JOURNAL OF MODERN SOCIAL SCIENCES Volume 2 Issue 1 , 2025 , 49-55
ISSN (P): 3078-4433 | ISSN (O): 3078-4441 Doi:10.71113/jmss.v2i1.161

Reimagining Private Museums: Challenging Collecting Ethics and Shaping Public Cultural Practices in China

Juewei Fan[1*]

[1]*Department of Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Bristol, UK*
*Corresponding author: id22815@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper explores the private museum accompany by the collecting craze in contemporary China and examines their impact on public cultural practices. It argues that while much existing research has concentrated on revolutionary events or modern art collections, the emergence of private museums challenges traditional museum narratives and offers a new lens through which to understand the evolving political and social contexts. This study provides a new perspective for understanding the psychological and cultural motivations behind heritage collection, emphasising the importance of material cultural attributes in shaping an individual's sense of self-empowerment. It not only sheds light on the practice of cultural relic collecting, but also has far-reaching implications for cultural inheritance and individual identity construction.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Material Culture, Collecting and Nationalism, Private Art Museum

Suggested citation : Fan, J. (2025). Reimagining Private Museums: Challenging Collecting Ethics and Shaping Public Cultural Practices in China. Journal of Modern Social Sciences, 2(1), 49–55. https://doi.org/10.71113/jmss.v2i1.161

Introduction

The rapid expansion of museums in China, often termed the China Museum Boom, reflects both economic growth and shifts in cultural policy. By 2022, the number of museums reached 6,565, a three-hundredfold increase since 1949. While state-led initiatives emphasize museums as instruments of soft power, private investment has also played a crucial role[1]. Existing research has examined how cultural policies shape private memory post-Mao[2][3][4][5][6][7], particularly in revolutionary narratives, but less attention has been given to private art museums and their role in shaping discourse on art and history.

This research will examine how collecting has become a major cultural phenomenon in China by tracing its historical transformations and the social identity of antiques. It explores the evolution of collecting practices, their social significance, power dynamics, and cultural capital formation across different periods. This study innovatively considers how the flow of cultural relics is positioned within the key elements of China's collecting moral framework and national sentiment, exploring the roles and impacts of individuals and private museums within the current Chinese cultural context. It reveals how collecting practices serve as a reflection of social values, cultural identity, and historical memory. Additionally, it considers collecting as a form of self-empowerment that challenges grand narratives—collectors reinterpret history and material culture, constructing alternative knowledge beyond mainstream discourse. Ultimately, this study reveals collecting's role in cultural reproduction, social mobility, identity construction, and memory formation.

The Transformation of the Social Identity of Chinese Cultural Relics

In examining the representation and justification of the social meaning of a collector's actions, the material social identity of the collection must also be understood in relation to perceptions of both the material and public spheres. Moore uses a chart to define the attributes of the four dimensions of the collection and the labels by which aesthetic value is judged (see Figure 1)[8].

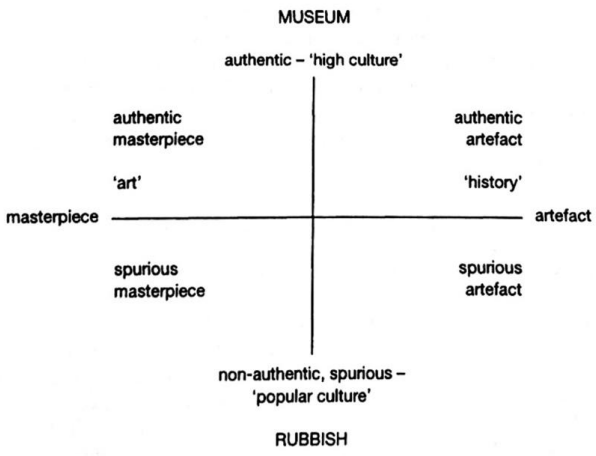

Figure 1: Plotting 'high' and popular culture

Source: Moore cited by Prerce (1995) in Museums and popular culture

These concepts simultaneously echo Cuno's discussion of the notion of mobility in terms of whose culture the object represents[9]. Although, there is a lack of clarity as to whether museum collections, as symbols of cultural significance, should be defined as antiquities of modern nations found within their national territories, ancient artifacts of vanished peoples, or as belonging to a universal culture of all humanity without political borders. From this perspective, antiquities are seen as a tangible representation of a nation's culture and history, and therefore, are considered to be the nation's cultural property[10][11][12][13][14].

ISSN (P): 3078-4433 | ISSN (O): 3078-4441 Doi:10.71113/jmss.v2i1.161

It is worth noting that these definitions are often based on a system of perceptions of culture and identity constructed from a Western perspective. In the context of the era marked by colonialist imperial expansion, collectors travelled to foreign countries, gathering local curiosities and exotic objects. The research of Procter provides detailed evidence of how Western collecting practices have greatly benefited from colonial expansion and how they have downplayed the dark conflicts between colonizers and indigenous peoples in museums[15]. It has resulted in the creation of a new flattened narrative that offers a tranquil set of notations for collections, erasing both their own histories and the original cultural contexts of the artifacts.

In China, the historical process did not undergo the same extensive stages of expansion and exploration of the outside world as seen in the West. The debate concerning the arrangement of collections and cultural ownership within the framework of Chinese practices necessitates deeper contemplation and exploration of the correlation between Chinese collections, material culture, and cultural narratives within its own cultural context. Equally significant is the examination of the values these collections aim to delineate and embody. Since Chinese culture stems from the country's rich historical and cultural heritage, the construction of the self does not need to be based on the subjective construction of the other nation, as is the case in the West. Accordingly, it is necessary to sort out the entangled relationship between material culture and historical narrative from the internal historical contradictions.

The history can be roughly divided into three stages: the period from 1949 to the end of the Cultural Revolution, the period from reform and opening up to the end of the 1990s, and the period from post-2000 to the present. Each stage has been marked by significant cognitive shifts at the level of public perception, as Chinese society has grappled with issues of heritage and national identity. These shifts have included periods of excision and rejection of traditional cultural elements, as well as efforts to reclaim and reinvent these elements in order to reinvigorate national sentiment and cultural identity in the present.

In Chinese history, imperial relics were considered the 'private property' of the emperor, and valuable works of art were believed to be buried with the emperor. The fall of the Qing dynasty also led to a series of problems, such as the loss of the Forbidden City's collections overseas and confusion over the ownership of cultural relics. Tsuyoshi Nojima's work comprehensively summarizes the fate of cultural relics closely related to modern Chinese history[16]. The Xinhai Revolution of 1911 to 1912 overthrew the Qing dynasty, but the relics remained in the hands of Puyi. Under a compromise with Yuan Shikai, the Provisional President of the Republic of China, Puyi was allowed to remain in the Forbidden City. Puyi continued to sell artifacts afterward, but the scale of the sale was far short of the number of artifacts collected over the ages. When Puyi was expelled from the Forbidden City in 1924 and the Palace Museum was established the following year, a considerable number of artifacts remained in the Forbidden City.

In the dual context of anti-feudal and democratic ideology, the Republic of China (1911-1949) no longer regarded cultural relics as the exclusive property of the state, as past dynasties had, but instead made them accessible to the public, marking the beginning of the Old Palace Musuem. The shifting idea served both as a means to promote the "achievements of the revolution" and as a symbolic transformation of relics from imperial possessions to public heritage. However, these artifacts never truly left the realm of political power.

In 1933, as Japan intensified its aggression against China, the government began relocating the Forbidden City's treasures southward. The Republic of China declared that these relics, representing thousands of years of culture, were irreplaceable. Tsuyoshi Nojima noted that while a fallen country might one day be revived, the destruction of culture meant irreversible loss[16]. After World War II, the artifacts were returned to the National Palace Branch in Nanjing in 1947. The Great Relocation of Cultural Relics from the Forbidden City stands apart from typical narratives of Chinese heritage. The Nationalist government invested enormous resources in moving these artifacts, not just for their artistic value but for their political significance. In the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek took the Forbidden City's most valuable relics with him—something no emperor had ever done before. Though Chiang had lost control of mainland China, he continued to claim legitimacy as its ruler. At this juncture, a universally recognized symbol of Chinese civilization was needed, and the Forbidden City's relics provided just that. Chiang then applied the logic that the rightful successor to the relics is the rightful ruler of China, reinforcing his belief that Taiwan was merely a temporary seat of government.

Cultural relics are strongly tied to politics. It particularly compelling in a period of destruction of cultural relics in mainland China during the Cultural Revolution. Having gained dominion over the continent, the Chinese Communist Party needed to construct a new set of social ideologies that were closely linked to the new society. The material remnants of the old society were far from assured of their place. Leung argues that what came to be known as the 'Four Olds' were products and reflections of China's feudal and capitalist history[17], and they had to be re-inscribed or hidden away. As Ho states, 'in Mao's continuous revolution, things could teach class lessons and identify class enemies. It was exhibitionary culture that gave material objects political power'[5]. The CCP's advocacy of the destruction of the 'Four Olds' effectively tied cultural relics to the old feudal society. Everything from before 1949, especially that which had belonged to the feudal ruling class, was wiped out of all cultural value in the political campaign and was seen as an enemy of the new social order. The CCP legitimized its rule and sanctified the revolution through a series of political propaganda. Collecting objects produced by the old society, generalized as antiques, seems to go against the idea that the era needed to be widely publicized.

In the private sector, heritage collecting has become an effective form of investment. Not only does it have the attraction of being a cultural attraction, but it is also a way of wrapping up one's social status and unique aesthetic standards with the cultural values that are embedded in cultural relics. For the national level, reinventing the value of heritage is also capturing the value behind the prosperity of exquisite artefacts. In addition, the opening up of the art market and the interest in the return of lost cultural objects from abroad after the reform and opening up has had a multifaceted impact on reshaping national cultural identity and constructing the social significance of cultural objects. On the one hand, the state used the loss of cultural artifacts to re-emphasize the narrative of the history of resistance against Western colonialists, in order to construct an antagonistic relationship between indigenous culture and foreign invaders to strengthen national identity. On the other hand, private collectors acquired lost Chinese cultural artifacts through high-priced auctions in the market and brought them back to China, making the value of antiques not only cultural and national but also a high-value attribute measured in monetary terms.

The narrative evidence for historical artifacts comes from the memory of the past, but the debate has always been about whose point of view the integration of memory expresses. Kavanagh notes that 'working with memory opens up many possibilities for historical exhibitions'[18]. The reason why objects were collected was originally an act of human choice, driven by the social context of the time and the values it shaped. As the original context disappears, so does the basis for the collector's choice at the time. Social perception, therefore, requires a counter-process to decipher the motivations of people collecting at the time, thus enabling the reproduction of information on value judgments in order to reconstruct a picture of nature and society. On the other hand, in addition to the information presented horizontally, objects are also superimposed with information about the passage of time during the turbulence of generations, leaving behind objects that, even if

ISSN (P): 3078-4433 | ISSN (O): 3078-4441 Doi:10.71113/jmss.v2i1.161

decoded and encoded, still do not restore the true history, but are only fragmentary reproductions of real information. It is believed the heritage industry is an example of the politics of recognition that gives value to monuments, objects and intangible heritage. It makes intangible cultural and historical responsibilities tangible by emphasising the significance of cultural objects. The continuity of historical culture and the age of national prosperity are founded on the assertion of an essentialist past and the purification of cultural origins, and the development of the heritage industry helps to reinforce this idea. By reinventing the value of heritage, it captures the value behind the prosperity of exquisite artefacts and revives the present with the glories of the past, which is particularly significant for the national confident.

Museum and Grand Narrative in China

Before delving into the various factors behind the emergence of private museums in China, it is crucial to provide a contextual understanding of the development of museums. It is necessary to examine how previous studies have characterized the narrative tone through which museums have been shaped, defined, and integrated into China's overarching plan for historical and heritage-based national cultural development coordination.

Like Lu mentions that museums in China occurred mainly as a result of internal and external conflicts, westernisation and colonialism in the late nineteenth century, and as such were never established merely for enjoyment and leisure[4]. As a foreign concept, the development of museums in China has been accompanied by conflicts and compromises between the ideologies of China and the West, but most importantly, the edifying role of museums has been inherited and preserved intact in China. As sites of production, circulation, and consumption of visual culture, museums have become state instruments of nationalism and have been used by Asian postcolonial states as instruments of modernization. Along with the rise of indigenous nationalism and resistance to a history of Western invasion, they created distinctive local discourses that approached the effectiveness of museums with a universal discourse that was epistemologically and ontologically identical to their Western counterparts.

There have been a series of studies on the development and changes of Chinese museums in the past century. Museums in China became a pivotal institution in the process of national construction, and the CCP was the sole designer of this construction. When reviewing the history of the development of Chinese museums, former researchers point out that museums are foreign products imported into China by the West. They were utilized by Chinese elites as a tool to promote civic education and popularize the knowledge and classification methods of modern science.

Since 1949, the CCP has promoted the recontextualization of memories of life in the pre-Communist China, often referred to as the 'old society', into an entirely different framework. The Western-style education methods in the museums were also eliminated and abandoned, and the development of the museums was considered an achievement brought about by the communist rule. Consequently, the content, form, goals, and focus of museums have been (re)designed to meet the requirements of new ideologies, with political education being the primary function.

If the government represents an authenticator that narrates the historical cultural heritage and spiritual profile of the nation, it is also worth considering which rights and technologies are utilized to support economic development and policy in this system of heritage, and how they contribute to the discursive construction of material evidence that presents the values and ethics that the government intends to convey and promote.

Wang points out that all historical accounts and analyses of China contain two narratives of China: a narrative of China as empire and a narrative of China as nation-state[19]. These two narratives are entwined with various modes of research often proposed in China studies, including stimulus and response, tradition and modernity, imperialism and local history orientation.

It can be argued that in China, the perspective of looking back has always contained instances of the spirit of encompassing. There are two levels of meaning implied. First, the collective memory and overall image of the nation is invoked by the representational role of the material. Second, the narrative context that has been publicly recognized and disseminated in China has always been in the name of the collective. In the Chinese museum context, any collection that bears witness to China's historical narrative is encapsulated as a national cultural object. Indeed, this concept is always in a quandary of value judgement. Varutti claims that 'remembrance, collective memory and historical evocation play a central role in the Chinese political and social present'[20]. It also corroborates with the idea that China was not created by the Han or any other ethnic group on its own, nor were its boundaries defined by a single place of historical activity of one ethnic group, let alone by the will of one of its elite groups. It was a complex series of historical movements that came together to build a community of human beings distinct from the rest of the world - the Chinese nation.

The work of Lowenthal testifies the significance of the past for those in the present and to the fact that objects as witnesses foreshadow a tangible experience as an important way of bringing the past into history[21]. The interest in heritage and the explosive growth of museums are ongoing social phenomena that go hand in hand with economic and policy adjustments and transformations. The work of Jimenez and Lord have summarized the two main factors behind the museum boom are rapid economic development and urbanization with the fact that both factors lead to social change and profound changes in the way humans value and view the world[1] . Additionally, the development of Chinese museums has benefited from the favourable financial and cultural policies, and the increase in the budget allocated to culture is crucial to the development of museums.

Unlike public museums, which have an overt cultural responsibility to the public, private museums often have a specific focus or theme that reflects the interests of collectors. Extant analysis of the reasons for the rapid rise of private museums in the museum world can be summarized in two main areas. One reason that can be summarized is centered on collections from private collectors. As an up-and-coming wealth group, they seek to further their personal reputation in the public sphere while managing their wealth and acquiring cultural significance. Adam notes that the change in access to wealth has further changed the way museum donors' approach cultural philanthropy, which was once mostly through family inheritance, but is now more through self-made efforts[22]. As a result, they desire more control over their financial and cultural acquisitions rather than handing them over to public institutions. Another reason is the desire of private museum founders to play the role of chroniclers and witnesses of historical events, using private emotions and material evidence of memory to provide alternative evidence and perspectives on a historical event which might be characterized by a collective narrative in the ideology of political interfered. This type of museum intends to liberate history from its dominant position in official political and historical discourse, as exemplified by museums such as the Jianchuan Museum Complex or The Museum of Revolutionary Soldiers Imprisoned by the Enemy.

By recognizing and supporting cultural diversity, private museums can play an important role in shaping a more inclusive and representative cultural landscape. The research of Zhang and Courty show that the apparent growth of museums in China that occurred in 2007 is testament to the power of government policy in shaping the expansion of museum influence[23]. The massive increase in the number of museums in China was largely orchestrated by the central government as part of a policy to support, develop, and control culture. A major policy shift in 2007 saw a significant reduction in admission fees and a shift in the revenue stream of most museums from a partially user-based model

ISSN (P): 3078-4433 | ISSN (O): 3078-4441 Doi:10.71113/jmss.v2i1.161

to one that is almost entirely publicly subsidized. Interestingly Hu Jintao, the General Secretary of the CCP from 2002 to 2012, proposed to enhance the soft power of Chinese culture at the 17th Communist Party Congress in 2007. This elevated Chinese culture to the level of an important source of national cohesion, creativity, and an increasingly significant factor in the competition for comprehensive national power, marking the first instance of such a proposal. Hu's efforts in the 'scientific concept of development' redirected the economist or developmentalist policies of his predecessor, which focused solely on GDP growth, towards more balanced reforms to address growing social disparities, injustice, and popular discontent. Museums are placed in a politically strategic position, at the same time private museums are allowed to become a cultural complementary resource.

The differences in values and discourse rights do not make the boundaries between public and private clear and non-aggressive. On the contrary, there are many closely related interests. As Oakes defines these public cultural spaces as the concept of new urban leisure spaces[24]. Leisure is promoted in China as a form of social order, and the government regards it as part of the spatial mechanism of national social order. Leisure is thus seen as part of a set of governance techniques designed to shape the behavior of Chinese citizens in specific ways and to achieve specific normative goals of the state. This also confirms that as Luo points out, the differentiation of cultural politics and visual ideology in the policy guidance of urban construction has made the phenomenon of urban art museums become a competitive landscape that highlights the performance of local governments[25]. However simply viewing private museums as a generalized, labeled cultural institution creates a gap in research regarding the private attributes of private museums and the role of the individual. It is necessary to explore the role played by private collectors in shaping the private museum and the influence of their personal agency.

Collecting, Elite and The Control of Taste

Since the material basis of all private museums begins with the personal collection. Collectors play a significant role in taking objects out of their original cultural contexts, deconstructing and reassembling them in new cultural environments and physical spaces. Collections allow a two-way relationship and interaction between individuals and objects, as well as between objects and the museum. It presents a distinct departure from the traditional museums where the process of collection is often invisible, and the arrangement of objects is merely presented as a one-way narrative for public education. Muensterberger defines collecting as 'the selecting, gathering, and keeping of objects of subjective value'[26]. Despite that, collecting is more complicated than the above wording suggests, and has become a complex activity requiring a great deal of skill. As it summarized by Cardinal

> 'To collect is to launch individual desire across the intertext of environment and history. Every. acquisition, whether crucial or trivial, marks an unrepeatable conjuncture of subject, found object, place and moment. In its sequential evolution, the collection encodes an intimate narrative...'[27]

Besides, it is worth noting that collecting is not a behaviour that is universally adopted at the public level. In ancient times, collecting was regarded as a privilege of nobles and royals. Nowadays, collecting is typically associated with individuals who have a certain level of wealth and expertise in the areas related to their collections. Collecting is often considered a serious and selfless way of allocating money, although it may require a significant investment of time. McIntosh and Schmeichel define collector as someone who is motivated to collect a series of similar objects that have no practical value to the collector, or where the person does not intend to dispose of the objects immediately[28]. Private museums offered wealthy collectors' alternative venues and presentations that were seen as a departure from the established exhibition conventions of the public museum sector, or even from the intimate domestic environment of previous generations. Additionally, collectors establish their own spaces to display their treasures and preserve the integrity of their collections, while fulfilling their philanthropic purposes.

Private collectors who bring their collections into the public cultural discourse by opening private museums are undoubtedly projecting their own aesthetic intentions onto the objects, while at the same time being among the constructors of the public cultural order as owners and spokespersons of the objects. The most crucial step to complete the wealth management is to open to the public for a beneficial interaction. They seek a display of identity and taste, to be seen by the public, to be tied to a reputation for refined culture and art. In fact, many museum feats began with the incomparable contribution of a single person whom Alexander called the 'Museum Masters'[29]. By using their knowledge and wealth, they have changed the nature of museums as a spatial platform that guides audiences to participate in experiences. The fact that museums have become synonymous with cultural and social responsibilities also makes these personal values always known as contributors to the society together with museums.

Therefore, the elitist culture carried by art museums has become an independent boundary within the scope of museums. While they claim that museums represent carefully constructed historical facts and world diversity, knowledge and educational functions are far less desirable for art museums than visual enjoyment. If antiques and other artistically adorned symbols of wealth and power which museum display are based largely or exclusively on aesthetic value criteria, visitors may receive the message that owning equivalent objects may form a gateway to upper class or a legal path to become socially recognized. The identity differences that museums try to eliminate are essentially being used again by the emerging power class.

Knowledge, taste, and appreciative ability shaped by educational background have inevitably become the basis for judging class and origin. According to Bourdieu, art museums play a key role in the production and reproduction of cultural capital and social inequality[30]. He argues that the art world is dominated by a small group of cultural elites who have access to the institutions, networks, and knowledge required to produce, curate, and display art. The elites control the selection of what is considered good or valuable art, and they use their cultural capital to reinforce their own power and status. As a result, art museums and the exhibitions they curate serve to reinforce existing social hierarchies and exclude those who lack cultural capital. Museum not only represents a new method of understanding the world centered on objects, but also represents an aesthetic spiritual pursuit standard agreed by social capital.

While private museums offer a personalized approach to the display and interpretation of collections, it is important to recognize that they are not entirely separate from established museum practices. Art museum or gallery inevitably affects the artistic interests and humanistic values of the public. Nevertheless, the deepening relationship between the wealthy and the government involved behind private art institutions, and the fierce competition among the wealthy and local governments, make it worthy to consider and explore further how they cultivate public opinion in the public sphere and what values they seek to define and embody.

The Ethics Debate Between Cultural Authority and Self-Empowerment in Chinese Collectors

It is evident that collectors, in their pursuit of acquiring objects, also seek to assert control over the enduring meaning associated with them. Unlike in the West, where upper-class aesthetic tastes are often passed down over time, some studies suggest that Chinese

ISSN (P): 3078-4433 | ISSN (O): 3078-4441 Doi:10.71113/jmss.v2i1.161

businessmen who collect art and artifacts prefer to express their commercial success through pure self-expression, using their wealth to acquire and control these works. Luo states that after the establishment of the PRC, social resources were redistributed through a reformed cultural and economic system[25]. Scholars were left in a position of powerlessness while those in business were entrusted with shaping the socio-economic drivers that could lead China into the modernization process. In this economic and cultural environment, the identity of collectors, who had both cultural and wealthy idiosyncrasies, shifted from literati with a discerning eye for art to a new noble class that benefited from the practice of Reform and Opening up. Luo further pointed out that since the upsurge of art collection in China is almost completely imitating the operation mode of the West, and the development of art in China does not have a clear development context like the West[25]. For this reason, most collectors have not received systematic art education, so the choice of art as a collection often involved a businessman's preference.

In the context of the ongoing debate surrounding the definition of the collector in China, the unique taste has become a fluid benchmark for cultural aesthetics, awaiting further exploration in the current discourse. Collectors and their collections mutually define and achieve each other, with their choices not only influencing the cultural value of the objects but also shaping the public's aesthetic judgments through their influence and choices. The ensuing discussion revolves around whether collectors, in using museums as a means to disseminate public cultural discourse, seek to enhance their own prestige or emphasize the authentic cultural presentation of the objects themselves. Sigg came up with 'a Typology of Collecting' based on his observation of both public and private in China, systematic and sporadic collections. The classification of five collection preferences (the 'I Like Art' Style, the 'Investment' Style, the 'Status Symbol' Style, the 'Focused' Style, and the 'Networked' Style) based on his observations further illustrates that what most Chinese collectors pursue is to be able to afford anything they like that is considered valuable[31]. The categories of purchases lie within their own tastes rather than within any coherent conception. In addition, the behavior of purchasing and collecting could often bring more benefits such as business, contacts and social reputation that have less relevant with art itself. Therefore, it is necessary to examine whether the existing generalizations about Chinese collectors in discourses can be applied to the diverse range of collecting categories in the future.

As more collectors establish their own museums, it is not difficult to see the trend of power and taste at the center of the global art market shifting from the West to China. They have great ambitions to build commercial or cultural empires. In particular, the rapid economic development of China in the last two decades has led to the emergence of a critical mass of entrepreneurs in the art investment and cultural industries. Rather than inheriting aesthetic tastes, they tend to show their commercial success through self-expression and use their wealth to acquire and control art. With the accumulation of more and more works of art, Chinese collectors have begun to generate a will to power in the art field. It can be regarded as a process of self-empowerment, establishing their own discourse power in China and even in the world, and expanding this power from the economic field to the social and cultural field. As Ćirić states that due to the privatization and corporatization of art fields, the relationship between culture and the market became indistinct[32]. In addition to numerous restrictions on artistic creation imposed by the Chinese government, efforts to establish a new public sphere, as envisioned by artists organizing exhibitions, were eradicated. As a result, private art institutions (whose founders were mostly collectors) became the owners of a discourse that influenced public culture.

The needs of Chinese businessmen on the cultural level are not limited to personal preferences and the pursuit of taste in the art world, which also implies the metaphor of nationalists who hope that their personal strength can contribute to the cultural life of the entire nation. In the Confucian-influenced social fabric of China, one of the most prominent features of national character is the belief that individual achievements should contribute to the collective progress. As Yang concludes that the importance of social networking, known as Guanxixue (关系学) in Chinese, further reinforces the interconnectedness of individuals and the collective[33]. A good reputation not only helps an individual to gain social recognition and prestige, but also provides an advantage in building trust and co-operation in business and social interactions. In the Chinese business environment, an individual's reputation and network of contacts are often seen as very important resources that provide businesspeople with greater access to opportunities and resources, which in turn contribute to business success and collective prosperity.

Another evidence-based phenomenon that makes private values intervene in social influence is the return of Chinese cultural relics lost overseas by Chinese private collectors through high-priced auctions. Chinese private collectors intervening in the return of Chinese cultural relics lost overseas through high-priced auctions can be viewed as a reflection of the importance placed on cultural heritage and national pride in Chinese values. Due to the fact that cultural relics are seen as an important symbol of a nation's history and identity, so their loss or removal from the country is seen as a loss of that cultural identity. In the modern history of China, in the face of internal and external challenges, China's sovereignty has been violated, and the Chinese government has failed to protect Chinese cultural heritage. For some scholars, the reaffirmation of cultural loss in modern Chinese history is now serving the ideological needs of the post-imperial Chinese government to maintain Chinese independence and unity. In addition, affirms that cultural relics are considered tools of Chinese cultural identity due to their close relationship with Chinese history and culture, which provide an important source of self-definition for Chinese people. When Chinese private collectors intervene in the return of cultural relics, they are not only satisfying their personal values and beliefs but also setting an example of shaping the values of cultural heritage and national pride in Chinese society, as well as the power of social norms and peer influence.

The struggle between private collectors and the government over the value of cultural resources following the intervention of private collectors in the public discourse is a war of symbolic capital that reflects the struggle of social actors in the construction of the self, for the discourse and the construction of national values. On one hand, it can be argued that the focus on the value of cultural resources is indeed a reflection of a war of symbolic capital, as cultural relics hold immense symbolic value in terms of national identity, heritage, and historical significance. In this sense, the contradictory position in the return of cultural relics is not just about the physical objects themselves but are also symbolic battles over the representation and control of cultural heritage. In this sense, the contradictory position in the return of cultural relics is not just about the physical objects themselves but are also symbolic battles over the representation and control of cultural heritage. The debate is deeply rooted in concrete issues of ownership, legality, and ethical considerations. The ownership of cultural relics may be disputed due to historical events such as colonialism, theft, or looting, and their return often involves complex legal processes and negotiations.

In this reciprocal and utilitarian fluid relationship, private museums are not merely repositories of artworks; private collectors also gain greater agency in the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage. They not only bear moral responsibilities but also continuously shape their own social identities in the process. However, this moral pursuit is inherently dualistic. On one hand, collectors demonstrate a sense of national responsibility and cultural consciousness by acquiring lost cultural relics, positioning themselves as key participants in the narrative of cultural revival. On the other hand, their actions remain constrained by the capital logic of the art market and embedded within the imagined

ISSN (P): 3078-4433 | ISSN (O): 3078-4441 Doi:10.71113/jmss.v2i1.161

prosperity of the cultural revival community. Within this paradoxical tension, private self-empowerment emerges as a process of cultural capital accumulation that oscillates between state authority and public interest—both relying on the national discourse framework and navigating the negotiation between market logic and personal agency to construct their own cultural authority.

Conclusion

Existing research on Chinese museums largely focuses on revolutionary events or the management of wealth by collectors of modern art, with little attention given to how private museums of ancient art, addressing historical narratives, can shape public cultural practices. This raises important questions about the role of private museums in redefining the competitive cultural soft power agenda and their classification within the Chinese context. This research seeks to explore the rise of private museums in China, emphasizing their influence on cultural practices, particularly how they empower collectors and contribute to the construction of social identities. It delves into how the rapid emergence of private cultural sectors challenges traditional collecting ethics and shapes public cultural engagement, highlighting key issues such as artifact legitimacy, authenticity, and ownership transparency. Private museums, as dynamic agents of cultural change, are not merely spaces for displaying art; they actively shape public perceptions of culture and aesthetics. Through diverse, sometimes controversial collections, they challenge conventional understandings of cultural values and historical narratives. This dynamic role underscores the transformative potential of private museums in contemporary Chinese society. Moreover, the distinction between private and public museums reveals significant differences in cultural rights and social responsibilities, offering insights into the intersection of museum culture with commercial and private interests. Their profound impact on China's cultural landscape plays a pivotal role in the redefinition of cultural authority, alongside the self-empowerment of collectors, ultimately shaping their social identities.

Future studies on private museums in China could focus on several key areas. A deeper exploration of the legal and ethical dimensions of private collections, particularly regarding the provenance of artifacts and their implications for cultural heritage preservation, would be invaluable. It is worthy to examine how these museums navigate the fine line between commercial interests and cultural responsibility, especially considering increasing global scrutiny over cultural ownership. Specific case studies involving behind-the-scenes observations of private museums could offer valuable insights into the practical challenges and decision-making processes these institutions face. Besides, longitudinal studies tracking the growth and evolution of private museums over time, along with changing public perceptions of these institutions, could provide important insights into the future trajectory of cultural practices in China. This could include analyzing the relationship between private museums and the broader museum sector, especially in terms of collaboration, competition, and policy.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and valuable suggestions.

Funding

Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Author Contributions

Not applicable.

About the Authors

Juewei Fan
Department of Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Bristol, UK

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ISSN (P): 3078-4433 | ISSN (O): 3078-4441 Doi:10.71113/jmss.v2i1.161

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