

# Art in Exile at Home: The National Palace Museum, Taiwanese Identity, and 'China's' Imperial Collection

Jean-Michaël Maugué

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*Jean-Michaël Maugué is a second-year undergraduate in English at Christ's College, Cambridge, interested in art and culture. He is a Specialised Art Editor at CJLPA, and has worked at Christie's and McMillan Fine Art, a commercial art gallery in London. In 2020, he co-founded Christ's College Poetry Society and led the publication of Voices in Isolation, a poetry and art magazine by students, fellows, and alumni. He is half French and half Taiwanese.*

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Between December 1949 and February 1950, three shipments, carrying a total of 3,824 crates of artefacts and artworks from the Qing imperial collection, left ports on the Chinese mainland for the island of Taiwan. Chiang Kai-shek was on the losing side of a four-year civil war against Mao Ze-dong's communist forces, and was forced to relocate his Nationalist army to Taiwan, where he set up a government in exile. It was on the island that Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Party, the Guomindang (GMD), would continue the struggle for Chinese sovereignty as the Republic of China (ROC). Back on the mainland, Mao Ze-dong consolidated political power under the Chinese Communist Party in the new People's Republic of China (PRC). The story of the imperial collection closely intertwines with that of Taiwan's national development, and it is through these 3,824 crates of imperial treasures, which became the core collection of the National Palace Museum, that we can trace Taiwan's fraught navigation of political and cultural identity.

The PRC/ROC schism of Chinese sovereignty also split the imperial collection of the Qing emperors, originally housed in the Forbidden City in Beijing. In 1925, the Forbidden City was converted into the National Palace Museum under Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government. The war with Japan and the subsequent civil war saw the imperial treasures transported across the country to elude Japanese and then communist capture. In this 15-year odyssey, Nationalist forces moved the precious artefacts from Beijing to the seat of central government in Nanjing, and then to Shanghai and further inland to Chengchou, Changsha, and finally Chongqing, where the wartime government resided. By 1947, most of the treasures were back in Beijing and Nanjing, but when Mao's People's Liberation Army (PLA) threatened the administrative capital of Nanjing, the Executive Yuan (the executive branch of the Nationalist

government) decided to urgently relocate the imperial treasures to the island of Taiwan. Curator Na Chih-liang's meticulous records have preserved the details of the epic transfer: five shipments were planned, but only three took place, not to mention the countless artefacts that could not be packed and shipped from Beijing in time.<sup>1</sup> The 3,824 crates that made it to Taiwan represented only one fifth of the original cases moved south from Beijing in 1933, but these crates included many of the best works.<sup>2</sup> As a result, there are now two 'Palace Museums', the National Palace Museum in Taipei and the Palace Museum in Beijing (originally the Forbidden City), each housing a substantial portion of the most important treasures from the Qing imperial collection. The 'One China' of today's politics mirrors the 'Two Palace Museums' in simultaneous existence.

The National Palace Museum in Taipei is most certainly equal, if not superior, to her estranged sister in Beijing, despite not being in its original home of the Forbidden City. Opening in 1965, the National Palace Museum houses some 650,000 items from across Chinese history, ranging from Neolithic jade pieces through Zhou bronze vessels to Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) painting and calligraphy.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the National Palace Museum's collection comes from the Qing imperial collection, accumulated over the course of a thousand years by Chinese emperors and royal families across four dynasties.<sup>4</sup> It includes pivotal works by early

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1 Na Chih-liang, *The Past Thirty Years of National Palace Museum* (Chinese Book Series Committee 1957); Na Chih-Liang, *Forty Years of National Palace Museum* (The Commercial Press 1966).

2 Jeanette Shambaugh Elliot and David Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China's Imperial Art Treasures* (University of Washington Press 2005) 96.

3 Lin Chiu-fang (ed), *National Palace Museum: National Palace Museum Guidebook* (eleventh edn, 2003) 13.

4 Helen White, 'Protecting the Past to Preserve the Future: A Case for



Fig 1. Immortal Blossoms in an Everlasting Spring (Giuseppe Castiglione c 1723 (album leaf), ink and colours on silk, 33.3 x 27.8cm). National Palace Museum, Taipei. Wikimedia Commons. <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Immortal\\_Blossoms\\_in\\_an\\_Everlasting\\_Spring#/media/File:Xian'e\\_Changchun\\_Album\\_13.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Immortal_Blossoms_in_an_Everlasting_Spring#/media/File:Xian'e_Changchun_Album_13.jpg)>.

painters from the Tang to the Song dynasties, such as the calligraphy of artist, scholar-official, and poet Huang Tingjian (1045–1105) and the Northern Song dynasty's Emperor Huizong (1082–1135). The museum certainly has a claim to being one of greatest repositories of imperial Chinese art in the world, if not the greatest. Art scholars have described the collection as 'a major artistic legacy of China's cultural heritage'.<sup>5</sup>

Yet it is precisely as the keeper of 'China's cultural heritage' that the National Palace Museum finds itself deeply entwined with Taiwanese political and cultural self-definition. The collection's composition and name identify it as the inheritor of China's 'National' treasures, belonging to four successive millennia of Chinese emperors. The ancient Chinese, in fact, regarded the

person who possessed the imperial collection as the heaven-ordained emperor with the mandate to rule.<sup>6</sup> Chiang Kai-shek, appropriating the imperial collection under the National Palace Museum in 1925, and then relocating the collection to Taiwan in 1949, was therefore identifying himself and his Nationalist party, the GMD, with the mandated seat of Chinese government. It was culturally imperative to bring the imperial treasures with him from the mainland. The exiled 'China', on the island of Taiwan, was given legitimacy as protector, owner, and keeper of the imperial collection of the Chinese emperors. This mythos was shared by other officials in Chiang's GMD. Na Chih-liang wrote several romanticised retellings of the collection's odyssey in exile. He recounts how after surviving bombings, truck overturns, and even uncontrolled speeding boats, no item of the collection was damaged or lost on the perilous journey to Taiwan. His conclusion is equally epic: the imperial collection is 'protected by heaven' under Chiang's GMD,<sup>7</sup> and the Nationalists, guarding the treasures surrounded

International Protection of the National Palace Museum of Taipei, Taiwan' (2009) 19(1) *Kansas Journal of Law and Public Policy* 148, 156.

5 Wen C Fong, 'Chinese Art and Cross-Cultural Understanding' in John P O'Neill and Emily Walters (eds), *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum* (Dora CY Ching tr, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Palace Museum 1996) 27.

6 White (n 4) 148.

7 Na Chih-liang, *70 Years in Guarding National Treasures of National Palace Museum* (National Palace Museum 1993) 198–203.

with a 'divine aura', are the rightful inheritors of the Qing emperors' mandate from heaven.<sup>8</sup>

Even the physical structure of the National Palace Museum reflects both evolution from and continuity with the Chinese emperors. The building's architect, Huang Bao-yu, sought to create a psychological connection between the spatial atmosphere of the National Palace Museum and the imperial architecture of mainland China.

As the sunlight came out from the left-top of the National Palace Museum, it would cause a 45-degree angle shadow. When people stood in the shadow, they would feel like standing in front of the Meridian Gate [of the Forbidden City] in Beijing.<sup>9</sup>

The colour schemes of the museum actually deviate from those of the Forbidden City. Instead of the reds and yellows of imperial autocracy, the museum boasts brown walls and blue-tiled roofs evoking the nationalist republic.<sup>10</sup> Where form provides continuity with the imperial regime, colour evokes a transition into the republican order. This sense of historical connection was imperative for Chiang's Nationalist government in a land of 'exile'. Even the plan of the museum evokes traditional inheritance: the imperial treasures come to rest in a space that shares the dimensions of the grand mausoleums of Sun Yat-sen (founder of the Chinese republic in 1911) in Nanjing and the Ming emperor Hongwu (expeller of the Mongolian Yuan dynasty in 1368) in Xiaoling.

Chiang's tenure as president of the ROC actually had more than purely symbolic parallels with the autocratic Chinese emperors. Upon landing in Taiwan, he initiated the island's martial law period (1949–87), where political censorship, imprisonments, and executions were common. The saving grace for the National Palace Museum's collection is, perhaps, that Taiwan escaped the Cultural Revolution (1969–79) that swept across mainland China. In Beijing alone, some 4,922 of 6,843 sites of designated 'historical interest' were destroyed. Luckily enough, though, the premier Zhou Enlai sealed the gates to the Forbidden City and prevented the Red Guard from ransacking the imperial collection in Beijing.<sup>11</sup>

Following the decline in the GMD's political hegemony, the museum became the negotiating space for a rapidly changing Taiwanese identity. Today, Taiwan is recognisably democratic, with open elections and multiple credible political parties. In 2000, Chen Shui-bian's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was elected to power. It brought an end to half a century of GMD control and offered, for the first time since 1949, a definition of Taiwanese identity that stressed independence from 'China'. The National Palace Museum's charter was subsequently changed in 2007 to reflect its mission to archive 'domestic and foreign' art, but the museum is still the locus of heated political debate in a Taiwanese landscape of changing cultural identity.<sup>12</sup> In February 2021, the

National Palace Museum faced a naming controversy. It was reported that 'it could be downgraded to fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, and that its name could be changed as part of a broader plot to 'de-Sinicise' it.'<sup>13</sup> The museum is currently under the direct jurisdiction of the Executive Yuan.<sup>14</sup> Should this change, the National Palace Museum, housing the Chinese imperial collection, would no longer be 'National', in a Taiwan that no longer explicitly considers itself 'Chinese'.

The National Palace Museum's collection has also been the locus for negotiating Taiwanese political and cultural identity abroad. The collection went on a landmark exhibition to the United States between 1961 and 1962. At the time, Americans saw the exhibition as 'a reminder that the free Chinese are fighting to save their cultural heritage as much as to recover lost territories'.<sup>15</sup> Yet the UN expelled the ROC from its 'China' seat in favour of the PRC in 1971, and in 1979, as part of its diplomatic rapprochement with mainland China, the United States ceased recognising the ROC government in Taipei in favour of the PRC government in Beijing.<sup>16</sup> The name of the National Palace Museum's next US exhibition, held in 1996, could not therefore include the term 'Republic of China'. The ROC government eventually acquiesced to 'Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum in Taipei'.<sup>17</sup>

Today, Taiwan holds official relations with only 15 nation states, and international exhibitions are often inconceivable.<sup>18</sup> The National Palace Museum rarely lends its collection overseas, only organising six big foreign loans since its opening in 1965.<sup>19</sup> These loans are only offered to countries that have passed laws granting exhibits immunity from judicial seizures. The fear is, of course, that the PRC government in Beijing would stake a legal claim to the imperial treasures. These laws are not widespread, and even a loan to Taiwan's only diplomatic partner in Europe, the Vatican, has not been possible because Italy does not offer artworks such immunity from seizure.<sup>20</sup> Mainland China has consistently and unambiguously claimed sovereignty over the island as well as the collection, and under Xi Jin-ping, PLA activity has increased in the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea.<sup>21</sup> In the event of armed conflict, the National Palace Museum's treasures would be excluded from international protection under the 1954 Hague Convention. The PRC would ensure that any dispute is a 'domestic' one rather than an 'international conflict' that falls under the remit of the treaty.<sup>22</sup> The international tensions arising from the paradox of 'One China' can be felt in the realm of art as well as anywhere. 'China's' once-united imperial collection exists dually, and the irreconciliation of the two

accessed 10 Feb 2021.

13 *ibid* 4.

14 National Palace Museum, 'About the NPM: Tradition & Continuity' <<https://www.npm.gov.tw/en/Article.aspx?No=03001502>> accessed 10 February 2021.

15 National Gallery of Art, 'Introduction to Catalogue' in National Gallery of Art, *Chinese Art Treasures* (1960) 8.

16 White (n 4) 160.

17 Andrew Solomon, 'Don't Mess with Our Cultural Patrimony!' *New York Times Magazine* (7 April 1996) 10.

18 White (n 4) 160.

19 'Treasure Island: Taiwan's National Palace Museum' *The Economist* (16 February 2008) 386(8567) <<https://www.economist.com/articles/2008/02/14/treasure-island>> (accessed 10 February 2021).

20 *ibid*.

21 'PLA Aircraft Drills Near Taiwan No Threat to U.S., Navy Says' (*Bloomberg*, 30 January 2021) <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-30/pla-aircraft-drills-near-taiwan-no-threat-to-u-s-navy-says?sref=HiTf60QO>> accessed 10 February 2021.

22 White (n 4) 148.

8 Huang Yi-chih, 'National Glory and Traumatism: National/Cultural Identity Construction of National Palace Museum in Taiwan' (2012) 14(3) *National Identities* 219.

9 Huang Baoyu, 'The Architecture of the Chung-Shan Museum' 1966 1(1) *National Palace Museum Quarterly* 69, 72.

10 Huang (n 8) 215.

11 Roderick Macfarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Harvard University Press 2006) 32–52.

12 Chi Wang, 'Why Taiwan's National Palace Museum Controversy is More than a Storm in a Teacup' *South China Morning Post* (5 Jan 2021) 1–6 <<https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3115954/why-taiwans-national-palace-museum-controversy-more-storm-teacup>>

halves causes friction in the dissemination and study of traditional Chinese culture and art.

A recent exhibition, however, could suggest a way forward. In 2015, to commemorate its ninetieth anniversary, the National Palace Museum in Taipei hosted a landmark exhibition of Giuseppe Castiglione's (1688–1766) work: 'Portrayals from a Brush Divine: A Special Exhibition on the Tricentennial of Giuseppe Castiglione's Arrival in China'. The dates provide a pretty alignment. 250 years before the National Palace Museum opened its doors in Taipei and brought the imperial collection to the public's shores in Taiwan, Castiglione landed in Macau from his native Milan and brought European painting techniques to the shores of China. Castiglione, who was known by his adopted Chinese name Lang Shi-ning, came to China as a Jesuit missionary, and served in the Qing court under the Kangxi (r 1661–1723), Yongzheng (r 1723–35), and Qianlong (r 1736–95) reigns. His work, consolidated as the personal property of the Qianlong emperor, was part of the imperial collection that formed the National Palace Museum in 1925. It is now split evenly between the Palace Museum in Beijing and the National Palace Museum in Taipei. For the exhibition, though, Beijing lent its collection of Castiglione's paintings and sketches to Taipei. In fact, since 2009, the Palace Museum in Beijing has been repeatedly willing to lend and collaborate with Taipei, although the National Palace Museum does not loan works to Beijing.<sup>23</sup> This spirit of collaboration has allowed a wonderfully comprehensive and popular exhibition to go ahead.

It is noteworthy that a Qing, eighteenth-century European court painter was chosen for this blockbuster exhibition commemorating the 'National' Palace Museum. Castiglione's work complicates the binary distinctions of 'Chinese' and 'European' art. His work is not of adherence to a 'national' identity, but of Early Modern global exchange and fluidity. The painting above (fig 1) is from Castiglione's bird-and-flower album *Immortal Blossoms in an Everlasting Spring*, a masterpiece of the Yongzheng reign. It shows how Castiglione harmonised Western perspective and shading techniques with the Chinese ink-and-colour-on-silk medium, achieving innovative and striking compositions. Other paintings such as the monumental *Hongli Troating for Deer*, which represents the Qianlong emperor on an imperial hunt, are considered by scholars such as Yang Bo-da to be collaborative. Castiglione's European-style portraits are set in a traditionally Han Chinese ink-scroll landscape, likely painted by Tangdai, a Manchu artist.<sup>24</sup> The fluid blending of two modes of representation in Castiglione's work underlines the ethnocultural syncretism of the Qing imperial polity.<sup>25</sup> The Qianlong emperor's 'National' collection was one of multi-ethnic diversity. His own Qing dynasty was Manchurian, there were European artists working in the Forbidden City, and court art had to synchronise with, yet innovate from, the Han imperial academic models.

It is in this spirit of a distinctly un-'National' imperial collection that I would like to conclude. The imperial collection, like much of

Chinese identity, is split between the Palace Museum in Beijing and the National Palace Museum in Taipei. However, a complex 'One China' need not be so restrictive to the dissemination of Chinese culture and art in the museum space. Collaboration between Beijing and Taipei, such as that for the Castiglione exhibition in 2015, can close, however momentarily, a stifling rift in what has always been an inherently multi-'National' imperial collection—to the great benefit of lovers of Chinese culture and art across the world. Though the National Palace Museum is indissolubly linked to an ever-changing Taiwanese identity, perhaps that change can be oriented towards a more dispersive definition of the 'National'—one for those looking at Taiwan from both the inside and outside, at least in the realm of art and in the spirit of wider dissemination.

<sup>23</sup>Kristina Kleutghen, 'Castiglione and China: Marking Anniversaries' (2016) *Journal 18: a journal of eighteenth-century art and culture* <<https://www.journal18.org/nq/castiglione-and-china-marking-anniversaries-by-kristina-kleutghen/>> accessed 21 February 2021.

<sup>24</sup>Yang Bo-da, 'Lang Shining zai Qing neiting de chuanguo huodong ji qi yishu chengjiu (Lang Shining's Creative Activities at the Qing Court and his Artistic Achievement)' in *Qing dai yuanyuanhua (Court Painting of the Qing Dynasty)* (Zijincheng chubanshe 1993) 49.

<sup>25</sup>Dorothy Berinstein, 'Hunts, Processions, and Telescopes: A Painting of an Imperial Hunt by Lang Shining (Giuseppe Castiglione)' (1999) 35 *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 170, 177.