Concessions in "The Silver Age": Exhibiting Chinese Export Silverware in China

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Introduction

How do transcultural artifacts support global political agendas in post-socialist Chinese museums? In a 2018 state media photograph, a young woman gazes at a glittering silver compote, her fingertips pressed against the glass case.[1] From an orthodox Chinese nationalist perspective on history, the photo of a visitor at *The Silver Age: A Special Exhibition of Chinese Export Silver* might present a vexing image of cultural consumption.[2] "Chinese export silver" *Zhongguo waixiao yinqi* 中国外销銀器 is a twentieth-century collector's term, translated from English, for objects sold by Chinese silverware and jewelry shops to Euro-American consumers.[3]

1 Xinhua News Agency, "Zhongguo waixiao yinqi liangxiang Shenyang gugong 中国外销银器亮相沈阳故宫 [China's export silverware appears in Shenyang Palace Museum]," Xinhua News February 6, 2018, accessed November 5, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/photo/2018-02/06/c_129807025_2.htm (photograph by Long Lei 龙雷).

2 Chinese title: *Baiyin shidai—Zhongguo waixiao yinqi tezhan* 白银时代—中国外银銀器特展. A compote is a fruit stand, or a shallow dish with a stemmed base. The exhibition catalogue describes the object as a "built-up and welded grapevine fruit dish" (duihan putaoteng guopan 堆焊葡萄藤果盤) and in English, "compote with welded grapevine design." See Wang Lihua 王立华, *Baiyin shidai—Zhongguo waixiao yinqi tezhan* 白银时代———中国外销银器特展 [The Silver Age: A Special Exhibition of Chinese Export Silver] (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2017), 73. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. The general introduction and section introductions of the exhibition and catalogue were bilingual, while the rest of the texts were only in Chinese; I have focused on the Chinese-language texts.

3 H. A. Crosby Forbes, John Devereux Kernan, and Ruth S. Wilkins, *Chinese Export Silver, 1785 to 1885* (Milton, MA: Museum of the American China Trade, 1975), 4. While many of the silverwares were made for foreign consumption, others were produced for mixed, foreign non-European, or domestic consumption, especially in the early twentieth century. For the domestic consumption of non-official silverware workshops and retailers, see Libby Chan, "Crossing the Oceans: Origins and Redefinition of Chinese Export Silver Ware," in *The Silver Age: Origins and Trade of Chinese Export Silver*, ed. Libby Lai-Pik Chan and Nina Lai-Na Wan (Hong Kong: HK Maritime Museum, 2017), 169–171. For a history and catalogue of modern Chinese silver shops, see Chen Zhigao 陈志高, *Zhongguo yinlou yu yinqi* 中国银楼与银器 [Chinese silver shops and silverwares], 5 vols. (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2015).

To appeal to a clientele of foreign sojourners, many examples combine Western object forms with Chinese designs and construction techniques. The craft silversmithing industry developed robustly in the Chinese treaty ports that were created after the First Sino–British Opium War ended in 1842. The commercial treaties resulting from the war allowed foreign residents to settle in Chinese port cities and claim extraterritorial privileges. The so-called unequal treaties and their effects have been censured in party-state readings of modern history. They are viewed as the start of a "century of humiliation," a period associated with foreign incursions on Chinese sovereignty, which ended with the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.[4] As silverwares like the compote are relics of intercultural tensions in the ports, they are unlikely candidates for exhibition as examples of Chinese fine craft. Yet through a series of translations and historical displacements, the organizers of the touring exhibition *The Silver Age* have deftly repositioned them as craft masterworks.[5]

The Silver Age was organized by, and first exhibited at, the Changsha Museum in Hunan Province in early 2016. It is projected to tour until 2022. Each of the exhibition venues to date was a first- or second-tier state museum.[6] In line with state cultural policy, these museums are venues where official narratives are buttressed by the use of historical artifacts as "evidence." The objects in the exhibition, which number about one hundred objects and sets of objects, were borrowed from private Chinese collections. In other words, art dealers and auction houses have effectively "re-exported" significant quantities of silverwares initially sold to foreigners during the late Qing dynasty and early Republican period to collectors in mainland

4 Pär Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4–5; Paul Cohen, "Remembering and Forgetting National Humiliation in Twentieth-Century China," in *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 167.

5 Chinese Museums Association 中国博物馆协会, "Changsha bowuguan 'Baiyin shidai — Zhongguo waixiao yinqi tezhan' xunzhan jihua 长沙博物馆「白银时代——中国外销银器特展」巡展计划 [Changsha Museum "Silver Age—special exhibition of Chinese export silverwares" traveling exhibition plan]," Chinese Museums Association website, accessed November 14, 2019, http://www.chinamuseum.org.cn/a/zixun/gedizixun/2017/0629/10359.html.

6 In addition to the Changsha Museum, the venues have to date of publishing included the Shenyang Imperial Palace Museum, the Xi'an Museum, the Yaozhou Kiln Museum, the Datong City Museum, and the China Museum of Fujian-Taiwan Kinship.

China.[7] The objects have evidently been embraced by public audiences; in the first six months that the mainland *Silver Age* was on view in Changsha, over 500,000 people came to see the show.[8]

This paper explores the strategies through which curators, museum officials, and state cultural media reporters presented counterintuitive examples of Chinese craft heritage as historical precedents for evolving state foreign-policy agendas.[9] Scholars have tracked how exhibitions of material objects have been deployed by the cultural arms of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to support changing and sometimes contradictory domestic politics. The contribution of the present study is to track an instance in which the state cultural heritage industry has worked, if indirectly, to support the CCP's ambitious overseas development program, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Taking the museum industry as context and *The Silver Age* as a case study, I analyze how silverwares made for a Western clientele were reframed through exhibition displays and media reports.

In understanding Chinese export silverwares as "transcultural" artifacts that are also subject to ongoing translation through exhibition strategies, I draw on Finbarr Barry Flood's method of studying material culture through dynamic temporal and spatial processes of exchange. He has focused on both "the relationship between strategies of translation associated with the circulation of objects and processes of *transculturation*" as ongoing and multidirectional.[10] Further, Craig Clunas has written that "connected histories" in Asia are remembered both through the "material persistence" of objects that

7 Hu Baofang 胡宝芳, "Guo zhi chong'er: yinqi 国之宠儿: 银器 [Country's darling: silverware]," *Jiancha fengyun* 检查风云 8 (2015): 82–83. Art dealers in London and Hong Kong have anecdotally observed a market shift over the last twenty years; currently, Chinese export silverwares sell better on the antiques market than English silver, Carlos Prata, interview with author, February 2, 2018; Chiara Scotto Pasanisi de Foscarini, interview with author, January 1, 2019. As evidence for growing interest in Chinese export silverware as an area of collecting, Christie's auction house has published a guide to collecting Chinese export silverwares online in English to accompany an online sale dated August 15–22, 2019, Jill Waddell, "Chinese Export Silver—A Guide for New Collectors," Christie's Asian Art, August 6, 2019, accessed November 5, 2019, https://www.christies.com/features/Collecting-Guide-Chinese-Export-Silver-10018-1.aspx.

8 Chinese Museums Association, "Changsha bowuguan 'Baiyin shidai.'"

9 Guolong Lai has written that "cultural heritage" or *wenhua yichan* 文化遗产 was a neologism imported to Chinese from English in the 1980s, but the concept of a "national cultural heritage" has been debated from the beginning of the modern Chinese state. See "The Emergence of 'Cultural Heritage' in Modern China: A Historical and Legal Perspective," in *Reconsidering Cultural Heritage in East Asia*, ed. Akira Matsuda and Luisa Elena Mengoni (London: Ubiquity Press, 2016), 48–50.

10 Flood uses a more current notion of the term "transculturation," initially proposed by anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, which accounts for multidirectionality of exchange as opposed to a single vector of influence. See Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton Universe Press, 2009), 9.

were the result of cultural exchange, as well as the ways in which histories of exchange are remembered and inflected "in the speech and imagination" of people that encounter the object.[11] Bringing together the two analytical strands, my study centers on the specific ways in which Chinese state museums and the museum media have guided the public reception of complex and even problematic transcultural objects.

I examine three levels of object reframing through translation employed by exhibition organizers. My analysis is driven by a set of terms that appear in the exhibition gallery text, its catalogue, and in media reports. The texts articulate the exhibition's stakes within political discourse. I begin with an examination of how the objects were presented in the exhibition as fine craft, and further, how they were interpreted through the formula of "Western-style object forms as the base, with Chinese patterns as supplementary."[12] As exemplary objects created by new market demands in the treaty ports, their production offered evidence of Chinese entrepreneurship, ingenuity, and cultural cosmopolitanism. Next, I track how the organizers selected the translated term "Chinese export silverwares" as a way of naming and understanding the exhibited objects. In doing so, they privileged a foreign history of reception through collecting, and circumvented their foreign patronage. Lastly, I consider how the objects were placed within state historical-ideological constructs, namely, the "Silver Age" and the "Maritime Silk Road." By purposefully selecting one of the constructs over the other, but invoking both through the objects' materiality and history, *The Silver Age* aimed to reconcile competing messages about the identity and objectives of the state in a global space.

In analyzing the exhibition's strategies, I argue that the emergence of Chinese export silverwares as a subject of collecting and display has provided the grounds for a political re-envisioning of the "century of humiliation." I contend that such cultural work is critical for the state, as it internally renegotiates the domestic Chinese relationship with the PRC's ascendant global status. The variable reception of treaty-port material culture, from artifacts of foreign incursion to examples of fine Chinese craft, has relied on the agility of state institutions. They are powerful mechanisms for connecting the Chinese public with forms of state-historical knowledge through objects, as well as responsive platforms for conveying policy changes. Before examining three levels of object translation used by exhibition organizers in *The Silver Age*, I will contextualize the exhibition within the development of the museum industry that has followed Chinese economic liberalization in 1978. As *The Silver Age* has traveled exclusively to governmental museums,

11 Craig Clunas, "Connected Material Histories: A Response," *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no. 1 (2016): 74.

12 In Chinese: *xishi qixing wei zhu, zhongshi wenshi wei fu* 西式器形为主，中式纹饰为辅.

it is necessary to understand the role of the Chinese cultural heritage industry in contemporary politics, and the visitor-centric objectives of the industry's planned development. Moreover, I will address how treaty-port history has been interpreted by museums and other cultural sites to support orthodox ideological narratives. The developments have provided the conditions for *The Silver Age* to participate in efforts to consolidate a global historical imaginary for the Chinese state.

The Silver Age in context: Museums and memories of the treaty port era

Starting in the 1980s, cultural policies issued by the CCP's Central Committee have identified state museums and other cultural heritage sites as bases of patriotic education and socialist activity.[13] The subsequent array of initiatives, including museum-building quotas, has resulted in the rapid proliferation, upscaling, and re-building of museums nationwide.[14] From 2008 to 2013, an average of 239 new official museums were registered with the Cultural Heritage Administration each year; growth has continued apace, and in 2018, the organization reported an addition of 218 museums from the previous year.[15] The Changsha City Museum in Hunan province, which organized *The Silver Age* under the leadership of curator Lihua Wang, is one of the new museums built in the last several years. The municipal museum of history and culture was completed in 2015 as part of a culture and entertainment development on the bank of the Xiang River. Opening in 2016, *The Silver Age* was the first special exhibition installed in the museum. Scholars have characterized the rapid growth of the cultural heritage industry as a "museum

13 For a history of cultural policy and the development of museums in China, see Chen Zhuo 陈卓, "Zhongguo bowuguan shiye de fazhan yu xianzhuang fenxi 中国博物馆事业的发展与现状分析 [Chinese museum institutional development and analysis of the present situation]," *Wenbo xuekan* 文博学刊 1 (2019), 61–63. For the 2018 attendance statistics, see Zhang Chong 张冲, "2018 nian woguo xinzeng yiyi duo renci 'daka' bowuguan 2018年我国新增1亿多人次'打卡'博物馆 [In 2018 an additional one hundred million people visited museums by 'punching cards']," National Cultural Heritage Administration website, May 18, 2019, accessed November 10, 2019, http://www.sach.gov.cn/art/2019/5/18/art_1027_155112.html.

14 Chen, "Zhongguo bowuguan shiye de fazhan," 62.

15 Private *minjian* museums are not included in the official statistics. See Kirk A. Denton, "Can Private Museums Offer Space for Alternate History? The Red Era Series at the Jianchuan Museum Cluster," in *Popular Memories of the Mao Era: From Critical Debate to Reassessing History*, ed. Sebastian Veg (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 80. For 2018 statistics, see Zhang Chong 张冲, "Guojia wenwu ju: jiezhi 2018 niandi quanguo bowuguan shulian yi da 5354 jia 国家文物局：截止2018年底全国博物馆数量已达5354家 [National Cultural Heritage Administration: By the end of 2018, the number of museums in the entire country already has reached 5,354]," National Cultural Heritage Administration website, May 18, 2018, accessed November 10, 2019, http://www.sach.gov.cn/art/2019/5/18/art_1027_155110.html.

boom." Studies have focused on museum-centered urbanization as a factor in real estate development, and moreover, museums as statements of soft power and cultural diplomacy. They have argued that the spectacle of a museum building, as opposed to its contents, has operated as a means of promoting the cultural standing of cities.[16]

Yet from a Chinese governmental view, domestic audience participation—in the form of attendance levels, accessibility, amenities, and rising exhibition quantity and standards—is just as significant as new construction. Visitor attendance is emphasized in state statistics because museums are important sites for learning political doctrine and current political-cultural narratives. In 2018, officials announced that the total number of recorded museum visits that year was a record-setting 1.126 billion, an increase of 100 million from the previous year.[17] In part, museum attendance is encouraged by a 2008 policy that makes state-run museums and revolutionary commemorative halls free, with the exception of historical architectural sites. According to official statistics, 88.6 percent of registered museums and other cultural institutions offered free admission in 2018.[18] Not only the impetus for urbanization and real estate development, cultural policy has also brought more visitors into the doors of new and recently refreshed Chinese museums.

In China, museums have encouraged domestic visitors to view the past through the lens of citizenship.[19] Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has identified the

16 Winnie Wong, "China's Museum Boom," *Artforum* (November 2005): 123. "Museum boom" appears to be a term specific to English-language scholarship and does not seem to have been translated into Chinese discussions of the infrastructural growth of museum and cultural institutions; rather, museum-related "booms" characterized in Chinese-language media reports have described the number of domestic tourists that visit museums and other cultural sites, particularly during Chinese New Year, or in the rise of museum products sold through online retailers. See He Jianwei 何建为, "Daka renshu jizhen, wenchuan chuangpin cheng wanghong: bowuguan fuzeren gai ruhe yingdui 打卡人数激增、文创产品成网红：博物馆负责人该如何应对 ['Punch-in' numbers of people have shot up, cultural products are hot online: how should museum leaders respond?]," *Xingjingbao* 新京報, September 26, 2019, accessed November 18, 2019, http://www.bjnews.com.cn/ent/2019/09/26/629842.html; An Laishun, "Cranking Up the Soft Power Engine of Chinese Museums," in *Cities, Museums and Soft Power*, ed. Gail Dexter Lord and Ngaire Blankenberg (Washington, DC: AAM Press, 2015), 147.

17 Zhang Chong, "2018 nian woguo xinzeng 1yiduo renci 'daka' bowuguan."

18 Admission is free with the presentation of a national ID card for PRC citizens, or a passport for foreigners. On the 2008 policy, see Huang Mingyu 黄明玉, "Zhongguo bowuguan de tizhi yu fazhan xiankuang 中国博物馆的体制与发展现况 [Chinese museum system and the current development situation]," *Bowuguan xuekan* 博物馆学刊 22 (1997), 231; on 2018 statistics see Zhang Chong, "2018 nian woguo xinzeng 1yiduo renci 'daka' bowuguan."

19 Kirk A. Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 12; Tracey Lie Dan Lu, *Museums in China: Power, Politics and Identities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 186.

common factor of the contemporary museum, in its range of manifestations worldwide, as a place where knowledge is the commodity on offer for visitors.[20] More specifically, from the founding of the modern state in 1949 to the present, Denise Y. Ho has written that the Chinese museum has been a space where political narratives could be signaled and studied. Mao era museums and exhibits were political tools for mass education and mobilization, playing a key role in party-state legitimization.[21] Moreover, due to the flexibility of exhibition spaces, exhibition texts could be and were revised; as Ho put it, an exhibition's text operated as "a barometer for political winds."[22] More recently, post-socialist cultural policy has drawn on this understanding of the museum as "political classroom."[23] A visual means of documenting cultural policies at work, state media reports of exhibitions often feature images of anonymous visitors, like the woman in the exhibition photograph from the the Shenyang Imperial Palace Museum (also known as the Mukden Palace) installation of *The Silver Age*; she is a model participant in the post-socialist wave of museum development. Visitors seen in media images constitute an active and participatory viewership, engaged in studying encased objects and taking pictures on cellphones. Not just leisure experience, museum visits are also a type of collective social labor in ongoing political education efforts.[24]

The state media photograph of the Shenyang visitor raises the question of what historical lesson might be learned from the object in the case, a luxury good made for the Euro-American market during the treaty port era. Within Chinese state museums, material objects are positioned as "evidence" for state agendas.[25] They often serve the purpose of creating historical

20 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), 2.

21 Denise Y. Ho, "Museum," in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, ed. Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere (Acton: ANU Press, 2019), 141. Specifically, post-reform cultural policy has mandated that museums and memorial halls operate as "patriotic theory education bases," and as a "part of the composition of socialist cultural activity." See Chen, "Chinese Museum Institutional Development," 62.

22 Ho, "Museum," 143.

23 Ho, "Museum," 141.

24 Yuan Guangkuo 苑广阔, "Bowuguan cheng daka mudi juyou duzhong xinshi yiyi 博物館成打卡目的具有多重现实意义 [Significance of museums becoming 'punching-in' destinations]," Sina.com.cn, January 18, 2018, accessed November 21, 2019, http://collection.sina.com.cn/jczs/2018-01-18/doc-ifyquptv7577751.shtml.

25 Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 148. Scholars have also gauged the possibility for alternative readings of sensitive histories, such as the Cultural Revolution in private (*minjian* 民间) museums. Private museums are not closely regulated by the government, and moreover have been encouraged as a form of impetus to cultural and real estate development. See Denton, "Can Private Museums Offer Space for Alternate History?," 80.

continuity between the past and present. In speeches and published reports, President Xi Jinping has emphasized how newly revitalized museums are places where the historical record can be "repaired." In paraphrase, he said that museums make objects speak and impart their historical wisdom to visitors.[26] The Shenyang visitor is shown viewing a silver compote, or fruit dish on a high stand. In the Xi'an installation of *The Silver Age*, the compote was placed in a wall case under a detail photograph (Fig. 1). Its pastoral fantasy, in the grape leaves and swallows springing from the stand, belies its provenance in the martial community of the international concessions in the treaty port of Shanghai. According to an inscription engraved on the top of the base, it was given to senior officer Armin Haupt in 1894 as a gift from the German Company of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps.[27] Based on the inscription, the Haupt compote was deeply entangled with the history of foreign extraterritorial privileges at Shanghai. As I discuss in the next section, *The Silver Age* almost entirely set aside such connections in favor of a framing of the silverwares primarily through craft. In the remainder of this section, I will situate the compote in the treaty-port context that accounts for its provenance as well as the industry that produced it. I will also consider the scholarship on how Chinese museums and cultural sites have interpreted modern histories of foreign imperialism. Approaches have ranged from presenting orthodox nationalist perspectives to more recent interpretations that align treaty-port markets with present-day economic aims.

Under the system known as *wukou tongshang* 五口通商 "five-port trade relations," the first commercial treaty in 1842 established five treaty port cities: Guangzhou, Ningbo, Xiamen, Shanghai, and Fuzhou. Additionally, Hong Kong was leased to the United Kingdom as a colony. At the height of the treaty port system, there were ninety-two official treaty ports and additional leased territories. Prior to the signing of the commercial treaties, a Chinese port-based silverwares industry developed in Guangzhou under the patronage of both foreigners and local Chinese elite clients. Unlike the silverwares handicraft industry in colonial British India, which was started by British retailers who employed British and Indian craftsmen, the Chinese export silverwares industry was run and staffed entirely by Chinese shop owners

26 Paraphrased from the statement, "他强调，要在展览的同时高度重视修史修志，让文物说话、把历史智慧告诉人们," Zhang Minyan 张敏彦, "Tuwen gushi: Bowuguan heyi zhongyao? Xi Jinping 'daka' gaosu ni 图文故事：博古管何以重要？习近平'打卡'告诉你 [Illustrated Story: Why are museums important? Xi Jinping 'punches in' to tell you]," Xinhua News, May 18, 2018, accessed November 21, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/xxjxs/2018-05/18/c_1122850154.htm.

27 Wang, *Baiyin shidai*, 73. Original German inscription on base, in script: "Die DEUTSCHE COMPAGNIE, S.V.C., ihrem ausscheidenden Compagniechef, Herrn LIEUTENANT HAUPT. Shanghai, im Dezember 1894."

Fig. 1: *Haupt silver compote wall case, Xi'an Museum installation. Photograph by author, 2019.*

and silversmiths.[28] Many Guangdong-based *yuebang* 粤帮, branch businesses with familial or other native-place commercial connections with Cantonese firms, were among the first new silverware retailers in the treaty ports selling to expatriate clients. Chief among them was Luen Wo, the shop where the compote was purchased.[29]

While the treaty ports opened up new markets for Chinese craft industries, Pär Cassel has written that nearly any point of contact between foreigners and Chinese "could be 'extraterritorialized'" to the foreigners' benefit.[30]

28 Vidya Dehejia, Dipti Khera, Yuthika Sharma, and Wynyard R. T. Wilkinson, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing in association with Timeless Books, 2008).

29 On Luen Wo 联和, see Chen Zhigao, *Zhongguo yinlou yu yinqi*, 5:100. The compote can be linked to the Luen Wo retailer from a mark struck on its base. For Chinese sojourners arriving in Shanghai after it was opened to international settlement, many of whom migrated from Guangdong and Fujian provinces, see Linda Cooke Johnson, *Shanghai: From Market Town to Treaty Port, 1074–1858* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 268–269.

30 Cassel, *Grounds of Judgement*, 5.

Foreigners in the ports claimed increased privileges through the treaty protections. Over time, they sought near-immunity from local laws, along with the cover of gunboats, imported military technologies, and their own police and militia forces.[31] One such defense organization was the Shanghai Volunteer Corps, a standing militia made up of foreign residents administered by the Shanghai Municipal Council. The Corps responded to threats inside the foreign settlement, such as protests, or outside the settlement, such as civil unrest or rebellion. As Isabella Jackson has written, all perceived threats were Chinese in origin.[32] The compote was given to Haupt, a senior Corps officer and agent for the German import/export firm Melchers & Co., likely upon his 1894 return to Europe.[33] When he returned to China in 1897, he expanded Melchers & Co. to Tianjin.[34] When understood from the perspective of its provenance, the compote is an artifact of foreign economic expansion and martial self-sovereignty on the Chinese mainland.

Museums and cultural sites have been key participants in keeping the memory of past foreign oppression vivid. Seen exclusively from this angle, the production history of Chinese export silverwares would seemingly render them antithetical to museum exhibition, especially as authentic fine craft objects. Since the 1990s, CCP rhetoric has aimed to solidify foreign aggression and settlement during the late Qing period into a cornerstone of Chinese national identity. In the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen suppression, the CCP took the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Sino–British conflict in 1990 to raise nationalist sentiment and promote party legitimacy, reinvigorating official narratives through patriotic education and other media.[35] As Julia Lovell has generalized from the account of one of the CCP commemorative studies of the period, "China's modern history was the story of the Chinese people suffering from, then resisting, (Western) imperialist aggression, beginning with the 'shameless'

31 Cassel, *Grounds of Judgement*, 4–5.

32 Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai*, 114.

33 A history and description of activities and figures of the SVC are recounted in Arnold Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hong-kong, Shanghai, and other Treaty Ports of China: Their History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company, 1908), 413–428. Haupt formally requested a leave of absence from the SVC in 1894 to return to Europe for several years. See "Meetings: The Municipal Council," *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, December 21, 1894. Haupt is listed in the Shanghai directory, see *The Chronicle & Directory for China, Corea, Japan, the Philippines, Into-China, Straits Settlements, Siam, Borneo, Malay States, &c. for the year 1894* (Hong Kong: Daily Press Office, 1894), 565.

34 Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions*, 742.

35 Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Historical Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 101–102.

and 'filthy' Opium War, a concerted plot to 'enslave our people, steal our wealth and turn a great nation that had been independent for thousands of years into a semi-feudal semi-colony'."[36]

A range of cultural institutions dedicated to commemorating different episodes of national humiliation have attempted to keep such historical atrocities alive in the people's collective imagination. The Opium War Museum in Humen was built on the site where the Treaty of Nanjing was signed, ending the first Sino–British war. In the party's retelling, the treaty set the stage for years of foreign invasion and oppression. The museum commemorates the ultimately futile actions the official Lin Zexu took to destroy opium stocks, as well as the place where Admiral Guan took his last stand.[37] Newly organized and rebuilt museums reproduce the horrors of Japanese war and colonialism, such as the September 18th Historical Museum in Shenyang, the Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression in Beijing, and the Unit 731 Museum in Harbin. According to the director of the Beijing Japanese Aggression museum Li Zhongyuan, when reopened in 2015, the museum displayed twice the number of photos, and almost triple the amount of relics than before, totaling 1,170 photos and 2,834 objects. In this case, the staggering development of the museum industry has been accompanied by the proliferation of sentiment through the object-based memory of foreign intervention.[38]

Recent installations at museums and cultural sites have begun to negotiate the tension between maintaining the class-based critique of imperialism and supporting new market-based priorities in the post-socialist era. As described by Kirk A. Denton, the "Foreign City" hall in the Shanghai History Museum primarily conveyed a sense of nostalgia for Shanghai's Republican period. It was not bristling with revolutionary umbrage about elite consumption. Gunboats at the beginning of the exhibit soon gave way to installations that recalled "the glamorous life of the foreigners," their lavish spaces of entertainment, and their imported consumer culture.[39] Additional recent scholarship about shifts in state historical narratives has focused on sites of architectural and cultural

36 Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China* (London: Picador, 2011), 343.

37 James Flath, "'This is How the Chinese People Began Their Struggle': Humen and the Opium War as a Site of Memory," *Places of Memory in Modern China*, ed. Marc Andre Matten (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 167.

38 Xu Jing, "Reopened Anti-Japanese War Museum Attracts Chinese Visitors," *China Daily*, August 31, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2015-08/31/content_21758698.htm.

39 Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 88–90.

heritage tourism in the context of China's economic and urban development. Most pertinently, Hong Zhang has evaluated the recuperation of the former Italian concession in Tianjin as a means of enhancing domestic tourism. Zhang has argued that the site was previously associated with foreign threats to Chinese sovereignty. After its renovation into a tourist attraction, local officials and writers have downplayed the current-day resonance of the past imperialistic connections of the concession. They argued that even though "the buildings served foreign imperialists in the past, they now serve the Chinese people."[40] The global economic dominance of China has justified the selective de-emphasizing of foreign aggression within sites of past humiliation. Former foreign enclaves in treaty ports cities such as Tianjin, Shanghai, Qingdao, and Xiamen are all popular domestic tourist destinations.[41]

With the post-socialist rise of China in the global economic milieu, CCP policy agendas are constantly in flux, as are, more subtly, official constructions of the past.[42] As Geremie Barmé has observed, each CCP policy change is inevitably accompanied by the "rehabilitation, re-evaluation, and revision" of official historical perspectives.[43] Denton and Zhang have shown how local re-articulations of historically contentious relics, consumer spaces, and heritage sites helped justify the new Chinese market economy and bolster cultural tourism. In the next section, I will track how the Chinese museum industry has imparted sophisticated "history lessons" through specific translations and positionings of ambivalent objects, such as the Haupt compote and other examples of Chinese export silverware. While history is doctrine, its construction must also be multivalent in the museum, readily shifting to support the aims of the party and convey new positions to visitors. The Chinese export silverwares on view in *The Silver Age* touring exhibition collectively inhabited the contradiction of their production history within

40 Hong Zhang, "From a Symbol of Imperialistic Penetration to a Site of Cultural Heritage: The 'Italian-Style Exotic District' in Tianjin," in *Chinese Heritage in the Making*, ed. Christina Maags and Marina Svensson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 87.

41 Another cultural site is of debatable status from a nationalist perspective: Suzette Cooke has examined the contradictions in the resuscitation of the Qinghai official residence of Nationalist general and Sino-Muslim warlord Ma Bufang as a domestic tourist site. She asked how the story and space of a non-Han and non-Communist center of power in China's ethnically and politically fraught northwest can operate as a legitimate site of Chinese culture heritage. See Suzette Cooke, "Telling Stories in a Borderland: The Evolving Life of Ma Bufang's Official Residence," in *Chinese Heritage in the Making: Experiences, Negotiations and Contestations*, ed. Christina Maags and Marina Svensson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 43–44.

42 Denton, *Exhibiting the Past*, 9.

43 Geremie Barmé, "History for the Masses," in *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China*, ed. Jonathan Unger (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 260.

CCP ideological narratives: namely, their status as, first, contentious goods produced expressly for members of the foreign settlements, and second, the material evidence of craft achievement and economic success of an agile Chinese industry.

Object display: "Western-style object forms as the base, with Chinese patterns as supplementary"

Like Tianjin's Italian concession in the abovementioned analysis of Hong Zhang, the reevaluation of treaty-port material culture as fine craft are the stakes through which "Western influence" can be incorporated as an element of Chinese cultural heritage. In the case of *The Silver Age*, organizers translated the objects for Chinese museum audiences by emphasizing their design characteristics and history of craftsmanship. Specifically, the formula of "Western-style object forms as the base, with Chinese patterns as supplementary," or *xishi qixing wei zhu, zhongshi wenshi wei fu* 西式器形为主，中式纹饰为辅, is repeated throughout the exhibition and related media accounts.[44] In this section, I will analyze the exhibition layout and accompanying texts, to consider how exhibition organizers displayed and framed transcultural objects in post-socialist museums. Through strategies of display, the exhibition argued that under Western patronage in the treaty ports, Chinese silversmithing achieved a new height of virtuosic craft skill and creative design. The challenge was how to reconcile presenting the silverwares as high craft alongside previous understandings of the role played by foreigners at the end of the last imperial dynasty. Comparison with a concurrent and identically named exhibition at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum of Chinese export silverwares will bring decisions made by curators and museum officials based on intended audience into focus.

Crane and pine, chrysanthemums in blossom, twisted filigree wires: magnified details of patterns and techniques from silverwares in the show greeted visitors to the Xi'an Museum installation of *The Silver Age* (Fig. 2).[45] Objects placed in the introductory gallery were few. Two standalone cases, each safeguarding a single vase under a soaring glass canopy, offered a spot-lit preamble for the rest of the exhibition. The first gallery

44 Wang, *Baiyin shidai*, 11. On Chinese connoisseurship in the Ming-Qing period, see Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010) and Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

45 I conducted fieldwork at the Shenyang and Xi'an venues of the exhibition; for understanding the first installation at Changsha, I relied on photographs, media reports, personal blogs, and the exhibition catalogue. While the content of the exhibition was slightly modified between shows, for the purposes of my analysis I will treat the exhibition as a single assemblage of displays, with an emphasis on its specific arrangements at the Xi'an Museum in November 2019.

asserted a stylistic understanding of objects over the historical. The framed panels of free-floating ornament silhouetted against deep purple walls, and the outlines of delicate filigree wire, linked objects on display foremost to the history of Chinese fine craft and material culture. Yet they encouraged visitors to view design and craft technique as unmoored from a particular historical context. When seen from a distance, glass-enshrined silver vases were rendered into silhouettes of classical Chinese "Guanyin" vase forms. While visitors would be prompted to note the Western forms of objects in subsequent galleries, the introductory gallery positioned them exclusively within the realm of a generalized Chinese craft aesthetic.

The introductory gallery's de-historicizing display techniques were accompanied by a lengthy narrative wall-text in both Chinese and English, which provided an historical interpretation of the objects for visitors.

Fig. 2: The Silver Age *introductory gallery, Xi'an Museum installation. Photograph by author, 2019.*

Importantly, their context of production in the treaty ports was not erased. Most of the exhibition texts and their re-articulations in Chinese state media emphasized craft: forms, motifs, and metalworking techniques. The effect was an attempt to re-articulate the production history of the wares. The treaty ports were not ignored, but rather, they were stripped of their imperialistic threat and any subsequent psychological wounds. By translating the objects within the space of the gallery, exhibition organizers

promoted the entrepreneurial combination of Western and Chinese design and their consumption within a market economy. Craft and ingenuity were promoted over any pernicious valences of their treaty-port origins.

The introductory text informed visitors that the essential point to understand about the silverwares was that they were made for buyers or for export to Western (*xifang* 西方) countries during the late Qing and early Republican periods. The government's overseas trade policy had an intimate relationship with the development of the silverware industry. From the late eighteenth century to the 1840s, during which time all foreign maritime trade was confined by law to Guangzhou's "single-port system," the majority Euro-American trading constituency favored luxury goods substituting for what they could procure in Britain and the United States. Here they enjoyed the convenience and price of a China-based industry, where labor was relatively cheap. Chinese metalworkers and jewelers responded by producing flatwares and tablewares which often seamlessly replicated Western fine goods in appearance, if not in construction. In the 1840s, Western powers used gunboats to pry open China's borders. As the forced opening of treaty ports increased, the export silverwares industry expanded. The industry spread to new markets in cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin, Hankou, and Jiujiang. The preface reconciled their complicated history, explaining that as more and more Western businessmen came to China, their understanding of Chinese culture grew deeper. They gradually grew to enjoy traditional Chinese cultural forms. Consequently, new types of objects emerged. Chinese elements were introduced toward bolstering functionality and for providing ornament, and ultimately "present the appearance of a good combination of Chinese and Western elements."

The exhibition's explanation of treaty-port wares thus invested Chinese designs with the ability to strategically reconcile cultural difference. Delivering the thesis of the exhibition, and the primary argument for the legitimization of the objects it displayed as fine Chinese craft, Chinese craftsmen were identified as the inventors of a new type of transcultural design.

> In a very short time, the fashion for the combination of Western object forms and Chinese decorative elements incited Chinese craftsmen's immense creativity. They used traditional craft techniques to produce one excellent piece after another, pushing Chinese silverware craft production toward its summit.[46]

46 Original Chinese: "而一旦西式器形与中国元素相结合成为一种时尚, 就激发出了中国银匠们极大的创造力, 他们用传统手工艺创作了一件又一件艺术佳作, 将中国的银器制作工艺推向了巅峰."

Chinese silversmiths effectively had created a product that surpassed the objects initially requested by the foreign clientele, which copied Western forms whole cloth.

The assessment of the production, if not of the position, of silversmithing under conditions of Western patronage in Chinese craft history is supported by a French period observer. Charles Lavollée visited a silversmith's shop in Guangzhou in 1843, just after the First Opium War:

> We entered it and were received at the counter by an old man busy weighing silver ingots. The goldsmiths of Canton ordinarily work only on command; so they have very few items in store. We could judge, however, by some fine pieces which were to be sent to England, how the Chinese workmen are skilled in the art of carving on metals. Here are real artists! Certainly their works do not surpass those of our Parisian industry, which remains the world's first. But we should not be surprised that the English and Americans give great favor to Chinese products. The shapes of teapots, sugar bowls, tankards, etc., modeled on those of Europe, have a remarkable originality of design, and the Chinese subjects that decorate them are perfectly rendered.[47]

In this French observer's eyes, Chinese oil painters producing for the market of Western sojourners were mere assembly-line workers, while the silversmiths were the "true artists." They had invented original, high-quality craft products by combining Chinese designs with European forms. Moreover, according to Lavollée, the Chinese silverwares met or surpassed the designs of domestic goods available to their English and American buyers.

Stated by the exhibition texts and echoed by a Westerner visiting the port city in the 1840s, the primary lens through which audiences should view these objects is through Chinese creativity and craftsmanship, as well as their market viability. Wrapping up a narrative rise and arch with a fall, the wall passage dated the end of the renaissance in Chinese silversmithing to the end of the dynasty, as well as the treaty-port system, in 1911:

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47 Original French: "Nous y entrâmes et nous fûmes reçus au comptoir par un vieillard occupé à peser des lingots d'argent *sycee*. Les orfèvres de Canton ne travaillent ordinairement que sur commande ; aussi n'ont-ils que très peu d'articles en magasin. Nous pûmes cependant juger, par quelques belles pièces qui devaient être envoyées en Angleterre, combien les ouvriers chinois sont habiles dans l'art de sculpter sur métaux. Voilà de véritables artistes ! Assurément leurs œuvres ne surpassent pas celles de notre industrie parisienne, qui demeure la première du monde. Mais ils ne faut pas s'étonner que les Anglais et les Américains accordent une grande faveur aux produits chinois. Les formes de théières, des sucriers, des pots à bière, etc., calquées sure celles d'Europe, présentent une remarquable originalité de dessins, et les sujets chinois qui les décorent sont parfaitement rendus." Charles Hubert Lavollée, *Voyage en Chine* (Paris: Imprimerie de Pommeret et Moreau, 1852), 363–364.

> During the Republican period, owing to the tumultuous political situation, the "texture" and level of craft production returned to its prior inferiority. Chinese export silverware declined with each passing day.[48]

In other words, when the Nationalists held political sway, the resulting disorder slowly destroyed the conditions that had allowed for a superior level of craftsmanship and design to be achieved. In fact, the Chinese silversmithing industry for the domestic market expanded during the Republican period, as silverware and jewelry shops operated for local clienteles in many cities. In that light, the "summit" achieved by treaty-port silversmiths, as emphasized by the exhibition text and the French visitor, was the cross-cultural mixing of forms to appeal to a foreign market.[49]

In the next gallery, the term "Chinese export silverwares" was defined as a "combination of Western appearance and Chinese patterns […] the kind of silverware made in a traditional Chinese way […] for export." The texts and displays emphasized how "traditional" Chinese handicraft production techniques were flexibly redeployed toward new product designs. In the section entitled "Craft lines of a thousand years" (*yimai qiannian* 艺脉千年), or craft techniques for working silver, such as filigree work, hammering, engraving, and gilding, were emphasized as the most salient historical aspect of the exhibition. While the techniques are not unique to China, and were likely adapted several centuries earlier from craft techniques developed in Western and Central Asia, the exhibition links them to a longstanding, native craft industry that predated the treaty port era. Most of the exhibition's wall texts and labels contextualized the objects for visitors through their formal qualities, drawing on the descriptive language of craft, or *gongyi* 工艺, catalogues and textbooks.[50]

For example, one case addressed the application of the *loukong gongyi* 镂空工艺, or "openwork" technique, in late Qing export silverwares (Fig. 3). The case featured several examples of bowls and breadbaskets, but a footed bowl lined with green glass was selected for deeper exploration. In the Shenyang installation, the bowl appeared in the case, while in the Xi'an installation, it was placed separately in a standalone case nearby.

48 Original Chinese: "民间时间, 由于时局动荡, 外销银器的材质, 制作工艺水平都较以前逊色, 中国外销银器日渐式微."

49 From inscriptions, we know that some of the wares were purchased by Chinese buyers and Asian port sojourners.

50 Some supplementary materials were included, such as illustrations from the Ming treatise *Tiangong kaiwu* 天工开物 [The exploitation of the works of nature] enlarged onto wall panels. They provided a quick primer on the smelting process presented through ancient Chinese texts. Other cases examined Western forms and packaging.

Fig. 3: Loukong *craft technique case, Xi'an Museum installation. Photograph by author, 2019.*

The wall text described how the technique relied on silver's material characteristics for thinness and extensibility; flattened sheets retain their strength so they can be pierced, creating delicate patterning out of the cavities in the form. The wall text included a large photograph of the bowl, approximately the size of the object itself. Meanwhile, the bowl in the case was accompanied by a description, which succinctly apprised the viewer of the bowl's craft characteristics:

> Silver bowl with openwork bamboo leaf pattern, glass insert. Open-mouthed rim, curving sides, deep belly, round foot. Openwork techniques used on base and belly, ornamented with bamboo forest, paradise flycatcher [type of bird associated with longevity], empty space uses "copper cash" pattern. Separable green glass bowl is added.

Viewed in the space of the gallery, the wall text and the photograph could serve as a kind of map to how the object was produced, where the openwork technique was employed, and the design patterns chosen. Entirely elided was any mention of the large inscription on the bowl's foot, "H. A. Perak. 1903." While it is unclear whether "Perak" indicated a last name or something else, the Roman letters and format of the inscription connected it to a European, and likely British, foreigner. For the exhibition's audience, the bowl's peripatetic "social life," as revealed through the implied provenance of the visible inscription, were left unacknowledged. Instead, the bowl, as translated by the displays in both object and photographed form, demonstrated the Chinese silversmiths' application of the metalworking technique *loukong* and the application of Chinese designs of bamboo, flycatcher, and "copper cash" patterns.

The culminating section of the exhibition, "Charm and intent of mutual harmony" (*yiqu xiangrong* 意趣相融), carried the argument of the show one step further. It encouraged visitors to view Chinese export silverwares as an ideal political merging of Western forms and Chinese patterns. As the catalogue explained, "One distinctive feature of CES [Chinese export silverware] is that it is a perfect combination of Western appearance and Chinese patterns, which, on the one hand, meets the living habits of the westerners, and on the other hand, coincides with the trend of nature worship and the pursuit of exotic beauty in Western world [*sic*]."[51] The section was organized by Chinese patterns, such as dragons, plum blossoms, and other flowers and plants, flower-and-bird, and figural and narrative scenes.

Again, the combination of Western object forms with Chinese designs was the main rhetorical focus of display. At the Xi'an installation of *The Silver Age*, a case displaying "dragon design silverwares," or *longwen yinqi* 龙纹银器, contained a set including a teapot, a coffeepot, a sugar bowl and a cream pot (Fig. 4). The "Chinese" design was identified as the embossed and chased dragons that crawled across the surfaces of the vessels. The "Western" aspect of the wares were their form, combination, and coordination. While the teapot as a form was invented in China, the development of a three or four-piece tea set started as an eighteenth-century European fashion.[52] As tea consumption became increasingly popular, the ensemble of tea utensils included a creamer and sugar bowl. Through object and textual assemblages such as the "dragon design silverwares" case, the show encouraged visitors to view export silverwares as modular combinations of material forms and design elements that carried with them generic notions about "Chinese" and "Western" design. Fundamentally,

51 Wang, *Baiyin shidai*, 146.

52 Philippa Glanville, *Silver in England* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987), 92–98.

they were cast as oppositional cultural signs that were reconciled through the innovation of Chinese craftsmen. The tea and coffee set was the material evidence for the interpretive construct of "Western-style object forms as the base, with Chinese patterns as supplementary." But their canny inventor emerged through the exhibition as the driving force in their history. In other words, the Chinese craftsman was the protagonist in their production, with the foreign consumer as critical, but supplementary.

The translation of objects by the exhibition through the abovementioned terms was accomplished due to their careful positioning as "evidence" within textual and photographic regimes of description, and techniques of display that bolstered a political aesthetic understanding. In his work on late imperial Chinese decorative objects, Jonathan Hay has studied the taste of the scholar-literati consumer of late imperial Chinese objects. This class of consumer brought to objects such as porcelains, bronzes, and carved lacquerware a set of material, sensory, and narrative associations based on connoisseurial knowledge.[53] *The Silver Age* proposed a different ideal consumer of Chinese objects: cosmopolitan treaty port residents and export markets.

Fig. 4: *"Dragon patterns" case, Xi'an Museum installation. Photograph by author, 2019.*

53 Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*.

Drawing on the exhibition strategies of the Western bourgeois museum to heighten the visual qualities of objects, the tacit message of the show was the triumph of Chinese ingenuity over Western military might and economic imperialism, via the cultural signaling of bird-and-flower designs on a silver coffee pot. The formula of "Western-style object forms as the base, with Chinese patterns as supplementary" was a lesson in the function of Chinese soft power. In the hands of adept creators and retailers, the application of "traditional" designs and techniques not only met the demands of new markets, but also had a transformative effect on the industry itself.

At each venue, the exhibition generated significant press, which gave its arguments a platform outside of the space of the museum. A *People's Daily* article on the exhibition installed at Changsha reiterated the main points succinctly as follows:

> While maritime trade quickly developed, at the same time that Western industry and commerce occupied China, it stimulated the outward reorientation of traditional Chinese handicraft industries. On the basis of the demand for opening marketplaces in port cities to sell to foreigners, Chinese silversmiths deeply mined national characteristics and made export silverwares that not only satisfied the everyday needs of their consumers, but also attained the highest standards of Chinese beauty. This silverware is the proof that China historically opened up and developed its capacity for overseas trade, and is the rich and varied souvenir of modern life. It is also the material vehicle of Chinese and western cultural blending.[54]

As repeated by the *People's Daily* article, the values reflected by the silverwares were taken almost directly from the exhibition wall text. The language of the installation was thus broadcast throughout the media for online and even print audiences.[55] Export silverwares were cast as "proof" of the outward-looking, global perspective of artisans in the late Qing period, at a time when China has previously defined itself as a victim of foreign imperialism. Yet in focusing on the craft and design qualities of the objects and positioning them as new applications of handicraft metalworking techniques, the exhibition sidestepped many elements of the

54 Deng Xiaoli 邓晓丽, "'Baiyin shidai — Zhongguo waixiao yinqi tezhan' jinri zai changsha bowuguan zhanchu '白银时代——中国外销银器特展' 今日在长沙博物馆展出 ['The Silver Age—Special Exhibition of Chinese export silverware' opens today at Changsha City Museum]," *People's Daily*, September 30, 2016, http://hn.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0930/c337651-29088411-2.html.

55 Li Li 李李 and Zhao Su 召苏, "Waimaoshi shang de bayin Zhongguofeng 外贸史上的白银中国风 [Foreign trade history of silver *chinoiserie*]," *China Art Weekly*, November 4, 2017, 12.

historical and political context of their conditions of manufacture. It glossed over specific object histories, or even patterns of ownership. It did not raise the question of how so many of them returned to China, and their current owners were not indicated in the gallery. Instead, all of the objects were couched in a shared provenance of craft production, which served instead to promote native handicraft industries and their entrepreneurial responsiveness to cosmopolitan markets.

In addition to the Changsha-organized show, a second exhibition on Chinese export silverwares opened in late 2017 at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum (HKMM). It was similarly titled *The Silver Age: Origins and Trade of Chinese Export Silver*, and was organized by museum curator Libby Chan.[56] The show included 160 objects and sets of objects, drawn mostly from Hong Kong private collections. Instead of taking a craft and design taxonomic approach in arrangement, the show placed export silverwares within the larger material context of silver currency exchanged between Western Europe and the United States and China, focusing on Hong Kong's historical role in maritime trade. Located on a pier in the harbor at Hong Kong, the HKMM is a non-profit, non-governmental museum founded in 2003 by members of the Hong Kong Shipowners' Association. It has presented a bilingual program on maritime history, as it intersects with Hong Kong's history as a major port city. Unlike the venues for the mainland exhibition, it was independent from CCP cultural policy and regulation.

The show expanded the types of objects exhibited in order to show the range of material forms silver has taken historically. The introductory section on the global silver market was composed of a selection of coins and silver ingots, as well as maps that tracked the circulations of silver bullion brought to Chinese ports through maritime trade. The section also addressed the history of Chinese gold and silversmithing processes. Examples of vessels from the Liao, Tang, and Ming dynasties were displayed, as well as jewelry made for Ming and Qing elites. A description of different metalworking techniques employed by Chinese craftsmen, along with brief explanatory definitions, was included as a wall panel. But unlike the touring mainland show, it was not a central concern of the Hong Kong exhibition.

The HKMM show foregrounded the confluence of the material, craft history, and cultural encounter that make up the social history of these objects, situating Hong Kong at the center of the narrative. The fourth section concentrated on objects from the treaty port era, highlighting the role of Hong Kong after it was ceded to Britain. After the opening of

56 In Chinese, *Baiyin shidai—Zhongguo waixiao jinyinqi zhi laili yu maoyi* 白银时代—中国外销金银器之来历与贸易. I was involved in the HKMM show in that I contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue.

the five ports that were the result of the first Sino–British Treaty in 1842, the Hong Kong silverwares industry rose in prominence along with the Shanghai industry. The fifth section "Craft Inheritance: Made in Hong Kong" focused on the Hong Kong silverwares industry and monetary metals in Hong Kong. "From Canton to Hong Kong" reconstructed the shop of the prolific Hong Kong silverwares retail firm Wang Hing. In this pair of galleries, large color photographs of a retired master silversmith, as well as drawings of his silverware designs, demonstrated the living heritage of the artisanal labor and knowledge local to Hong Kong. The final section dramatized a Western table setting, along with a dense display of dressing table implements. The question of Hong Kong's increasingly tenuous political autonomy was elided by the resemblance of its silverwares industry during its time as a British colony to other mainland Chinese treaty ports. The show argued that the products of the Hong Kong silversmithing industry were unique effects of its history as a former British colony, but also that it shared a set of conditions with mainland treaty port cities such as Shanghai.

Using different exhibition strategies, both exhibitions posited a Chinese silversmithing industry as a participant in global craft history. Further, they reconstructed the late Qing and early Republican period as a productive time in Chinese foreign trade, where China garnered an influential position in the world economy. In both shows, the role of foreign incursion through extraterritoriality at Shanghai, and colonialism in Hong Kong, is nearly excised from the presentation of objects. Also common to the exhibitions was the argument that Chinese silversmithing reached a previously unrecognized height of design, skill, and quantity of production in the very last days of the Qing period. Yet as the two exhibitions defined "Chinese export silverwares" differently, they also yielded different renderings of a Chinese "silver age" in metalworking.

While the aim of the HKMM show was to historicize Chinese export silverwares in the global silver trade and local history, the aim of the mainland show was to provide visitors a framework for their integration into Chinese craft history, translating them into fine craft through display. The Hong Kong show allowed for more flexible criteria of what could be exhibited in a show that tracked the historical transformative capacities of silver objects, and their material connections to money. The Hong Kong show's "silver age" was thus twofold: first, the long history of the material culture of silver and silverwares in China, and second, the Hong Kong export silverwares industry as an important part of that history. The traveling mainland *Silver Age* generalized about the context and character of a Chinese export silversmithing industry, aside from the inclusion of a wall-mounted table listing major shops and their cities.

Less concerned with local history or specific industries, it emphasized the productive encounter of Western demand with Chinese craft techniques through "Western-style object forms as the base, with Chinese patterns as supplementary." Later in this paper, I will analyze the complex historical-ideological work of the exhibition, in order to identify the "silver age" it proposed for both the treaty-port silversmithing industry and China's position on the global stage. Prior to that point, I will address one additional strategy of translation used by exhibition organizers to position treaty-port material culture as fine craft objects. I argue that the mainland *Silver Age* accomplished a historical reorientation in part by placing the objects in a foreign lineage of reception. Foregrounding their transcultural collecting history was a means of re-articulating and recuperating them, precisely through their overseas history of reidentification.

Collecting history and classification: "The truth was revealed: Originally, these very special utensils came from ancient China"

A second means through which the mainland *Silver Age* organizers translated Chinese export silverwares for domestic audiences was by framing them within their American reception history. Specifically, they stressed the objects' "loss" in the West and subsequent "rediscovery," nearly fifty years prior to the planning of the exhibition, in the United States. In a report published online about the development of the exhibition, Changsha Museum curator Lihua Wang wrote:

> The exhibition organizers first bought a group of English-language books on the topic, but Chinese export silver is a recently discovered category of cultural objects. Before the 1970s, Chinese modern export silverwares had fallen into oblivion […].[57]

Unlike the blend of Western forms and Chinese designs that gained popularity in the treaty ports, many, but not all, early nineteenth-century Chinese export silverwares replicated Western object designs. Their mid-twentieth-century owners assumed they were produced in the United States or Britain. In other words, during China's insular Maoist period,

57 Original Chinese: "白银策展团队事先已经购买了一批相关的英文书籍，但是中国外销银器是近年来新发现的文物类别，在20世纪70年代以前，中国近代外销银器还湮没无闻…近年来，在英、美等西方国家，中国近代外销银器已经引起了收藏家、学者和博物馆的重视，被评价为中国传统银器手工艺的最高峰。然而，在国内，近代外销银器还没有引起文博界和学术界的大力关注[…]," in "'Baiyin shidai—zhongguo waixiao yinqi tezhan' cezhan xinde '白银时代—中国外销银器特展'策展心得 ['The Silver Age—A special exhibition of Chinese export silver' report on exhibition planning]," Changzhou Museum website, accessed January 3, 2017, http://www.czmuseum.com/wx/default.php?mod=article&do=detail&tid=17064.

Chinese-made silverwares hid in plain sight in American and European collections.

In the Chinese-language introductory wall text of the exhibition, the organizers attributed the revelation of the objects' origins to one book: "In 1975, American H. A. Crosby Forbes' *Chinese Export Silver* was published, and the truth was revealed: originally, these very special utensils came from ancient China."[58] Indeed, a team of curators and collectors based in Massachusetts, led by Forbes, published the first study on the silverwares. Their forgotten history seemed to coincide with China's retreat from engagement with much of the United States and Western Europe during the Cold War. Around the time of President Richard Nixon's visit to China and the softening of Sino–American diplomatic estrangement in 1972, the Forbes team began publicizing their research on Chinese silverwares made for Anglo-American markets found in New England collections.

In this section, I argue that Wang and the exhibition organizers chose to use the translated Forbes term "Chinese export silverwares" because it offered a transcultural lineage of collecting for the objects. By interrogating the terms of their unearthing through a change in recognition—from silverwares produced by Western craftsmen to Chinese craftsmen—I will consider the effects of their so-called rediscovery. After exploring how aspects of the objects' design led to their camouflage in American and British collections, I will consider how the use of the translated term "Chinese export silverwares" allowed the objects to be interpreted within a China-centered history of the treaty port era. Emphasizing their twentieth-century American reception history was an additional means of eliding more historically sensitive readings.

Many early nineteenth-century Chinese silverwares were modeled after English forms, following the taste of British and American buyers. Their seamless replication clouded their production history. Unlike the treaty-port silverwares that advertised their Chinese connections through design, many silverwares made prior were nearly indistinguishable from silverwares made within Anglo-American markets, aside from minute construction details. In producing such objects, Chinese silversmiths and retailers took advantage of the assumptions of their buyers about signs of quality. Every silver object to be sold in England had to be assayed by the goldsmiths' guild, and its alloy certified to contain 92.5 percent silver. Thereafter it was struck with a set of five stamps, or hallmarks. In the terminology of silver collectors, marks applied to silverwares that mimic this set of impressions are known as "pseudo hallmarks."

58 Original Chinese: "直到1975年, 美国人克罗斯比。福布斯 (H. A. Crosby Forbes) 的《中国外销银器》一书出版, 才使真相浮出水面一原来这些颇具特色的器物来自古老的中国." The English translation cites the Forbes text, but does not mention H. A. Crosby Forbes by name.

They were common throughout colonial silverware industries producing for English markets in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as those that developed in South Africa, Canada, the Caribbean, and Australia.[59] In the Chinese case, pseudo hallmarks were used regularly, such that many of the initial or retailer's marks can be linked to known Chinese workshops, retail shops, and exporters.[60] By contrast, imitated sovereign, duty, and date marks are more unevenly used, and likely have no informational value. Unlike the British hallmarking system, Chinese pseudo-hallmarking was not under the jurisdiction of any regulating organization, nor was it enforced by threat of punitive measures—aside from those incurred through the violation of English law if imported.

Besides close resemblance to wares made for other Anglo markets from a design perspective, a full or partial pseudo hallmark carried the valence of a known guarantor of value and legitimacy as "English" or even "American." One example of a set of pseudo hallmarks from an early-nineteenth-century tea service can be connected to the Guangzhou retailer Wongshing, as indicated through a "W" mark appearing second from the left (Fig. 5). The lion to the left of the "W" imitates the sterling mark that certifies that the ware has been assayed at the standard. The mark to the right of the "W," a figure wearing a crown (or perhaps in this case, a Western man wearing a brimmed hat), is patterned after the crowned leopard's head, which was the London Assay Office town mark. The mark to the far right is an indistinct rendering of the sovereign's head, which indicated the payment of duty. The set of pseudo hallmarks is missing any imitation date-letter mark. Until the Forbes catalogue and subsequent research, the initial mark was often thought to reference American or British retailers or makers. For example, in American museums, objects bearing the "CS" mark of the Guangzhou retailer Cumshing were commonly attributed to the late eighteenth-century American maker Godfrey Shiving, who used a "GS" initial mark.[61] Thus, along with designs that seamlessly imitated similar objects produced by English silversmiths and their Anglo adherents, attributions to English and American makers were compelling obstructions to Chinese identification.

The Forbes catalogue and related publications reidentified many objects in both public and private collections as Chinese, and therefore part of

59 Glanville, *Silver in England*, 163–164.

60 Recent catalogues of Chinese export silver marks include Chen, *Zhongguo yinlou yu yinqi*, and Adrien von Fersht, *Chinese Export Silver 1785–1940: The Definitive Collectors' Guide*, 4th ed. (Glasgow: Self-published, 2015), accessed March 17, 2018, http://chinese-export-silver.com/catalogue-of-makers-marks/.

61 Forbes, *Chinese Export Silver*, 74.

Fig. 5: *Detail of Wongshing retail mark and pseudo hallmarks on Chinese export silver teapot, early nineteenth century. National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.*

the new classification "Chinese export silverwares." Further, the publication solidified the use of the term and its definition in American and English collecting and museum circles. The team that published the catalogue was led by H. A. Crosby Forbes, a historian and curator. Founder of the Museum of the American China Trade in Milton, Massachusetts, he was a descendant of merchants involved in the nineteenth-century American commodities trade with China.[62] Forbes had inherited silver made for American merchant Robert Bennet Forbes and his wife stamped by the Guangzhou-based retailer Khecheong; his interest in the subject developed when he began investigating the possibility that silverwares that had descended in New England merchant families like his own were not what they seemed upon closer inspection.[63] Yet, as Libby Chan has written, from the publication of the Forbes catalogue up until around the time of the mainland and Hong Kong *Silver Age* exhibitions, the objects have

62 "About," Forbes House Museum online, accessed August 8, 2018, http://www.forbeshousemuseum.org/history/.

63 Peabody Essex Museum, Philips Library, H. A. Crosby Forbes research files. Also see Forbes, *Chinese Export Silver*, 8–9.

received scant further academic study, and remain obscure outside collecting communities.[64] Recent attention from Chinese collectors has renewed interest in the objects, the implications of which I will address in the next section on the "return" of silverwares to the mainland as part of the recuperation of cultural heritage lost during the "century of humiliation."[65]

The Silver Age organizers connected the objects in the exhibition to the above-described narrative of recuperation through the selection and translation of the term *zhongguo waixiao yinqi* "Chinese export silverwares." John Devereux Kernan and Hong Kong Maritime Museum curator Libby Chan have raised several issues with the term. One of the co-authors of the 1975 catalogue *Chinese Export Silver, 1785–1885*, Kernan later wrote that he preferred "China trade silver" instead. He maintained the continuity of the term selected in compromise with Forbes, because by then it was "becoming ever more current."[66] While every word in the phrase is contestable at some level, the primary question has been with the word "export." The word implies that the objects were made specifically for (Western) foreign markets and sent abroad for retail. It elides the possibility that the wares were consumed locally by non-Chinese consumers, and also purchased by Chinese domestic consumers.[67] Further, it obscures export markets in East and Southeast Asia, as well as objects made by the Chinese diaspora in locations stretching from Indonesia to the Philippines. Other potential terms would have placed it in different historical and cultural frameworks.

Chinese-language alternatives are numerous. Period advertisements for silverwares catering to a Western clientele used a different set of terms to describe the objects. Around 1918, Luen Wo advertised the sale of *yangzhuang jinyin shoushi* 洋装金银首饰, or "Western-style" gold and silver jewelry, a prevalent term at the time.[68] Yet another term used in period advertisements was *xishi* 西式, also meaning "Western style."[69] In the 1940s, Hong Kong retailer Tai Sang advertised for *Zhongxi canju* 中西餐具, or tablewares that combine Chinese and Western elements.[70] In contemporary newspaper and magazine articles on the silverwares, periodizing terms

64 Chan, "Crossing the Oceans," 152.

65 Auction houses and dealers have been actively developing new markets; for example, see Waddell, "Chinese Export Silver—A Guide for New Collectors."

66 Kernan, *Chait Collection*, 9.

67 Kernan, *Chait Collection*, 9.

68 Chen, *Zhongguo yinlou yu yinqi*, 5:102.

69 Chen, *Zhongguo yinlou yu yinqi*, 5:4.

70 Chen, *Zhongguo yinlou yu yinqi*, 5:146.

such as *jindai yinqi* 近代银器, or "modern silverwares," are used. The term counters the emphasis on Western buyers of "export" wares; the collector Zhao Su 召素 has written that the term includes objects made by private silver workshops and stores for both foreign export and domestic markets.[71] The word *jindai* generally describes the period from the beginning of the First Opium War in 1839 to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, but it can also extend to the end of the Qing dynasty. A 2015 exhibition of silverwares and jewelry at the Zhejiang Provincial Museum in Hangzhou, titled *Luxury of Gold and Silver—A Galaxy of Gold and Silver Wares Collected by San Duo Jiu Ru* included a small selection of export silverwares in its two-volume catalogue, which it described along with objects for domestic markets as *Qing zhi Minguo yinqi* 清至民国银器, or "Qing-to-Republican period silverwares."[72] In 2016, a Ningbo Chinese Harbor Museum curator published a short article on the examples of Chinese export silverwares in the museum's collection, using the term *Qingdai waixiao yinqi* 清代外销银器, or "Qing-period export silverwares."[73]

Forty years after the publication of the Forbes catalogue, exhibition organizers chose not to re-articulate the exhibited objects within a Chinese-specific history of gold and silverwares. Besides any of the terms listed above, they might have chosen "late Qing and early Republican non-official silverwares" or "Anglo-Chinese silverwares."[74] Instead, the objects were framed within a well-established lineage invoked by overseas collectors and curators, one that emphasized the transcultural mobilities of the objects. In *The Silver Age*, the Forbes term "Chinese export silverware" maintained a link to the modern nation of China over the temporal specificity of more endogenous terms. It also retained the indication toward western European and American markets as opposed to Asian or domestic markets. Finally, it aligned *The Silver Age* objects with a transcultural collecting lineage. Critical to the mythology of objects is the near-archeological nature of their rediscovery, when origins obscured by Western assumptions and classification systems were brought to light. In other words, the

71 Zhao Su 召素 "Zhongguo jindai yinqi yu jinyinye (yi) 中国近代银器与金银业（一） [Chinese modern silverwares and gold and silver industry I]," *Yishupin* 艺术品 3 (2015): 64.

72 Chen Hao 陈浩, *Jinshe yinhua* 金奢银华 [Luxury of gold and silver], vol. 1 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 2015), unpaginated.

73 Chen Weili, "Ningbo Zhongguo gangkou bowuguan Qingdai waixiao yinqi 宁波中国港口博物馆清代外销银器 [Ningbo Chinese Maritime Museum Qing period export silverwares]," *Dongfang shoucang* 东方收藏 6 (2016): 47–49.

74 James Broadbent used the term "Anglo-Chinese" to describe the silverwares produced in China in the British taste in the early nineteenth-century; see James Broadbent, Suzanne Rickard, and Margaret Steven, *India, China, Australia: Trade and Society, 1788–1850* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 2003), 124.

forgotten period in the history of Chinese export silverwares as such was a critical aspect in contextualizing their contemporary reemergence as art objects. The gap between the decline of the industry, identified by the mainland show as the Republican period, and their reidentification about fifty years later, relieved Chinese museum visitors of the responsibility of their social and political history in that period. Not only did it suspend half of the century of humiliation from the reception history of the objects, it also excised the culturally sensitive Mao period.[75] Closer scrutiny, particularly within a nationalist-ideological lens, might have required the hardening of terms by which the objects were defined as the material effects of treaty port incursions. But as they were essentially re-discovered just before post-socialist liberalization started in 1978, it was as if they, along with New China, were both newly visible in an international context.

The Silver Age galleries not only positioned the objects within a discovery narrative, but they also provided visitors with a second experience of discovery; namely, upon entering the exhibition, visitors were exposed to a new category of Chinese fine craft, still-extant in previously unknown quantities. As a Liaoning provincial paper pitched the exhibition: "Everyone knows that ancient Chinese porcelains were hot commodities in Europe, but did you know? Two hundred years ago, Chinese silverwares were also treasured by European elites."[76] Thus, in addition to their claims of technical finesse and design ingenuity, export silverwares in the sheer abundance of their survival overseas represented a cache of late Qing craftwork previously unavailable to public knowledge and scholarly understanding. As the exhibition prefatory text related, "In the history of the development of Chinese silverwares, late period export silverwares continuously were not recognized. The quantity of this type of wares was limited, as well as dispersed among Western elites, and so for a time were covered in dust by history […]." The return of the silverwares to the mainland by collectors, which I will discuss in the next section, was thus a conduit through which an overlooked aspect of Chinese craft history was reinstated into the historical record.

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75 As Denton has written, the historical narrative of Shanghai constructed by the Shanghai Municipal History Museum also skips over the Mao era in order to strategically create echoes of the present in particular periods and interpretations of the past: "That the Republican era is represented as largely devoid of class suffering is a reflection of the ideological emphasis on social harmony in the present, a rhetorical strategy facility by skipping over the Mao era, with its violent history of class struggle," *Exhibiting the Past*, 92.

76 Original Chinese: "中国古代瓷器热销欧洲人尽皆知，但是你知道吗，中国银器在200年前也曾经因为工艺精湛而为欧洲贵族所宠爱." See Gao Wei 高巍, "'Liuyang' 200 nian waixiao yinqi Liaocheng shouzhan '留洋' 200年 外销银器沈城首展 ['Study abroad' 200 years: Export silverwares are main exhibition at Shenyang]," *Huashang chenbao* 华商晨报, accessed February 7, 2018, http://liaoning.nen.com.cn/system/2018/02/07/020360415.shtml.

Moreover, the exhibition posited the silverwares as cultural and technological achievements, perhaps even as the height of Chinese craftsmanship in gold and silver. That foreign museums, owners, and collectors believed the objects to be American or English is another demonstration of the consummate ability of Chinese silversmiths. In this narrative, not only did Chinese craftsmen transform native handicrafts, such as porcelain, into export products intensively sought after by Europeans, but they could also produce English silverwares at such a high level that they were taken by English viewers and owners to be English. Repeatedly, the creativity and enterprise of Chinese artisan was the essential lesson learned from the material evidence of Chinese export silverwares.

As Paul Cohen has argued, "China-centered" approaches to history track continuities across nineteenth-century history, when foreign relations often appear as the most determinative factors in Chinese history. The approach rejects Western action as the primary force driving change in China, and also rejects China's passivity as its defining characteristic. The Forbes "discovery" showed that Chinese metalworking existed prior to the opening of the treaty ports. Far from those skills "grinding to a halt in 1800 or 1840 and being preempted or displaced by the West," the objects displayed in *The Silver Age* are evidence that they flourished.[77] Chinese export silverwares have received market and state sanction, and even museum canonization, due to the ways in which they can invoke official histories of "foreign impact" while offering a China-centered alternative.[78] In embracing the craftsmanship of Chinese export silverwares as their most important attribute across the nineteenth century, Chinese craftsmen, instead of the Western residents for whom they were made, are cast as the "measure of significance." Further, their second "rediscovery" in post-socialist China through *The Silver Age* is the result of their prior discovery in a foreign context. As I address in the next section, key to the cultural claims of these objects was the means through which the ambivalent material of silver—so closely connected to national disgrace—can be reclaimed through the circuits and narratives of cultural heritage.

77 Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 154.

78 "Foreign impact and Chinese response" is the classic and often-glossed formulation of Opium War history, as famously formulated by American historian John Fairbank in *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of Treaty Ports, 1842–1854* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964). Paul Cohen has argued for a "China-centered" history of China, which gives Chinese actors agency in the late Qing period. Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Global-historical politics: "Silver Age" vs. "Maritime Silk Road"

The "Silver Age" of the exhibition's title had two sets of possible associations for visitors. It referred to a "peak" of creative production in the Chinese silversmithing industry. It also connoted a period of economic prosperity within a silver-based economy. The flourishing last century of the Ming dynasty, from 1550 to 1650, is often cast as China's "silver age" in both economic history and political-historical recounting.[79] Economic historians have argued that, since the beginning of the Manila galleon trade through the Philippines, China was the primary destination for the Spanish-minted silver coins, received in exchange for silks, porcelain, gold, and other goods.[80] While Europe used gold as its high-value exchange currency, silver circulated by fineness and weight in the Chinese domestic economy. Relying on a two-tiered, bimetallic currency system, the imperial government minted copper coins, but allowed the market to determine the value of silver.[81] The silver trade brought Chinese society into increasing entanglement with the world economy; moreover, monetization spurred domestic consumption.[82] Thus, a period notable for its circulating wealth due to vast quantities of imported silver was invoked as the temporal context for Chinese export silverwares in the exhibition.

It was an uneasy choice from the standpoint of historical and economic synchrony, as the treaty port era of 1842 to 1911 is studied and remembered as a period of Chinese silver loss rather than prosperity and flow. Additionally, the latter is a period of exchange often connected to the geographical imaginary of the "Maritime Silk Road," or *haishang sichou zhi lu* 海上丝绸 之路. Both constructs, invoked frequently in conversations

79 Richard von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000–1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 113–142. For silver imports in modern China, also see William Atwell, "Ming China and the Emerging World Economy, c. 1470–1650," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 8.2, ed. Denis C. Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 376–416; Takeshi Hamashita, "Silver in Regional Economies and the World Economy: East Asia in the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries," trans. J. P. McDermott, in *China, East Asia and the Global Economy: Regional and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Linda Grove and Mark Selden (New York: Routledge, 2008), 39–56; Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giráldez, "Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 2 (2002): 391–427.

80 Flynn and Giráldez, "Cycles of Silver." See also Man-houng Lin, *China Upside Down: Currency, Society, and Ideologies, 1808–1856* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center and Harvard University Press, 2006), xxiii–26.

81 Atwell, "Ming China," 400–403.

82 Atwell, "Ming China," 416. For a cultural history of consumption during the Ming and the moral anxieties that were the result, see Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

about cultural heritage, are contemporary Marxian ideological arguments on a global scale. They serve as historical maps for rebuilding Chinese cultural prominence on the basis of economic investment and transportation networks. In this section, I will consider how Chinese export silverwares and related objects have been positioned in debates about cultural heritage and craft history. First, I will examine how exhibition organizers argued for the inclusion of export silverwares in the large-scale "return" of cultural artifacts to mainland China through private collecting. After addressing how the powerful "Silk Road" historical imaginary has been invoked in cultural heritage contexts, I will argue that due to the controversial history of the treaty port period, the use of the "Maritime Silk Road" was less appropriate than that of the historically inconsistent "Silver Age." Both positioned China within a global context, yet the "Silver Age" was used to translate the objects to museum visitors as a form of material return. The objects thus performed as a type of material reparation for the "century of humiliation."

The Silver Age exhibition texts and accompanying media posed the collecting of exported silverwares, as well as their heightened profile through exhibition and research, as a component of the "return of overseas cultural artifacts," or *haiwai wenwu huiliu* 海外文物回流. The movement is a mass-scale repatriation of Chinese art objects and material culture that began about twenty years ago in parallel with China's economic rise.[83] Politically invested by the CCP, the overseas dispersion of cultural objects is often constructed as an injustice carried out by foreign imperialists during the century of national humiliation. According to this story, Chinese cultural heritage was illicitly taken out of China, or sold by unscrupulous dealers to clients overseas. Thus, the recovery of cultural artifacts, most prominently hand-scroll paintings, ceramics, and the objects looted in 1860 from the imperial collections at the Yuanmingyuan garden, is lauded as a patriotic enterprise.[84]

83 Wang, *Baiyin shidai*, 1. For a predictive analysis of China's now widely acknowledged position of global power, see Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 2012).

84 For discussion of the recent cultural repatriation movement, see "Haiwai wenwu huiliu shi yishu shichang de datou suozai 海外文物回流是艺术市场的大头所在 [Overseas cultural artifacts return flow is the art market's primary essence]," Sina.com.cn, accessed October 11, 2017, http://collection.sina.com.cn/auction/hqgc/2017-10-11/doc-ifymrcmn0186848.shtml; Andrew Jacobs, "China Hunts for Art Treasures in U.S. Museums," *New York Times*, accessed December 16, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/17/world/asia/17china.html; Karl E. Meyer, "The Chinese Want Their Art Back," *New York Times Sunday Review*, accessed June 21, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/the-chinese-want-their-art-back.html. On looting, see James Hevia, "Looting Beijing: 1860, 1900," in *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*, ed. Lydia H. Liu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 192–213.

The Yuanmingyuan and its estranged objects have been the intensive focus of Chinese political rancor, incited by the rhetoric of national humiliation. The site was restored into a public park and gardens, but the ruins of the former imperial residences remain as tall piles of artfully landscaped rubble, memorials to the violence of British and French troops. James Hevia has called the park a "site of memory" in its refusal to allow visitors to forget past conflict through the reminders of willful, intransigent materiality.[85] In one media flashpoint, three bronze Zodiac animal heads taken from the site caused public outcry when they were brought to sale at auction in 2000 in Hong Kong.[86] As Annetta Fotopoulos has argued, the Zodiac heads were defined as symbols of Chinese nationhood and victimization specifically by drawing on the language, legitimization, and global platform provided by cultural heritage discourse.[87] According to Fotopoulos, the return of the Zodiac heads to Chinese soil was less central to the Chinese nationalistic cause than the collective, internationally visible effort to rally for the recognition that reparations are deserved for past violations.[88] The objects allowed conversations about debts owed to the Chinese people to be moved from the local sites of Chinese memory to the international realms of the global art market and the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

Though their status as Chinese cultural heritage has been contested, artworks such as the Zodiac heads have traceable connections to the pillaging of the former imperial gardens by French and British troops. Looting is inextricable from their history of transaction, and from their movement overseas. By comparison, the assertion that Chinese export silverwares are part of the "return of overseas cultural artifacts" movement is more tenuous. The wares were produced for sale, in many cases, to non-Chinese consumers who took them abroad as private property. Yet the phrasing of "return" is consistent with how the objects have been marketed by online retailers to Chinese buyers. Product listings on Alibaba online retail giants Mall and

85 James Hevia, "The Afterlives of a Ruin: Yuanmingyuan in China and the West," in *Collecting and Displaying China's "Summer Palace" in the West: The Yuanmingyuan in Britain and France*, ed. Louise Tythacott (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2018), 26. This edited anthology is the latest contribution to the voluminous English-language scholarship on the Yuanmingyuan, its looted artifacts, and national memoryscapes; see for example Haiyan Lee, "The Ruins of Yuanmingyuan: Or, How to Enjoy a National Wound," *Modern China* 35, no. 2 (March 2009): 155–190.

86 For the cultural heritage controversy and responses by contemporary artists, see Patricia Yu, "Making Lost Heads Speak: The Yuanming Yuan Zodiac Animals and their 'Analog' Resurrection," undated unpublished manuscript.

87 Annetta Fotopoulos, "Understanding the Zodiac Saga in China: World Cultural Heritage, National Humiliation, and Evolving Narratives," *Modern China* 41, no. 6 (November 2015): 621.

88 Fotopoulos, "Understanding the Zodiac Saga," 622–623.

Taobao have described objects one might identify as Chinese export silverwares as "silverwares returned from overseas," or *haiwai huiliu yinqi* 海外回流银. A search for this phrase on TMall, where shops are required to register and thus the risk of buying fakes is purportedly reduced, yielded over 560 results, which ranged in dating from the Ming to Republican periods. While it is impossible to know how many of the wares had any legitimacy as authentic objects, many of them resembled the objects exhibited in *The Silver Age* exhibition from the perspective of their forms, designs, and dating.[89] The retailers claimed for them a shared provenance with other Chinese objects that were "lost" and thus preserved overseas during the turbulence of the intervening hundred-and-fifty years, through the Taiping Rebellion, the Cultural Revolution, or the instant liquidation of the smelters' furnace that can happen at any time.

The reclamation of objects that left the mainland during the century of humiliation through the purchasing power of private Chinese collectors and buyers might be viewed as a signal of China's reemergence as a prominent player in the global economy. Thus, in terms of their role within the battle over Chinese heritage, *The Silver Age* objects might be first viewed from the perspective of their material, rather than their Chinese-Western hybrid form. Lieutenant Haupt's compote along with the other silverwares in *The Silver Age* are thus not only artifacts of exterritoriality, but might be viewed as the material vestiges of silver "drain" from China to the West during the century of national humiliation. Perhaps the most critical factor in understanding the position of Chinese export silverwares in Chinese state museums is through their transformability of silverwares into economic materials, in the literal and physical return of estranged wealth.

Historians have argued that China entered a period of economic turmoil in the nineteenth century, starting with the "Daoguang Depression," named after the emperor who ruled from 1820 to 1850, which coincided with the political and social upheavals of the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion of 1851 to 1864. As Richard von Glahn has written, it is the "sharp contrast between the 'prosperous age' (*shengshi* 盛世)—as many contemporaries described it—of the eighteenth century" and the decline of the nineteenth century that has "long compelled scholars to ask what forces had brought about such a drastic change in China's fortunes" at the end of the imperial era.[90] There was little governmental regulation of the domestic value of silver. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the

89 Search conducted February 3, 2019.

90 Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 349.

Chinese economy was uniquely susceptible to price fluctuations in the global silver market, as well as volatility and shifts in commodity flows. A series of silver drains to Europe and the United States occurred, first during the Opium Wars of the 1840s, and more recently during 1930s changes in American silver policy.

Most of the so-called "silver drain" centered around the triangular system of trade that the British adopted in selling opium, in order to avoid the considerable risk of transporting large shipments of Spanish silver dollars to China. The British East India Company sold licenses to private "country traders" to transport opium from India to China, where they sold the drug for silver. They deposited the silver with British agents, who gave them letters of credit.[91] Thus in the nineteenth century, relatively little silver was brought to China. As the demand for opium eclipsed the export of Chinese goods, anxiety about the currency supply rose among Chinese officials and intellectuals. The Qing scholar Liang Tingnan 梁廷枏 wrote in the 1850s, "At the very beginning, silver dollars were used to buy Chinese goods. Now, all the silver has been taken back. At the beginning, [foreign merchants] collected only silver dollars; today, they also collect silver ingots. At the very beginning, only British silver did not come; today, the silver of the United States and country traders does not come."[92] China's wealth in the form of circulating commodity currency had vanished in opium smoke. The dependence of the Chinese economy on foreign silver coins entered into nineteenth-century discussions among statecraft scholar-officials on national sovereignty. While scholars were split over the question of whether the state should intervene in the currency system, Man-houng Lin has written that both sides railed against the state's relinquishing of power over its own monetary system due to the use of foreign currency; in the words of one statecraft scholar, "silver is controlled by cunning merchants abroad."[93]

Following the historical intersections of silver with national shame, silver in the form of money is indelibly associated with opium consumption, foreign intervention, and the loss of self-sovereignty. The linkage between the perception of overseas control of the silver supply and the silver drain was consolidated by the large indemnity that the Chinese state was forced to pay to the British state after the First Opium War.[94] The silver drains are etched in nationalist memories of the period. Anecdotally, present-day reference to

91 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 130.

92 Liang Tingnan 梁廷枏, *Yifen wenji* 夷氛聞記 (Beijing: Zhongua shuju, 1959), 1.11b. As quoted in Lin, *China Upside Down*, 75.

93 Lin, *China Upside Down*, 210.

94 Von Glahn, *The Economic History of China*, 374.

silver exports can raise the nationalist specter of past "silver crises," attributed in different instances to Euro-American trade imperialism and currency manipulation.[95]

The material return of fugitive wealth, albeit in the "Western" forms of souvenir bowls, tea sets, salt cellars, toast racks, and cruet stands, could be seen to operate as a form of historical restitution, alongside other aspects of the "return of overseas artifacts." The "Silver Age" as a historical construct powerfully signaled China's past prosperity and position in the global economy through the medium of silver. While discussions about formerly looted Yuanmingyuan artifacts broadcast Chinese suffering into global spaces, Chinese export silverwares offer the possibility of a parallel, China-centered narrative about cultural heritage, foregrounding the confluence of historical craft technique and modern adaptability. Instead of another story of humiliation, the silverwares offer an alternative account of Chinese triumph over imperialists through design. Further, framed within a Western category of decorative arts as a global category of research and collecting, the legibility of their value as fine craft objects can likewise be global, not just limited to Chinese audiences. Aside from their aesthetic value, the objects have evidential value; they serve as proof for an outward-looking, as opposed to hermetic, Chinese past, particularly when it comes to its overseas trade relations.

Finally, the private collector might see in silverwares the same value that formed the rationale of the English hallmarking system; namely, silverwares are statements of wealth, but they are also easily liquidized if necessary. Through invoking the *haiwai huiliu*, a private act of consumption was less straightforwardly one for private enrichment, but rather a collective effort to restore the treasure of the nation. The exhibition of Chinese export silverwares does not overwrite or nullify the Chinese heritage sites dedicated to preserving the memory of past periods of foreign imperialism. A China-centered narrative of the treaty port era can coexist alongside the deep wells of nationalist indignation gathered around objects such as the articles looted from the Yuanmingyuan imperial collections. In the collective theater of Chinese cultural heritage exhibition, and in a context of constant policy re-articulation, they work simultaneously, if contradictorily.

Yet, it is remarkable that the exhibition elided the most powerful metaphor at play in the Chinese cultural heritage industry at the time of *The Silver Age*'s organization, the political-historical imaginary of the Silk Road and

95 For a Chinese-nationalist perspective on the damaging effects of 1930s US silver policy, see "Effort Against Silver Outflow During the World Silver Market Fluctuation (1933–1935)," Bank of China website, accessed July 30, 2018, http://www.boc.cn/en/aboutboc/ab7/200809/t20080926_1601869.html.

its littoral extension, the "Maritime Silk Road."[96] In 2013, at forums in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, Xi Jinping outlined the CCP's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or *yidai yilu* 一帶一路. From the start, the CCP has positioned the initiative as a "Twenty-first Century New Silk Road."[97] An ambitious foreign policy platform that aims to unite the Eurasian continent through Chinese investment and trade, as of 2018, it had garnered the partnership of over seventy countries, many of which have committed to projects funded by Chinese policy banks.[98] As Xi has frequently reiterated in his speeches on the initiative, it is patterned on the ideological-historical imaginary of the Silk Road: Central Asian caravan routes and Southeast Asian trading ports that supposedly networked ancient China to India, East Africa, and Europe. From the start, the initiative has been predicated on two branches: the overland "Silk Road Economic Belt" (*sichou zhi lu jingji dai* 丝绸之路经济带) and the "Maritime Silk Road."

In line with the politicization of objects as evidence for state narratives in the Chinese museum, cultural heritage has played an integral role in buttressing the agendas of the BRI. At the 2017 opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, Xi began his speech by citing particular metal objects in Chinese museums as historical evidence for the "Silk Road spirit" of "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit":

> Over 2,000 years ago, our ancestors, trekking across vast steppes and deserts, opened the transcontinental passage connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa, known today as the Silk Road. Our ancestors, navigating rough seas, created sea routes linking the East with the West, namely, the maritime Silk Road. These ancient silk routes opened windows of friendly engagement among nations, adding a splendid chapter to the history of human

96 The concept of the "Silk Road" was first posited by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in the 1870s; see Tamara Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," *Critical Inquiry* 40 (Autumn 2013): 196. While Richthofen mentioned a "Maritime Silk Road," the first full elaboration has been attributed to French archeologist and sinologist Edouard Chavanne; see Yaguang Zhang, Hui Zhang, and Chang Luo, "The Belt and Road Initiative in the Voice of the New Era," in *Regional Mutual Benefit and Win-win under the Double Circulation of Global Value*, ed. Wei Liu and Hui Zhang (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2019), 3.

97 He Fan, Zhu He, Zhang Qian, "Construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road: Present Situation, Opportunities, Problems, and Solutions," trans. Wu Lingwei, *Dangdai shehui kexue* 3 (2018): 21–22.

98 Terry Mobley, "The Belt and Road Initiative," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 57; Jonathan E. Hillman, "How Big Is China's Belt and Road?," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 3, 2018, accessed November 15, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-big-chinas-belt-and-road.

> progress. The […] "gilt bronze silkworm" displayed at China's Shaanxi History Museum and the Belitung shipwreck discovered in Indonesia bear witness to this exciting period of history.[99]

A bronze silkworm from the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) served as material proof for the importance of the overland silk trade, during an early imperial period that is critical to the founding of Han Chinese identity. Not only were the Eastern and Western Han dynasties notable for their military, cultural, and technological accomplishments, but they controlled trade routes into Central Asia and reportedly received diplomatic envoys from Rome.[100] Meanwhile, a group of over thirty Tang dynasty (AD 618–907) gold and silverwares recovered through marine excavation of a sunken ship at Belitung Island in Indonesia revealed that such objects were potentially destined for trade in Southeast Asia.[101] Due to the quality of manufacture and their maritime provenance, François Louis has described them as "among the most important discoveries of Tang gold and silver ever made."[102] Thus, even at international economic policy events, Chinese leaders have drawn on well-known examples of cultural artifacts to provide models from the past for present-day global economic exchange and benevolent cultural cooperation.

As Tamara Chin has noted, the overland diplomacy and trade of a "Silk Road" has provided a "template for modern international commerce" as well as a "condition or strategy for geopolitical thought and action."[103] It allowed for an idealized utopic formation through vast, flowing networks of peaceful, cross-cultural exchange. According to Chin, it recast the past image of China into an "open" empire. In its engagement with the world, the vision counteracted one common and powerful narrative about the late Qing Empire, often constructed as an isolated, stagnant, and

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99 "Full Text of President Xi's Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum," Xinhua News, May 14, 2017, accessed November 14, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm.

100 For an overview of the Han dynasty from a material culture standpoint, see Department of Asian Art, "Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hand/hd_hand.htm; for the gilt bronze silk worm, see *Liujin tongcan* 鎏金铜蚕 [Gilt bronze silk worm], Shaanxi History Museum digital catalogue, December 7, 2016, accessed November 12, 2019, http://www.sxhm.com/index.php?ac=article&at=read&did=10497.

101 François Louis, "Metal Objects on the Belitung Shipwreck," in *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*, ed. Regina Krahl, John Guy, J. Keith Wilson, and Julian Raby (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2010), 85–86.

102 Louis, "Metal Objects on the Belitung Shipwreck," 85.

103 Tamara Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road," 195.

backward civilization.[104] Harm Langenkamp argued that the Silk Road has been evoked as an ideal model for east–west cultural exchange by both Chinese and Western entities and institutions following the Cold War. The notion of "collective harmony" has been put toward the "diverging, rather than contrasting, visions" of both neoliberal cosmopolitanism and post-socialist multiethnic nationalism.[105] Before the BRI, Langenkamp wrote that the most well-known Chinese cultural deployment of the Silk Road imaginary was the 1979 ballet *Rain of Flowers Along the Silk Road* (*Silu Huayu* 丝路花雨), in service of the latter agenda. By performing sinicized renderings of ethnic musical traditions, non-Han characters demonstrate their adherence to the homogenizations of "cultural harmony" under Han cultural dominance.[106] As the BRI has developed, initiatives have drawn situationally on the Silk Road imaginary's simultaneous yet divergent rhetoric of cosmopolitanism and multiethnic nationalism. The "Silk Road" has operated capaciously, providing historical continuity for the BRI, appealing to both domestic and international audiences, and implicating non-Han subjects in its Central Asian center.

The harmonious combination of Chinese designs and Western forms posited for Chinese export silverwares would seem to work most strongly as historical evidence for the cultural exchange narratives of the "Maritime Silk Road." Since the BRI was announced, exhibitions and cultural sites in China have increasingly drawn on the cultural-historical template of the terrestrial and maritime Silk Roads. Most directly, a major exhibition of cultural artifacts in 2019 at the National Museum of China in Beijing followed the BRI policy to the letter, with Xi Jinping's 2013 BRI proposal as the acknowledged impetus for the show. The exhibition's English title was *Sharing a Common Future: Exhibition of Treasures from National Museums along the Silk Road*.[107] With the participation of twelve national museums from sites identified on the Silk Road, the exhibition borrowed 234 sets of artifacts, which it displayed in two sections, the Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road, arranged by country. Objects from Kazakh armor, to a silver Russian tea urn, to a carved stone Cambodian Buddha

104 Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*.

105 Harm Langenkamp, "Contested Imaginaries of Collective Harmony: The Poetics and Politics of 'Silk Road' Nostalgia in China and the West," in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, ed. Hong-Lun Yang and Michael Saffle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 260.

106 Langenkamp, "Contested Imaginaries," 255.

107 Chinese title: *Shufang gongxiang: sichou zhi lu guojia bowuguan wenwu jingpin zhan* 殊方共享: 丝绸之路国家博物馆文物精品展 [Distant regions enjoy together: Silk Road national museums exhibition of culture treasures].

espoused the value of "cultural integration," with some museums contributing objects that demonstrated the historical impact of China on material culture both domestic and imported.[108] Moreover, related cultural artifacts produced by late imperial Chinese artisans for foreign trade have been framed by museums within the geographical imaginary of a "Maritime Silk Road." A traveling exhibition on Chinese export crafts was first installed at the China Maritime Museum in Shanghai in 2017. Including about 130 artifacts such as paintings, fans, silverwares, maps, and nineteenth-century nautical instruments, it was explicitly positioned with the "Maritime Silk Road"; an article in the *Shanghai Observer* told visitors that the exhibition would allow them to see, using a Chinese idiom, the "rich display of lights and colors" of the ancient Maritime Silk Road.[109] Additionally, a 2019 exhibition on the history of Chinese silver currency at the Shanghai Museum invoked the "Maritime Silk Road" in historical framing of a section on Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) silver bars recovered from the Nanhai I, the sunken wreck of a Chinese merchant ship.[110]

Moreover, *The Silver Age* might have been aligned with the "Silk Road" imaginary from a Chinese craft history perspective. By describing the treaty-port silverwares industry as a high point of the craft, the exhibition organizers drew an implicit parallel with Tang dynasty silverwares. As He Yunao and Shao Lei have written, the first "peak" *dingfeng* 顶峰 of Chinese gold and silverware production was during the period.[111] On September 9, 2019, *The Silver Age* opened at the Xi'an Museum.[112] As the site of the

108 National Museum of China 国家博物馆, "Shufang gongxiang: sichou zhi lu guojia bowuguan wenwu jingpin zhan 殊方共享: 丝绸之路国家博物馆文物精品展 [Sharing a Common Future: Exhibition of Treasures from National Museums along the Silk Road]," exhibition website, accessed November 14, 2019, http://www.chnmuseum.cn/portals/0/web/zt/20190411sfgx/.

109 Wang Zhiyan 王志彦, "Zhongguo gongjiang wei Yingguo guizu dingzhi de shehu ciqi chang sha yang? Zhege zhanshang neng kandao gudai haishang sichou zhi lu de liuguang yicai 中国工匠为英国贵族定制的奢华瓷器长啥样？这个展上能看到古代海上丝绸之路的流光溢彩 [What did the luxury ceramics that Chinese craftsmen made for English elite look like? At this exhibition you can see the rich display of objects from the ancient Maritime Silk Road]," *Shangguan yinwen*, September 16, 2017, accessed November 14, 2019, https://www.shobserver.com/news/detail?id=65213.

110 Li Liang 郦亮, "Zhechang tezhan jiekai 'baiyin diguo' qianshi jinsheng 这场特展揭开'白银帝国'前世今生 [This special exhibition uncovers and re-enlivens the 'Silver Empire' of the past]," *Qingnianbao* 青年报, April 27, 2019, accessed November 14, 2019, http://www.why.com.cn/epaper/webpc/qnb/html/2019-04/27/content_86884.html.

111 He Yunao 贺云翱 and Shao Lei 邵磊, *Zhongguo jinyinqi* 中国金银器 [Chinese gold and silverwares] (Beijing: Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe, 2008), 127.

112 Dang Tianye 党田野, "Xi'an bowuyuan tuichu 'Baiyin shidai — Zhongguo waixiao yinqi tezhan' 西安博物院推出'白银时代—中国外销银器特展' [Xi'an museum opens 'Silver Age—Special exhibition of Chinese export silverwares']," Sina News. September 29, 2019, accessed November 14, 2019, https://k.sina.com.cn/article_1784473157_6a5ce64502001e21w.html.

ancient capital Chang'an of the Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties, the city and its surrounding areas are rich with archeological treasures. During the Tang dynasty, Chang'an was an important center of economic and cultural exchange with Central and Western Asia; in the modern mapping of the so-called Silk Road, it has been positioned as the eastern endpoint of a network of trade and diplomatic routes that extended across the Eurasian landmass to European cities including Venice.[113] Galleries at the Xi'an Museum, as well as at the Shaanxi History Museum, are dedicated to premodern Chinese gold and silverwares, including many examples of Tang-dynasty silver and gold objects such as cups, bowls, plates, incense holders, and small dragon sculptures.[114] Qi Dongfang and Zhang Jing have written that Tang precious metalwares exhibited characteristics never seen before in Chinese traditional craft objects. The characteristics were often described in craft history as "Western style" (*xifang fengge* 西方风格).[115]

The "West" at this time was not the maritime West of the late imperial period, but instead overland regions to the empire's west. While Chinese craftsmen and laborers had employed gold and silver mining, smelting, and metalworking techniques since the Shang period (1600 to 1046 BC), the technologies were relatively less-developed than those in other media such as bronzes and ceramics.[116] By the mid-eighth century AD, gold and silverwares in the styles of the Sassanian Persian, Byzantine, Roman, and Sogdian empires had been imported via tribute and trade conduits. The techniques and designs of foreign wares spurred demand for similar kinds of luxury goods to be made domestically. Under official patronage, metalworkers in both northern and southern China brought a high level of craftsmanship to the production of innovative forms and designs.[117] Given the claims made in *The Silver Age* about a similar craft renaissance due to the impact of "Western style" on Chinese treaty-port silverwares, the exhibition's Xi'an venue might have solidified connections to the historical-ideological (Maritime) Silk Road.

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113 For example, the UNESCO *Silk Roads* project included points farther east, such as Nara, Japan, and points farther west, such as Paris, in its mapping of Silk Road networks. See "About the Silk Road," *Silk Roads: Dialogue, Diversity & Development*, UNESCO website, accessed November 15, 2019, https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-road.

114 See Xiang De 向德, ed. *Jinhui yude—Xi'an bowuyuan cang jinyinqi yuqi jingcui* 金辉玉德一西安博物院藏金银器玉器精粹 [Brightness of gold, virtue of jade—Selections from the Xi'an Museum collection of gold and silverwares and jades] (Xi'an: Xi'an bowuyuan, 2012).

115 Qi Dongfang 齐东方 and Zhang Jing 张静, "Tangdai jinyin qimin yu xifang wenhua de guanxi 唐代金银器皿与西方文化的关系 [The relationship between Tang dynasty gold and silver vessels and western cultures]," *Kaogu xuebao* 考古学报 2 (1994): 173.

116 He and Lei, *Zhongguo jinyinqi*, 20–23.

117 He and Lei, *Zhongguo jinyinqi*, 128–129; 137. Also see Qi and Zhang, "Tangdai jinyin qimin," 174–188.

Yet the "Maritime Silk Road" and the "Silver Age" have distinct significance and function as constructs. A report on the Chinese silver currency exhibition in the Shanghai newspaper *Youth Daily* positioned them in relation to each other. It explained that China's "Silver Age" "was the inevitable result of international trade during the age of ships. As overseas trade developed along with ship technologies, silver was carried long distances and it became the important linkage and bond for the 'Maritime Silk Road'."[118] An interval where resources were marshaled toward the construction of a maritime trade network, through advanced transportation technology and infrastructure, thus leads to a period of economic plenty. The "Maritime Silk Road" is not just a historical imaginary of peaceful east–west cultural exchange on a foundation of trade. Rather, it is more specifically focused on accumulating marine power in order to regain lost cultural prominence.

While unvoiced, tacit in the historical formulation is the hope that maritime-based development will lead to a third "Silver Age" for contemporary China. In 2017, a research group at Fuzhou University along with the Social Science Academic Press produced a thirteen-volume set of reference books on China's strategy for building maritime power. At a conference at Fuzhou University, the organizers narrated a basic timeline for a new understanding of Chinese history in terms of China's maritime orientation and a "Silver Age." They posited that in Chinese history, there were three periods of development toward the sea, or *xianghai* 向海. The first time was during the Tang dynasty, when people started using market boats for trade. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the support and protection of maritime policies, prohibitions on maritime trade were ended. Thus began the "Silver Age" of the Chinese, and even the global, economy. Following economic liberalization in 1978, a focus on developing economy and culture has led to the third and present orientation toward the sea.[119] A "Silver Age," as defined from the perspective of this set of social scientists, is a period of not only economic prosperity, but one that resuscitates the social flourishing and global cultural dominance of the Tang and the late Ming periods.[120] The contention is shared by *The Silver Age* exhibition through its three levels of object translation in the space of the post-socialist museum.

There is irony in the narrative elisions required for the "Silver Age" to work as the imaginative frame for *The Silver Age*. As the "Maritime Silk Road"

118 Li Liang, "Zhechang tezhan jiekai 'baiyin diguo' qianshi jinsheng."

119 "'Haishang sichou zhi lu yu Zhongguo haiyang qiangguo zhanlüe congshu' chuban《海上丝绸之路与中国海洋强国战略丛书》出版 [*Maritime Silk Road and Chinese National Maritime Power Strategy Series* was published]," *Fujian ribao* 福建日报, September 3, 2017, accessed November 14, 2019, http://fjrb.fjsen.com/fjrb/html/2017-03/09/content_1007702.htm?div=-1.

120 "'Haishang sichou zhi lu Zhongguo haiyang qiangguo zhanlüe congshu' chuban."

has served as a template for harmonious economic collaboration, the lasting connections between the national shame of treaty-port incursions and the "silver drain" have hindered its use in this case. The objects counterintuitively operated more securely within the double meaning of a "Silver Age," as both the return of an economic material and a signal of Chinese innovation. If the intention is to make a case for the inventive capacity of Chinese creators given the proper conditions, then Chinese export silverwares are best presented as works of fine craft in a type of "Silver Age," when creative production met and improved upon demand.

In press accompanying the Xi'an Museum exhibition opening in 2019, *The Silver Age* was consistently couched in the terms that have followed the show around China since its first opening in Changsha: the transcultural designs of the objects, the Forbes revelation in 1975, the large-scale "return," or *huiliu* 回流 of the objects, and the objects' bearing on definitions of a Chinese cultural and economic "Silver Age." I have argued that exhibition organizers carried out a series of strategic translations to position Chinese export silverwares as "evidence" for both a past and future "Silver Age," drawing on the concepts and narratives provided by this set of terms. As transcultural objects, Chinese export silverwares help articulate a new national relationship with past foreign imperialism through present global prominence through their design and their material. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has written, "The radical potential of material culture, of real things […] is the endless possibility of re-reading." [121] Silver has the potential to be viewed as art object or monetary store of value. Silverwares thus have a particular flexibility in attesting to both craft and economic history, as revealed by the Hong Kong Maritime Museum exhibition. But in the mainland *Silver Age* exhibition, the material and design ambivalence of the objects was used to accommodate tensions between competing state narratives.

Returning to the photo of the Shenyang visitor to *The Silver Age*, one might ask what elliptical history lesson she had learned from gazing at the Haupt compote. Narrative compromises made by Chinese state museums in the exhibition of historically complex, and materially ambivalent objects, like Chinese export silverwares, have revealed the contradictions the state has inhabited in cultural heritage discourses. At this point, it has pursued the double strategy of maintaining the emotional resonance of Chinese victimhood at the hands of foreign imperialists, as well as provide the global-historical support for its expansionist projects. Given the post-socialist trajectory of the PRC and the integral supportive position of the museum and cultural heritage industry within its development

121 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 215.

strategies, the state will continue to further refine the political uses of the museum industry. The BRI and its future iterations will likewise continue to rewrite the historical and cultural value placed on objects through their exhibition in state museums. Part of the ongoing debate will be about the definition of Chinese cultural heritage, and its location within global art hierarchies. Whether undertaken by the Chinese state-cultural industry or any other organization, the positioning of transcultural objects within narratives about global history can serve as powerful political statements. Objects, in their material intractability, on one hand put limits on infinite expression. At the same time, their ambivalence opens them up to constant reframing.

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