

## Chinese Diplomat and the 1935 International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London: From Proposal to Implementation

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This paper examines the crucial role of Quo Tai-chi 郭泰祺 (1889–1952, fig. 1), the Primary Chinese Ambassador to Britain sent by the Nanking Nationalist government (1928–37), at the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London (1935–36). It focuses on how he overcame various obstacles and implemented with great success the exhibition plan proposed by Sir Percival David (1892–1964), an aristocratic banker and admirer of Oriental art. First, I will briefly provide an overview of the London Exhibition, which was a major cultural event in twentieth century China and Britain, and make clear the cultural and historical background of its plan, which was formulated by British promoters and accepted by the Chinese Government. Then I will describe the negotiations Ambassador Quo Tai-chi engaged in on behalf of his government with that of Britain and Sir Percival David.

Following the abdication of the last Qing emperor in 1912, parts of the imperial art collection, which had been concealed behind the walls of the Forbidden City and at various imperial residences for centuries, were revealed to the outside world for the first time. Of the many works of art that were disposed of following the collapse of the dynasty and that circulated in the international art market, some found their way to Japan and the West. With the establishment of the Palace Museum in 1925, foreign art collectors became more familiar with China's national treasures, and a new enthusiasm for Chinese art began to take hold. At the end of 1932, a group of British collectors led by Sir Percival David proposed to hold a comprehensive exhibition of Chinese art in London. Formal negotiations for such an exhibition began with the Chinese government in 1934, and after lengthy deliberations the Chinese Ministry of Education (the government body responsible for organizing national cultural events) decided to participate. Chinese authorities had high expectations that this event would demonstrate the grandeur of the Chinese nation to a worldwide audience—and, perhaps more importantly, that it would help garner sympathy and support for China's resistance against Japan, which had been pressing on Chinese territory since its occupation of Manchuria in September 1931.

The exhibition was held at the Royal Academy of the Arts' Burlington House in Piccadilly from 28 November 1935 to 7 March 1936. More than 780 works from the Chinese government



**Fig. 1** The Chinese Ambassador to the Court of St. James, Quo Tai-chi (London, 1935). *Photo Album of Public Service Activities of Guo Tai-chi*, edited and published by the Second Historical Archives of China, Nanjing.



**Fig. 2** Overview shot of Gallery VI, 1935. Royal Academy Chinese Exhibition.  
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**Fig. 3** Overview shot of Gallery IX, 1935. Throne; tea wood, with cloisonné enamel and carving of cloud scrolls and bats. H. 96.3 cm; W. 110 cm. Footstool with designs in gold lacquer. Ch'ing Dynasty. Lent by the Chinese Government.  
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**Fig. 4** Central Room of the exhibition: Colossal Standing Figure of Amitābha Buddha. Marble, with inscribed lotus base (585 AD). H 5.78 m. Lent by C. T. Loo, Paris.  
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collection were shown at the exhibition, along with an additional 3,100 pieces belonging to some 240 collections from other countries. Magnificent works of bronze and jade, ceramics, paintings, sculptures, as well as other objects—the likes of which few Westerners had ever seen—were chosen from the Palace Museum, National Museum, Academia Sinica, Henan Provincial Museum and Anhui Provincial Library, as well as from the ornate Dunhuang collections of the National Library of France and the British Museum (figs. 2, 3, 4). The exhibition provided a powerful stimulus for the study of Chinese art, and

revolutionized Chinese art history as an intellectual discipline. For China, it was a great public relations success. Chinese art enjoyed favorable press for the duration of the exhibition, with the British media publishing a number of treatises and reports in universal praise of the uniqueness and universality of Chinese art and civilization. Chief among the many positive effects of the exhibition was a boom in the writing and translation of studies about Chinese art, literature and history, both in English and in other Western languages. Studies of Chinese civilization also enjoyed unprecedented popularity, among which those of Laurence Binyon (1869–1943) and Arthur Waley (1889–1966) are perhaps the best known, symbolizing as they do the sincere effort of Western writers to understand China at the time.

As a key participant in the International London Exhibition, the government of the Republic of China had to negotiate some complicated historical and cultural problems. First, since many Chinese intellectuals were far more concerned with the designs of the Imperial

Japanese Army in Manchuria at this time, there was strong domestic opposition to China lavishing time and energy on its cooperation with the British over an art exhibition in far-away London. Secondly, since the nineteenth-century China had generally been depicted as an undeveloped nation and stagnant civilization that stood in stark contrast to the major European powers, which had become very scientifically and technologically advanced since the Industrial Revolution. Notions of Chinese backwardness had become ingrained in Western understandings and interpretations of China, its art, and culture. These also provided a pretext for foreign powers to establish concessions in China following the Opium War. Nonetheless, Europeans had admired Chinese porcelain, ceramics, lacquer, and other art forms for centuries. They had generally acknowledged the quality of Chinese art as well as its favorable influence on the art, culture and social life of Europe. However, Chinese culture was regarded as “timeless” and “primitive,” and Chinese works of art were thus seen as interesting curiosities worth collecting but lacking in higher artistic value. Even when Chinese art (especially pictorial art) came to be better known in the West at the beginning of the 20th century, they were seen through Japanese eyes and interpreted by Japanese art scholars based on their connoisseurship and art tradition.<sup>1</sup> Following Japan’s full-scale invasion of Manchuria in September 1931, many in China felt an increasingly urgent need to reinterpret and redefine Chinese culture and art in a global context. The Nanking government began to pursue policies that aimed to promote Chinese culture worldwide, and to elevate China’s art and artistic tradition to the same international status enjoyed by Western art.

It was under such circumstances that Quo Tai-chi was assigned and sent in 1932 to Europe as the China plenipotentiary representative of the League of Nations while concurrently serving as the Minister to Britain. During his nearly nine-year mission in Britain, he initially promoted Sino-British friendship by giving numerous lectures and dinner-talks hosted by universities, clubs, and Oriental studies organizations based in Britain, and won the admiration of the British people, from the royal family, aristocrats, and politicians to the educated-public. Chief among his accomplishments as a professional diplomat for the Nanking Nationalist government was implementing the London Exhibition by overcoming a number of obstacles in Britain and his homeland. This paper aims to reveal the whole process by which he negotiated with British diplomats, collectors and artists—including Sir John Simon (1873–1954), the British Foreign Secretary of the time—and Sir Percival David. I focus on Quo’s official letters between himself

<sup>1</sup> For example, Laurence Binyon’s understanding of Chinese pictorial art was very much influenced by Japanese connoisseurship and aesthetics, although he was not aware of it. *The Kokka* and other Japanese art publications colored his perspective. His guide to Chinese art philosophy were the English-language works of Okakura Tenshin 岡倉天心 (1863–1913) and Taki Seiichi 瀧精一 (1878–1945), especially Okakura’s *The Ideals of the East* (London, 1903), which Binyon reviewed enthusiastically in *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *The Book of Tea* (London, 1905), as well as Taki’s “On Chinese Landscape Painting: Part I, II, III” which appeared in *The Kokka* from April 1906. These works introduced Binyon to facets of Confucianism, Taoism and Zen Buddhism that would color his own writing on Chinese art and his thinking in general. As for details regarding how Binyon interpreted Chinese painting and the influence from Japan, see Fan Liya, “Chinese Painting through ‘Japanese Eyes’: with Special Reference to Laurence Binyon’s Understanding and Misunderstanding of Chinese Painting” paper presented at the 34th World Congress of Art History, 20 September, 2016, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China.

and Sir John Simon, Sir Percival David, and Dr. Wang Shih-chieh 王世杰 (1891–1981; the Minister of Education and the Chairman of the Chinese Organizing Committee for the London Exhibition), as well as primary source documents found in other countries.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the submission deadline I was unable to provide a complete English paper for this volume. This is a summary of a paper which was originally written in Japanese and will be published in Chinese in mid 2017 in a major modern Chinese history academic journal based in Beijing, China.