local historical sites as well. Longhua Temple, located further out in Xuhui district, did not fare as well as the aforementioned Jing'an Temple. Red Guards set the temple's three thousand sutras on fire and sent its bronze artifacts to the smelter (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1967). During the restoration of the temple in 1982, however, Shanghai's salvage archaeologists gave the temple artifacts salvaged from other historic complexes throughout the Shanghai metropolitan area, including a Qing dynasty bell that had been in salvage archaeology's custody since the late 1960s (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1967). The artifacts restored essential architectural and religious features to the temple, and allowed Longhua to reopen to the public.

Salvage archaeologists also placed artifacts of local history into consumptive circulation. This was a long-term process. Throughout most of the late 1960s, Shanghai's museums, libraries, and universities were closed, much like those across the country. They did, however, have ample storage space to hold salvaged artifacts—since all activities ceased, the organizations had a great deal of unused space. Salvage archaeologists actively utilized those spaces for storage. In fact, the Shanghai Museum and Library soon gathered more artifacts than the work units had space to store them. By 1974, the Shanghai Library's salvage archaeology team had accumulated 1,200,000 Chinese language texts, 390,000 foreign language texts, 1,100,000 ancient Chinese texts, 1,200,000 stele rubbings, and 1,000,000 magazines (Shanghai shi geweihui, 1974). Local universities, such as East China Normal University and Jiaotong University, as well as technical colleges for sewing, medicine, and railroad construction, later acquired these texts for educational purposes (Shanghai shi geweihui, 1970). The Shanghai Library also set aside space for genealogies and gazetteers, which contained detailed historical information at the country and township levels (Wenhua bu, 1960). These additions enriched the library's own collection with rare material on local history. In fact, salvage archaeologists took it as a point of pride that they never allocated genealogies or gazetteers for export. Chen Peifen, who catalogued and

managed many of the Shanghai Museum's collection of salvaged antiquities, declared that "if foreigners saw that, they would think that you were selling out your ancestors. That was not allowed, so all these genealogies were just piled in the Shanghai Library" (Interview with Chen Peifen, Feb. 1, 2010). The Shanghai Museum, in turn, applied this same logic to salvaged ancestor portraits.

Salvaged bronzes saw similar increases in circulation. Unlike books, however, which largely sold within China, bronzes were exported for cash. So long as the artifacts were legal for export and not excruciatingly difficult to transport (like multi-ton bells and Buddha statues), Shanghai sold salvaged bronzes on the international art market. In 1966, the PRC created a special work unit, the China National Arts & Crafts Import & Export corporation (CNART), for the express purpose of selling manufactured, salvaged, and seized arts and crafts overseas (Elliott, 2005: 110–49).<sup>12</sup> Lu Songlin recalls evaluating artifacts for the Shanghai Museum at Yufo Temple, a Buddhist complex in the municipality's Putuo district. He found seven incense burners with Xuande reign (1426–1435) incisions, but with metals profiles that marked them as reproductions created during the first half of the twentieth century. Lu sent the burners, and other artifacts like them, to CNART for sale and export (Interview with Lu Songlin, June 16, 2011).

The Ministry of Foreign Trade strongly supported the sale of salvaged artifacts. In directives to both state and local administrations, ministry officials declared that selling salvaged relics "both protects our mother country's cultural heritage and expands our supply of export materials" (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1973). This policy applied to non-Chinese as well as Chinese artifacts. Salvage archaeologists received a ministry-approved list of non-Chinese artifacts to target when participating in raids and inspections. These included decorative ceramics, glass, amber, ivory, crystal, and paintings, as well as any non-Chinese artifact more than 200 or 300 years old (Shanghai shi wenhua xitong geweihui, 1969).

By 1973, the sale of seized, confiscated, and salvaged art objects became so pervasive that the state began regulating which work units could participate and what could be sold. Only work units with permission to export, such as the omnipresent Cultural Relics Stores 文物商店, could purchase salvaged artifacts from the populace. These work units could then sell to local art dealerships as well as to foreigners at export-import trade fairs, such as the Canton Fair. In fact, Cultural Relics Stores tended to keep a minimum supply of stock on site, as they conducted the majority of their business wholesale at the Canton Fair (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1973).

The buyers who came to China's twice-yearly Canton Fair demanded a dazzling variety of arts and crafts, which mainland work units met with gusto.

Some of these buyers were art dealers from mainland China who had moved their businesses to Hong Kong after 1949. Others were overseas Chinese art dealers who traveled to Hong Kong regularly to purchase supplies for their businesses in England, the United States, and elsewhere. Still others were members of international art firms, like Christie's and Sotheby's, which saw the new supply coming out of China as a resource for their auctions and sales partnerships.

The Canton Fair sold "ceramics, bronze relics, calligraphy and painting, stele rubbings, embroideries, seals, studio objects, coral, jade, jewelry, ivory, and snuff bottles with historical, artistic, and scientific value" as well as "reproduction cultural relics and arts and crafts with export value" (Shanghai shi wenhua ju, 1973). Demand for these artifacts was strong for several reasons. The appetite for Chinese art among overseas Chinese who had regained their wealth by the 1970s was substantial. Overseas dealers also harbored the strong and realistic expectation that higher quality works of art were being sold cheap. The Cultural Revolution's rushed authentication procedures fostered mistakes in the salvation process. Trade fairs proved to be such a profitable venue that salvage archaeologists themselves protested the export policy's negative impact on cultural heritage preservation (Interview with Lu Songlin, June 16, 2011).

The sale of salvaged artifacts drove profits at the Canton Fair. The integration of politics and sales strategy also shaped what got approved for export. For example, throughout the early 1970s, the Cultural Revolution focused on the Anti-Confucius, Anti-Lin Biao campaign. Consequently, the PRC's Cultural Industries Management Bureau dictated that while stele rubbings were in principle cleared for export, those that referred to Confucius temples were not. Similarly, artifacts that praised Confucius and Mencius, or referred to them, were not exportable. Texts and objects that "use the past to satirize the present, malign socialist life . . . express dissatisfaction regarding socialism" also did not have export clearance (Shanghai shi geweihui, 1974). Neither did pornographic texts and objects, nor works that threatened the party's rhetoric on the national essence and ethnic minorities, or promoted religion.

Intriguingly, the export of ugly works 形像丑恶 was also banned (Shanghai shi geweihui, 1974). The existing documentation does not give details on what defined ugly. It is clear, however, that ugly refers to aesthetic criteria. Ugly stood as a category distinct from objects whose appearance harmed the national essence and ethnic dignity. Ugly also had nothing to do with the object's state of repair. Dealers who frequented the Canton Fair noted that export work units liberally sold objects in need of repair throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, the ready supply, and demand, for Chinese

art objects that needed repair gave art conservators in Hong Kong a boost in income (Interview with Alvin Lo, June 14, 2010).

## Conclusion

Although this article has focused on salvage archaeology in Shanghai, Shanghai's salvage archaeologists' continued work with recycling, smelting, and refinery plants throughout China's industrial eastern coastline over more than two decades suggests that the program maintained a reach that went beyond Shanghai and even the region. Due to its location, the specific objects that Shanghai retrieved may have differed from those retrieved by similar programs in Xi'an and Beijing. The funneling of large amounts of scrap from recycling stations all over the country to refineries that were available only in Shanghai, however, meant that the city's salvage archaeologists got a representative and significant portion of all the artifacts that could have been saved from industrial refineries during the Maoist years.

The Shanghai salvage archaeology program's long-term effort to retrieve, conserve, and circulate salvaged artifacts associated bronze relics with the proletariat. This narrative arc is consistent with a larger museological trend, occurring throughout the People's Republic, where Marxist ideas about labor's direct association with human history have been promulgated through objects as well as object-specific historical narrative (Schmalzer, 2006). As the largest program of its kind in the PRC, Shanghai's salvage archaeology projects helped make collecting and displaying bronze relics more compatible with Chinese Communist Party rhetoric. Narratives about bronze relics presented them in the context of the creativity of the working class.

As a result of the particular Marxist framing of bronzes, both in museums and through the work of salvage archaeology, bronzes never went through periods of rejection or condemnation. This distinguished them from painting and calligraphy, which were negatively associated with bourgeois elitism, even though as a whole, bronzes, painting, and calligraphy had long been regarded as sophisticated art objects among Chinese collecting circles. In fact, despite Cultural Revolution sensitivities about the relevance of ancient artifacts to the proletariat, both the Palace Museum and the Shanghai Museum organized comprehensive bronze exhibitions during the Cultural Revolution (Shanghai shi wenguan hui, 1975). The exhibition hailed the artifacts as "the critical inheritance of our educational mission" (Shanghai shi wenguan hui, 1975). Ancient agricultural implements, chariot parts, standards and measures, and ancient weapons and ritual containers were particularly useful in drawing a politicized portrait of the ancient past. Bronzes were seen in the context of labor, produced by labor, and retrieved in the process of industrial growth.

This is not to say that the salvage archaeology program enjoyed perfect success. Metals of all kinds were highly sought after to meet metal and paper quotas set for industrial growth, and Shanghai's salvage archaeologists felt the loss of unsalvaged bronzes and texts as acutely as they celebrated those they saved. Nevertheless, these narratives helped protect bronzes from absolute destruction and political criticism. They also limited the sale of bronzes overseas: instead of unfettered distribution, the Canton Fair sold items in select categories according to specific export restrictions. In the short term, salvage archaeologists served as an important buffer against wholesale destruction of culturally relevant objects, particularly during the chaos that epitomized the launch of political campaigns during the Maoist era. In the long term, salvage archaeology supported the larger state project to wrestle art collections away from private hands and put them into public museums.

Shanghai's salvage archaeology office, however, did more than integrate bronze artifacts into PRC state-building. The city's plethora of industrial processing plants and repositories made it an ideal location for the concentrated retrieval of ancient material. Salvage archaeologists in Shanghai not only worked in tandem with political campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, they benefited from them. In its first decade of its existence, the Cultural Heritage Rescue Depository recovered tons of bronze ritual vessels, court implements, and mirrors, as well as rare dictionaries, instruction manuals for the illiterate, eight-legged essay compilations, and maps. During the Great Leap Forward, salvage archaeology integrated ancient agricultural tools, weaponry, and coins into museum collections throughout the PRC. The Shanghai Museum and Library profited tremendously from these retrievals—the institutions' privileged access to artifacts salvaged in Shanghai contributed to the wide scope and prominence of their respective collections. The Cultural Revolution shifted salvage archaeology's focus to local history. This allowed Shanghai to retain key artifacts of its religious and commercial past, as well as protect artifacts from destruction as "superstitious" artifacts. Furthermore, the state-directed sale of salvaged artifacts through international trade fairs not only provided China with the foreign exchange it desperately needed, it also became one of the few, and abundant, sources of Chinese art for overseas buyers.

The artifacts salvaged in Shanghai, in turn, integrated the controversially non-Chinese city into the historical narrative of Chinese civilization. While the Communist narrative derided Shanghai's International Settlement and French Concession as elements that tainted the city's past, it also celebrated Shanghai's role in recovering China's ancient past. The daggers, standards and measures, and coins salvaged in Shanghai literally lent substance to the

nationalist and revolutionary narrative, and provided palpable links between China's ancient and present state regimes.

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### Notes

1. Salvage archaeology is a recently coined term for material preservation programs focused on retrieving and restoring materials from scrap heaps. I use this term to describe similar programs in China, which described their work with such terms as “rescue” 抢救.
2. Throughout the article, *ton* refers to the metric ton.
3. There is a long history, reaching back to the Song dynasty, of elite Chinese art collectors accumulating bronze objects. The variety of bronzes amassed by the Shanghai salvage archaeology program, however, as well as its focus on weapons, coins, and standard weights and measures, was unprecedented. Starting early in the twentieth century, overseas Chinese art collectors became interested in collecting bronze objects as a secondary, or tertiary interest alongside their primary focus on porcelains. However, they were largely barred from purchasing ancient bronze objects by the PRC's cultural relics laws, which prohibited the sale of objects created before 1795.
4. The depository attributes its creation to Ministry of Culture administrators Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958) and Wang Zhiqiu (1909–1987), both of whom occupied top positions at the State Cultural Heritage Administration.
5. This source provides a detailed description of salvage archaeology procedures as they applied to industrial development during the early 1950s.
6. Paper manufacturers throughout the country were purchasing used books as well as newspapers and other scrap paper for pulping. A Song edition book got pulped

- as a result, leading to a general directive forbidding light industries from pulping old books.
7. This data set includes the 574 first-tier artifacts that depository employees noted in their report, as well as 26 shards that could not be associated with any specific object, but were nevertheless ancient and kept in custody in the hopes that future salvage archaeology projects might find the rest of their pieces. The depository could not determine the precise date of manufacture of the 26 shards. As a result, they comprise 81% of the 32 broken artifacts in the “no date” column of Table 1.
  8. Mirrors make up the majority of these forgeries (103 out of 122 objects). A few mirrors, however, were valuable. The inventory noted two Ming forgeries of Han dynasty mirrors and three Ming forgeries of Tang dynasty mirrors.
  9. In 1956, nationalization erased private dealerships from the Chinese economy. Art dealers either left the country or moved into new jobs in China’s nationalized art markets. Some dealers, like those mentioned above, also found contract work with Shanghai’s museums, libraries, and salvage archaeology program.
  10. These petitions received immediate attention because both Jin and Huang held contract positions with Shanghai’s salvage archaeology office. In the context of the post-1956 nationalization of private companies, this meant that Jin and Huang, who once had been art dealers with their own shops, became part-time contract workers with the Shanghai salvage archaeology office.
  11. Printing 1,000 color posters, each measuring 31 by 21.6 inches, cost 3,600 RMB. Occasionally, the Cultural Affairs Bureau also established liaison with commercial industries such as the Shanghai Municipal Advertising Company, which could print 10,000 posters for 4,400 RMB.
  12. Lu’s testimony fits with Elliott’s findings regarding Beijing during the same period.

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