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How China and America Can Protect the World's Antiquities

Cracking Down on Illegal Trade

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In 1971, a ping-pong match between the U.S. and Chinese national teams helped [open relations](#) ^[1] between the two countries. Since then, people-to-people diplomacy has been a bright spot in otherwise tense interactions. But civil society engagement has become increasingly challenging. The Chinese government's 2016 law on the [management of foreign NGOs](#) ^[2] restricts many long-standing partnerships that the government now finds politically threatening, such as those that focus on the legal and political systems. Cooperation between the United States and China continues in less politically sensitive arenas, such as emerging global environmental and public health threats, and there are more opportunities here to be seized. When officials from both countries sit down later this week at the first round of the Social and People-to-People Exchange Dialogue—established by U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping at their [Mar-a-Lago summit](#) ^[3] in April—they should look to another important and time-sensitive global challenge: combating the destruction of cultural heritage sites and the looting and trafficking of illegal antiquities.

Throughout much of the war-torn Middle East and other conflict-ridden areas, the treasured remains of ancient civilizations are under threat. In Afghanistan, the Taliban destroyed two fourth- and fifth-century Buddha carvings at Bamiyan; Islamist extremists burned priceless thirteenth-century manuscripts in Timbuktu; and, more recently, the Islamic State (ISIS) devastated the ancient ruins of Palmyra as well as numerous other important historic sites. Alongside the destruction has been massive looting of artifacts from tombs and museums. Such acts erase cultural identity and can thereby contribute to political instability. “Cultural cleansing is a tactic of war, used to destabilize populations and weaken social defenses,” UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova has stated. “The loss of sacred places, libraries, museums and other irreplaceable historic monuments contributes to people in war-torn countries being vulnerable to the appeal of violence and extremism.” Even worse, the looting and illegal trafficking of antiquities serves as a [source of funds](#) ^[4] for further atrocities. According to one report, ISIS is earning millions of dollars annually from selling antiquities from Syria.

The United States and China are well positioned to take on this problem. For one, U.S. and Chinese collectors and auction houses play an important role in fueling the illegal global trade in antiquities. In 2017, for example, the U.S. arts and crafts chain Hobby Lobby was found to have imported an estimated \$11.8 million in illegal Iraqi artifacts. China, in turn, is a significant importer of illegally trafficked art from Libya. (Chinese-flagged cargo ships have also been used to transport looted antiquities.) Further, although not always successful in its efforts, the United States, both through the government and nongovernmental actors, has long been a leader in global efforts to address the illegal antiquities trade. It has strengthened educational efforts for museums and auction houses, as well as enhanced its enforcement domestically by levying tough fines and prison sentences for those involved in illegal antiquities trafficking. China has focused primarily on stemming the looting and trafficking of its own antiquities, but as its role in the broader antiquities market grows, it too must enhance its education and enforcement efforts.

One of the best things countries like the United States and China can do, according to Deborah Lehr, founder of the Antiquities Coalition, is to sign cultural memoranda of understanding with the countries that supply illicit artifacts. These memoranda provide a legal basis for restricting the import of cultural property, require strict documentation of an artifact's provenance, and represent an important symbolic commitment by both countries to fight the import and export of illegal antiquities. Both China and the United States should commit to advancing such agreements with vulnerable countries, as well as with those countries through which looted antiquities travel. Although there is no working estimate of how much of the illegal antiquities trade would be curtailed if the United States and China signed and enforced such bilateral memoranda, their positions as the largest and third-largest markets for art and antiquities globally suggest that it would be significant.

Documenting and preserving the artifacts that currently exist would also help. The Council on Library and Information Resources and the Antiquities Coalition in the United States are both involved in a nascent effort to develop a digital library of Middle Eastern works that would bring "uncatalogued, undescribed, and undocumented collections" online. China could bring valuable experience to bear on such an effort: since 1994, Chinese conservators, along with their international counterparts, have been working to restore, document, and digitize a massive collection of ancient manuscripts discovered in Dunhuang in the Gobi Desert.

The restoration and replication of [cultural heritage sites](#) ^[5] and artifacts is also an area of common interest between the two countries. The California nongovernmental organization CyArk, for example, produces 3-D laser surveys of global monuments. It has done work in Iraq, Jordan, Myanmar, and Pakistan, among others. The surveys are later turned into 3-D models and architectural drawings that can be used for reconstruction. At the same time, Chinese companies are already using 3-D printing to replicate ancient Chinese artifacts held abroad to "bring them back home." Marrying the documentation and surveying abilities of the U.S. firms with the scale and capacity of China's 3-D printing capabilities would be powerful.

Stabilizing and protecting cultural heritage areas threatened by conflict is also an important arena for potential cooperation. As president of the J. Paul Getty Trust, James Cuno has noted that an international response to the destruction and plundering of cultural heritage sites needs to include intervening in conflict zones before damage and destruction have occurred and engaging and supporting local authorities in the protection of sites and heritage. This includes "supporting the policing of the region's political borders to discourage the illicit export and import of cultural heritage artifacts." The United States Committee of the Blue Shield works with the U.S. military to undertake protection of cultural heritage sites and antiquities during armed conflict and natural disasters. But its capacity is limited. China's role as one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping forces—which are often deployed in protection of sites—suggests that Beijing could be a major partner for the Blue Shield and U.S. military.

Cooperation on the issue of cultural heritage and antiquities protection offers the United States and China an important new opportunity to strengthen their relationship. Particularly as China seeks to expand its role on the global stage and exerts more influence in the politics and development of the rest of the world through its Belt and Road Initiative, the illegal trade in antiquities offers a relatively noncontroversial arena for cooperation. Even more important, by pooling the resources and complementary strengths of the United States and China, Trump and Xi could send a powerful message that they are prepared to protect the world's ancient civilizations from wanton destruction and illegal profiteering and that others should join them in the fight.

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