

# Liberty Unchained: the Impact of “Escape from the British Museum” on the Repatriation Discourse of Cultural Artifacts

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## Abstract

**This study is an analysis of the success of the series “Escape from The British Museum” and the repatriation of foreign artifacts in the British Museum. Following The British Museum’s report on the disappearance of their artifacts on August 21st, 2023, a global online discourse started urging the museum to return their stolen or improperly obtained artifacts. On August 30th, 2023, a mini-series called Escape from The British Museum was uploaded onto the Chinese video platform Bilibili. It tells the story of a Chinese jade pot escaping from The British Museum and bringing back letters from other lost-over-sea Chinese artifacts to their counterparts in China. The series blew up online and has received a positive response, helping to raise more awareness of the restitution of lost Chinese artifacts. This discourse and the media success of the mini-series demonstrated the importance of museums as a space for intercultural communication and posed the question of “How do we go beyond being multicultural societies to being ‘intercultural societies where a plurality of cultures cooperate in dialogue and shared responsibility.’”<sup>1</sup>(Bodo et al., 2009).**

## Keywords

**Intercultural Communication, Journalism, Escape From The British Museum, Social Media.**

## 1. Introduction

The British Museum is one of the world's largest and most prestigious and comprehensive museums, dedicated to history, art, and culture. Established in 1753, it has a vast collection of over 8 million works from various parts of the world. However, with the complications regarding Britain’s colonial history, the objects behind the show-glass are not only witnesses of the diversity of cultures but also documents of the blood and tears shed by many historical war zones and old British colonies.

The museum's holdings include artifacts from ancient civilizations, such as Egypt, Greece, Rome, Mesopotamia, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Controversies have arisen over the years regarding the acquisition of these artifacts. Critics argue that certain items were obtained through colonialism, imperialism, or looting and should be repatriated to their original countries.

## 2. The British Museum and the issue of repatriating artifacts

The ownership of artifacts by institutions like The British Museum is one of the unresolved issues in our post-colonialism society. Many artifacts in The British Museum were acquired during periods of colonial expansion and imperialism through unjust methods such as military conquest, diplomatic pressure, and looting without the consent or understanding of the local communities.

Numerous countries such as Greece, Egypt, Italy, Nigeria, and China have actively engaged in efforts to repatriate artifacts from The British Museum that they believe were taken unlawfully or under unethical conditions.

Geoffrey Ronald Robertson, an Australian-British barrister, who was appointed to the Queen's Council in 1988, criticized "encyclopedic museums" such as the British Museum, the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art that "lock up the precious legacy of other lands, stolen from their people by wars of aggression, theft and duplicity"<sup>2</sup>(Alberge, 2019).

The restitution of artifacts remains a complex and debated topic. Some argue that repatriation is necessary for cultural sensitivity and historical justice especially when considering factors like cultural hegemony and cultural context:

1. The artifacts in Western museums historically reflected a Eurocentric perspective. This reinforced cultural hegemony by framing non-Western cultures in ways that were often influenced by colonial narratives, stereotypes, and power dynamics.
2. Museums often hold items divorced from their cultural, religious, or historical settings, which can impact the understanding and appreciation of artifacts.
3. The retention of artifacts in Western museums, arguing that it perpetuates a legacy of cultural exploitation and domination. The possession of these objects can be seen as a continuation of power imbalances.

Others contend that museums provide a valuable context for global appreciation and understanding of artifacts and better-equipped research laboratories for studies. Undoubtedly, the dazzling collection is a strong advertisement for tourism and constitutes the reason why the museum refuses to give up them.

The debate continues, and museums, including the British Museum, have engaged in discussions and collaborations with source countries to address concerns.

We need to acknowledge the fact that in any country or region, the operation of museums, the transportation of artifacts, and their restoration and preservation all require significant funding. Consequently, the economic flows and exchanges will be more dynamic, and countless employment opportunities will emerge. Not to mention the tourism industry has anything to do with it.

Nowadays, we have lived in a modern era when cultural identity is the need of our time. There is no doubt that people nowadays have attached great importance and attention to the genuine appreciation of their countries' artifacts.

It is time for policymakers to find a mutually agreeable solution, which, however, will not be a joyride as it involves many countries and regions and covers multiple elements. Each country's discretion is preferred.

Cultural artifacts are witnesses to history and carriers of culture, and their dispersal and return not only concern a country's history and cultural heritage, but also reflect the international community's awareness of and attitude towards cultural diversity as well as the protection of cultural artifacts. Returning these precious cultural artifacts is a respect for historical justice and the maintenance of cultural diversity.

### **3. Escape from The British Museum and the impact of its success**

The series is not only a piece of entertainment but also an introduction (or reintroduction) to the restitution of Chinese cultural heritage from The British Museum. According to the museum's official website, they have in collection, around 230,000 pieces of Chinese artifacts, and about 2000 of them are on long-term display. These artifacts covered nearly all of China's history from the Stone Age to the Qing Empire and ranged from ceramics and silverware to all forms of art. Although the museum stated that all Chinese artifacts were acquired through

donation, auction, and exchange, it is still believed that some of these artifacts were looted during all the wars and crossfires the two countries had in history, starting from the First Opium War.

In August 2023, as an after-effect of the series, headlines like “#The British Museum, please voluntarily return the Chinese artifacts” and “#No Chinese citizen can walk out of The British Museum with a smile on their face” started trending on social media, initiating discourse in Chinese and global social media, spreading the information through words of mouths by the Chinese who are studying or living abroad. This phenomenon generated a level of social pressure for The British Museum and the British government to stop avoiding the issue of artifact repatriation and to take more positive steps towards real cultural equality and demonstrate the importance of social media in the field of intercultural communication.

One of China’s most prestigious newspapers People’s Daily commented on the series, saying: “Escaping The British Museum is not an escape from history, but an escape from the one-sided understating of history and outdated mindsets.” Wise words for all of us. We ought to have a reflection on the darker side of history.

Just as Escape from the British Museum has demonstrated, Chinese cultural artifacts displayed in the British Museum are like a group of children who have left home. It is heart-wrenching to see them alone and scarred in a foreign land. The question—— “Why did you ‘leave home’?” is always tempted to be asked.

The series “Escape from The British Museum” has awakened people's attention to the protection and inheritance of cultural artifacts, reminding people to cherish and respect every piece of cultural heritage and guard the common spiritual home of mankind.

It promotes international cultural exchanges, dialogues and the development of cultural diversity. With no doubt, people from different countries and regions ought to learn to understand and respect each other's cultural traditions, and strive for enhancing mutual understanding and friendship. Meanwhile, it may also promote the formulation and implementation of relevant policies.

#### **4. Museum as the place for Intercultural Communication**

Museum is at the center of this debate. The British Museum's ownership of various artifacts is not simply about returning foreign artifacts but should be about a broader discourse on the impact of this ownership, on relationships between cultures, between social and economic forces and between historical and political forces.

Museums often house artifacts and historical items that are representative of cultures and contribute to the safeguarding of cultural heritage for present and future generations. They also serve as educational institutions, offering visitors the opportunity to learn about the history, traditions, and customs of different cultures. This knowledge helps to dispel stereotypes, misconceptions, and ignorance, fostering a more informed and open-minded society.

Instead of being a reason for conflict, museums should be a safe space for cultural exchanges, a place for people to engage in dialogue, share their perspectives and experiences, and promote meaningful intercultural conversations. The museums may be true representations of the encounter between cultures, real spaces of convergence and dialogue, the physical environments of the discovery of mutual influence and also the complementarity between men, between cultures, between human groups<sup>3</sup>(Giusti, 2013).

In the case of The British Museum, the better option might be to use this conflict of interest as a way to assist other countries in shaping their narratives and identities and to reconcile with ex-colonial regions based on mutual understanding.

## 5. Conclusion

In the concluding remarks of "Liberty Unchained: The Impact of 'Escape from The British Museum' on the Repatriation Discourse of Cultural Artifacts," the analysis highlights a profound recognition of the mini-series' successful engagement with audiences globally and its catalytic role in amplifying the discourse on the repatriation of cultural artifacts. The series, by leveraging the emotive power of storytelling, underscores not only the tangible longing for the restitution of cultural heritage but also the intangible essence of fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding.

The British Museum, with its expansive collection of artifacts from diverse cultures, stands at the intersection of historical grandeur and contemporary controversies surrounding cultural restitution. The essence of the museum's dilemma lies not merely in the physical return of artifacts but in the broader, more nuanced challenge of navigating the complexities of cultural identity, heritage, and historical justice in a globalized world. The narrative of "Escape from The British Museum" serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for museums to transcend their traditional roles as custodians of cultural heritage to become active facilitators of intercultural communication and reconciliation.

The series' impact extends beyond its immediate audience, stirring a global conversation that challenges existing paradigms of cultural ownership and the ethical responsibilities of museums. It prompts a reevaluation of the ways in which museums can contribute to the healing of historical wounds and the building of a more inclusive, empathetic world. This dialogue, sparked by the series, reflects a growing consciousness among people worldwide about the significance of cultural artifacts not just as objects of aesthetic appreciation but as vital links to history, identity, and collective memory.

In light of these reflections, it becomes imperative for policymakers, museum professionals, and cultural stakeholders to engage in a concerted effort to develop frameworks that balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the principles of equity, respect, and mutual understanding. Such endeavors should aim not only at the physical repatriation of artifacts but also at fostering a cultural milieu where diverse narratives and histories are acknowledged and respected.

Furthermore, the series' success illustrates the potent role of media in bridging cultural divides and enhancing global awareness about issues of cultural restitution. As such, there is a significant opportunity for museums to leverage digital platforms and storytelling as tools for engaging with global audiences, democratizing access to cultural knowledge, and promoting a more inclusive narrative of human history.

In conclusion, the journey of cultural artifacts from their lands of origin to foreign museums and potentially back again is emblematic of the broader quest for cultural understanding, reconciliation, and coexistence in an increasingly interconnected world. The narrative presented by "Escape from The British Museum" not only calls for the return of cultural heritage but also, and more importantly, advocates for the transformative power of intercultural dialogue as a foundation for a more just and understanding global community. This calls for a collective effort to reimagine the role of museums in the 21st century, not as repositories of conquest but as crucibles of cultural exchange and mutual respect.

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