CHAPTER 4

Forge and Export: The Trade in Fake Antiquities from China

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This chapter explores aspects of the manufacturing, smuggling, trading, and identification of fake Chinese antiques, while focusing mostly on items originating from the region of South China. Art forgery is one of the most common forms of art crime committed to satisfy the never-decreasing demand for “new” antiques by the constantly growing and overheated international art market. South China plays a central role in those operations, as it not only hosts numerous workshops solely dedicated to producing high numbers of fake Chinese antiques of varying quality, but its location also provides multiple transportation routes for shipping the contraband abroad, for example via the Pearl River Delta or Hong Kong. In many cases, the forgers operate in organized manners and often produce fakes following precise instructions. While most copies of antiques are produced as replicas and sold as such, a high number of items is nevertheless produced with the sole purpose of cheating purchasers.1

Besides copies of less known or entirely fabricated pieces, copies of famous Chinese antiques can also be found on the market. For example, a Ming Dynasty “chicken cup” that was sold for $38.5 million at an auction in Hong Kong in April 2014,2 setting a new record for the most expensive Chinese porcelain, is at the same time one of the most reproduced pieces of Chinese art ever.3 Copies can be found for sale at countless Chinese antique shops, some of which attempt to convince customers that they stumbled across a bargain. Demand and increasing prices in the art market combined with greed provide

excellent opportunities for forgers and fraudulent antique dealers alike, which leads to more fraud overall as a result. Either an irresistibly low price or the desire of a collector for a particular piece can help criminals to convince buyers that they are buying genuine pieces despite their suspicions that they are being offered a fake.4

Mere Copies or Fake Antiques?

This chapter recognizes that there are many different interpretations of the term “fake” in relation to pieces that are not genuine. The concept of a genuine work and an imitation is by no means as clear-cut in China, and, as a result, art forgery in China has never carried the dark connotations that it does in the West.5 In fact, the conservation of cultural heritage through copying and rebuilding has a long tradition in Chinese and other Asian cultures, which also reflects a different perception of originals and copies.6 To copy masterpieces was, and remains, widely practiced to train artists and to pay homage to artists from previous generations. Historically, copying was as a stage in the learning process, giving value to the copyist; there was no demeaning the act of copying for a lack of imagination thereby making any copy a forgery. A forgery begins with the intention to deceive; of course, further problems arise when the copies made for the purpose of study and practice merge with the ones that intended to deceive.7

Striving for a definitive etymological definition of this term is beyond the scope and purpose of this work. Nevertheless, “fake” may be synonymous with “forgery,” but the word is also sometimes used to describe a copy or a reproduction. For the purpose of this chapter, the term “fake” is understood in the context of “counterfeit”—which implies that a piece is manufactured or altered deliberately to be later used as a tool for deception. One example of a definition of “counterfeit” as used in the international art market can be found in the conditions of sale by Sotheby’s:

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