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Final report for the project to research the provenance of cultural heritage in a colonial context and to publish the results, funded by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture

Project title:	“Sensitive Cultural Heritage, China 1889-1949 in Swiss Ethnographic Collections: Boxer War (2023-2024)”
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

a. Brief introduction to the institution carrying out the project

The Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (UZH) is a university social anthropology science museum. With a collection of around 50,000 objects and its own archives, the museum is linked through the directorate to a Chair of Social Anthropology, which is responsible for the museum's scientific orientation. A management committee coordinates the strategic and operational business. Doctoral students receive practical training at the museum through the chair, and teaching is offered. Students are involved in exhibitions, collection work, archive work, research-based teaching projects, etc. through internships, tutorials and specialized training.

b. Brief introduction to the objects to be investigated

As part of the workspace project and the exhibition “Looted Goods? 5 Questions on Objects from China at the End of the Imperial Era”, the provenance of around 80 objects from the period from around 1900 to around 1949 was examined at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich with regard to their origin from looting during the Boxer War. The Boxer War of 1900-1901 was ostensibly directed against the anti-colonial, anti-Christian, anti-modern movement of Boxer warriors (Yihetuan) in northern China. Due to a chain of historical circumstances, about 80% of the city of Beijing was destroyed and an enormous amount of cultural objects were destroyed or looted and appropriated during a year-long release by the Eight Allied Forces. The trauma of the plundering of the Yuanmingyuan Imperial Palace by British and French troops in 1860 is part of the prehistory of the Boxer War. A large number of those Chinese cultural objects also ended up in private hands and in collections worldwide, including Switzerland, e.g. an imperial nephrite sceptre in the Winterthur Nature Museum.

c. Brief summary of the research project and the results

An initial survey of Swiss museums with ethnographic collections revealed general astonishment regarding the preservation of possible looted goods from the Boxer War. The Ethnographic Museum therefore decided to explore the topic in a research-based workspace exhibition together with the Chinese-German provenance researcher Dr Yu Filipiak. The aim was to investigate the provenance of the museum's own Chinese holdings. We submitted an application to the BAK, including for the registration of possibly looted goods from the Boxer War in (ethnographic) museums in Switzerland. The aim was to understand the dimensions of the topic for Switzerland and to provide an initial report on possibly looted goods from the Boxer War in Swiss museums. Herewith we present this report, as well as a list of 191 objects from all those museums we visited or whose collections we inspected online that were either proven to have come from the looting – a minority – or should be examined more closely to clarify their provenance.

As a result, it has been shown that almost all Swiss ethnographic collections hold single objects from the Boxer War that were looted or may have been looted, which entered the collections through purchase, donation, bequests and, in some cases, targeted acquisition. Provenance research on these objects is usually difficult due to a lack of documentation. We found no evidence of direct Swiss involvement in the looting. In Switzerland, a country without colonies and without diplomatic representation in China around 1900, the actors of



the time positioned themselves individually with regard to the Boxer War. There were active efforts to acquire imperial objects in particular, which entered the collections via various channels, including certificates of authenticity. However, there is also evidence of pro-Boxer attitudes in Switzerland, and the fact that Swiss citizens were literally entrusted with cultural property, and how this was done. To our knowledge, this topic of a kind of self-collecting or self-archiving – we assume that Mr. Hüsey and the Chinese mandarin who entrusted him with his official's robe were possibly not an isolated case – has not yet been researched.

WORKING REPORT

a. Initial situation and state of research at the beginning of the project

This report presents the results of one year's research work on the project "Sensitive Cultural Heritage China 1889-1949 in Swiss Ethnographic Collections". The focus of this investigation was on the Boxer War (1900-1901) and the question of the extent to which, and by what means, looted goods from the Boxer War found their way into Swiss (ethnographic) museum collections. The remit covered the city of Beijing, which had been targeted for looting, as well as the surrounding area affected by the war as far as the city of Tianjin.

b. Project process (including a list of the tasks and achievements of the project staff)

In accordance with the objectives, six Swiss museums' Chinese collections, which were assembled between 1900 and 1949, were reviewed and examined – those at:

- the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich,
- the Museum Rietberg,
- the Bern Historical Museum
- the St. Gallen Cultural Museum,
- the Geneva Ethnographic Museum (MEG), and
- the Basel Museum of Cultures.

c. Methodological approach and type of publication of the results

In terms of methodology, Mareile Flitsch and Yu Filipiak developed a basis for the project with targeted research on objects from China at the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich. For the exhibition "Looted Goods? 5 Questions on Objects from China at the End of the Imperial Era", we worked with general categories of looted objects (collected between 1900 and 1949, acquired, included in the collection; possible origin: imperial workshop or high quality of the objects; contexts; references in the archive) and with three concepts, the first two of which were developed and refined as part of the workshop series "Five questions on the Collections" at the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich:

- The question of craftsmanship in the objects was based on the assumption that the quality and care of their production allows conclusions to be drawn about the context of origin in production, but perhaps also in use. It turned out that some of the textiles in the collection are of very high quality (embroidery on gauze, hosiery, imperial manufactory embroidery); that an incense burner, certified by a diplomat to have come from the chambers of the Dowager Empress Cixi, is indeed of exquisite casting



- technique; that bronzes, porcelain, scrolls and ancestral images suggest different material histories; and that the substantial number of shoes for bound feet from around 1900 points to a kind of general plundering of the female body at the time.
- The methodical approach posed the question of contexts that could indicate looting, for example ancestral portraits that were usually burned instead of being sold. The Ethnographic Museum is one of the few museums that owns a family portrait of an upper class Chinese family, a template drawn with very fine faces of the deceased.
 - We worked with the concept of Switzerland as a country without colonies, comparable to Norway, for example, as this did justice to the fact that these countries also positioned themselves differently on colonialism through their museums and collections.¹

The above-mentioned museums were contacted to obtain an initial overview of the extent of their artefacts from China from the period around 1900 in Switzerland. In all museums except Geneva the circle of possible objects from the looting context was then discussed, viewed, narrowed down and a selection of objects including additional information was viewed in person on site. There was not enough time for a visit to Geneva, so only the MEG's very extensive, well-documented online database was consulted. All the museums were enormously helpful and co-operative in this work. They provided staff and time, documents and photographs, etc. and were very interested in the project.

At the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, with the workspace exhibition "Looted Goods? 5 Questions on Objects from China at the End of the Imperial Era", a format was created that continuously informed the public about provenance research in the museum's own collection and thus the progress of our research: in guided tours, public lectures, in the exhibition texts, in the media guide and, finally, in the 360° documentation of the exhibition.² Due to the museum's location in the Old Botanical Garden, the exhibition was placed in the context of plant hunting in China and the colonial seed trade: The Old Botanical Garden of the University of Zurich alone contains six endemic tree and shrub species from what is now the People's Republic of China. The exhibition also provided information on the progress of research in the BAK project, for which a separate text track and a separate section of the media guide were reserved. Publications and events from other Boxer loot research projects were also linked and published in the media guide, in particular those from the German joint project on looted goods from the Boxer War led by Dr Christine Howald at the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (SPK) Berlin. These opportunities to follow the research in the project and on the objects were very well received by visitors. The guided tours were very well attended, as was the supporting public programme with films and lectures. The high number of Chinese visitors was hugely welcome, and they in turn appreciated the fact that an exhibition (the first exhibition on Boxer War loot in the German-speaking world, by the way) was informing the public in Switzerland about the looting during the Boxer War. Yu Filipiak also continuously informed Chinese colleagues and interested parties via an academic WeChat portal, which garnered numerous reactions to the

¹ See: Rasmussen, J.M. and Viestad, V.M.: Curation by the Living Dead: Exploring the Legacy of Norwegian Museums' Colonial collections. *Critical Arts*. 2022, pp. 63-83.

² Online: https://reichderbilder.de/360/pluenderware_360/.



project and made it known in the People's Republic of China. Some visitors wrote reactions in the visitor book or on index cards in the exhibition, for example:

“When you look at me,

*I'm something new,
I stand fresh and fair,
But when I look at you
I see nothing but foreign looks.*

*Taken away from my land
Stolen? Yes. Rightly so?
I do not think so.*

*I stand here as a memory of this past
at home, everybody knows me,
yet, I'm just one of the pack
Here I set the attention of curious eyes.
Come see me for I have a story to tell,
come learn from a land and time far away.
I was stolen from my home,
but now I serve on purpose
wherever I may be and go,
I bring cultures together
In such a challenging world.*

Ruiz”

The research project on possible looted goods from the Boxer War in Swiss collections was reported on at two conferences of the German joint project in 2023 (Berlin) and 2024 (Munich) and at the Federal Office of Culture BAK in December 2023. Following approval from the BAK and the museums visited, the final report on the BAK project will be published in German, English and Chinese on the website of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich and made generally available; the joint project in Germany will of course be informed about this, as will the institutions and colleagues in the People's Republic of China, e.g. at the Palace Museum in Beijing.

d. Object statistics (case groups according to type or time of additions or intermediaries of additions including changes in the course of the project)

See the Excel list in the Appendix, file name: *BAK Projekt VMZ ZH Liste moegl Raubgut Boxerkrieg Slg CH.*

e. Documentation of the provenances determined for the objects checked (e.g. object dossier or extract/export from internal documentation systems)

Among the several thousand Chinese artefacts in the museums visited, 191 objects were identified as potentially belonging to a looted heritage context. The types of objects are diverse and include textiles, porcelain, clothing and shoes, paintings, weapons, flags, Buddha statues, ritual artefacts, fragments from the Summer Palace and the Great Wall, as well as furniture.



From the **collection of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich**, 71 objects were identified. Most of these objects were presented in the exhibition “Looted Goods? 5 Questions on Objects from China at the End of the Imperial Era”. Historical photos from the photo archive were shown as historical evidence of the circumstances from a Swiss/foreign perspective. The focus was on objects whose provenance, based on the available object data, suggested they should be further examined to determine whether they are, or could be, looted goods.

- One example of such an object is a set of 16 large carved teak wood panels, each approximately two metres high. Each panel is divided into a heart panel and a base panel. The objects are densely decorated with very old symbols that are culturally and historically significant for China. Based on the symbols, the panels can be categorized as belonging to, or being made for, nobles of the upper ranks (four-clawed dragons). The index card for the object states that these wooden panels come from “the plundering of Peking”. The panels, like numerous other objects, came into the collection of the UZH Ethnographic Museum from the estate of the Zurich merchant Emil Aepli, about whom we have been able to find out little, apart from his address and some correspondence. In Late Imperial China, the guild of cabinetmakers also provided furniture, windows and furnishings for the better-off social circles in Beijing. Such “partition walls” were important elements of wall panelling, room division and the demonstration of wealth. We know from reports of looting during the Boxer War that wooden panels were torn off walls, either as fuel or as looted goods that were sold on the market or auctioned off in Beijing. Traces of use on the panels suggest that they were used for a different purpose in Switzerland; the archives indicate that they were probably installed in a summerhouse.
- Another example of an object requiring more scrutiny is an ancestral portrait. In China, such portraits were very private, kept in family archives and households and used for ancestral celebrations, and they were not sold under normal circumstances. However, with the colonization and proselytization of China, Chinese Christians were forced to turn away from ancestor worship. The Boxer movement therefore accused the missionaries of disregarding ancestor worship. From reports on the Boxer War, we know that ancestral temples were plundered. It is not clear whether this ancestral image should be seen in this context. The portrait was acquired by the Swiss merchant August Hoffmeister in China. From 1908 to 1948 he was a silk merchant in the U. Spalinger company in Canton. He also held the office of Swiss Consul General in China from 1939 to 1948. How the ancestral picture came into his private possession requires further research.

The Museum Rietberg, the youngest of the museums visited, which was founded in 1952 as the Museum of World Art, has an extensive collection of Chinese artefacts. No cases of looted property from the Boxer War can currently be identified directly from the database and archive. The curator of the China collection informed Yu Filipiak and Mareile Flitsch about the many years of provenance research at the Museum Rietberg, including on a collection of Chinese paintings. The Museum Rietberg is sensitized to acquisitions made during the Boxer War and is in contact with experts on the subject. Provenance research is a collaborative method for jointly producing knowledge about the history of the collection.



In the **Bern Historical Museum's** China collection (over 3,000 objects), the first step was to select **752** Chinese objects that could be assigned to the period 1900 to 1949. Of these, around **80** objects (books, paintings, weapons, flags, textiles, porcelain, jewellery and ritual objects) were shortlisted. Following a dialogue with colleagues at the museum, an initial rough search and several visits to the depot, a number of objects were identified as proven or suspected looted goods. For instance:

- A gun barrel that stands in the museum's inner courtyard is well-known and particularly striking. This object undoubtedly comes from Count von Waldsee's plundering of the Beijing Observatory in 1901. The origin of the object has since been analysed by the Bern Historical Museum (BHM).³

The background to this object has been researched: during the Kangxi era of the Qing dynasty (1661-1722), Emperor Kangxi commissioned the Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688) to develop light and transportable cannons to arm the Imperial Army. After Verbiest had developed a first type of artillery, he designed five different types of cannon in 1681. These were variations on the cannons of the Ming dynasty and were designed to fulfil different ranges, weights and other purposes. Verbiest produced a total of around five hundred pieces of artillery for the Qing Army. The gun barrel at Bern is one of these and belongs to the "Military Perfect and Eternally Steadfast Generalissimo" (*Wucheng yonggu dajiangjun pao* 武成永固大將軍炮) type. A total of seventeen such gun barrels still exist today, thirteen of which are located in Europe. Germany and Italy each have four, and the others are located in Austria, Hungary and Switzerland.

The BHM's collection also includes numerous weapons, uniforms and flags that were most probably collected as war trophies during the Boxer War. One example is a suit of armour.

- Qing dynasty armour was divided into different types, namely light armour, dark armour, iron armour and armour made of starched cloth. The first three types were made of armour plates, while the last was made of thick fabric sewn in several layers and fitted with copper rivets. In the middle and late Qing dynasty, armour was increasingly dominated by fabric armour, the surface of which was made of satinized fabric and therefore had a greater variety of colours. The Qing emperors not only had armour for protection, but also ceremonial armour for troop parades. This object is a ceremonial suit of armour from the Qing period and consists of eleven pieces. The armour came into the Bern Historical Museum in 1906. The previous owner was an unknown German naval officer. The colour of the fabric and the numerous decorations with a dragon motif suggest that the armour was of imperial origin.
- In the China collection, the collections of Heinrich von Niederhäusern and Berta Anna Watkins deserve particular attention. Heinrich von Niederhäusern's collection comprises a large number of weapons and armour that were assembled between 1900

³ See the contribution "Geschützrohr aus Bern" [The gun barrel from Berne], on <https://www.bhm.ch/de/sammlungen/provenienzforschung/spuren-kolonialer-provenienz/geschuetzrohr>; there a link can be found to: "Eine chinesische Kanone aus der Ära des Kangxi-Kaisers (regierend 1661–1722) im Bernischen Historischen Museum" [A Chinese gun barrel from the Era of the Kangxi Emperor (reigned 1661-1722) in the Berne History Museum], by Prof. Maria Khayutina, published in the *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte* [Berne Journal of History]. 2015.



and 1911. It can be assumed that these are war trophies from the Boxer Rebellion. Berta Anna Watkins' collection includes a large number of porcelain items that were collected before 1916 and are characterized by their excellent quality. In this context, it should be noted that there is an urgent need for further provenance research.

The identification of the porcelain, paintings, furniture and ritual artefacts is proving difficult, as extensive research is required to clarify the assumption of looting. In this regard, co-operation with Chinese porcelain experts and further provenance research is required.

Initially, **26** objects were selected from the collection of the **St. Gallen Cultural Museum**. Two objects with the inventory numbers VK 4552 (copperplate engraving, victory celebration of the Qianlong Emperor) and VK 4654 (scroll, document), which would be of interest for research, are missing. Five objects were returned to the Thurgau Historical Museum, for which we do not yet have any further details. After a detailed inspection of the China collection and repeated discussions with our colleagues at the St. Gallen Cultural Museum, **10** objects were added to the list that may be looted goods from the Boxer War. The following two objects are particularly noteworthy:

- Sabre (inventory number VK 2042)
As far as the provenance is concerned, we know that this object was donated to St. Gallen Cultural Museum by the collector Paul Jung on 13 February 1922. Paul Jung had received this object from a person named Frank Schulz. The sabre came from Boxer movement rebels and ended up in Western hands in the course of the military conflict with the Boxers. Whether Frank Schulz was a participant in the suppression of the Boxer Uprising is not yet known, and requires further research.
- Woman's robe (inventory number VK 1720)
This object comes from the old collection of the St. Gallen Cultural Museum and has been in the museum's possession since 1918. The robe is made of yellow silk and is embroidered with rich motifs. In the centre of the front is an embroidered phoenix surrounded by numerous dragons. The seawater and river cliff pattern (海水江崖紋) is depicted on the lower part of the robe. In the Qing period, this pattern was only used by the emperor, his officials and their wives and mothers, who were awarded the corresponding rank by the emperor. The colour of the fabric and the numerous decorations with phoenix and dragon motifs suggest an imperial origin.

The following questions arise in this context: Is this a garment from the imperial household? Why does the phoenix motif form the centre of the robe instead of the usual dragon? Here, too, there is a need for further research and dialogue with specialist colleagues.

From the China collection of the **Geneva Ethnographic Museum**, which could only be consulted using the online database due to time constraints, **53** objects were selected that met the project criteria. These include textiles, paintings, weapons, pieces of furniture and fragments from the Summer Palace and the Great Wall. Two objects are explained in more detail below.

- Throne backrest
This backrest is part of the imperial throne. Unfortunately, there is no information about the collector in the database. The fabric is yellow silk. It features richly-



embroidered motifs, including the eight immortals, dragons in front view with five claws and the Chinese character “shou (寿 long life)”. The aforementioned Chinese seawater and river cliff pattern (海水江崖紋) can be recognized in the lower part of the backrest.

- Long sabre (*pudao* 樸刀)

The inventory manuscript from 1925 contains the following information: “*Couperet de bourreau chinois pris sur place par un officier lors de l’affaire du siège des Légations; longue lame simple, manche à 2 mains recouvert de cordes. Pékin.* [Chinese executioner’s axe, captured by an officer during the siege of the legations; long simple blade, two-handled handle wrapped in cord. Peking].”

The term “executioner’s axe” is inappropriate for the weapon known as a *pudao* in Chinese, as it was not used as a tool for executions in China at the time. In the Qing period, a *pudao* was part of the imperial infantry’s equipment and was widely used.

During the initial inspection, numerous objects from the Geneva collection were identified as being of good quality, including porcelain, ivory baskets, dragon robes and pieces of furniture. In addition, objects were identified as being of interest, such as the fragments from the Summer Palace. Further research will have to look into the provenance of these objects.

More than 300 objects were selected from the **Basel Museum of Culture’s** China collection. These include books, paintings, weapons, flags, textiles, porcelain, jewellery, ritual objects and musical instruments collected between 1900 and 1949. After an initial inspection, **27** objects were shortlisted. The Naas Collection and the Freiherr von Gebattel Collection are of particular interest. The Naas Collection was acquired by the museum in 1901. It includes a bow with arrows from Peking, a sabre and an official’s chain. As these objects were probably collected around 1900 and some of the objects are said to have come from Peking, it is important to investigate the provenance of this collection further. The objects with the numbers IID 5877, IID 5892, IID 5895, IID 5896 and IID 5897 originally came from the collection of Baron von Gebattel. This is probably Ludwig Hermann Freiherr von Gebattel (15.01.1857 - 20.09.1930). He served as a general staff officer with the army high command of the East Asian Expeditionary Corps under Colonel Maximilian Count Yorck von Wartenburg in Peking in 1900.

In addition, there are other objects that require further research, not only in terms of their origin and collector, but also in terms of their significance and value, such as the objects with the numbers IID 1632 and IID 14663. Object IID 1632 consists of a dragon robe and a dragon skirt. After an initial examination, it was determined that the skirt is not part of the garment. The dragon robe with numerous patterns is in good condition. The special feature is that all the patterns are woven rather than embroidered. According to an initial rough assessment by a colleague from the Nanjing Cloud Brocade Museum (Nanjing Yunjin bowuguan 南京雲錦博物館), the material of this robe is probably Yunjin silk brocade from Nanjing. It is probably a very valuable garment. Further research is also required here.

Object IID 14663 is a Yunjian woman’s collar (雲肩). The catalogue card contains the following information:

“Purchased flea market in Basel, 23 March 1991



According to the German seller, from the estate of a German soldier who took part in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion with the military contingent.”

This information could be a reference to a looted object. The collar has numerous embroidered motifs and is beautifully handcrafted. By examining the object and exchanging information with Chinese colleagues, it would also be possible to determine the region from which it originated and which social classes used it.

In order to ensure the feasibility of the project in the limited time available, we only selected and analysed those objects that were collected or entered the museums in the period between 1900 and 1949, i.e. that were either removed ad hoc or circulated via the trade. However, there are also objects that were added to the museum collections after 1949 and fit the selected categories, such as the Yunjian women’s collar mentioned above with the number IID 14663 and the uniform from the late Qing period (19th century) with the number IID 10626. It can therefore be concluded that a longer period should probably be taken into account for further investigations into Chinese looted goods in Swiss collections.

Following extensive research in the above-mentioned museums, **191** selected objects were recorded in an Excel database. **71** of these objects come from the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, **30** objects from the Bern Historical Museum, **10** from the St. Gallen Cultural Museum, **53** from the Geneva Ethnographic Museum and **27** objects from the Basel Museum of Cultures. The database contains information on object names in German and partly in Chinese and English, along with their date of acquisition, type of acquisition, collector, material, dimensions, inscriptions on the objects, dating, comments on the objects, reasons for suspecting a possible looted property context and a link to the respective page of the online collection (if available).

i. In the case of human remains, additionally all individual biographical data of the deceased individual as far as can be ascertained (including any external expertise or scientific reports)

As part of the project, the question arose as to whether anthropological collections in Switzerland – analogous to anthropological collections in Germany⁴ – might contain human remains (skulls) of decapitated so-called “Boxer warriors” or from graves desecrated during the Boxer War. We have made enquiries to this effect to the various collections in Switzerland, but the responses from the collections are still pending at the time of writing this report.

ii. Documentation of enquiries/requests from regions of origin, if these are already available for the objects or human remains under investigation

The project attracted a great deal of interest, especially on Chinese social media, where Dr Yu Filipiak disseminated information. Many users wrote to tell us that they greatly appreciated the fact that the Boxer War, the looting and any looted goods in Swiss collections

⁴ Holger Stoecker: Erstcheck: Koloniale Provenienzen in der Anthropologischen Staatssammlung München [First check: Colonial provenances in the Anthropological State Collection Munich]. 2023(?) Manuscript, accessed with the author’s kind permission. Research has been carried out in Germany on human remains from the Boxer War, see e.g. Haberer, Karl: Schädel und Skeletteile aus Peking. Ein Beitrag zur somatischen Ethnologie der Mongolen, Jena 1902. Birkner, Ferdinand: Beiträge zu Rassenanatomie der Chinesen. Habilitation thesis, Munich 1904.



were being reported on and that an exhibition was being held, as a step towards transparent understanding.

Even if Switzerland preserves some remarkable objects from the Boxer War, such as the gun barrel from the imperial observatory in front of the Bern Historical Museum, China's interests are undoubtedly focused on institutions such as the British Museum, the Louvre, etc., where extensive holdings of central Chinese cultural artefacts are preserved, including – as a lecture by Ricarda Brosch during the exhibition at the Ethnographic Museum UZH impressively demonstrated – extremely valuable burial objects from imperial tombs at the end of the imperial era.

The conference “BOXERLOOT! Museum collections, the Boxer war and practices of plunder”, held in Munich on 22-23 February 2024, was also attended by researchers from the Palace Museum in Beijing. In the People's Republic of China, efforts are being made to record the extent of the plunder in surveys and targeted research in museums. Individual restitutions have already taken place, particularly in the 1950s in the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

f. Documentation of the researched biographies (including biographical data), profiles and trade routes of historical actors relevant to the project, e.g.

i. Persons, such as members of the colonial administration, missions and military, as well as dealers, collectors, manufacturers, users, previous owners, descendants, survivors and other affected persons

As part of this survey project on possibly looted heritage from the Boxer War in Swiss collections, in-depth research on individual collectors was either not possible or not very fruitful. This was the case with Ernst Aepli, who acquired most of the objects in question in the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich. According to the archive, Ernst Aepli also took back objects that clearly originated from the looting context, such as a book cover from the venerable Hanlin Library (翰林院 Hànlín Yuàn, literally “Brush Forest Academy”), which was burnt down during the Boxer War and some of which had already been inventoried. Where the objects were then given to and why he got them back has not yet been clarified.

ii. Institutions, such as trading or transportation companies, ethnographic dealers, auction houses or associations

It is worth mentioning here that the trade in arts and crafts and cultural artefacts, which was initially boosted by Chinese dealers in Switzerland in the 1950s, with its somewhat difficult to understand certification practices, as well as the practice of auctioning Chinese arts and crafts, still seems to have been barely researched. The censer in the Ethnographic Museum UZH's collection, certified by a Dutch diplomat and said to originate from the chambers of the Dowager Empress Cixi, was acquired in the 1950s from a company or gallery in Zurich called Oriens. For a long time, the description “looted goods from the Boxer War”, specifically from the covert looting of cultural artefacts from the Imperial Palace, was a certificate of authenticity that could be used to advertise, but certainly also to deceive. We can expect a grey zone here that we have not been able to explore in any way.



g. Documentation of the institutional history relevant to the project, both of the funded institution and any predecessor institution(s).

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h. Documentation of the historical context researched in the course of the project, both on the Swiss or European side and on the local side of the country of origin (including important events and places)

The historical context of the Boxer War has now been relatively well researched by Western, Japanese and Chinese scholars, and Russian sinology has also conducted research in this field. The historical context was presented in the exhibition “Looted Goods? 5 Questions on Objects from China at the End of the Imperial Era”, with the help of a chronological table, photographs from the archive, text panels and a media guide with additional texts. All of this will remain available online in the 360° documentation of the exhibition on the Ethnographic Museum’s website.⁵

i. Documentation of the (inter)national (research) networks established in the course of the project

The project and the results obtained were widely disseminated via our academic networks in Europe and China.

- In addition to sending information to our own academic networks, Dr Yu Filipiak used a WeChat portal for Chinese archaeologists (*Taishang kaogu wenboguan* 太上考古文博馆, 226 members), from which information about the exhibition and project, as well as exhibition reviews were published.
- Parallel to our project, a separate network was formed in Germany under the heading “Boxer Loot”. The subject of looted goods from the Boxer War in German museum collections is currently being researched in a joint project under the direction of Dr Christine Howald at the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in Berlin.⁶ This joint project, which involves eight museums in Germany, brings together an international network from which we were also able to benefit. During both of the joint project’s conferences⁷ we reported in detail on the state of knowledge of the BAK project in our own contributions.
- We also contacted the Palace Museum in Beijing, the institution that is currently researching the topic of Boxer War loot in the People’s Republic of China. As Mareile Flitsch and Yu Filipiak had the opportunity to talk at length with decision-makers and colleagues from the Palace Museum in Beijing at the Munich conference

⁵ S. 360° The extended exhibition room,
https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/360_degree_exhibitions.html.

⁶ Traces of the “Boxer War” in German Museum Collections, s. <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/collection-research/research/traces-of-the-boxer-war/>

⁷ See: Conference 2./3. March 2023 on <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/about-us/whats-new/detail/workshop-on-2-3-march-2023-carried-away-research-into-the-provenance-of-museum-objects-from-the-boxer-war/>; Conference 22./23. January 2024 on <https://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/boxerloot-conference-on-22-and-23-february-2024-in-munich/>.



- on 'Boxer Loot' in spring this year, and as we will be publishing this report in Chinese, we decided to abstain from a planned trip to Beijing as part of the project.
- Dr Yu Filipiak also has extensive contacts in Chinese museums, from whom we have always been able to obtain information in response to our enquiries.

As we will publish the report on the Ethnographic Museum's website in German, English and Chinese, we expect the results to be widely distributed.

SUMMARY

a. Evaluation of the results

As a result, it has been shown that almost all Swiss ethnological collections hold individual objects from the Boxer War that definitely were, or may have been looted, which entered the collections through purchase, donation, bequests and, in some cases, targeted acquisition. Provenance research on these objects is usually difficult due to the lack of documentation (due to the ad hoc looting context). We found no evidence of direct Swiss involvement in the looting. In Switzerland, a country without colonies and without diplomatic representation in China around 1900, the actors of the time positioned themselves individually with regard to the Boxer War. They actively endeavoured to acquire imperial objects in particular, which entered the collections via various channels, including certificates of authenticity. However, there is also evidence of pro-Boxer attitudes in Switzerland. And there is the case of an official's robe that a Chinese mandarin entrusted to the Swiss watch merchant Mr Hüssy from Küsnacht, and which Mr Hüssy's heiress handed over to the Ethnographic Museum in 2009 – a Swiss citizen was literally handed cultural property to care for. To the best of our knowledge, this topic of a kind of self-collecting or self-archiving – we assume that Mr Hüssy and the Chinese mandarin who entrusted him with his official's robe was not an isolated case – has not yet been dealt with in research.

b. Open questions and need for further research

This report is accompanied by an Excel list of the 191 objects for which further research into provenance would be interesting. However, it should be emphasized once again that the looting context around 1900-1901 was chaotic and that the objects themselves, and the routes by which they arrived in Switzerland, are barely documented.

As was also established in the aforementioned joint project on looted goods from the Boxer War in German museum collections, the research is often not worth the effort for many objects of average quality, since little is known about them. In addition, as we have shown in this report, the higher quality objects in question require not only archival expertise but, above all, object expertise. China porcelain specialists are needed to be able to assess the quality of the preserved historical porcelain, including imperial wares, for example, as well as specialists in the history of Chinese textiles, experts in scrolls and paintings, experts in bronze castings, etc.

Following our reporting, research into better-documented individual cases seems promising. The Historical Museum in Bern has done an exemplary job of researching the provenance of the gun barrel looted from the imperial observatory. Individual cases can perhaps also be



researched well in smaller museums in Switzerland – because it seems to us that through the market, the actors and coincidence, possibly looted goods may have been brought to all museums in Switzerland – as shown by the above-mentioned example of an imperial nephrite sceptre from the Yihueyuan looting in 1860 by British and French troops in the Winterthur Natural History Museum, which the provenance researcher and ethnologist Raphael Schwere pointed out to us.

And we have observed that the history of the trade in Chinese arts and crafts and Chinese cultural goods in Switzerland has hardly been researched since the 1950s, which also seems to be an important desideratum, in order to assess the dimension of objects that may have ended up in private hands. The interest in them, the market for them, seems to have been there. Conversations with individual players in the art market during our tours and events were extremely informative.

And finally, it would seem interesting to expand the examination of collections in Switzerland to include local history museums as well as specialist museums (porcelain museums, clock museums, etc.). Coincidences of all kinds have apparently occasionally led to objects from looted contexts in China being included in local history museums.

For some of the identified, apparently very exquisite porcelain, paintings and textiles, we suggest an in-depth examination by Chinese experts, perhaps in the form of an invitation to relevant experts in the Palace Museum in Beijing to visit Switzerland?

The colleagues from the Palace Museum who we met at the aforementioned Munich conference were very positive about our project's initiative and valued this as a step towards reaching an understanding about the whereabouts of cultural heritage, the context of which is only gradually becoming the focus of research in China, and which is still perceived as historically painful and shameful in the People's Republic of China.

APPENDIX: LIST OF POSSIBLY LOOTED CULTURAL HERITAGE FROM THE BOXER WAR IN SWISS COLLECTIONS

An Excel file contains a list of 191 items that were identified as possible loot from the Boxer War in the collections of ethnological museums in Switzerland that were subjected to an initial review. Among these are - a minority - objects that are proven to have come from the looting of the Boxer War in China. The vast majority of the objects listed were considered as a category of possible loot because the temporal (1900-1949) and/or qualitative criteria (production, indications of origin from imperial workshops). Indications of specific contexts or individual indications of looting contexts in the archive show that they should be subjected to a more detailed examination in order to clarify their provenance and to rule out, as far as possible, an origin from the looting of the Boxer War.

The Excel file can be obtained from: flitsch@vmz.uzh.ch.