More than Belonging: Reclaiming Sovereignty in the Debate on Cultural Relics Restitution

Linlin Zhang

Beijing Language and Culture University，Haidian Beijing，100083；

Abstract： This paper looks at the problem of cultural artefact restitution by starting with a personal experience at the Usher Gallery in Lincoln. There, the author saw an unlabelled cabinet with clear Eastern features, but no information about where it came from or who made it. This raised important questions about how museums treat objects from other cultures, and whether these objects are truly respected when they are taken out of their original context. Many people argue that sharing culture is more important than giving objects back. Others believe that returning artefacts is the only fair solution. This paper supports the second view. Before people talk about sharing or cooperation, they must first return objects to their rightful owners. Without this step, there can be no real respect or equal exchange. The paper discusses why some museums still avoid returning items, such as fear of losing power or lack of clear laws. It argues that when museums display objects without names, stories, or backgrounds, it is not just careless, but a form of symbolic violence. In the final part, examples of countries working together to return artefacts were shown. These cases prove that restitution is possible and helpful. In the end, the opinion that museums need to face their past honestly and take real steps toward justice is emphasized. Restitution is not only about the past—it is about how humanbeings build fair and respectful cultural relationships today.

Key words: Displaced cabinet； Restitution； Cultural relics； Cultural sovereign

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Introduction

During my visit to the Usher Gallery in Lincoln, I came across a cabinet that bore distinct Eastern characteristics—its lacquered surface, intricate floral motifs, and curved structure immediately suggested Chinese or Japanese craftsmanship. And yet, there was no accompanying label, no contextual information, no trace of the story behind its creation or journey. It was, to me, an object displaced—not only geographically, but also culturally and historically. The absence of information, care, and cultural context left me feeling uneasy. In its silence, the cabinet seemed not only displaced, but forgotten—its history suspended, its meaning erased. This personal encounter sparked my critical reflection on the narratives that museums choose to tell (or omit) about the objects in their care. If an artefact's presence in a museum is justified by claims of better preservation, research, and public engagement, then where is the evidence of these responsibilities being fulfilled? What happens when an object is decontextualized to the point of anonymity? These questions led me to re-examine the core ethical and epistemological dilemmas surrounding the restitution debate.

This paper argues that the failure to return artefacts is not simply a matter of legal complexity, but a reflection of ongoing power imbalances rooted in colonial legacies. It contends that museums must move beyond a rhetoric of stewardship and engage in a genuine reckoning with the histories embedded in their collections. Through a critical analysis of both successful and contested restitution cases, the argument that the refusal to return objects often stems not from a desire to protect heritage, but from an unwillingness to relinquish control over cultural narratives will be demonstrated. By doing so, this paper contributes to broader discussions on cultural sovereignty, museum ethics, and the future of heritage preservation.

1 Restitution Debates: Key Theories and Contemporary Dilemmas

Since the second half of the 20th century, the issue of cultural restitution has drawn increasing attention from the

international community. Especially after World War II, global discussions have been shaped by growing calls for the return of cultural property. A complex and often tense dialogue has emerged between countries of origin (where the objects come from) and market countries (where the objects are currently held). From the perspectives of moral responsibility, cultural identity, and global justice, returning looted or displaced heritage seems to be an urgent task. However, in practice, restitution remains full of resistance, delays, and political deadlock. The issue of returning cultural objects is not just an academic debate or a minor topic in museum governance. It reflects a real and ongoing dilemma rooted in historical trauma and cultural inequality. It is also a critical reflection on the lasting impact of colonialism. Behind the seemingly neutral acts of "display" and "collection" lies a struggle over power: who has the right to tell history, and who gets to define heritage?

Although international opinion has long leaned towards supporting restitution, the word "return" still carries heavy weight. In 1983, the Greek government formally requested the British Museum to return the Parthenon Marbles. Forty years have passed, and the negotiations remain unresolved. The British Museum insists it has "legal ownership" and treats the matter as a policy issue, rather than one of colonial justice. Yet many academic voices are no longer silent. As early as 1972, Karl Meyer sharply criticised museum acquisition practices (Meyer,1973). He argued that collecting is not a passive or beneficial act but directly linked to illegal global networks of cultural objects (Meyer,1973). If museums expand their collections without restraint, they are in fact encouraging illicit trade. His view remains thought-provoking today. Meyer is not alone. In The Brutish Museums, Dan (2020) claims that displaying colonial-era loot in museums today is a form of delayed violence. For him, returning these objects is not just about moving things from one place to another, but about healing historical wounds and giving back a voice to cultures that were silenced. Savoy and Sarr (2018) also argue that objects trapped in the wrong place and context can never truly be "owned." They see restitution not as a loss, but as a chance for museums to renew themselves and take a step towards social justice. Thanks to these voices and efforts, some objects have indeed been returned. For example, in 2021, France returned 26 artefacts to Benin, marking a new beginning for Franco-Beninese relations. In June 2023, the National Museum of Denmark announced it would return a sacred Tupinambá feathered cloak to Brazil. This cloak was once part of indigenous rituals. Its return shows respect for a long-neglected culture and signals a shift in museum ethics.

However, not everyone agrees with restitution. One of the most controversial voices is Tiffany Jenkins. In her 2016 book, she argues that museums were not responsible for the original acts of looting and should not be blamed for the past. She believes objects should "stay where they are" because museums can offer "better preservation, deeper research, and wider public access" (Jenkins,2016). This view is hard to be accepted. The idea of "better preservation" often implies cultural arrogance. Does it mean that only in Western museums can other cultures be properly preserved? If a country truly never had the ability to care for its heritage, how has that heritage survived until now? As for research, much of it is based on cultural misunderstandings. What do people really "know" about objects taken out of context, left in display cases without proper explanation? How many artefacts still have no basic labels? And "public access" is also a highly political term. Who is the "public"? Is it everyone with equal cultural rights, or just those with the means and permission to visit certain museums? Jenkins sees restitution as a threat that politicises museums. But the fact is that museums have never been neutral spaces. Their so-called neutrality is, in fact, deeply political. Removing non-Western objects and showing them in a silent, decontextualised way is perhaps the clearest example of cultural dominance.

The difficulty of restitution does not lie in technical problems. It lies in whether we are willing to recognise that museums are not only spaces for storing objects but also places where complex histories are witnessed and continued. To truly achieve cultural justice, we must not let history end in a display case. We must allow it to return to where it belongs.

2 Case Reflection: The Cabinet in The Usher Gallery

The cabinet standing silently in The Usher Gallery stayed with me long after I left the museum. It had no label, no explanation, and was not part of any themed exhibition. It was simply there, in silence. And it was exactly this silence that raised many questions: What is it? Why is it here? Where does it truly belong? Why has its story been hidden? Its presence felt abrupt and out of place, and it made me deeply aware of a kind of "cultural disconnection". The object clearly had an Eastern design and pattern, but in a space with no context, it became a "stateless" relic—stripped of its cultural roots and lost

in meaning. This lack of labelling is not just a missed opportunity to inform; it can be a form of contextual violence—towards both the object itself and the visitors trying to connect with it emotionally. Fuhrmann and Sabine (2025) once wrote in their article that when museums show objects without addressing their original context, they may unintentionally reproduce colonial power structures and reinforce misunderstandings and marginalisation of the cultures they came from. Museums are not always places of knowledge and understanding. Sometimes, they can be spaces of silence and concealment. They might hide the true origins of an object, or gloss over the violent processes that brought it there. Had this cabinet also been taken by force? Is its presence here part of a longer story of colonial violence? The discomfort it caused revealed the awkward position of many cultural items in these "other" spaces. They no longer "belong" to their original cultures, nor are they fully "understood" or "respected" where they are now. Colonial violence continues today through the control of cultural heritage (Simpson, 1997). This violence is not only about the original act of taking—it's also about the ongoing silence, the continued denial of cultural authority. Objects displayed without explanation or context may represent not only a lost world, but also the restitution and healing that is still unfinished. This also challenges the argument often used to resist returning objects—that of so-called "cultural sharing" or the idea that "connection and appreciation" are more important than ownership. True cultural sharing must be based on return and recognition of sovereignty. If the people who own a heritage cannot also be the ones to explain and speak for it, then "sharing" is just another form of possession in disguise. Restitution is not only a political or legal issue—it is about emotion and respect. It is a meaningful act of repair in cross-cultural relations.

3 Rethinking Restitution: From Emotional Connection to Legal Possession

If we are still asking whether artefacts should be returned, then the real question is no longer "can they be?" but "why haven't they been?" After countless moral debates and emotional appeals, restitution has become more than a question of ownership. It is about rebuilding trust between civilisations and facing up to historical responsibilities (James Clifford, 1997). It is not only a pursuit of institutional justice, but also a kind of ethical awakening. Contemporary discussions on the ownership of cultural heritage are often caught in a tug-of-war between "sharing" and "sovereignty" (ICOM, 2022). Some Western museums promote the idea of "universal culture", claiming that heritage belongs to all humanity. They argue that large institutions with more resources and wider audiences are best placed to safeguard these objects for the global public. Yet in many cases, such narratives risk becoming rhetorical tools that obscure the history of how these objects were taken. If "sharing" is built on one-sided possession and unequal power, then it cannot be called true sharing. Real sharing must be rooted in equality. And genuine respect must begin with return.

A hopeful example helps us imagine what authentic cultural sharing might look like. In 2015, the French government returned 32 looted gold ornaments from the tomb of a Qin noble in Dabaozi Mountain, Gansu Province, to China. These items had appeared in a Paris auction catalogue. Chinese scholars and heritage institutions quickly identified them as illegally exported and intervened. After thorough investigation, the French Ministry of Culture confirmed their illicit origins, halted the auction, and returned the artefacts. This act was widely seen as a constructive moment in Franco-Chinese cultural relations. It demonstrated France's sense of historical responsibility, but more importantly, it offered a working model for how restitution can be institutionalised through international cooperation. When accepting the returned artefacts, China's National Cultural Heritage Administration emphasised that the move reflected mutual respect and collaboration between the two governments—and set a precedent for future partnerships. What matters most here is not simply that the objects went "home", but that the process itself tried to answer a deeper question: can "cultural sovereignty" and "cultural sharing" be reconciled rather than opposed? In this case, both parties showed a willingness to look beyond ideological differences and face shared historical burdens. That is the true meaning of sharing. The fate of cultural heritage is not just about where it is stored, but whether it can return to its roots and rebuild emotional ties with its original communities.

Yet this kind of restitution remains rare. Compared to France, the UK has shown far less willingness to act. Leading institutions such as the British Museum continue to hide behind the banner of "universal museums", using ideals of education and cross-cultural understanding to delay or resist returns. But this ignores the voices of those who have been deprived of cultural agency. In many cases, museums have the authority to decide what to do with their collections. The

issue is not that they cannot return objects—but that they will not. “Sharing”, then, becomes a convenient excuse, used to cover up a reluctance to confront historical accountability.

This paper insists that restitution is not the enemy of cultural sharing, but its foundation. Without recognising the rightful ownership and sovereignty of cultural heritage, there can be no truly equal cultural relationship. Restitution is not a “loss”. It is the return of objects to the places where they can be understood, respected, and brought back to life. Only in their proper cultural context can artefacts truly live, not as lifeless displays behind glass, but as vessels of history, memory, and future meaning. Of course, restitution does not mean the end of collaboration. In fact, it should be the beginning. Real cultural exchange should happen after restitution-through co-curated exhibitions, joint research, and shared projects based on mutual respect and equal partnership. When speaking of the future of “cultural sharing”, remember that return is not the end of the story. It is where it begins. A truly responsible museum of the future must start with restitution and then walk towards cooperation. Not by clinging to others’ heritage, while preaching the beauty of “sharing”.

4 Conclusion

This essay explores the close connection between cultural restitution and cultural sovereignty, highlighting its significance in contemporary museology and heritage preservation. By examining several case studies, it becomes clear that different nations and institutions respond to restitution in varied ways. These cases not only expose the legal, ethical, and political complexities of restitution but also reflect the broader challenges facing global heritage protection today. Restitution is not merely about returning objects; it is deeply tied to cultural identity, historical trauma, and the modern recognition of cultural diversity. It is increasingly seen as both a form of redress for historical injustice and an act of cultural awakening. However, the process of restitution remains fraught with difficulties—especially when it intersects with global power dynamics between cultures. The British Museum’s refusal to return the Parthenon Marbles exemplifies the contradictions of the so-called “universal museum” model. While such institutions claim to serve humanity and foster cross-cultural understanding, they often uphold a form of cultural dominance, disregarding the sovereignty and historical justice at the heart of restitution demands. The ongoing debate between “universalism” and “cultural sharing” reminds us that true sharing must begin with return and recognition of origin.

Given these tensions, it is vital to reconsider how modern museums can become genuine platforms for cultural exchange and cooperation—not just spaces of collection and display. In this light, restitution should not be seen solely as a legal or political issue, but as a vital path to cultural revival and identity reconstruction. Museums must move beyond possession towards collaboration. Only then can they help build more equitable and trust-based relationships. In the end, although the path to restitution is complex, it offers a new direction for the sustainable future of global heritage. By returning artefacts and affirming cultural sovereignty, we can restore forgotten histories and lay the groundwork for meaningful cultural exchange. True cultural sharing can only be achieved when we begin with respect for history and recognition of diversity.

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