CHAPTER FIVE

THE KARLBECK SYNDICATE

It is thanks in large part to Swedish researchers and art connoisseurs that Chinese culture and art became known in the West. Because of their pioneering work, Sweden today occupies a central position among the countries outside of East Asia that own representative collections of Chinese antiquities and art wares (MFEA Director Bo Gyllensvärd 1959).

A Swedish Crown Prince in the Forbidden Palace

On a windy November evening in 1926 a group of people boarded a train in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin. A head or two taller than everyone else, Swedish Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf stood out from the crowd. Antiquities collecting and archaeology were the Crown Prince’s favorite hobbies. He had enjoyed a pleasant stay in the Chinese capital, accompanied by China expert Johan Gunnar Andersson. Together they had visited the curio shops in Beijing, making purchases for the museum in Stockholm. Knowing all the right people in Beijing, Andersson even managed to arrange a visit to the Forbidden Palace. The Dragon Throne had stood empty since the last Emperor of Qing was driven out of Beijing just a couple of years earlier, and Andersson now saw to it that Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf entered the palace complex through the magnificent huge central gate reserved for emperors. The Crown Prince and his wife, Lady Louise, preceded the Swedish entourage through a series of majestic gates, up and down the broad stairs, across the vast palace grounds and past the audience halls to the inner palace. Arriving in the Emperor’s private quarters, the Crown Prince was shown the Imperial art collection. Allowed to open the sealed boxes, he marveled at treasures long hidden away. Some pieces were covered with so much dust that the Crown Prince had to clean them to recognize the ornaments. This led to some astonishing discoveries. “This is totally unbelievable,” he cried out, lining up no fewer than thirty-six identical bowls of a type that only a single exemplar had been known before (Andersson 1959, 116).

Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf knew of what he spoke. He had been interested in Chinese porcelain since 1907 when he first visited the
China collections at the British and the Victoria and Albert museums. He returned to London every year, visiting antique shops and befriending art dealers (Gyllensvård 1975, 5). London had been the Western center of trade in Chinese antiquities since the plundering of the Beijing Imperial Summer Palace during the Second Opium War in 1860. That event created the European market for Chinese art. For a long time afterward, this plunder of dubious provenance commanded a good price and gave its owners bragging rights (Clunas 1994, 422). The next surge in trade in Chinese antiquities came when the colonial powers sent a punitive expedition to Beijing in 1900 after the rebellious Chinese “Boxers” had killed Christian missionaries. In retaliation Western troops plundered the Forbidden Palace. Following this, many exquisite pieces of Imperial Chinese porcelain could be had at attractive prices in London. The single copy of the bowls admired by the Crown Prince on his trip to Beijing belonged to the British Museum and probably was part of the loot resulting from either the Opium War or the Boxer Rebellion plundering.

Moving on from the Forbidden Palace and the curio shops of Beijing, the delegation proceeded to Tianjin where Andersson put the royal couple on board a brand new railroad going south to Nanjing. Such a railway trip was not without its risks. With civil war ravaging the country and Chiang Kai-shek’s troops moving north to reclaim the nation from its many warlords, the north-south railway certainly was a coveted target. The railroad was newly laid after many years of work by, among others, the Swede Orvar Karlbeck, the very man whom the group from Sweden was en route to visit. In a vast country with few roads, a railway like this one could mean the difference between military victory and defeat. Apart from the military threat, there were also

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1 Ironically a palace building built in Italian Renaissance style outside of Beijing, at the so called Summer Palace, was destroyed by European troops. The war was fought mainly by the British to force China into further concessions of trade and territory.
2 For a background on imperialist looting in China, see Hevia.
3 Paris, with its Southeast Asian colonies, was another center for trade of Asian antiquities.
4 It was natural that Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf, who had participated in archaeological excavations in Greece, Cyprus and Egypt, would want to excavate in China. Johan Gunnar Andersson arranged that Erik Nystöm, Thorild Wulff’s old partner from collecting for the Rhösska Konstslöjdsmuseet, receive the Crown Prince in Taiyuan in northern China, where he prepared a couple of nearby Stone Age sites (Andersson 1959, 114).