

Chapter 2

Historical Background

Tangible objects have served both cosmological and political purposes in China since the Zhou dynastic era (approximately 1,000–250 BCE). In order to assert their own legitimacy, rulers typically would display the bronze and jade ritual objects as well as court seals, scrolls, and tax records of either their ancestors or those whom they had defeated. For the same reason, rulers would attempt to monopolize production of these objects (Elliot and Shambaugh 2005: 5–6). What we now know as “heritage objects” were thus originally collected, preserved, and displayed in China for contemporary political purposes, not because they reflected the past per se or for their aesthetic value. Instead, these imperial objects were believed to enable a communicative link with heaven (see Chang 1983). For example, following their conquest of the Song capital of Kaifeng in 1127 AD, the Jurchen, a seminomadic group from Manchuria, looted the imperial warehouses of art, furniture, scrolls, paintings, musical instruments, and even clothing, all of which they transported to their own capital, present-day Beijing, where they established the Jin Dynasty. The Jurchen capital was in turn conquered by the Mongolian leader Genghis Khan in 1234 AD, who named the city Dadu and built a palace on the site of what is now Beihai Park (Elliot and Shambaugh 2005: 24–28). Similarly, when Zhu Yuanzhang, founder of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), overthrew the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), his forces seized control of an imperial collection that contained artifacts dating from the ninth-century Tang. After this, he ordered the destruction of the Yuan palaces in Beijing and transported these artifacts to his new capital at Nanjing, only to have the third Ming Emperor, Zhu Di, shift the capital back to Beijing in 1421, following the construction of the Forbidden City between 1406 and 1420.

This chapter describes the development of archeology, heritage, and museums in China. By way of introduction, we review the purpose and methods of traditional historiography, the cultivation of an interest among elites in the past during the Song, Ming, and Qing eras, the role of cultural heritage in the late Qing and Republican periods, and the place of history and heritage in the civil war between Communists and Nationalists. We also introduce the key concept of *jingdian* (“scenic spot”) and discuss their role in the development of a national class of literati and scholars dating back to at least the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

As these examples show, as each succeeding group overthrew existing rulers, they would seek to capture the material objects of authority, at times destroy the built space of those whom they had defeated, and relocate the center of power. This is a pattern that would continue until the 1911 Revolution, when the new Nationalist government led by the revolutionary hero Dr. Sun Yat-sen moved the capital from Beijing to Nanjing. This also illustrates how what we refer to as “China” has not been a fixed territorial space. Instead, the territory of this entity has shifted with each conquest, expanding and contracting, while the center of power has followed each conqueror. Chinese archeologists have identified as many as 13 different dynastic capitals, ranging from Beijing, Nanjing, and Xian to Datong, Kaifeng, and Luoyang.

This also demonstrates the political importance of material culture in China for thousands of years. Objects from the past were important because they were believed to legitimize new rulers. However, although field archeology is relatively new in China, the study of past dynasties through an analysis of their material artifacts is not, dating back to the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD). What K.C. Chang termed an antiquarian interest in the past can be traced to two key works, the *Kaogutu* (1092) by Lu Dalin (1046–1092) and the *Bogutu* (1107) by Wang Fu (1079–1126). These were catalogues that provided drawings and descriptions of bronze and jade objects from previous eras, including private as well as imperial collections (Chang 1981: 156–158).¹

Similarly, travel as an exercise in experiential learning and enjoyment dates back to at least Confucius (551–479 BCE), who spent much of his adult life traveling between states in search of a just ruler to serve. Tellingly, the roots of the Chinese term for travel (*luyou*) are not in physical exertion and work (*travail*) as in Romance languages but in fun, companionship, and entertainment (Han 2006: 83). Beginning in the late Tang Dynasty (618–907) and continuing during the Song Dynasty, well-to-do literati traveled to famous sites. These sites, variously known as *jingshen* (scenic spots), *fengjing qu* (“wind and scenes”), and *mingshen qu* (famous sites), date as far back as the Qin Dynasty (Nyiri 2006: 7). By the sixteenth century, a canon of such sites had emerged. These were visited to confirm interpretations handed down by Tang and Song era predecessors, primarily through written and visual markers (Strassberg 1994). For example, sites would typically be characterized as resembling animals, people, or other objects and marked by poetry or at times by literal inscriptions carved on rocks. There was little if any focus on personal interpretation; sites were judged on the extent to which they fulfilled and confirmed a shared interpretation: “Views – even in their names – encompassed not only a particular aspect of a scenic spot, but also the appropriate circumstances of viewing, which could include season, time of the day, weather and the spectator’s mood” (Nyiri 2006: 9).

Completely absent from this Chinese approach to travel was any romanticized notion of solitary travel as intrinsically superior. Indeed, the idea of traveling alone in circumstances designed to force the traveler to confront radical differences and alienation from the familiar as a means of gaining new insights has never been part

¹ Lu Dalin has been hailed by state authorities as China’s first anthropologist. In 2010, his tomb, along with those of several relatives, was excavated in Lantian County, near Xian in Shaanxi province (Yang 2010).

of mainstream Chinese norms. This was true for monasteries as well. Pilgrimage destinations such as Mount Wutai (*Wutai Shan*) in Shanxi, Mount Emei (*Emeishan*) in Sichuan, and Yellow Mountain (*Huangshan*) in Anhui provinces were economic, social, and tourist centers and thus part of everyday life (Kieschnick 2003: 186–187). Travel in China today remains overwhelmingly a social activity, undertaken with friends and family, as we discuss in Chap. 6. It also remains focused on *jingshan*. However, what counts as a scenic spot continues to expand: no longer limited to classical sites, the list of national “must-see” destinations now includes classical, early modern, Republican era, civil war, Maoist, and even modern sites such as theme parks and shopping malls.

The emergent interest, particularly during the Song and Ming eras, in studying the past through material cultural and travel remained subservient, however, to a much broader and deeper historiography. The underlying purpose of studying the past throughout Chinese history has been to document proper and improper behavior, identify the just and the unjust, and thereby influence action in the present. The practice of history was not a faithful recounting of facts; it was a moral project. And until the twentieth century, the primary form this took was biographical (Chang 1981: 157). For example, during the Tang era, an official history office was established to document and interpret previous reigns. The intent was not necessarily to establish what really happened or what was “true” but for “bureaucrats to justify the present dynasty’s power and authority” (Fowler 1987: 238).

How does this relate to a sense of national identity? A common view is that identification as “Chinese” is a very new phenomenon and only began to emerge in the years immediately before and following the 1911 Revolution. However, others argue that a key result of the Jin and Mongol conquests between the twelve and fourteenth centuries was an increased consciousness among elites of a civilized self standing in contrast to a suspect not-civilized other. Following the Manchurian invasion and defeat of the Ming rulers in 1644 and the establishment of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), this emergent sense of “Chineseness” was directed against Manchu authorities (Duara 1993: 5). Some scholars go further, arguing that the material record demonstrates a relatively wide geographical space of similitude. K.C. Chang cites the Shang Dynasty (1,766–1,027 BCE) as an example. If the extent of this state is defined by evidence of writing, then the Shang territories were relatively small. If, however, the Shang sphere is defined by archeological discoveries of bronze and pottery, then this state stretched from Liaoning in the north as far south as Hunan (Chang 1977: 640).

Nevertheless, in hindsight, it is clear that one of the key problems faced by Sun Yat-sen and his colleagues in their ethno-nationalist campaign against authorities in the final years of the Qing Dynasty was a noticeable absent of National identity among people. Indeed, most subjects of the Qing Empire did not identify as either “Chinese” or as “Han” but by kin, place, or language ties. This lack of a cohesive ethno-nationalist identity reflected foundational Confucian attributes that classified people not by race, ethnicity, or place of birth but by their degree of cultural achievement. From a Confucian perspective, people were not Chinese or other; they were civilized or other. Anyone could become Chinese by acquiring the language skills

needed to access Confucian texts that in turn instruct in how to be a person capable of cultivating *ren*, the foundational human condition of virtue, benevolence, and proper social behavior. To cultivate *ren* is to cultivate one's human essence and thus to be human(e). Until the late nineteenth century, this Sino-centric world view simply assumed that outsiders, if given an opportunity, would want to be transformed into civilized (e.g., fully human, hence "Chinese") people, since to not be Chinese was by definition, to be inferior (Zhang 1997: 76). Being Chinese was thus a cultural category, not biological or even historical, and was achieved not by dint of birth but through education and self-reflection.

Confronted with this dilemma, a society of people who lacked a national consciousness, Sun Yat-sen's Tong Meng Hui (Chinese United League), the forerunner of the Nationalist Party (KMT), promoted the concept of Han nationality or ethnicity (*minzu*). The first of Sun Yat-sen's "Three Principles of the People" (*Sanmin Zhuyi*) *minzu* was a transliteration of the Japanese neologism *minzokushugi*, which became prevalent in Japan after the Meiji Restoration and connoted racial uniqueness (Tuttle 2005; Zhang 1997). Sun Yat-sen argued that the subjects of the Qing had to be convinced they were not just historically linked to a ethno-national past as "people of the Han" (*Han ren*) but also biologically linked to each other as a "Han race" (*Han minzu*). According to Sun, only after recognizing this would Qing subjects recognize the Qing state as a foreign occupation (Gladney 2004: 13–14). In other words, for a Nationalist revolution to succeed, the foundational Confucian emphasis on the five relationships (*wulun*) had to be broken. Rather than defining themselves according to ties with their spouses, children, parents, friends, and ruler, Qing subjects had to be convinced to identify with other subjects with whom they presumably shared a *zu*, a hazy concept that translates as clan, community, or ethnic group but for Sun's purposes defined one's race (Dikötter 1992: 123). Only when this was achieved would the subjects of the empire see themselves as citizens of a republic (Harrison 2000: 175) (Fig. 2.1).²

Yet in the aftermath of the establishment of the Republic of China (1911–), Dr. Sun called on Han Chinese to transcend their (new) ethno-nationalist conscious and become the leaders of a multiethnic society of Chinese (*zhongguo ren*). This dual emphasis on the Han people as the vanguard of the revolution and a collective advance of all Chinese toward modernization has continued under the Chinese Communist Party, as we discuss in Chap. 4.

While the collecting and archiving of material artifacts have been a part of the historical record in China for more than two millennia, both the scientific search for and public display of objects are a relatively recent practice. The Geological Survey of China was established in 1916. This organization was dominated by Europeans

² Prasenjit Duara (1992) argues that the category of racial difference in fact appeared in China during the reign of the Qing Emperor Qianlong (1735–1796), who led an active campaign to codify Manchurian superiority by dint of birth. Duara also argues that the great Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) was a Nationalist rebellion against Manchu control and led to a Manchu ethnic revival. Other scholars argue that the Taiping Rebellion was a religiously inspired charismatic movement, given that its leader, Hong Xiuquan, claimed to be the brother of Jesus Christ.



Fig. 2.1 Sun Yat-sen, leader of the nationalist movement that established the Republic of China in 1911 (National Museum of China, Beijing)

such as Johan Gunnar Andersson, who led the first archeological excavation of Paleolithic Yangshao sites in Henan province in 1921. However, these early field researchers were trained not in archeology but in geology and paleoanthropology. They consequently emphasized index fossils and comparative analysis across a wide geographical range rather than individual sites (Chang 1981: 164). The founder of scientific archeology in China is generally regarded as Li Chi (1895–1979). Li studied both ethnology and physical anthropology at Harvard before returning to China in 1921. He was the first Chinese scientist to work on a field excavation, joining the Yangshao dig in 1923. He later helped establish the first Archeology Department in China, at Beijing University in 1925, served as the first director of the Central History Museum in 1945, and served as the founding director of the Department of Archeology at National Taiwan University in 1949 (Chang 1981: 165).

The emergence of archeology as a field of study reflected a growing interest among Chinese scholars in empirically based sciences. In 1930, the KMT (Nationalist) government passed a *Law on the Preservation of Ancient Objects*, the country's first regulations of cultural artifacts (Murphy 2004; Zhuang 1989). This was followed in 1931 by the "Statute for the Preservation of Scenic Spots, Points of Historical Importance, and Articles of Historical, Cultural, and Artistic Value" (Gruber 2007: 272).

The country's first museum had been established in Shanghai by French priest Pierre Heude in 1868, followed in 1872 by the founding of the British Royal Asiatic Society, also in Shanghai. The first government museum was opened in 1912 by the

Ministry of Education in Beijing on the grounds of the former Imperial University, and in 1914, the Ministry of the Interior opened the Beijing Ancient Relics Exhibition Hall to display the more than 70,000-piece art collection of the Qing Dynasty royal family. By 1921, the fledgling Republic of China had 13 museums located in Beijing, Hubei, Shandong, Shanxi, Hebei, Jiangsu, Guangdong, and Yunnan (Pao 1966: 22–23). And, following the expulsion of the deposed Emperor Puyi in 1924, the Forbidden City was opened to the public as a museum on October 10, 1925 (Watson 1995: 8). Despite political instability, military conflict among various warlords, a weak central government, and economic problems, the museum industry flourished in Republican China. Indeed, by 1936, shortly before the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), the Republic of China had 77 museums, 56 art galleries, and almost 100 conservatories (Pao 1966: 31). This period also saw the emergence of a nascent tourism industry; in 1922, the *Encyclopedia of Chinese Scenic Spots and Ancient Relics* (*Zhonghua Guangguo Mingsheng Guji Daguan*) was published (Nyiri 2006: 14).

The first formal attempt to categorize the country's material heritage occurred in 1948, shortly before the collapse of the Nationalist government, when professors at Qinghua University issued a list of 450 sites under the title of *A Brief List of Important Architectural Heritages in China*. However, a government project to build a national museum in Nanjing failed, primarily because of the war. Construction began in 1933. Between 1932 and 1936, approximately 20,000 crates of material were shipped from Beijing's Forbidden City to Nanjing for the museum. But before the museum could open, the staff and curators packed the most important objects, divided these into three separate shipments, and followed government ministries to Chongqing in Sichuan province in 1938. They briefly returned to Nanjing in 1946 after the Japanese surrender before following the Guomindang (KMT) into exile on Taiwan in 1948, where this collection became the basis of the National Palace Museum in Taipei, which opened in 1965.

The Palace Museum in turn became a key component of the post-civil war struggle for international status between Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist government on Taiwan and the new People's Republic of China led by Mao Zedong. The KMT government in Taiwan claimed to be the guardians of China's historical record against a radical regime bent on the wholesale destruction of the past, while the CCP government in Beijing depicted the removal of the Nanjing collection to Taiwan as an act of theft (Watson 1995: 11). Heritage, then, even before it was labeled as such, was an important factor in modern Chinese politics much like it had been for centuries before this at times of regime change.

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