

Revolutionizing Antiquity: The Shanghai Cultural Bureaucracy in the Cultural Revolution, 1966–1968^{*}

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ABSTRACT This article examines the response of Shanghai's cultural bureaucracy during the Attack on the Four Olds, the Red Guard repudiation of old culture launched in the early years of China's Cultural Revolution (1966–76). It focuses on how local officials, acting in a space created by the Central Cultural Revolution Group and the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee, worked to control the damage wrought by the political campaign and justified their activities by adapting the rhetoric of revolution. Based on the archival documents of the Shanghai Bureau of Culture, this article traces the reinvention of the cultural bureaucracy and the subsequent shift in the language of preservation. It argues that during the Cultural Revolution, there was an institutionalized and ideologically legitimated movement to protect historic sites and cultural objects. Faced with the destruction of antiquity, Shanghai officials instead proposed its rectification, defending cultural relics in the name of revolution.

The revolutions of 20th-century Chinese history have presented intellectuals with a persistent problem: what to do with Chinese tradition. From May Fourth iconoclasts to Red Guards to reform-era critics of Chinese culture, making revolution has often included a rejection of the past. Yet these revolutions – and the governments they brought to power – also derived legitimacy by representing antiquity and historical continuity. The Chinese Communist Party, like its Nationalist predecessor, incorporated antiquity into its revolution by protecting and preserving cultural relics, or *wenwu* 文物. From its inception, the state promulgated regulations, built museums, designated historic sites and established systems for collection, creating a cultural bureaucracy that nationalized

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China's *wenwu*.¹ But the fate of *wenwu* in Maoist China was not always secure, and the Attack on the Four Olds, a repudiation of old culture launched in the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), threatened to destroy cultural relics as excrescences on the revolution.

The problem of defining antiquity for revolution has precedents. In the case of revolutionary France, the abbé Henri Grégoire first coined the term “vandalism” in 1794 to defend the monuments of the *ancien régime*. Grégoire framed the preservation of monuments in the language of republican nationalism, creating a rhetoric which reinscribed monuments with revolution.² In the same period museums were used to recontextualize culture, placing sculpture and paintings in chronological order and casting sacred objects as art.³ As in the French case, the Russian Revolution began with a period of iconoclasm that was swiftly stemmed by the Bolshevik authorities. Within the first year of revolution, the provisional government established a system for protecting cultural objects for the masses. In this way, Richard Stites has argued, Bolshevik iconoclasm “turned out to be the iconoclasm of disarming, demythologizing, and antiquarianism,” following Lenin in building socialist culture out of the culture of past and present.⁴

It is the image of Red Guard iconoclasm that remains in present-day understanding of the Cultural Revolution, and this period is seen as one of the most critical threats to Chinese culture in the 20th century.⁵ A narrative of chaotic destruction is documented in both Chinese and Western scholarship, and in popular memoirs.⁶ Several recent works, however, have challenged this view. Studying cultural practice during the Cultural Revolution, Paul Clark argues that the creativity and popularization of these arts – including opera, ballet, film and others – are part of the 20th-century narrative of modernizing culture in China.⁷ In addition to cultural construction there was also cultural defence. Dahpon Ho's path-breaking study of preservation during the Four Olds campaign has shown that such attempts were central and local; using the example

1 Jocelyne Fresnais, *La protection du patrimoine en République populaire de Chine: 1949–1999* (Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 2001). See also Denise Ho, “Antiquity in revolution: cultural relics in 20th-century Shanghai,” PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2009.

2 Anthony Vidler, “The paradoxes of vandalism: Henri Grégoire and the Thermidorian discourse on historical monuments,” in Jeremy D. Popkin and Richard H. Popkin (eds.), *The Abbé Grégoire and His World* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), pp. 129–56.

3 Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in 18th-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 155–97.

4 Richard Stites, “Iconoclastic currents in the Russian Revolution: destroying and preserving the past,” in Abbot Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites (eds.), *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 17.

5 A recent exception is Mobo Gao, *The Battle for China's Past: Mao and the Cultural Revolution* (London & Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2008).

6 For surveys of the Cultural Revolution, see Wang Nianyi, *Da dongluan de niandai (The Age of the Great Turmoil)* (Zhengzhou: Henan remin chubanshe, 1988) and Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006). For French scholarship on Chinese patrimony see Fresnais and Zhang Liang, *La naissance du concept du patrimoine en Chine: XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions Recherches, 2003).

7 Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

of the Confucius Temple complex, he also demonstrates that local resistance could be organized and bottom-up.⁸ I attempt to contribute to this scholarship by offering a case study of Shanghai as a centre of art collection, by emphasizing the institutional role in preservation⁹ and highlighting the complexity of the bureaucratic response.¹⁰

This article, based on archival documents of the Shanghai Bureau of Culture, traces the reinvention of the cultural bureaucracy over the years 1966–68 and the subsequent shift in the language of preservation. It argues that during the Cultural Revolution, there was an institutionalized and ideologically legitimated movement to protect historic sites and cultural objects. During the Attack on the Four Olds, cultural officials were faced with a number of dilemmas. How could they protect the objects under their care without defying the revolution? How could they evaluate the direction of a political campaign and situate their work within the movement? What risks could they take at the local level and what had to wait for more powerful patronage?

This study begins with the Attack on the Four Olds in Shanghai in the summer of 1966. It shows that in 1966 the activities of Shanghai Museum officials and the Shanghai Cultural Relics Commission, *Shanghai shi wenwu guanli weiyuanhui* 上海市文物管理委员会, were mostly reactive, intervening to collect objects confiscated during house searches and salvaging *wenwu* from historic sites. It then examines a series of meetings in Beijing, convened by Qi Benyu 戚本禹 of the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG) with members of Beijing cultural institutions such as the Palace Museum and the Beijing Library. It traces the April 1967 establishment of the Shanghai Municipal Small Group for Sorting Cultural Relics and Books, *Shanghai shi chachao wenwu tushu qingli xiaozu* 上海市查抄文物图书清理小组, to these meetings, using unpublished ephemera and the records of the Bureau of Culture to show that the CCRG created a space for local action that was then institutionalized by the Shanghai

8 Dahpon David Ho, “To protect and preserve: resisting the Destroy the Four Olds campaign, 1966–1967,” in Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Andrew G. Walder (eds.), *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 64–95.

9 The institutional role in preservation has either been minimized or misunderstood. For gazetteers, see Ma Chengyuan, Huang Xianfeng and Li Junjie (eds.), *Shanghai wenwu bowuguan zhi* (*Gazetteer of Shanghai's Cultural Relics and Museums*) (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1997). For Party histories, compare “Tushuguan, wenwu he bowuguan, dang’anguan” (“Libraries, cultural relics, museums and archives”) in *Dangdai Zhongguo de Shanghai* (*Shanghai in Contemporary China*) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1993), pp. 293–323 and Li Junjie, “Wenbo sanshi nian quzhe licheng” (“30 years of complicated progression in cultural relics and museums”), in Xie Liping and Huang Jian (eds.), *Feng yu licheng: 1949–1978* (*Trials and Hardships: 1949–1978*) (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2005). In a recent landmark survey, MacFarquhar and Schoenhals explain that Shanghai set up a “Bureau for sorting looted goods” after the end of the Cultural Revolution: MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, p. 117. The authors cite the memoir of Nien Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), pp. 504–13. Actually, Nien Cheng does not say when this bureau was set up.

10 Eddy U provides a study of bureaucratic fragmentation during the Cultural Revolution. The co-optation of intellectuals in the education system offers an interesting parallel to the employment of artists and connoisseurs in the cultural bureaucracy. Eddy U, *Disorganizing China: Counter-Bureaucracy and the Decline of Socialism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

Revolutionary Committee. Finally, it focuses on how the Wenwu Small Group wrote about its activities and how its self-construction changed over time. By late summer 1967 the Wenwu Small Group began to date its activities to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, defending cultural relics in the name of revolution and claiming that preservation was a mission of the Cultural Revolution all along. The Shanghai cultural officials, through their work and their writing about it, had an answer to the problem of antiquity in revolution: without historic continuity, there could be no new culture.

The Attack on the Four Olds and the Shanghai Cultural Relics Commission

The Cultural Revolution was simultaneously an attack on political enemies believed to be undermining the revolution and a call for China's young people to make revolution. For these young people, or Red Guards, making revolution included attacking the so-called Four Olds: old thinking, old culture, old customs and old habits. Believing that they were fulfilling Chairman Mao's directive, Red Guards set about ransacking personal collections and destroying historic sites and temples. By late August 1966 the Attack on the Four Olds had spread from Beijing all over the country.¹¹ As the movement broke out in Shanghai, Red Guards streamed through the streets from dawn until the middle of the night, proclaiming themselves the critics of the old world and the builders of the new.¹²

But despite the assertiveness of Red Guard claims and the violence of their actions, the Attack on the Four Olds was ill-defined. What exactly constituted the Four Olds, and what did it mean to attack them? As Wang Nianyi has argued, though the phrase Four Olds can be traced to central speeches and documents, the distinction between "old" and "new" was never made clear.¹³ A manifesto by Red Guards in Beijing demonstrates how the Attack on the Four Olds could be open-ended. This statement listed "100 ways for destroying the old and establishing the new," explaining that Red Guards must "raise high the great red banner of Mao Zedong Thought, open savage fire on the 'Four Olds,' and smash to bits imperialist, revisionist, and bourgeois goods and all things not in accord with Chairman Mao's thought."¹⁴ However, there is only

11 Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao (trans. and ed. D.W.Y. Kwok), *Turbulent Decade* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), pp. 71–72 and Yu Hui (ed.), *Hongweibing mi lu Hongweibing mi lu (Secret Records of the Red Guards)* (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 1993), pp. 192–93.

12 See e.g. "Shanghai Tianjin geming xiaojiang he shangye zhigong xiang boxuejiji 'sijiu' fadong zong-gong: huiqi geming tie saozhou, hengsao yiqie jiuixisu" ("Revolutionary little generals and commercial works in Shanghai and Tianjin make a general offensive against the Four Olds of the exploiting classes: raising the revolutionary iron broom, they sweep away all old customs"), *People's Daily*, 25 August 1966, p. 2.

13 Wang Nianyi, *The Age of the Great Turmoil*, pp. 67–68.

14 "Po sjiu xin yibailie" ("100 items for destroying the old and establishing the new"), Mao Zedong zhuyi xuexiao hongweibing (Mao Zedong Ideology School), August 1966, in Song Yongyi (ed.), *Zhongguo wenhua da geming wenku (Chinese Cultural Revolution Database)* (Hong Kong: Xianggang Zhongwen

one clear instruction on cultural relics in this manifesto: bookshops for classical books were ordered out of business. The manifesto declared, “all bookstores and libraries must be internally purified and must clear away all poisonous weeds; do not permit these goods of the bourgeois ideology to be poured into our youth ever again.”¹⁵ Throughout, both the proper means for smashing the Four Olds and the correct attitude towards them remained vague.

Framed in this way, the Attack on the Four Olds gave rein to two possibilities. On the one hand, it could be interpreted as licence to total destruction. On the other, the lack of clear instruction suggested an opportunity to museum officials: they could collect cultural relics and preserve them in order to mount proper criticism. As Red Guards invaded the homes of Shanghai’s well-to-do, searching for evidence of counterrevolution and remnants of the Four Olds, the meaning of “attack” determined the fate of the “olds.”¹⁶ Recently published biographies of collectors, as well as interviews conducted in the reform period, show that officials from the Shanghai Museum sometimes intervened in the house searches.¹⁷ In several examples, collectors telephoned the Shanghai Museum in the middle of a search, urging the staff to rush over with trucks and take the art objects back to the museum.¹⁸

The archival record of the Shanghai Bureau of Culture reflects both the widespread damage to cultural relics and the political uncertainty in which the cultural officials operated. At the outset of the Cultural Revolution, the Bureau of Culture and the Cultural Relics Commission were still entrusted with *wenwu* units (*wenwu baohu danwei* 文物保护单位), and answered to the Shanghai Municipal Government.¹⁹ In October 1966, the Shanghai Cultural Relics Commission inspected its *wenwu* units, which included graves, guildhalls, temples, a cathedral and historic houses.²⁰ The purpose of the Commission’s report

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daxue Zhongguo yanjiu fuwu zhongxin, 2002) (*WDGW*). The translation of this document comes from Michael Schoenhals (ed.), *China’s Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969: Not a Dinner Party* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 212.

15 *Ibid.* p. 216.

16 It should be noted that house searches were even more extensive in Shanghai than in Beijing. Compared with 33,695 in Beijing, in Shanghai a total of 84,222 homes were searched. Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Ten Years of Turbulence: The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1993), p. 98, and Yu Hui (ed.), *Secret Records of the Red Guards*, p. 193. There is a small discrepancy between these two sources: *Secret Records of the Red Guards* lists 33,600 households in Beijing and 84,222 in Shanghai. Another account records 150,000 households searched in Shanghai Municipality: Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade*, p. 79.

17 Zheng Zhong, *Haishang shoucang shijia (Collectors in Shanghai)* (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2003), pp. 147, 247, 311, 335, 376–77.

18 “Qingtong de youhuo: Yang Lan fangtan Ma Chengyuan” (“The allure of bronzes: Yang Lang interviews Ma Chengyuan”), *Wenhui bao*, 10 October 2004.

19 In January 1967 the municipal government was overthrown and the Shanghai Party Committee was replaced by the Shanghai People’s Commune, renamed the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee on 23 February. The new Bureau of Culture then answered to the Revolutionary Committee. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution*, pp. 166–69.

20 Shanghai Municipal Archive (SMA), B172-3-5.

to the People's Committee was to describe the state of damage to the city's 36 *wenwu* units and to request that their status as protected sites be revoked. The report treated the liquidation of the *wenwu* units as an ordinary bureaucratic matter, only once explaining that the change would accord with the "current great attack on the Four Olds and great establishment of the Four News in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution."²¹ Removing the *wenwu* unit label, the Commission transferred responsibility for the sites to lower levels of the municipal hierarchy, although some sites were not even transferred because they had been completely destroyed, *gaodiao* 搞掉, by Red Guards and their accompanying "revolutionary masses."

While the Commission's report reflected the damaged state of the *wenwu* units in autumn 1966, and while its impassive language and withdrawal of responsibility indicates at once political extremity and exigency, a number of other suggestions reveal that there was a salvage operation at work. Four places, a temple, a guildhall and two pagodas in the suburbs, were determined to have "definite historical value," and the Commission directed its members to take photographs and make surveys and maps if any of the buildings were later to be removed, reconstructed or demolished.²² The Commission also recommended that some artifacts, including temple deities, Confucius tablets and grave markers, be removed and stored. And further, it stressed that if any construction or agricultural development was to take place in the vicinity of historic graves, it retained the right to co-ordinate excavation.²³ Throughout, the report revealed that officials of the Cultural Relics Commission had been quietly engaging in damage control, actively selecting those "moveable" parts of the historic sites, taking them down and storing them elsewhere. Even the photography and surveys served the purposes of preservation, allowing buildings to remain a subject of study and allowing for the possibility of later restoration and rebuilding.

Yet the Commission's response to the Attack on the Four Olds remained a reactive programme of salvage and damage control. Much of the destruction was neither pre-empted nor prevented: all the images of the gods in the City God Temple were smashed, at the Chenxiang Pavilion all the Buddhas were destroyed, the Jing'an Temple lost all its cultural relics, the thousands of volumes of scripture at the Longhua Temple were burned, and the Xujiahui Cathedral's steeples were damaged and its interior torched.²⁴ Whether designated *wenwu*

21 SMA B172-3-5, p. 12. The suggestion was approved two weeks later by the People's Committee.

22 *Ibid.* The sites included the Guangfu Temple, the Merchant Shipping Guild, the Yuxiang Temple Pagoda in Jiading county and the Jiyunchan Temple Pagoda in Qingpu county. The Guangfu Temple was eventually razed to make way for a three-storey office building in 1969. At that time the Shanghai Museum approved its destruction as a building with "little historical value." SMA B172-3-28, p. 40.

23 SMA B172-3-5, pp. 12–14.

24 Ma Chengyuan, Huang Xuanfeng and Li Junjie (eds.), *Shanghai wenwu bowuguan zhi* (*Gazetteer of Shanghai's Cultural Relics and Museums*) (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1997) (*SHWWBWGZ*). See individual entries, pp. 171, 174, 177. For an account of the destruction at the Longhua Temple, see Jin Ding, "Bu dao de Longhua ta" ("Longhua pagoda wasn't destroyed"), in Chen Pengju (ed.), *Shoucang lishi* (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1998), pp. 235–37.

units or not, Shanghai's historic sites were at the mercy of Red Guards. The cultural officials needed powerful patronage. It would not be until early 1967 that sanction from central authorities would grant them an ideological and institutional space in which to manoeuvre.

Reconstituting Cultural Authority at the Centre and the Localities

On 1 December 1966, Qi Benyu, a junior member of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, made a speech at the Palace Museum. Qi Benyu went to the Palace Museum as a CCRG member, but also as someone who was by background an intellectual and – as a later meeting revealed – someone standing in for those in the CCRG who wished to safeguard cultural relics.²⁵ His revolutionary credentials made it possible for him to go to the Palace Museum, where he suggested to its officials that the Palace be converted into a site for inculcating class consciousness. He proposed a “Revolutionary Palace Museum,” which would not destroy its collection but instead protect cultural relics as the people's property and use the imperial collection for class education.²⁶

About two months later, Qi Benyu convened a second meeting, this time with a large group of cultural officials assembled from Beijing libraries, cultural relic and archaeology work units, and museums.²⁷ The transcript of this meeting of 27 January reveals a number of things about *wenwu* in Beijing in early 1967. First, it shows that ordinary people were pre-empting Red Guards, destroying their own collections or selling them for scrap.²⁸ Second, it reveals that Beijing cultural institutions – like their Shanghai counterparts – were both acutely aware of the destruction of cultural relics and fearful to intervene. And finally, it suggests that Qi Benyu, representing others in the CCRG, was willing to provide political cover for the project of preservation.²⁹

25 Qi Benyu was originally an historian at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. In 1961 he worked in a locomotive and rolling-stock works in Beijing and wrote to Mao criticizing its supervision by the Beijing Municipal Committee under Peng Zhen. In 1963, he wrote an article critical of Liu Shaoqi. He was appointed to the CCRG in September 1966, and made associate editor of *Red Flag* in February 1967. In February 1968 he was attacked and purged for ultra-leftism. See *Who's Who in Communist China* (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1969), Vol.1, pp. 128–29, and *Chinese Communist Who's Who* (Taipei: Institute of International Relations, 1970), Vol. 1, pp. 133–34. On the purge of Qi, see *Qi Benyu ziliao ji* (*Collected Materials on Qi Benyu*), Harvard-Yenching Library. Qi's role in cultural preservation does not seem well-known, although today one can find this account on the internet.

26 “Qi Benyu zai gugong de jianghua” (“Qi Benyu's speech at the Palace Museum”), 1 December 1966, *Wuchan jieji wenhua dageming cankao ziliao*, Vol. 4, in *WDGW*.

27 This meeting came two weeks after Qi led denunciations of the leadership of the Ministry of Culture. “Qi Benyu zai Wenhua bu bianlunhui shang de jianghua” (“Qi Benyu's speech at a debate at the Ministry of Culture”), January 1, 1967, Beijing bolizongchang hongweibing lianjiezhān (eds.), *Zhongyang shouzhāng jianghua*, March 1967, in *WDGW*.

28 On burning confiscated items, see Wang Nianyi, *The Age of the Great Turmoil*, p. 71.

29 “Qi Benyu yu tushu wenwu kaogu bowuguan deng danwei geming zaofanpai daibiao zuotan” (“A discussion meeting with Qi Benyu and representatives from the revolutionary rebel factions of work units representing libraries, cultural relics, archaeology, museums, etc.”), 27 January 1967, *Wuchan jieji wenhuadageming shouzhāng jianghua huibian*, April 1967, in *WDGW*. The following quotations all come from this document.

Qi opened his speech by invoking his comrades Chen Boda 陈伯达 and Kang Sheng 康生. They were concerned, he stated, about the confiscated books being sold for scrap paper. He stressed that rare editions had to be preserved, and that the work of cultural relic management needed to be appropriately understood. He called on his audience to discuss the current situation.

An official from the China Bookstore (Zhongguo shudian 中国书店), which dealt in secondhand publications, spoke first. “The China Bookstore currently doesn’t accept books.”

“Why?” demanded Qi.

“There are some schools who think that old books no longer have any use. The Institute for Architectural Science (Jianshu kexue yanjiuyuan 建筑科学研究院) is completely stacked with books; we’ve carried over several cartloads. Residents are burning their calligraphy and painting.”

“Why?” asked Qi.

A representative from the New China Bookstore (Xinhua shudian 新华书店) echoed his colleague: “Old books are no longer being sold ... At the local level they’ve also said that in the counties many books are being burned; during the Attack on the Four Olds in August, the number of books burned was especially large.” Other institutes chimed in to explain how books were being recycled for paper, that an important collection was designated for pulp, that the Beijing Library had sorted through its stacks and sent books to the paper plant, and that neither individuals nor institutions were willing to buy up these potentially dangerous books.

Qi Benyu was indignant. “I myself will buy them! There are some that are necessary for reading ... You rebel groups also don’t approve of burning books, [so] you can write a proposal, ‘Don’t burn string-bound books,’ what about that? ... When those in the humanities need to read these books, they can be made into internal publications!” He explained, “The proletariat needs to carry out struggle with [the books] and you also need these things as [objects of] criticism.”

Throughout his dialogue with the cultural work units, Qi Benyu’s remarks jumped back and forth between practical measures and ideological justifications. He ordered cultural work units to take in old books. Paying a small amount for books, he asserted, should be permitted. The books could be maintained on site, managed by proletarian revolutionary factions, and if they required more storage space Qi suggested that they use the Beijing Confucius Temple. The paper factories, he continued, should have a meeting with the Institutes of History, the Bureau of Cultural Relics (*Wenwu ju* 文物局), the Beijing Library, the China Bookstore, and the library at the Academy of Sciences. Factory workers had to be trained to retrieve old books from scrap paper.

Qi Benyu returned several times to the idea of writing a proposal. While confirming the rightness of the Attack on the Four Olds, he stressed that burning books was not a solution. Although the Qin Emperor had burned books, the people in antiquity had not understood proper critique. “Real proletarians”

would understand that only through criticism could problems be resolved. Qi explained that the fact that “the broad masses do not have to read these old things is a great liberation. But a small number of people have to read these things, those who research history can read them. This is in order to make criticism, in order to develop Marxism, Leninism and science.” At the end of the meeting Qi ordered the cultural institutes to make reports on the state of cultural preservation, and to confer with Red Guards. They should write a proposal, organize and protect cultural relics, search for objects confiscated by Red Guards, and ensure that these objects be turned over to the state. No matter what faction they belonged to, Qi stressed, all cultural institutions had to adhere to three principles: separate out books, protect and manage cultural relics, and do not destroy.³⁰

Two weeks later, a wall flyer appeared on the streets in Shanghai. Signed by the “revolutionary factions” of Beijing’s cultural institutions, the manifesto printed on the flyer made the argument that in order to establish China’s new culture, Red Guards and proletarian revolutionaries had to protect and preserve the objects of China’s ancient culture. The authors asserted that this project was both in line with Chairman Mao’s teachings and appropriate to the new stage of the Cultural Revolution, announcing that:

If we only burn up antiquated books, periodicals, calligraphy, and painting, we will ... lose the object of our criticism ... Therefore, the broad Red Guard and proletarian revolutionaries ... have adopted an efficient measure to protect the ancient books, periodicals, paintings, and calligraphy with value, and mercilessly smash the slanders of imperialism and revisionism to our country’s great Cultural Revolution, and destroy the shameless lies in all of ancient culture.³¹

Though this flyer appeared to be a bottom-up proposal from the Beijing cultural institutions, other factors make it evident that it was the directions of Qi Benyu — and by extension the CCRG — that made it possible. First, a number of the signatories were present at the January meeting.³² Second, the authors followed many of Qi Benyu’s instructions, both in the practical measures for preservation, and in their invocation of Red Guard activities and their revolutionary rhetoric. Third, in the context of the re-radicalizing of the Cultural Revolution after the February Countercurrent, the cultural institutions would have had ever more need for CCRG support.³³ And finally, we know from the archive

30 This note ends the quotations from *ibid.*

31 Beijing zaozhi zongchang shoudu zhigong geming zaofanzhe lianzongzhan (Beijing Paper-Making Industrial Complex Worker’s Revolutionary Rebels United Station) *et al.*, “Guanyu baohu gujiu shukan zihua de changyishu” (“Proposal regarding the protection of ancient and old books, periodicals, calligraphy and painting”), unpublished flyer, 15 February 1967.

32 Specifically, workers from the Beijing Library, the China Bookstore and the New China Bookstore had both attended the meeting and signed the petition. Additionally, several institutions mentioned at the meeting then appeared as petitioners, including the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Palace Museum and the Museum of Chinese History.

33 Despite the success of Shanghai’s “January storm,” a number of measures were taken in February 1967 to rein in the excesses of the Red Guards. Mao turned on these critics in mid-February, and the “February Countercurrent” was used by the CCRG against the Party leadership. Though it would be tempting to link the flyer to the February Countercurrent, I would argue that in its aftermath, it was all the more imperative that protecting cultural relics be defined as revolutionary.

that the proposals in the document were backed by other suggestions that were sent through official channels of power at the same time. On the day the flyer was sent out, the Chinese Academy of Sciences sent a telegram to the Shanghai Bureau of Culture to request reports on cultural relics.³⁴ A few days later, the CCRG issued a directive to the Ministry of Culture and the Bureau of Cultural Relics, notifying all subordinates to identify and protect metal Buddhas or other cultural relics that had been sent to metal smelting plants.³⁵ So the cultural institutions in Beijing did meet and organize as Qi suggested, and the proposal on the flyer thus represents a turning point in the protection of cultural relics in the Cultural Revolution.

It is worth analysing the proposal that was posted in Shanghai, which was at once self-declaration, ideological lesson and manifesto. The proposal was a carefully crafted text, beginning with a Mao Zedong quotation from “New Democracy” which was already familiar to museum and cultural workers: “China’s long period of feudal society created a magnificent ancient culture.” It was necessary to understand the development of ancient culture, distinguishing its feudal from its democratic nature, in order to “develop new democratic culture.”³⁶ The proposal praised the accomplishments of the Cultural Revolution and confirmed the rightness of the Red Guards’ Attack on the Four Olds. Within the Cultural Bureaus, the authors affirmed, “capitalist revolutionary academics” had “carried out a dictatorship over the proletariat, giving a big green light to the classical books and periodicals, emphatically admiring them, using them to propagate the old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits of the exploiting classes, resisting the spread of Mao Zedong Thought and preparing for a restoration of the capitalist system.”³⁷ But there was a correct way to attack the Four Olds and one could not burn books. Instead, one had to assimilate the excellence of the “ancient people’s culture” while rejecting the bad influences of the Four Olds. In order to do this, Red Guards should “strengthen the protection for antiquated books and periodicals, paintings and calligraphy, and historical documents.”

The cultural institutions then proposed a series of practical measures for cultural protection. Purchasing bureaus for books and documents in first and

34 SMA B172-3-5, pp. 8–9. Page 9 is the original telegram. The Shanghai Bureau of Culture’s reply is not copied in the archive. This telegram was also sent to other cities, and a reply was requested within two days.

35 SMA B172-3-5, p.1. This document was relayed from the Ministry of Culture to the Bureau of Culture, whereupon it was relayed to areas under Shanghai Municipality’s jurisdiction and other counties in the east China area. Shanghai’s subordinates, the Cultural Relics Commission, the Shanghai Museum and various Shanghai recycling companies, were notified. A more detailed order from the CCRG followed in March, requesting that localities manage all relics from the Four Olds campaign, “to be taken care of after the movement is over.” SMA B172-3-5, p.4. This document was copied to the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee, originally received from the Ministry of Culture on 28 March 1967, and received at Shanghai on 12 April 1967.

36 Mao wrote the essay “On New Democracy” in 1940. See *The Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1954), pp. 153–55.

37 Beijing zaozhi zongchang *et al.*, “Proposal regarding the protection of ancient and old books, periodicals, calligraphy and painting.”

second-tier cities should resume buying, in order to take such books out of circulation. Libraries, cultural palaces, offices, organizations and schools all over China should “temporarily seal up for safekeeping” the objects of their collection, and forbid their haphazard disposal. Likewise, any paper mill that might receive such materials should also seal them up, take care of them and allow the revolutionary rebel factions in the cultural bureaus to assist. Finally, private collections were not to be destroyed; “relevant bureaus should welcome and take in individual sales and donations.” The authors of the proposal called upon Red Guards for assistance in this revolutionary project.³⁸

If the proposal of the cultural institutions is compared to the CCRG directive, also issued in mid-February 1967, there is a contrast in language and content. The proposal was both ideological and practical; the CCRG gave no ideological justification for the preservation of metal Buddhas. Originating at the centre of power, perhaps the source of authority was revolutionary enough. But when they are read together it can be seen how they were linked, and how the movement to preserve culture was both bottom-up and top-down. While the cultural institutions did not make their case independently, the patronage of the CCRG did not negate the agency of officials at Beijing or in Shanghai. Through both the signals and the directives from the centre, cultural authorities in Shanghai were granted a space to mobilize in their own local place.

Rewriting History: The Reports of the Wenwu Small Group

In April 1967, the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee established an ad hoc team of cultural workers from various institutions, the Shanghai Municipal Small Group for Sorting Cultural Relics and Books (Wenwu Small Group). The establishment of the Wenwu Small Group was facilitated by CCRG encouragement of “revolutionary cadres.”³⁹ Its members came from 12 different work units, including the municipal Bureau of Culture and the Commission for Cultural Relics.⁴⁰ It was divided into four teams, a *wenwu* and books receiving group, a group for the organization and management of these collected *wenwu*, a group for the rescue of metal objects and books, and a group of personnel who travelled to inspect the surrounding counties of Shanghai.⁴¹ The reports

38 This section ends the citations from *ibid.*

39 Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong both stressed the creation of a “three-in-one” combination that would include revolutionary cadres. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, p. 158. This first appeared in *Red Flag* and was reprinted in a *People's Daily* editorial on 10 March 1967. On 11 March the Central Committee ordered all organizations to follow suit. Li Kwok-sing (ed.), *A Glossary of Political Terms of the People's Republic of China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1995), pp. 270–71. This combination was attempted in the Wenwu Small Group as well, SMA B172-3-5, p. 16.

40 Another secondary source lists 16 work units and explains that at its height the Wenwu Small Group had 106 workers. Li Junjie, “30 years of complicated progression in cultural relics and museums,” p. 214. Unfortunately the individual members were not listed, and all correspondence was signed by the Wenwu Small Group as an organization.

41 SMA B172-3-5, p. 26.

that the Wenwu Small Group made during 1967 describe the state of cultural relics in the aftermath of the Attack on the Four Olds, and show how local officials attempted to deal with them.

Their first report, from the end of May 1967, documented the team's visits to over 70 work units, to understand and evaluate how these units, in both the municipality and the countryside, were dealing with confiscated *wenwu*. Within the city, over 100 workers collected and began to sort confiscated objects. The items were temporarily stored at the Jade Buddha Temple; books were channelled through cultural relic stores and sent onward to the Shanghai Library.⁴² Going to the countryside, the Wenwu Small Group visited ten counties over six days, assessing local management of *wenwu* and books seized by Red Guards. The team found that each of the ten counties and even some of the communes had small groups for confiscated property, but reported that "the average worker in charge of management doesn't understand the professional work of *wenwu* and books ... in some of the counties, the books and calligraphy were burned, the ceramics were broken and the metals were sold."⁴³ They found many cases of neglect and some of destruction; they remarked with chagrin that those responsible for Longhua Temple had incorrectly "used 'Four Olds' as a principle to deal with things," burning all the books and scriptures at the temple.⁴⁴ But in other cases, the Wenwu Small Group found more organization. Perhaps in response to the directives of the Bureau of Culture, the Songjiang County Museum had collected over 40,000 volumes of books and 3,000 pieces of painting and calligraphy.⁴⁵ To improve local management, the Wenwu Small Group suggested that each county be assigned a supervisor from the Bureau of Culture and Education, that workers centralize confiscated *wenwu* and books in each county seat, and that local officials choose several artifacts from among those *wenwu* to show their workers how to recognize and salvage an object as a cultural relic.

In the weeks that the Wenwu Small Group was organizing logistics and gathering information, the Central Committee issued its own statement on protecting cultural relics and books on 14 May.⁴⁶ The language of the Central Committee's

42 It is interesting to note that throughout this process the Shanghai Wenwu Small Group referred to its Beijing counterparts and knew what they were doing. For more on the logistics of the operation, see SMA B172-3-5, pp. 15–17 and Ho, "Antiquity in revolution," pp. 239–41.

43 SMA B172-3-5, p. 21.

44 *Ibid.* p. 27.

45 *Ibid.* p. 27. Songjiang county appears to be exceptional, perhaps because of historic wealth and culture in the town.

46 "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu wuchan jieji wenhuadageming zhong baohu wenwu tushu de jidian yijian" ("Several opinions from the Central Committee in regards to protecting cultural relics and books during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution"), 14 May 1967, *Wuchan jieji wenhua dageming wenjian huibian*, 1 April 1968 in *WDGW*. Also reprinted in *Wenhua dageming ziliao*, p. 463. Before this 14 May directive, there was an earlier central document issued by the Central Committee, the State Council and the Military Affairs Committee on 16 March regarding state property. "Zhonggong zhongyang, guowuyuan, zhongyangujunwei guanyu baohu guojia caichan, jiejue nao geming de tongzhi" ("Notice from the Central Committee, the State Council and the Military Affairs Committee on protecting state property and economizing when making revolution"), *Wuchan jieji wenhuadageming youguan wenjian huiji*, Vol. 2, June 1967, in *WDGW*. Dahpon Ho interprets the 14 May suggestions as a clarification of the 16 March circular.

statement was familiar. It praised the Cultural Revolution and its rupture with the Four Olds, but stressed that preserving the “cultural quintessence created by the labouring people throughout history” was needed for building new culture. The Central Committee reiterated ideas that cultural workers would have already heard: protecting revolutionary sites was a way to propagate Mao Zedong thought, ancient sites were to be transformed into places of class education, and books were to be saved as negative teaching materials and objects of criticism. The administrative measures that the Central Committee proposed were also redundant and are not enumerated here. Overall, the Central Committee’s suggestions were repetitive and late, a rubber stamp for activities that were several months in the making. The documents from February 1967 onwards show that it was on the basis of directives from the CCRG that the Wenwu Small Group was formed. But perhaps this high-level veneer was politically desirable, because in June 1967 the Central Committee’s name appeared in conjunction with the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee on yet another wall flyer explaining the protection of cultural relics to the public.

This June 1967 flyer looks much the same as the proposal from the Beijing cultural officials of February 1967. The text was prefaced by the same Mao Zedong quotation. But apart from this obligatory heading, the document, issued on 19 June 1967 by the Political Propaganda Group of the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee, had no other ideological argument. It explained that the Wenwu Small Group had been formed following the spirit of the Central Committee directive (no mention of *ex post facto*), and that it was led by the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee. The text explained the institutional function of the Wenwu Small Group and called on both work units and Red Guards to help it identify confiscated objects.⁴⁷ The flyer was straightforward, legitimating the Wenwu Small Group as a product of both central and local, Party and Revolutionary Committee action. What is more remarkable about the flyer is that, in contrast with the February proposal, there were no arguments for why the protection of cultural relics was important. With the exception of the Mao quotation as a header, it was a bureaucratic authorization of an already accepted doctrine rather than a revolutionary call to arms.

This change does indeed reflect the local political climate of the first half of 1967. While the authors of the February proposal had to justify their ideas to the public, by June the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee was firmly in control of Shanghai, and their approval of the Wenwu Small Group made its work both acceptable and officially “revolutionary.” But the shift, I would argue, was more

47 Shanghai shi geming weiyuanhui zhengzhi xuanchuan zu (Shanghai Revolutionary Committee, Political Propaganda Group), “Genju Zhonggong zhongyang zhishi jingsheng, Shanghai shi wenwu tushu qingli xiaozu zai shi geming wenwu weiyuanhui de zhijie lingdaoxia yijing zhengshi chengli, bing kaishi guozuo” (“According to the spirit of the directive of the Chinese Communist Party, the Shanghai Municipal Small Group for Sorting Cultural Relics and Books has already been formally established and has begun their work under the direct leadership of the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee”), unpublished flyer, 19 June 1967.

than a transfer of bureaucratic power. Rather, by mid-1967 protecting cultural relics was ideologically legitimated, so much so that the Wenwu Small Group began to rewrite its institutional history, casting its revolutionary project as one which began with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁸

Before turning to the content and language of these reports from August and November 1967, it is worth exploring a significant discrepancy in the Wenwu Small Group's construction of itself. Each of its reports began with a brief institutional history. In May 1967, it stated that it was established in April. From the archival record, there is no reason to doubt this.⁴⁹ But by October 1967 it claimed its work began in August 1966, laying claim to any and all activities related to cultural preservation since the Cultural Revolution began. This temporal conflation changes our reading of the documents in two ways. First, it complicates understanding of the chronology of preservation efforts. If the work the reports describe began when the Wenwu Small Group was founded in April, then there was a shift in the cultural bureaucracy goals, from salvage and sorting to the targeted collection of objects still in the possession of private collectors. Alternatively, if the work they describe truly began in August 1966, then officials accompanied Red Guards from the outbreak of the Attack on the Four Olds. Of course, one possibility does not exclude the other, which leads to a second way of interpreting the historical fiction of the reports: the legitimation of the Wenwu Small Group and its mission allowed cultural officials to represent early efforts as purposeful and directed objectives of the Cultural Revolution itself.

Supported by central and local legitimacy, the Wenwu Small Group's rhetoric was more sophisticated and sure-footed than that of the Beijing cultural institutions earlier in the year. It also used Mao quotations, this time extracted from his report to the Sixth Plenum of the Central Committee in 1938:

Another of our tasks is to study our historical heritage and use the Marxist method to sum it up critically. The history of this great nation of ours goes back several thousand years. It has its own laws of development, its own national characteristics and many precious treasures. As regards all this, we are mere schoolboys. Today's China is an outgrowth of historic China. We are Marxist historicists; we must not mutilate history. From Confucius to Sun Yat-sen, we must sum it up critically, and we must constitute ourselves as the heirs to this precious legacy. Conversely, the assimilation of this legacy itself becomes a method that aids considerably in guiding the present great movement.⁵⁰

48 The work of the Wenwu Small Group remained sensitive, and their reports were classified and labelled top secret (*jimi*). Its report of August 1967 was sent directly to the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee and the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee Political Propaganda Group. It was also copied to the CCRG, various Revolutionary Committee Groups, and the Shanghai Bureaus of Real Estate, Culture, Publishing and Finance. I presume that this report was vetted, rewritten and issued a second time in November for the Central Committee and the CCRG. The revised November report is the last document I located in the archival record.

49 Official history also lists the founding date as April 1967. *SHWWBWGZ*, p. 376.

50 SMA B172-3-5, p. 30. Though it was not specifically credited, this quotation is from "The new stage in the development of the National War of Resistance Against Japan and the Anti-Japanese National United Front" (Report to the Enlarged Sixth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 12–14 October 1938), in Stuart R. Schram (ed.), *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings, 1912–1949*, Vol. VI: The New Stage, 1937–1938 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 538. I use Schram's translation.

Mao's quotation was a defence of history and its "precious treasures" (*zhengui pin* 珍贵品), and his words were used by the authors of the report to take their revolutionary project one step further. Rather than explain the collecting and preserving of objects scattered by Red Guards, Red Guard searches and struggle sessions were glorified as cultural preservation for the masses:

In the course of the historically unprecedented Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, personally started and directed by our Great Leader Chairman Mao, the little generals of the Red Guards and the revolutionary masses have from the homes of the capitalist roaders ... and the ox-ghosts and snake demons, confiscated numerous precious *wenwu* and books [which are] the creation of the motherland's historical labouring masses. This is an immortal contribution established by the Red Guards, this is a great victory for Mao Zedong Thought.⁵¹

This ideological interpretation made it appear that preserving cultural things was the goal of the Cultural Revolution in the first place. The problem was not what to destroy – *wenwu* and books were sacrosanct – it was who owned them. This shift made it necessary to predate preservation to August 1966, ignore the Attack on the Four Olds and cast preservation as a revolutionary act that the Chairman himself had directed.

Collapsing the salvage operations from 1966 and the institutionalized collecting from 1967, the Wenwu Small Group reported that it had received items from over 600 work units in Shanghai. Between August 1966 and September 1967, it received 280,000 pieces of *wenwu* and 360,000 volumes of books. From the scrap metal plants they retrieved more than 8,000 *jin* of bronze objects and handicrafts and from the scrap paper mills over 4,000 *jin* of books.⁵² The objects were described by category: revolutionary *wenwu*, historical *wenwu* and books. Paying special attention to the rare, the Wenwu Small Group compiled an index and a set of photographs of the most valuable *wenwu* and books.⁵³ Of historical *wenwu*, there were Shang and Zhou bronzes, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing ceramics, books, seals, currency, and modern handicrafts. The authors highlighted particular objects, stressing those artifacts or books that were not even in state collections. At times they took on the tone of a connoisseur, describing the colour and firing of a certain Song ceramic and concluding that it could "reflect that in our country, as early as the Song dynasty, the ceramic technique

51 SMA B172-3-5, p. 30.

52 From the August 1967 report, the Wenwu Small Group estimated that based on their current number of personnel it would take two or three years to sort through all the things they had collected, and require at least 5,000 square metres of storage space. They had been using storage in the Jade Buddha Temple and had attempted to take over some rooms in the Xujiahui Cathedral, but the space had been turned into an umbrella factory. SMA B172-3-5, p. 40. As for the number of materials received, a present-day gazetteer puts the total between June 1967 and December 1968 at 3,320,000 *wenwu* and handicrafts and 5,470,000 volumes of books. *SHWWBWGZ*, p. 376. In Beijing, salvaged *wenwu* included 117 tons from scrap metal plants and 320 tons from scrap paper plants. From house searches, Beijing totals were 1,850,000 paintings, 23,570,000 volumes of books and 5,380,000 miscellaneous *wenwu*. Suzhou house searches yielded 170,000 books, paintings and *wenwu*. See Wang Nianyi, *The Age of the Great Turmoil*, pp. 70–71.

53 Unfortunately, these two documents are listed as attachments to the November 1967 report but were not included in the copies.

had already reached a relatively high level.”⁵⁴ Even foreign-language books were catalogued for their ideological and scientific value, and could be simultaneously “criminal testimony” to imperialist invasion and “important materials for the research of the artistic creativity of the ancient working masses.”⁵⁵ All objects were collected, catalogued and pressed into service of nation and revolution.

It remains unclear exactly how all of these objects were collected. When was the division between ad hoc and organized collecting? The numbers indicate that much acquisition happened after the autumn of 1967; the number of books, for example, jumped from 360,000 volumes in September 1967 to 5,470,000 by the end of 1968.⁵⁶ But this estimate speaks to the number of objects processed rather than the number confiscated.

Another aspect of collection remains unclear. The Wenwu Small Group repeatedly referred to having help from the masses. From the June flyer describing its activities and by its own account, it was actively publicizing its work and endeavouring to “mobilize the masses, trust the masses and rely on the masses.” In large measure this seems to have referred to propaganda, distributing leaflets and holding meetings on the importance of *wenwu*.⁵⁷ By extension this meant that the Wenwu Small Group was sometimes tipped off to the location of hidden cultural relics, and in the report the authors were certain to give “the masses” due credit. In one example at the Shanghai Rubber Research Institute, they wrote:

The proletarian faction, after realizing the political meaning of protecting *wenwu*, actively gave us clues. From this we received a Song dynasty pan from the Geyao [kiln], a Ming Xuande (Xuanzong Emperor, r. 1426–36) flower design white dragon pan and other precious Ming-era porcelains. If not for the great support of the worker-farmer-soldiers armed with Mao Zedong Thought, it would be impossible to collect and organize this great number of *wenwu* and books.⁵⁸

And yet another group figured mysteriously in the process: the cultural workers themselves. For it seemed that they were providing specialists and specialized knowledge in order to target certain collectors and collections. As the Wenwu Small Group explained:

Only when the specialists in *wenwu* and books are put into the great mass movement and united with the masses can the work have results ... Right when the Red Guards’ great Attack on the Four Olds movement started, the revolutionary factions of the *wenwu* and book bureaus immediately organized efforts to go deep into the work units and vigorously co-operate with Red Guards’ revolutionary actions.⁵⁹

If one takes the report at face value, it appears that Red Guards received help from cultural officials. It was information from these experts, the Wenwu Small Group claimed, that helped the revolutionary masses of the Shanghai Flour Factory confiscate a Qin dynasty scale from a collector called Gong

54 SMA B172-3-5, pp. 31–32.

55 *Ibid.* p. 33.

56 *Ibid.* p. 40 and *SHWWBWGZ*, p. 376.

57 SMA B172-3-5, p. 33.

58 *Ibid.* p. 34.

59 *Ibid.* pp. 34–35.

Xuren. And it was also the knowledge of the specialists – together with Mao Zedong Thought – that revealed to Red Guards that book collector and “capitalist” Qin Qing was hiding his rare books of rubbings behind a case draped with Mao’s picture.⁶⁰ But by now we know not to take the Wenwu Small Group at face value, and recent biographies have shown that these house searches – and the role of Red Guard, collector and official – were far more complicated than confiscation.⁶¹

The actual position of the cultural officials in the summer of 1966, as the archival record has shown, was tenuous. Even if there was some level of co-ordination by “revolutionary factions” at that time, a cultural official was taking a considerable risk to protect *wenwu*. It was only after central authority legitimated local action that the organized work of the Wenwu Small Group could begin. But once it did, the Wenwu Small Group laid claim to all efforts at cultural preservation, situating their institutional origins at the *beginning* of the Cultural Revolution. Cultural preservation could be institutionalized (through the Wenwu Small Group) and legitimized (through the ways in which it was perceived) because of the ideological turn that made it revolutionary. As the Wenwu Small Group concluded in November of 1967, the work of protecting *wenwu* “includes protecting state property from damage, includes the protection of the cultural quintessence created by the historical working masses, and includes the critical inheritance of the exemplary heritage of the Chinese nation. The question of how to build a new proletarian culture is [how to] carry forward the revolutionary cause and forge ahead into the future.”⁶²

In the end, the Wenwu Small Group never made it to the latter steps. It collected *wenwu*, but how these relics of old culture would create new culture was left unexplained. Whether the *wenwu* and books were thought to have evil influence or whether they were thought to contain cultural quintessence, they were safely put away. Critical rectification was saved for a later date. As one of the early directives to the Shanghai smelting plants explained, *wenwu* should be held until the movement was over.⁶³ In the words of Shen Zhiyu 沈之瑜, a contemporary museum official who was asked by his daughter about the use of ancient things, “I believe history is always progressive; a period of regression is only temporary.”⁶⁴ Underlying Shen’s properly Marxist comment was a belief in the endurance of the Chinese tradition; perhaps it was this belief that spurred the cultural bureaucracy to save the culture they had originally been charged with safeguarding.

60 *Ibid.* pp. 34–35.

61 Zheng Zhong, *Collectors in Shanghai*.

62 SMA B172-3-5, pp. 33–34.

63 *Ibid.* p. 4.

64 Shen Jianhua, “Huainian fuqin Shen Zhiyu” (“Remembering my father Shen Zhiyu”), in Shen Zhiyu, *Shen Zhiyu wenbo lunji (Collected Writings of Shen Zhiyu on Cultural Relics and Museums)* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), p. 433. Shen does not specify when her father made this remark, but it appears that it was after he was released from the Shanghai Museum in 1969.

Conclusion

During the Cultural Revolution, there was an institutionalized and ideologically legitimated defence of cultural relics at both the central and local levels. This argument does not deny the number of relics that *were* destroyed, nor does it negate present-day understanding of the period as a moment of crisis for Chinese culture. As the museum official Shen explained in the mid-1980s, one of the tragedies of the Cultural Revolution was the lost objects in the museum, “the precious *wenwu* that were smashed as ‘Four Olds’.” Shen affirmed: “The Cultural Revolution was in actuality a big revolution in culture, a great catastrophe.”⁶⁵

But in the face of the destruction of the Attack on the Four Olds, cultural workers took risks to salvage and collect *wenwu*. As the above discussion has shown, situating their actions in the context of an uncertain revolution was no easy task. How does this case help us understand the intersection of culture and politics during the Cultural Revolution? In its simplest terms, this is a story of bureaucracy in changing politics. The Cultural Relics Commission and the Shanghai Museum had a responsibility to protect and preserve the objects under their care, and the impulse to preserve – accompanied by the criticism appropriate to a Marxist historicist – was a safer choice. This way of reading the activities of the Wenwu Small Group, therefore, is to see it as a reactive, damage-control response to the forces of a political movement beyond central or local control.

But because the very project of preservation was called into question by the Cultural Revolution, justifying this work took initiative. In the context of widespread chaos, during which the Party was attacked and the line of authority between central and local weakened, the actions of the Wenwu Small Group were both top-down and bottom-up. They were top-down because Qi Benyu and the CCRG signalled that preservation in the name of revolution was defensible, and because the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee authorized the establishment of the Wenwu Small Group. At the same time, they were bottom-up because the Cultural Relics Commission had already been attempting to salvage *wenwu* in 1966, and because the creation of the Wenwu Small Group was a patchwork of activities justified after the fact. The centre gave the local space to manoeuvre, space that was necessary but not sufficient to explain the agency of local actors.

For neither the bureaucratic impulse nor the mechanisms for local initiative fully explain the defence of antiquity in revolution. From the Shanghai Museum officials who intercepted Red Guards to the nameless members of the Wenwu Small Group who rewrote their own history, people took risks because to them cultural relics had a value that persisted despite what the revolutionary

65 Shen Zhiyu, “Guanyu wenwu baohu zhengce de jianggao” (“Speech notes on policies for protection of cultural relics”), in *Collected Writings of Shen Zhiyu*, p. 73.

moment prescribed. These officials organized because they were also Chinese intellectuals to whom cultural survival mattered.⁶⁶ By institutionalizing the preservation of cultural relics and by adopting the politically expedient language of revolution, the cultural bureaucracy made the case that it was right to rebel.

What does this case study of the Shanghai cultural bureaucracy reveal about the Cultural Revolution and the experience of the recent Chinese past? In some ways, Shanghai is exceptional: as a centre of wealth and art, it had both private and nationalized collections that were unique and that today comprise the celebrated Shanghai Museum. Also, during the Cultural Revolution Shanghai was quickly returned to central control, and the mobilization of the Wenwu Small Group surely reflects its relative stability in comparison to other areas. Yet while Shanghai represents an exemplary node in the system of cultural preservation, it is important because the richness of its collections brings the crisis of the Cultural Revolution into sharp relief. This case demonstrates how antiquity was reinscribed for revolution, and shows that both individuals and institutions could have agency in the process.

66 From members of the central leadership to workers in the museum, cultural relics remained important throughout the Maoist period. On the connoisseurship and collection of Kang Sheng, see Dahpon Ho, "To protect and preserve." For Mao's circle, see a recent volume on the collection of his personal secretary, Tian Jiaying. Chen Lie, *Tian Jiaying yu xiao mangcangcang zhai* (*Tian Jiaying and the Little Studio of the Vast Grasses*) (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2002).