

US hands over Tibetan Buddhism relics to China

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Some of the 41 cultural artifacts, including Tibetan Buddhist relics, that the Manhattan district attorney's office handed over to China on March 3. (China's National Cultural Heritage Administration via Xinhua)

The recent transfer of cultural artifacts, including several Tibetan Buddhist relics, from the US to China may help advance the Chinese government's efforts to distort Tibet's history and appropriate its religion and culture, Tibetan scholars and other critics of the transfer say.

On March 3, the Manhattan district attorney's anti-trafficking unit handed over to officials from [China](#) 41 "illegally exported" cultural artifacts, including a bronze money tree, pottery, jade pieces, Buddha statues, and Tibetan Buddhist cultural relics, Chinese state-run media reports said.

The transfer was conducted as part of an agreement between the two countries to protect cultural heritage and identity and prevent Chinese cultural relics from illegally entering the US. Since the pact was first agreed to on [January 14, 2009](#), the US has sent 594 pieces or sets of cultural relics and artworks to China.

The transfers have come as greater focus is paid to artifacts and other cultural items in Western museums and private collections obtained during colonization or other periods when the countries of origin were too weak to prevent the widespread pilfering of cultural items.

But sending Tibetan artifacts to China has raised concern that Beijing will use them to justify its rule in Tibet, which the country annexed in 1950.

"The Chinese government will certainly misuse these returned artifacts, and will use them to further promote their false historical narrative that Tibet has always been a part of China," Vijay Kranti, director of the Center for Himalayan Asia Studies and Engagement, based in New Delhi, said.

[In January](#), Li Qun, the director of China's National Administration of Cultural Heritage, said the country will work toward advancing "the return of key cultural relics to the motherland" and to use archaeology to "better explain Chinese civilization."

Critics say China has already [misused](#) ancient finds to back territorial claims over both Tibet and Xinjiang, a western region that is home to Uyghurs and other Muslim communities seeking greater autonomy from Beijing.

"It is an outrageous act to return Tibetan objects in the diaspora to the People's Republic of China, which is deliberately destroying Tibetan cultural heritage," said Kate Fitz Gibbon, executive director of the Committee for Cultural Policy, a US think tank that was established in 2011 to strengthen the public dialogue on arts policy.

"Since China occupied Tibet, U.S. authorities have accepted that Tibetan artifacts belong to the Tibetan people, not China's government," Fitz Gibbon said in an email. "The turnover by the Manhattan District Attorney's Antiquities Trafficking Unit

directly challenges that policy.”

An event that included Chinese and US officials was held March 3 in New York to mark the latest handover.

Chinese state-run media said the items were seized in November 2024. China’s National Administration of Cultural Heritage and the Chinese Consulate General in New York verified that the artworks were Chinese in origin.

The Manhattan district attorney’s antiquities trafficking unit previously handed over 38 antiquities—the majority of them identified as Buddhist religious objects from Tibet—during a ceremony at the Chinese Consulate General in New York on April 17, 2024.

But there’s little information about the transfers on the antiquities unit’s website, which does publicize materials that have been transferred to other countries.

The antiquities unit did not respond to at least three separate requests for comments. The US State Department and its Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Department also did not immediately respond.

According to China’s National Administration of Cultural Heritage, the latest 41 cultural artifacts include relics and artworks from the Neolithic Age (around 10,000 BC—1,700 BC) to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911).

China had signed agreements similar to the one with the US with governments of [25 other countries to promote](#) the return of what it considers to be stolen property.

Tibetans have expressed their disappointment over the US’s handover of Tibetan artifacts and relics to China.

Such handovers take away the chance for Tibetans to tell their own stories, said Dawa Tsering, director of the Tibet Policy Institute in Dharamsala, home to Tibet’s exile government.

“With every Tibetan Buddhism relic that goes to the hands of Communist China in such handovers, we Tibetans lose the opportunity to present the truth of our identity and our country to the world,” Dawa Tsering said. —Radio Free Asia

Additional reporting by Youdon.

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