

Heng Xian and the Problem of Studying Looted Artifacts

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Abstract *Heng Xian* is a previously unknown text reconstructed by Chinese scholars out of a group of more than 1,200 inscribed bamboo strips purchased by the Shanghai Museum on the Hong Kong antiquities market in 1994. The strips have all been assigned an approximate date of 300 B.C.E., and *Heng Xian* allegedly consists of thirteen of them, but each proposed arrangement of the strips is marred by unlikely textual transitions. The most plausible hypothesis is one that Chinese scholars do not appear to take seriously: that we are missing one or more strips. The paper concludes with a discussion of the hazards of studying unprovenanced artifacts that have appeared during China's recent looting spree. I believe the time has come for scholars to ask themselves whether their work indirectly abets this destruction of knowledge.

Keywords *Heng Xian* · Chinese philosophy · Shanghai Museum · Looting

Heng Xian 恆先 (*In the Primordial State of Constancy*) is a previously unknown text reconstructed by Chinese scholars out of a group of more than 1,200 inscribed bamboo strips purchased by the Shanghai Museum on the Hong Kong antiquities market in 1994 (MA Chengyuan 2001: 1). The strips have all been assigned an approximate date of 300 B.C.E., and *Heng Xian* consists of thirteen of them. The first published version was edited by the veteran palaeographer Li Ling 李零 (Li Ling 2003).

Scholars closely observing the activities of the Shanghai Museum group soon discovered an important flaw in Li Ling's reconstruction: his Strip 7 does not seem to flow properly into his Strip 8:

[begin 7] 名，無謂名。事非事，無謂事。祥宜利主，採物出於作，焉有事不作無事舉。天之事，自作為，事庸以不可更也。凡 [end 7 begin 8] 多採物先者有善，有治無亂。有人焉有不善，亂出於人。先有中，焉有外。先有小，焉有大。先有柔，焉 [end 8]. (Li Ling 2003: 294–95)

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The text above is presented in LI Ling's own transcription, which is no longer widely accepted in many of its particulars. But the main point is that regardless of how one interprets the graphs and parses the clauses, the phrase *fan duo cai wu* 凡多採物, which represents the junction of Strips 7 and 8, is unlikely. *Fan* ("for all X ...,") and *duo* ("many X") would seem to contradict one another; not surprisingly, I have been unable to find the sequence *fan duo* in any ancient text.¹

The alternative arrangement most commonly adopted today connects Strip 7 to Strip 10:

凡 [end 7 begin 10] 言名:先者有疑,妄言之。後者效比焉。舉天下之名,虛樹。習以不可改也。舉天下之作,強者果天下 [end 10]

This seems to make more sense:

For all [end 7 begin 10] speech and names: those of former times had doubts, and spoke them foolishly; those of later times revised and compared them. All names in the world are vacuous constructions; through practice, they become inalterable. All activity in the world—those who act by force achieve the world's ... [end 10]

But of course moving Strip 10 out of LI Ling's original sequence raises the problem of what do with Strips 8 and 9. CAO Feng 曹峰 (CAO Feng 2006: 110ff.) has proposed putting them right after Strip 10, producing the sequence 7-10-8-9-11. But this does not seem right either, because Strips 9 and 11 do not fit together very well:

[begin 9] 有剛。先有圓,焉有方。先有晦,焉有明。先有短,焉有長。天道既載,惟一以猶一,唯復以猶復。恆氣之生,因 [end 9 begin 11] 之大。作,其 XX² 不自若。作,庸有果與不果,兩者不廢。舉天下之為也,無捨也,無與也,而能自為也。

Once again, the sentence at the juncture of the two strips in this reconstruction, namely *Hengqi zhi sheng, yin zhi da* 恆氣之生,因之大, is unlikely. The main problem is that *yin zhi da* represents the "Comment" section of the sentence (Chao 1968: 69–72), which usually requires a verb—and *yin zhi da* does not contain a verb. Conceivably, the sentence could mean something like "The generation of constant *qi* is the greatness of compliance [*yin*]," but in such cases, where the "Comment" contains no verb, one normally expects a final *ye* 也 (e.g., Pulleyblank 1995: 16). To be sure, Warring States authors did not necessarily write Chinese according to our rationalized grammatical rules.³ But an added difficulty is that this would be the only instance in which *Heng Xian* uses *yin* as a noun ("compliance"), and a reader would hope to learn more about what is meant by such an abstraction.

There are yet more problems. LI Ling's Strip 5 may be out of place too.

¹ An anonymous referee for the journal has helpfully suggested that *duo* 多 might stand for *zhu* 諸 (an alternation noticed in another context by Schuessler 2007: 220–21). *Fan zhu caiwu* might mean something less implausible, such as "For all the various creatures, ...," and the sequence *fan zhu* is indeed attested.

² "XX" stands for two obscure graphs that cannot be reproduced in the standard character set.

³ See the trenchant comments by Rudolf Wagner in Allan and Williams 2000: 130; also Shaughnessy 2006: 40f.

[begin 4] 生之生行，濁氣生地，清氣生天。氣信神哉，云云相生。信盈天地，同出而異性，因生其所欲。察察天地，紛紛而 [end 4 begin 5] 復其所欲。明明天行，唯復以不廢。知既而荒思不殄。有出於或，性出於有，意出於性，言出於意，名出於 [end 5]. (Li Ling 2003: 291–92)

This is not impossible, but the sentence *Chacha tiandi, fenfen er fu qi suo yu* 察察天地，紛紛而復其所欲, at the juncture of Strips 4 and 5, is confusing: “Splendid are Heaven and Earth! They are profuse and reproduce that which they desire.” What is the referent of *qi* 其? Is it Heaven and Earth?

PANG Pu 龐朴 (PANG Pu 2004) suggested a different arrangement that is now followed by most Chinese scholars (e.g., Li Rui 2010: 355–56; Ji Xusheng 2005: 197f.): 1-2-3-4-8-9-5-6-7-10-11-12-13. On the basis of this sequence, XING Wen 邢文 (XING Wen 2010b) has argued that *Heng Xian* is a forerunner of the famed “eight-legged essay” (*bagu wen* 八股文) of imperial Chinese examinations (e.g., Elman 2000: 380–99).⁴

But PANG Pu’s arrangement has some difficulties of its own, including the transition from Strip 4 to Strip 8. The two strips produce the sentence *Chacha tiandi, fenfen er duo caiwu* 察察天地，紛紛而多彩物, and once again we are faced with an independent clause that seems to lack a verb. In *fenfen er duo caiwu*, the grammar requires a verb both before and after *er*, and *duo caiwu*, which ostensibly means “many diverse creatures,” does not contain an obvious verb. Perhaps *duo* could be read as a causative verb: “They are profuse and cause the diverse creatures to multiply,” but the notion that Heaven and Earth cause the diverse creatures to multiply seems alien to the overall cosmogony of the text.

Just as difficult is PANG Pu’s postulated transition from Strip 9 to Strip 5:

[begin 9] 有剛；先有圓，焉有方；先有晦，焉有明；先有短，焉有長。天道既載，維一以猶一，維復以猶復。恆氣之生，因 [end 9 begin 5] 復其所欲。明明天行，唯復以不廢。知既而荒思不殄。有出於域；生出於有；意出於生；言出於意；名出於 [end 5]

One cannot easily explain the *yin* 因 in the sentence *Hengqi zhi sheng, yin fu qi suo yu* 恆氣之生，因復其所欲. Perhaps it means: “The engendering of constant *qi* relies on reproducing that which they desire [or it desires?].” But to my ear, it sounds as though fragments of two different sentences have been mashed together.

More plausible than any of these reconstructions is a hypothesis that Chinese scholars do not appear to have taken seriously: that we are missing one or more strips. And considering that there are multiple awkward transitions, I suspect that we may be missing *several*. Thus PANG Pu’s arrangement might be salvageable with the important proviso that between Strips 4 and 8, and perhaps again between Strips 9 and 5, there are *lacunae* of indeterminate length. But is also possible that what we now call *Heng Xian* is really *two* discrete texts—both incomplete—that have been incorrectly yoked together. After all, the first half of the text, which discusses the generation of the cosmos without an external Creator, and the second half, which discusses (among other topics) the inherent arbitrariness of language, are not self-evidently related, though some scholars have tried to show connections between the two.⁵ It goes

⁴ Xing has evidently changed his mind about this at least once; in a publication earlier in the same year (XING Wen 2010a), he argued that *Heng Xian* is to be divided into *six* sections.

⁵ Of the many studies of the philosophy of *Heng Xian*, WANG Zhongjiang 2008 is the most persuasive to me. The first half of the text has been the subject of more publications than the second.

without saying that some of these problems might be resolvable if we knew more about the context—which is to say, if we knew more than nothing about the context. Were there other texts at the site that focus on cosmology? Or theories of language? Presumably the manuscripts came from some tomb. Who was the deceased? What other grave goods did the tomb contain? And was anyone else buried in the same place?

These unanswerable questions should force any researcher to remember that we are dealing with an unprovenanced⁶ manuscript. While pinning down the right sequence of strips can be difficult even in the case of manuscripts excavated under controlled circumstances, the problems with *Heng Xian* are exacerbated by the fact that we have been provided with only the barest information about how the strips were discovered and removed, and disappointingly little about the actions of the Shanghai Museum after their emergence in Hong Kong. We do not even know what proportion of the hoard was purchased! It is by no means impossible that there were other strips at the same site, which either made their way into other collections after being looted, or, for whatever reason, were never smuggled out of China.

When the first volume of the Shanghai Museum manuscripts was published in 2001, the director of the museum, the late MA Chengyuan 馬承源, wrote a foreword (MA Chengyuan 2001) briskly outlining the circumstances of their discovery, but he provided no details about how the staff of the Shanghai Museum identified and authenticated them. Since the strips have never been available for public inspection, scholars around the globe do not have any independent means of even verifying that they are genuine. We are asked to accept their authenticity essentially on faith, and the museum itself naturally has a vested interest in promoting them.

The Shanghai Museum manuscripts are probably genuine for one depressing reason: in China today, it is easier to loot a tomb than to forge a manuscript. Looting is out of control (Dutra 2004; HE Shuzhong 2001). With literally billions of dollars of annual sales of Chinese art, much (if not most) of it unprovenanced, looting is big business, even as it is universally condemned. And I believe the time has come for scholars to ask themselves whether their work indirectly abets this destruction of knowledge. Every time a cultural or academic institution such as the Shanghai Museum makes a large (and highly publicized) purchase of looted artifacts, it only encourages the next cycle of looting.⁷ Over the past couple of years, one Chinese institution after another has acquired its own cache of newly looted manuscripts: for example, Beijing University (Anonymous 2010), Tsinghua University (LI Xueqin 2011), and the Yuelu Academy (ZHU Hanmin and CHEN Songchang 2010).⁸ This has almost become a game of one-upsmanship, and clearly the acquisition of such

⁶ In this paper, I use the terms “provenance” and “provenience” to refer to the history of ownership of an object, and its original location, respectively (e.g., Mackenzie 2011). Thus an “unprovenanced” object is one whose history of ownership is unknown, whereas an “unprovenienced” object is one whose original location is unknown. Naturally, an object can be one, or the other, or both.

⁷ For the notorious case of the Getty Museum, and the decrease in looting that seems to be a consequence of its recently reformed acquisitions policies, see Felch and Frammolino 2011: 309–12.

⁸ In addition, the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong 香港中文大學文物館 purchased seven bundles of wood and bamboo manuscripts, totaling 259 strips, between the years 1989 and 1994. While the official account of these items is terse, one point is unmistakable: at least some of the bamboo strips had been only recently removed from the soil (CHEN Songchang 2001: 116).

artifacts is thought to add to an institution's prestige.⁹ No less is it considered an honor for individual scholars to be invited to collate and publish manuscripts acquired in this manner. It will not be long before such activities are recognized for what they are, namely complicity.

These developments have already shaken the field. As recently as 2005, Matthias Richter wrote (Richter 2005: 6): "in a manuscript ... we have a particular witness of a text that is unambiguously attached to a specific historical context" (as opposed to received texts, whose contexts have been irretrievably lost). He continued: "Cases like the Shanghai Museum manuscripts, the origins of which are obscure, as they were acquired from the antique market in Hong Kong, are still a rare exception" (Richter 2005: 7n.3). A rare exception no longer—and it seems almost quaint to be reminded that, just a few years ago, scholars advocated the study of excavated manuscripts on the grounds that they provide an unambiguous and specific context. Manuscripts excavated by conscientious archaeologists do just that, but the most eagerly studied manuscripts these days seem to be the looted ones.

A sea change in the pattern of looting took place in the mid-1990's, just after the discovery of the tomb at Guodian 郭店 and its marvelous collection of bamboo manuscripts. This tomb was excavated by archaeologists from the Jingmen Municipal Museum 荊門市博物館 in 1993, soon after having been looted (Jingmen Municipal Museum 1998). As LIU Zuxin 劉祖信, the head of the excavation, told me in person a few years later, no one on the team thought the tomb contained much of interest until someone noticed something peeking out of the soil, and exclaimed, "That might be a bamboo strip!" (*Zhe hen keneng shi zhujian* 這很可能是竹簡!). In other words, the looters who had cleaned out most of the tomb left behind the greatest prize of all, namely the manuscripts, either because they were unaware that the bamboo strips had any value, or because they did not know what to look for. But looters will never make the same mistake again. The Shanghai Museum manuscripts, we remember, were purchased the very next year.

Thus if there is an appropriate time to ask the scholarly world to stop and rethink its role in this mess, it is right now, as more manuscripts are being looted than ever before. The treasures that are being systematically pillaged and sold to the highest bidder should have been left for future generations to excavate and study properly. It is not necessary here to rehearse all the reasons why the study of looted artifacts, and not merely their purchase, has been criticized by archaeologists (Renfrew 2000 is a particularly influential discussion; also Society for American Archaeology 1996). Suffice it to say that the study of an unprovenanced manuscript from most other parts of the world would be frowned upon—and some academic journals might, on principle, refuse to consider this very article. If *Heng Xian* were a Celtic manuscript, and not a Chinese one, it might never have seen the light of day. And real money is involved,

⁹ I know that the Yuelu Academy strips languished for quite some time in Hong Kong and were already in a sorry state of preservation when they were purchased; they might have disintegrated entirely if the deal had not gone through. But I have no doubt that they are genuine. The dealer, who presumably knew their origin, was only too willing to send samples abroad to be tested at a materials laboratory, but could not find one that would cooperate. I regret that I cannot reveal my sources.

even on the academic side. For example, in 2010, the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) awarded a grant to Ulrich Lau and Thies Staack of the University of Hamburg for a project on the manuscripts that were purchased by the Yuelu Academy.¹⁰ I have to question whether a public funding agency (in Germany or any other country) should support the study of looted artifacts, and referees who are assigned to evaluate proposals for such grants have an obligation to raise the issue whenever an object of study has no satisfactory provenance.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that repatriation—a subject of intense international debate in recent years (e.g., Appiah 2006: 115–36)—does nothing in itself to solve the problem of looting.¹¹ Indeed, when a looted artifact is repatriated by being purchased at great cost, the process only encourages more looting in the future. This has become a severe problem in China as acquisitions for the purpose of repatriation, which are often upheld as great demonstrations of patriotism, have undeniably driven up prices (Fiskesjö 2009). Recently, there have been calls for China to rethink its role in contributing to the despoliation of its own antiquities. Responding to a Chinese request that the U.S. government forbid the import of Chinese artifacts, James Cuno, currently President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, wrote:

[The Chinese government] asks the U.S. government to not permit U.S. museums to acquire what Chinese art museums can acquire, both within China and elsewhere: unprovenanced and likely looted and recently smuggled antiquities. The Chinese justification is that these are rightfully Chinese property, where they may now be. Buying them back for China is a patriotic act regardless of any alleged incentivizing effect such acquisitions may have on the looting of archaeological sites. And the constraints they want the rest of the world to accept ... do not apply [to their own institutions]. (Cuno 2008: 101)¹²

What well-endowed institutions will do is beyond the capacity of any individual to control; for myself, I have come to subscribe to the view that scholars must not contribute to the sale of looted antiquities by providing authentication and expertise, and that by referring to such objects in print, we inescapably provide authentication and expertise (famously, Coggins 1972 and Elia 1993; also Chase *et al.* 1988: 60; Renfrew 2000: 74).¹³ I do so here only to highlight what I regard as an unrecognized crisis in Chinese studies. If one wants to study excavated artifacts, there are plenty of properly excavated materials still awaiting thorough investigation.

¹⁰ http://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/china/Rechtstexte_e.pdf (accessed July 29, 2011).

¹¹ For example, Bunker does not seem to recognize this point (Bunker 2005).

¹² Cuno adds: “The Poly Group and its Art Museum are aggressively seeking to purchase—and the Poly International Auction Co., Ltd., is trying to sell—the very kind of material that the Chinese government is requesting the U.S. government to ban. This is clearly a case where retentionist cultural property laws are part of a nationalist cultural and political agenda” (Cuno: 105).

By quoting Cuno here, I do not mean to imply that I support the other positions in his book; for a devastating review, see Winter 2008.

¹³ Merryman 2004 is a leading representative of the backlash against what he calls “the archaeologists’ Crusade,” but even Merryman refuses to condone the acquisition of looted artifacts; his objection, rather, is that archaeologists have overzealously supported measures impeding *licit* trade.

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The Problem of Looted Artifacts in Chinese Studies: A Rejoinder to Critics

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Abstract

Ten years after the publication of “*Heng Xian* and the Problem of Studying Looted Artifacts” in *Dao*, this rejoinder to critics begins by recapitulating my original argument, then considers the leading objections that have appeared in the interim. After dispensing with two trivial and *ad hominem* responses (that I am a hypocrite and an imperialist), the discussion focuses on the one serious objection, namely, that the benefits of studying looted artifacts outweigh the costs. I conclude with my reasons for disagreeing with this judgment.

Keywords Antiquities trade · Chinese manuscripts · Looted artifacts · Scholarly ethics

In the years since the publication of “*Heng Xian* and the Problem of Studying Looted Artifacts” (Goldin 2013), a critical mass of responses has appeared, and the time has come for a succinct rejoinder.

Let me begin with a recapitulation of my argument. Looting is inimical to knowledge and science not only because it often damages artifacts, but, more typically, because it destroys their original context, without which artifacts cannot be fully understood (e.g., Fagan 1991: 77–84 and Sease 1997; for an influential opposing view, see Owen 2009 and 2013: 335–356). Looting is fueled by the extraordinary value of authenticated artifacts on the antiquities market, and consequently researchers who contribute to authenticating them are effectively complicit. Because referring to looted artifacts in print is tantamount to authenticating them, scholars must refrain from doing so.

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I borrowed this reasoning from pioneers like Clemency Coggins, Ricardo Elia, and Colin Renfrew (Coggins 1972, Elia 1993, Renfrew 2000),¹ and merely applied it to the present circumstances in China.² I do still study looted artifacts; I even try to learn from them. What I will not do is *cite* them. Moreover, repatriation is not the issue—as Xu Zhuoyun 許倬雲 recognized decades ago, repatriating an artifact does nothing to mitigate the pernicious consequences of looting (Xu 2010: 383–385).³ Authenticity is not the issue either—although there have been some notable forgeries,⁴ a depressingly large number of artifacts that have been identified as looted are authentic. The issue is the destruction of knowledge.

One of the first responses I received is that I must be some kind of hypocrite. Many of these have come in private and need not be repeated here, but this one, by Michael Friedrich, appeared in print:

In [Goldin 2013], he first discusses textual problems in an unprovenanced manuscript before advising the reader not to do so and blaming the German Research Foundation (DFG) for funding a project on the Yuelu collection; two volumes edited by him include articles using such artefacts. (Friedrich 2020: 330, n.141)

Though Friedrich's final point is vague, the implication seems to be that if I really stood by my position, I should not permit contributors to cite looted artifacts in volumes that I edit. (I e-mailed him to clarify, but he did not respond.) I do not try to control colleagues, nor do I prohibit students from referring to looted artifacts, because I am not a commissar. By Friedrich's logic, a vegetarian should forbid everyone else at the dinner table to eat meat. Moreover, accusing someone of hypocrisy is usually a weak strategy because it is *ad hominem*: it does nothing to refute the position. Even if I were a hypocrite, my arguments about looted artifacts would still stand. Thomas Jefferson was a hypocrite of historic proportions, but this does not invalidate the Declaration of Independence.

The second response was that I am an imperialist (or at least that I smell like one), as in this indictment by Lothar von Falkenhausen:

Pertinently, the Chinese academic community has no qualms whatsoever about dealing with unprovenanced texts, and it might well perceive an attempt by Western Sinologists to legislate “best practices” in Chinese manuscript studies as imbued with a whiff of imperialist arrogance. Pragmatically, in any case, a Western early China specialist who ignores these texts and the important

¹ At the time, I was not aware of Brodie 2009, which is particularly relevant for its focus on manuscripts.

² Note that the argument applies to *recently* looted artifacts, that is, artifacts looted under circumstances that still obtain today. The objection that a sizable number of pieces in the British Museum or the Louvre were also looted (which I view as an attempt at *reductio ad absurdum*) is a red herring, because most of them were looted under circumstances that do not still obtain today. Hence referring to, say, Veronese's *Wedding Feast at Cana*, which was looted by Napoleon's army in 1797 and is the largest painting in the Louvre, does not plausibly contribute to further looting today.

³ Edward L. Shaughnessy still seems to misunderstand this point (Shaughnessy 2022: 255).

⁴ See the discussions and references in Foster 2017: 172–181 and Friedrich 2020: 309–320, both heavily reliant on Hu 2010.

scholarship done about them by Chinese specialists would consign his/her own work to irrelevance. (Falkenhausen 2021: 267)

It is surprising that an archaeologist as eminent as Falkenhausen would make such patently untenable claims. What he calls “the Chinese academic community” does indeed have qualms about dealing with unprovenanced texts. With reference to looted epitaphs (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘) rather than looted manuscripts, Luo Xin 羅新 has expressed serious dismay (Luo 2008; see also Zheng et al. 2014).⁵ Consider also this article from *Guangming Daily* 光明日報:

The reasons provided by the “rescuers” for studying looted manuscripts are well known: it is the “rescue” and “conservation” of the materials, and also on account of their unique scholarly value. The other side of the problem is: when one [looted artifact] after another is purchased and housed in the name of “rescuing,” could it incite wave after wave of more serious looting? Rampant looting is related to the dereliction of the relevant authorities, but is that all there is to it? Paul R. Goldin points out that the time has come for scholars to look inside their hearts and ask themselves whether their work indirectly abets this kind of destruction of (and behavior toward) knowledge. (Zhang 2019)⁶

These lines are preceded by a lengthy and accurate restatement of my work (omitted here for the sake of concision). This discussion, presented fairly and without rancor in a forum as significant as the *Guangming Daily*, ought to put to rest the notion that Chinese researchers will not heed my views. It is strange (or worse) for foreigners to doubt that Chinese scholars could be just as alarmed by looting as they are.

Edward L. Shaughnessy, also in the process of objecting to my position, concedes as much:

Chinese scholars are every bit as concerned about the incidence of tomb-robbing in China as the handful of Western scholars who are clamouring for scholars everywhere—but especially in the West—not to make any use of looted materials in their publications. (Shaughnessy 2022: 255)

Thus, while Falkenhausen criticizes me for voicing my concerns on the grounds that Chinese scholars supposedly “have no qualms whatsoever” about using looted artifacts, Shaughnessy does so for the very opposite reason: “Chinese scholars are every bit as concerned” as I am. One or the other might stand, but not both.

Falkenhausen’s final assertion is easily refuted, because other prominent “Western early China specialists,” including Anthony J. Barbieri-Low and Michael Hunter, hold views broadly congruent with my own—and their work is hardly “irrelevant” (Barbieri-Low, forthcoming; Hunter 2021: 16). As I stated in my original paper (Goldin 2013: 158), the notion that one simply cannot afford not to work on

⁵ Both explicitly discuss what I consider the core problem: citing looted artifacts stimulates further looting. Many Chinese scholars have told me in private that they agree with me, but dare not speak out in today’s climate. (A referee for the original paper wrote this too.) All the more reason why I must.

⁶ The author added further reflections in Zhang 2022, with comments on the inadequacy of relevant laws in China.

looted artifacts⁷ makes no sense in a field with so much primary source material, both transmitted and archaeologically excavated, both textual and nontextual, awaiting rigorous study.⁸ It would be worth applauding if Western scholars were to begin working on indefensibly neglected sources such as the Eastern Han 漢 legal texts from May First Square (Wu-Yi Guangchang 五一廣場) in Changsha 長沙, which were responsibly excavated and are enormously important (to cite just one of any number of examples). That would be “relevant.”

The third and strongest response is that the benefits of referring to looted artifacts outweigh the costs. I do not agree, as I shall explain below, but others have come to this conclusion after *bona fide* reflection. One articulate exponent is Christopher J. Foster:

While Goldin’s call to abstain from studying looted bamboo-strip manuscripts is praiseworthy in its intentions, I personally believe that it would be a detrimental course of action. We are presented with a choice: either to recover what information we can from looted artifacts, at the risk of inspiring further acts of pilfering archaeological sites; or to sacrifice already looted artifacts we could have saved and studied, risking that our actions ultimately have little impact on the antiquities market, and might lead to the destruction of bamboo strips by looters regardless. In both cases, the risks are uncertain and difficult to weigh objectively. For my own research, I would rather act upon the known quantity (the artifacts already looted) than the unknown (those additional artifacts which will be looted because of the incentive we provide). While I would not deny that our scholarship incentivizes tomb robbery to a certain extent, it is questionable how significant an impact it has, especially in light of the complex mechanisms driving demand for illicit artifacts. Instead of devaluing the historical import of looted bamboo strips, we should embrace their value and aim to educate the public instead about the disastrous consequences of tomb robbery. (Foster 2017: 239)⁹

Reasonable minds can disagree, but I think Foster underestimates the impact that conscientious researchers can have (see Foster 2017: 235 for similar doubts on his part); more importantly, I think he also underestimates the costs by designating them as “unknown.” I do not by any means “devalue the historical import of looted bamboo strips”; on the contrary, like any other sincere researcher, I appreciate their value only too keenly. Many of them provide information that was previously unavailable, sometimes even unimagined. This is why I wish to do anything I can to prevent further looting. There are thousands of unexcavated tombs across China (not to mention other kinds of cultural deposits such as hoards and caches). If we can

⁷ Repeated in Friedrich 2020: 330.

⁸ For a similar perspective from Assyriology, see Cherry 2014: 240.

⁹ See also Hu 2010: 105; in English, Pines 2020: 43–45, and Kern 2019: 46–49, who notes that he could not have presented his argument *without* looted manuscripts. I am grateful to Pines and Kern (who disagree with me), as well as to Chinese scholars who should remain nameless, for help while I was drafting this paper.

prevent even a tiny percentage of them from being looted, it stands to reason that the value of the knowledge we will have preserved should dwarf the value of a single cache of looted manuscripts like those now housed at Peking University, as fascinating as they may be.

There are parallels with the ecological ravages of whaling in the 19th century:

Commercial whaling did not cease because the market recoiled from devouring the future of an entire species—and with it, its own prospects. The mechanism of capital had no such discipline: people buying corset stays and umbrellas were insulated from most knowledge of bowheads.... Nothing in [the narrative of progress once baleen had become obsolete in the early 20th century] reckoned with how whale profits were incommensurate with the cost their absence left in Beringia, in human lives and changed seas. Bowheads avoided extinction not because a new space opened in the accounting ledger to tally their worth alive. They survived because, in the world outside the strait, they ceased to have any value at all. (Demuth 2019: 68–69)

Bowhead whales survived because baleen lost its commercial value in the Industrial Age, not because people loved marine mammals or because they took care to inform themselves of the devastation caused by systematic hunting. People loved corset stays and umbrellas, and chose, in Foster's words, to act upon the known quantity rather than the unknown. But *disregarding* hidden costs does not *reduce* them. What it usually does—if we are honest about our history—is to defer the reckoning to future generations.

Most scholars working on classical Chinese texts have high integrity; my purpose is not to impugn colleagues around the world as villains. We do not participate in looting directly, and understandably resent the dilemmas that it has imposed on us. But I am certain of my own choice: neither the quest to satisfy someone else's criteria of "relevance" nor the opportunity to work on marvelous looted materials outweighs the cost of potentially encouraging more looting. I am not so egotistical as to believe that *my* implicit authentication of a looted artifact would suffice, in itself, to raise its market value, but that of scholars collectively, a limited imagined community in Benedict Anderson's sense (Anderson 1991: 6–7), surely does.

An observation, in closing: philosophers have generally been more sympathetic to my views on looted artifacts than Sinologists. For example, Colin Klein concurs that "withholding citation is an effective sanction" in academic disciplines (Klein 2017: 2), and has proposed applying the same rationale to research that relies on disproportionately harmful experimentation on sentient animals. This was not my intention, and I am not sufficiently knowledgeable about the issues to be sure that I support the argument. But it is better than being branded a hypocrite or imperialist.

Declaration

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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