Chapter 3

Illicit Excavation in Contemporary China

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China was one of the most important areas of civilization in the ancient world, but today our study of this civilization is obstructed by illicit excavation which has now reached such a scale that much Chinese archaeology has been deprived of its original context. Although in contemporary China there was already some illicit excavation before 1978, the large-scale destruction of the archaeological heritage has only happened since the establishment of the ‘Reform and Opening’ policy, especially during the last ten years, and the consequences cannot be properly appraised at the present time.

According to Chinese law, national and regional administrations shall, in their respective jurisdictions, take under protection the cultural heritage. However, although illicit excavation is one of the main threats to the cultural heritage, there are no plans to collect the regional or national data necessary to show what percentage of archaeological sites have been looted. This might be for several reasons, including the evasion of responsibility at various levels and departments of the administration, a lack of resources to support such work, and a desire not to expose past mistakes. Yet although such data are not available, it is still possible to gather enough information to show that illicit excavation in China is a serious problem. This information can be obtained from auction houses, antiquities trade areas, dealers, collectors, archaeologists, police, and local government and customs offices. Sometimes, information can also be collected personally at damaged sites.

Before producing a list of sites which have been seriously damaged, it is useful to present something about the background of illicit excavation in China. Until about twenty years or so ago most Chinese people respected their heritage and they considered an archaeological site to be part of the ‘national cultural heritage’ or the ‘soul of the ancestor’. But before 1980, Chinese people were very poor and, after the ‘Cultural Revolution’ (1966–1976), many also felt that loyalty to authority and reverence of the past were foolish concepts. Thus when foreign travellers and investors first came to China as a consequence of the ‘Reform and Opening’ policy, and some Chinese people learned that the antiquities preserved in their old houses, courtyards, museums and, indeed, archaeological sites, were marketable, they immediately took advantage of this opportunity to make money by selling any antiquities in their possession. Very soon, antiquities could be exchanged for $20 or $50, a fair sum for a poor peasant teacher, and the illicit traffic — theft from museums and illegal excavation — began, especially in west and central China. This was the situation in 1985. By 1988 internationally organized groups had appeared, and they could quickly obtain information about the market in Hong Kong and London. In 1990, copies of books like Sotheby’s Art Market Review could be found even in very poor areas of the countryside. More seriously, perhaps, some local government employees began to believe that the sale of antiquities, especially material from archaeological sites, could benefit local people, and began to establish antiquities trade areas and auction houses. In 1992, an international auction house was established in Beijing and — at about the same time — the present desperate illicit excavation and traffic began throughout most of China. By 1995, at least two hundred auction houses and antiquities trade areas had been established, from which archaeological material can be very easily obtained. All kinds of people are interested in this material, including foreigners, dealers, film stars, university professors, civil servants, a Member of Parliament, and even the wife of the president of a foreign country. A famous slogan several years ago was: ‘If you want to become a rich man, you should go for excavation, you only need one night’.

Since 1992 there has been news of illicit excavation almost every week. It would take too much time to present all available information here, I can only
try to select some cases which show the seriousness of the situation (Fig. 3.1):

1. The Ancient Tombs site at Reshui (Dulan County, Qinghai Province) is protected at the national level, and is the most important archaeological site of the Tibetan Tubo Culture, contemporary with the Tang Dynasty (ad 618–907). In an area of more than 200 square kilometres, there are in total more than 300 tombs of Tubo date. Several years ago, archaeologists investigated a few of these tombs and the information they recovered was so important that the site was nominated one of the ‘Ten Most Famous Archaeological Sites’ both in 1985 and 1996. In January 1999, however, the site began to suffer from large-scale illicit excavation by more than one thousand local people, who excavated the tombs with high explosives and bulldozers. By May, at least 21 tombs were badly damaged and it is not known how many others had been illicitly excavated. After five months there were large quantities of broken funerary objects and bones lying at the side of the road in the area. It is said that the local people received the 'good news' about the Tubo antiqui-
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ties, especially the silk, from an auction house, and that they began large-scale 'work' in winter — the slack season in farming. Although more than 50 looters were arrested at the end of May 1999, the site has since been subject to large-scale illicit excavation in 1996 and 1997.

2. The site of the Mausoleums of Kings of the Zhao State (Handan City, Hebei Province), a major site protected at provincial level, dates from the Warring States Period (770–221 BC) and has in total five mausoleums. In March 1997, five people from Beijing and Shanxi Province blew open the second mausoleum with high explosive, and removed bronzes, gold ornaments and jades — in total more than 500 antiquities. Some of these antiquities were moved very quickly and illegally through Hong Kong to London, and others (about 259 antiquities) were bought by a 'collector' in Anhui Province for $15,000. This 'collector' then exported the antiquities to Canada, and he believed that he could obtain more if the site was excavated again. In October 1997, therefore, he collected people from several provinces and began to dig once more, but they were put under arrest at the site when they had almost finished their 'work'. Although some of the antiquities were returned from the United Kingdom and Canada in 1998 and 1999, much of the historical, artistic and scientific value of the site has now been lost. Archaeologists are left with an incomplete site to study the history of the period. Jades from this site are believed to be among the most important in China.

3. The site of the ancient city of Loulan (Nuooqiang County, Xingjiang Province) one of the major sites to be protected at national level, dates from the Han, Wei and Jing Dynasties (206 BC–AD 420). Also called 'Krorain' in ancient times, it was one of the most important centres on the 'Silk Road' and was made famous by Western explorers about one hundred years ago. It was first excavated illicitly at the beginning of the twentieth century by Swedes, British, Americans and Japanese, and today it is still dug by local people. For example, a criminal group entered the site to dig ancient tombs in February and March 1998. In February, they received about $10,000 from a 'collector' for the sale of illicit archaeological material. They were arrested in March when they returned home with a beautiful lacquered coffin they had discovered. I am sure that they believed themselves unlucky because their 'friends' on the illicit excavation are still free.

4. The site of Niya (Mingfong County, Xingjiang Province) also protected at national level, has a total area of more than 70 square kilometres, dates to the Jingjue State of the Han, Wei and Jing Dynasties (206 BC–AD 420). It is also the one of the most important sites on the Silk Road. Archaeologists there have found some ancient mummies and many inscribed wooden tablets written in Chinese and 'Kharoshthi' (an early Indian script). But at the same time, such important historical material is also of interest to the illicit excavator. The site is located in the Taklamakan Desert and is so large that it is difficult to discover evidence of damage. But now it seems certain that at least inscribed wooden tablets from the site have been excavated illicitly. In November 1998, some local people were put under arrest. The arresting officer found many antiquities in their houses and they said that many more, including numerous inscribed wooden tablets from the site, had been smuggled abroad.

5. Jingzhou City of Hubei Province is at the centre of what was the area of the 'Chu Culture' during the Zhou period (1000–256 BC). The Chu Culture is important for the history of both art and philosophy on account of its famous lacquer, and also its bamboo strips — significant because of their contents. Many books written during this early period of Chinese civilization have disappeared over the past thousand years, but some of them have now been rediscovered on Chu bamboo strips. And different copies of some classic works have also been discovered. Needless to say, the illicit excavator is also interested in this material. More than one thousand Chu Culture tombs have been dug into, and sometimes cultural material from this area appears on the antiquities trade areas both of China and abroad.

Four years ago, Shanghai Museum, the most modern museum in China, collected 1200 pieces of Chu Culture bamboo from the antiquities trade area of Hong Kong, which together constitute a library of ancient Chinese philosophy. The director of the museum was delighted and announced that the importance of these bamboo strips is much greater than that of the museum itself, but it is still not known how much information about the Chu Culture has been lost.

6. Chifeng City (Inner Mongolia) is at the centre of what was the area of the Neolithic Hongshan Culture (3500 BC) and also the Liao Dynasty (AD 907–1125). There are many archaeological sites there which preserve information about the lifestyle of
the ancient Northern People, which was very different from that of those who inhabited the Central Plains. Unfortunately, there has been little archaeological research in this area and not much is known about their history. In 1997, some stone, jade and pottery of the Hongshan Culture, and gold and silver wares of the Liao Dynasty appeared at an auction house, the high prices fetched sent the illicit excavators crazy. The local government estimates that about 4000 ancient tombs and other historical sites of this area have now been robbed. The local archaeologist suggests that the number might be as high as 15,000. It is difficult now to find any new evidence of past cultures in this area.

7. There are in total about 20,000 underwater archaeological sites in China. As on land, some of the underwater cultural heritage is also illegally excavated (Fig. 3.2). At the beginning of 1999, archaeologists working underwater near Huguang Island of the Xisha Islands in the South China Sea discovered a historic shipwreck of the Song dynasty (AD 960–1279) together with a large area of drifted antiquities. To their surprise, they also found two large holes made by explosives, which had also seriously damaged other parts of the site. It is thought that this attack probably happened several years ago. This archaeological site is located so far from the mainland that it draws attention to the serious situation of the underwater archaeological heritage of China.

Discussion of the consequences of illicit excavation is very difficult, but two things seem clear:

1. The importance of an archaeological site depends upon the maintenance of its integrity. Yet on most archaeological sites in China this integrity has now been lost. It is very difficult to find a site which has not been damaged in some way by illicit excavators.

2. In consequence, a large amount of knowledge has been destroyed through illicit excavation. For example, we know very little about the Liao Dynasty. The most famous Liao sites had already been looted during the nineteenth century and, as mentioned above, almost all Liao tombs have been dug into during the last few years. Now there is no known surviving Liao site, or any Liao archaeological material remaining undisturbed in context. For another example, Jing State (Shanxi Province) was one of the important states of the Zhou period (1000–256 BC). Jing coloured pottery is very famous; ten years ago its price on the antiquities trade area in Beijing was about $1000, but today it has dropped to about $5. At the same time, in some areas it is now almost impossible to find this pottery still in its archaeological context. It is very easy to buy some of the ancient, coloured pottery, but it is very difficult to understand the people who made or used it.

Before designing a strategy to stop archaeological looting, it is first necessary to describe the economic structure of the illicit excavation and trade.

- China is a large developing country and each province has reached a different economic level. In Beijing and Shanghai, illicit diggers can get much more money for their discoveries than is possible in other provinces, especially a poor province like Qinghai, because it is easier for them to find a ‘high-end’ collector or dealer, or take the illicit material abroad by themselves.

- If illicit excavation is carried out spontaneously by the locals, the money they get is less than if it is sponsored.
At present, the money made from illicit excavation each year is increasing annually. It is bad business for one type of antiquity to be discovered too frequently, so sometimes antiquities are deliberately damaged in order to limit supply. The price fetched in the auction houses in developed countries is the ‘imperial edict’ for the illicit excavators. Needless to say, illicit excavation is allied to other activities, especially tourism, handicrafts and construction work. According to Chinese law, any unit or individual that discovers cultural material while carrying out construction or agricultural work must immediately report the discovery to the local department of cultural administration because ‘all cultural antiquities remaining underground or in the inland waters or territorial seas within the boundaries of the People’s Republic of China shall be owned by the state.’ In practice, however, there are engineering projects going on almost everywhere in China, yet only a few discoveries are ever reported. It is difficult to say how much archaeological material is damaged or stolen in the process, but the situation seems to be almost as serious as with illicit excavation. In 1996, a dealer told me that he had erected simple buildings on top of some small tombs, then excavated them carefully but illegally. I know he obtained information about the tombs from experts of the National Administration on Cultural Heritage (NACH). In similar fashion, it is said that some farmers of Shanxi Province buy fields only for their archaeological remains.

The illicit excavator wants only to recover treasure from archaeological sites, but for some illicit traders, handicrafts are equally desirable. Indeed, sometimes it is difficult for the trader, collector, police or customs officer to distinguish genuine archaeological from handicraft material. Needless to say, it makes protection more difficult.

Tourism also makes it more difficult to curtail the looting as, in many cities, antiquities trade areas have been established especially for tourists. Some exploration parties both from China and abroad are also interested in archaeological sites that lie far from any major cities. One tourist company even runs a course on illicit excavation. In these circumstances, it is difficult for the customs service to prevent illicit export by large numbers of tourists. According to information they have supplied, more than 110,000 illicit cultural objects (including antiquities) were intercepted between 1991 to 1995, more than 12,000 in 1997, and more than 5000 in 1998. Yet these numbers refer only to recoveries from tourists, and do not include seizures from freight transport. Nevertheless, the Chinese customs service has done its best to stop the looting.

Another, serious, side of the illicit trade is faking, as shown by the following story. In 1996, a large quantity of ancient pottery appeared in an antiquities trade area in Beijing. It was so beautiful that many people — including professors from the National Administration on Cultural Heritage, the museum and the university (including the director of the National Museum and the director-general of the State Bureau of Cultural Relics) — believed a large archaeological site had been looted. Although someone reported to the NACH that the material was illicit, and that the trade area should be placed immediately under police control, thousands of pieces of pottery were still sold to collectors, dealers, foreigners, museums and even the NACH, and no one from the police took action to stop the illicit trade. After about a month of trading, a farmer reported that the pottery was all from a small workshop at Mengjing County of Henan Province. Upon visiting the workshop, I found some professors and students from the art school who were all very hard at work. I also found many bags of soil from an archaeological site which was used to coat the new pottery. The county magistrate told me that he hoped more people could start up similar businesses so that the county would benefit economically.

Some local governments are aware that archaeological sites are a good resource for encouraging tourism. In consequence, some sites are ‘rebuilt’ because they are ‘not very convenient’ for tourists. Needless to say, much information of the ancient culture is lost when archaeological sites are rebuilt in this way.

According to information supplied by the customs service and the police, dealers and collectors from most of the developed countries and some developing countries are interested in archaeological material from China. Each year the authorities recover illicit material from almost every customs house in China. This means that routes for the illicit traffic pass through most large Chinese cities, although Hong Kong remains the most important staging post for this traffic. This seems to be for three reasons. First, Hong Kong has the largest Chinese antiquities trade area. According to Chinese law, archaeological material is illicit if it is on the market, yet almost all kinds of archaeological material can be found there. Some museums even make purchases there, an action which is also illicit but which, nonetheless, re-
receives the approval of the NACH. Secondly, Hong Kong is the most important route out of China — better developed than the mainland routes. Finally, Hong Kong is the information centre. Although illicit excavators and dealers in China have access to information, even from the worldwide web, major illicit excavations are still commissioned in Hong Kong. In 1994, someone from the NACH even invited the 'experts' from an auction house in Hong Kong to make a speech in the Chinese national museum: 'What kind of property is the most welcome in Hong Kong' was one of the themes.

When faced by the serious problem of illicit excavation in China, what measures have been taken and what measures should be taken to stop the looting?

Although there was no tradition of legislation, laws regarding the protection of cultural heritage were adopted very early in 'New China'. For example, China passed rules on the export of the objects in 1950, the second year of the New China. In 1961, the regulation on protection was adopted, including excavation of archaeological sites and export of the objects. In 1982, The Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage was adopted and was amended in 1988 and in 1991. According to this law, some national standards and rules were also adopted, especially as regards exports. At the same time, more than 30 regulations on protection at the regional level were adopted. There is strict punishment under criminal law for the damage of the heritage, and it was made much stricter in 1998. Every year, there are some people who are sentenced to death for illicit excavation.

China has ratified the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, the UNESCO 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, and the UNIDROIT 1995 Convention on Stolen and Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. Although there are still no specific agreements on the trade in antiquities between China and other countries, China is receiving more cooperation from abroad, especially from North America. Almost every year now, some cultural material is returned to China from the more developed countries. I must point out that China is also receiving more and more cooperation from international organizations, especially from UNESCO.

There are some 60,000 professional people in China dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage, including professionals from the cultural heritage departments of each level of government, museums, protection centres for some major sites, institutes for archaeological excavation, and cultural property identification services. Most of them receive training in history, archaeology, and identification. Only a few site protection centres have their own police forces, in total probably less than 1000 people, some of whom have received special training. Usually, however, people can still only report to a public police station if they discover an illicit excavation.

At the present time it is difficult to judge what public attitudes are to antiquities and heritage, and its loss. Chinese people respect their heritage, like to collect antiquities and are angered when they are lost by illicit export. In fact, according to the police, most information about illicit excavation comes from reports made by local people. But because of the inability of the authority to protect the heritage, because of corrupt officials, because of poor education (as regards cultural heritage), antiquities are still seen as only money for many Chinese people. But there are more positive signs. For example, cultural heritage lawyers are invited several times each year to lecture middle school and university students on the protection of cultural heritage and the importance of legislation against the illicit excavation and traffic. The students themselves often have meetings to discuss the protection of cultural heritage and visit the sites which have been damaged. They even held a quiz based on knowledge of protection, including national laws and international conventions, and in total about 100,000 young people joined in. There are also some museums and universities which have acted to deter looting. Some exhibitions of returned archaeological material have been held in museums, including the national museum, and some experts on cultural heritage have also held training courses for police stations and customs houses.

Although these and similar initiatives have acted as a deterrent to looting, they are far from sufficient in such a large developing country. Laws and international conventions are only paper constructs for many people and authorities, and education and training are still lacking. The administration at all levels needs an accurate assessment of the problem, and to this end the regional and national data on looting should be collected as soon as possible. I should stress here that non-governmental organizations devoted to stopping illicit excavation, and supporting publications which relate to these matters, are very necessary in China. We have many reasons to strengthen cooperation at international level, especially at non-governmental international level.