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Master's thesis

Art Canon and the cultural gaze

A postcolonial comparative analysis of the work by
W.G. Gulland and Osvald Sirén



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Abstract

This study examines how W.G. Gulland and Osvald Sirén, two influential figures in the early Western engagement with Chinese art, constructed cultural authority through different professional positionalities. Gulland a non-academic merchant-collector, derived authority from connoisseurship, access to collections, and social networks, while Sirén, an academic art historian, grounded his authority in scholarly training, archaeological fieldwork, and institutional affiliation.

Gulland's writing emphasises material qualities, dynastic prestige, rarity, and visual appeal, framed through European tastes and selective use of sources. His approach illustrates the commercial and curatorial construction of authority, where collecting, display, and circulation determined which objects became canonical. The absence of Chinese voices and reliance on European intermediaries reflect dynamics identified by Said's Orientalism, Spivak's subaltern silences, and Chakrabarty's critique of historicism.

Sirén's scholarship situates Chinese art within historical, stylistic, and archaeological frameworks, translating Chinese visual culture into categories legible to Western audiences. His work demonstrates the academic and institutional construction of authority, combining comparative methods, textual evidence, and collaboration with Chinese specialists, while also reflecting Eurocentric assumptions and essentialist interpretations.

Together, Gulland and Sirén illustrate complementary modes of Western authority, commercial and scholarly, that converged to embed Chinese art within European museums and epistemologies. Their practices shaped the Western canon of Chinese art, influencing how it was interpreted, collected, and preserved.

Keywords

W.G. Gulland, Osvald Sirén, Chinese art, Chinese porcelain, postcolonial, canon, Orientalism

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1 Introduction

The point of departure for this thesis was an unexpected discovery in an antiques shop. Among shelves filled with decorative objects were several books with worn spines and faded covers: *Kinas Konst under Tre Årtusenden, Del I & II (Chinese Art through three millennia, Vol I and II)* published in 1942 & 1943 and authored by the art historian Osvald Sirén. Weeks later, I acquired a reprint of William Giuseppe Gulland's two-volume work *Chinese Porcelain*, a near-identical reproduction of the original 1918 edition. Although newly bound, the reprint emphasised that the text was considered too important not to be republished, an invitation not only to read, but also to question the foundations upon which knowledge of Chinese art in the West has been constructed.

My interest in Sirén had begun to develop earlier, particularly after encountering his conviction that art must be studied within its original environment.¹ This belief guided his travels from the Nordic countries to Italy, across the Atlantic to the United States, and thereafter to China. These journeys were epistemological as well as they were geographical, grounded in the idea that contextual experience is essential to the understanding of art. This principle came to define both his scholarly production and his curatorial practice.

What drew my attention to the works of both Gulland and Sirén was not merely their content, but the ways in which Chinese art, and porcelain in particular, was framed. Sirén, through his academic authority and institutional roles, likely contributed to shaping the Western scholarly perspective through which Chinese objects came to be interpreted. Gulland, by contrast, appears to have approached Chinese art as a merchant and collector, emphasising materiality, collectability and aesthetic appeal, potentially filtered through a lens of exoticism. Together, their writings raise critical concerns about how Chinese art became embedded within Western institutional narratives, where processes of selection, categorisation, and preservation often reflected post-imperial hierarchies.

¹ Johan Eriksson, 'Osvald Sirén, From Renaissance Italy to the Far East', in *Swedish Art Historiography: Institutionalization, Identity, and Practice* (Nordic Academic Press, 2022).



My engagement with Chinese porcelain has evolved through successive research projects at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The bachelor's thesis examined a blue-and-white butter dish from the Qianlong dynasty (1736-1795), situating it within the broader context of chinoiserie and social status in the eighteenth-century Sweden.² Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural and symbolic capital in combination with iconographic analysis, the study explored how porcelain functioned not only as an aesthetic object but also as a marker of hierarchy and cultural exchange between Europe and China.

At master's level,³ my research expanded into a comparative study of a Tang dynasty (618 –907) *Fat Lady* sculpture and a Ming dynasty (1368 –1644) blue-and-white porcelain object. This project investigated issues of materiality and canon formation, analysing how these objects have been received and presented within Western art-historical discourse. The findings demonstrated that Ming porcelain, due to global trade networks and technological innovation, attained a more established position within the Western canon, whereas Tang sculptures were often marginalised and exoticized.

Building on these foundations, the present thesis undertakes a comparative analysis of two influential early twentieth-century figures: the merchant William Giuseppe Gulland (1841 –1906) and the art historian Osvald Sirén (1879 –1966). Gulland's mercantile background may have fostered an emphasis on collectability and material value, aligning with broader colonial ideologies of trade and ownership. Sirén, by contrast, through his academic authority and curatorial activities, may have contributed to the integration of Chinese porcelain into Western academic paradigms. Applying a postcolonial lens, this study examines Gulland's two-volume work *Chinese porcelain* from 1918,⁴ and Sirén's two-volume *Kinas Konst under Tre Årtusenden, Del I & II (Chinese Art through three millennia, Vol I and II)* from 1942

² Ida Molin, 'Chinoiserie och status; Kinesiska föremål i svenska hem på 1700-talet' (Umeå Universitet, 2025), <https://umu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1928450/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

³ Ida Molin, 'Kanon och materialitet, En komparativ analys av Tangdynastins Fat Lady och Mingdynastins blåvita porslin' (Umeå Universitet, 2025), <https://umu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1972727/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

⁴ W. G. Gulland, *Chinese Porcelain Volume II*, 4th edn, Vol II (Chapman & Hall Ltd, 1918); W. G. Gulland, *Chinese Porcelain*, 4th edn, Vol I (Chapman & Hall Ltd, 1918).



& 1943,⁵ analysing how textual framing, curatorial choices, and collecting practices sustained Western cultural dominance. Although their work was separated by two decades, they were produced under distinctly different historical circumstances, marked by shifting perceptions of China and changing global power relations.

At a time when museums and academic institutions increasingly seek to decolonise their collections and narratives, it is essential to understand how historical structures continue to shape perceptions of art, culture, and value. This thesis contributes to that ongoing discussion by critically examining the legacy of colonial power structures in art history and by advocating for more inclusive and reflective approaches to cultural representation.

This study employs qualitative text analysis combined with critical discourse analysis to examine how Gulland and Sirén framed Chinese art in their respective works. The methodological approach is interpretive, with a focus on close reading and contextual analysis of selected publications by the two authors.⁶ The aim is to uncover how language, structure, and narrative strategies reflect underlying ideologies and epistemologies related to colonial power and cultural authority. The analysis is informed by postcolonial theory, primarily the works of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha,⁷ which guide the interpretation of how Chinese porcelain is represented, framed, and valued. Rather than assessing historical accuracy or aesthetic judgements, the study focuses on how meaning is constructed through discourse. Attention is paid to rhetorical devices, descriptive language, and implicit assumptions concerning culture, value, and knowledge. The comparative dimension of the analysis highlights similarities and differences in Gulland's and Sirén's contribution to Western canon formation and institutional influence. This method is particularly suited to examining the intersection of cultural representation and power, as it enables a nuanced reading of how texts both reflect and reproduce broader colonial structures.

⁵ W. G. Gulland, *Chinese Porcelain*, 4th edn, Vol I & Vol II (Chapman & Hall Ltd, 1918); Osvald Sirén, *Kinas Konst under Tre Årtusenden, Del I*, vol. 1942 (Natur och Kultur Esselte Aktiebolag, 1942); Osvald Sirén, *Kinas Konst under Tre Årtusenden, Del II*, vol. II. (Natur och Kultur Esselte Aktiebolag, 1943).

⁶ Esaiasson, 2024, 309–37; *A Handbook to W. G. Gulland Bequest of Chinese Porcelain* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1950); Sirén, 1942; Sirén, 1943; Gulland, 1918.

⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Ny utg. (Ordfront, 2000); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Repr (Routledge, 2003).



1.1 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to compare how W.G. Gulland and Osvald Sirén framed and represented Chinese art in the early twentieth century. The study explores how their differing professional positions, shaped interpretations of Chinese art and contributed to the construction of Western cultural authority and canon formation.

Main research question

How do W.G. Gulland's and Osvald Sirén's respective professional backgrounds, non-academic and academic, shape their representation of Chinese art?

Supporting research question

What do these representations reveal about the construction of cultural authority and institutional influence in a postcolonial context?

1.2 Methodology

This section presents the methodological and epistemological foundations of the study. The thesis employs a qualitative research approach grounded in postcolonial theory, with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the overarching methodological framework for analysing texts and discourses.

1.2.1 Materials

The methodological approach of this thesis is interpretive, with a focus on qualitative text analysis. An interpretive approach enables a deeper understanding of how language and discourse are used to shape perceptions of Gulland and Sirén,⁸ as well as the meanings they ascribe to Chinese art. This approach seeks to capture subjective and context-dependent meanings and is concerned with discourse practices rather than an empirical chain of events.

A challenge inherent in interpretive approach is the difficulty of reproducing results, as the analysis involves subjective interpretation in which the researcher's pre-

⁸ Jonathan Moses, *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research*, 3rd ed, with Torbjørn L. Knutsen (Macmillan Education UK, 2019), 153, 164–66, 200–201.



understanding plays a significant role. Had the aim of the study been to measure, for example, the frequency with which Gulland or Sirén was cited in later scholarship, or to establish causal relationships between their work and subsequent exhibitions or publications, a neopositivist explanatory approach would have been appropriate.⁹ However, such quantitative measurements fall outside the scope of this thesis.

The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis as its primary methodological tool. CDA provides a means to examine how language, representation, and discursive strategies shape the portrayals of Chinese art in the writing of W.G. Gulland and Osvald Sirén. By situating these texts within a postcolonial framework, the analysis highlights how professional positionalities, non-academic in Gulland's case and academic in Sirén's, inform the construction of authority and legitimacy. This methodical combination enables the study to address the main research question concerning how their respective backgrounds shape representations of Chinese art, while also engaging with the supporting question of how such representations contribute to the production of institutional influence in a postcolonial context,¹⁰ as this thesis inherently involves subjective interpretation in which the author's or researcher's pre-understanding plays a significant role.¹¹

The primary material consists of W.G. Gulland's *Chinese Porcelain Vol I and II* from 1918, and Osvald Sirén's *Kinas Konst under Tre Årtusenden, Del I & II (Chinese Art through three millennia, Vol I and II)*, published in 1942 & 1943.¹² Gulland's work comprises over 500 pages, while Sirén's extends to nearly 1,000 pages; both are richly illustrated. These works were selected because they represent significant scholarly and literary achievements, share a comparable two-volume structure, and were published approximately twenty-five years apart, albeit under markedly different historical conditions. Gulland wrote at a time when little was known in the West about Chinese ceramics and porcelain predating the Ming dynasty. Sirén, by contrast, benefited from direct access to archaeological discoveries in China, including

⁹ Peter Esaiasson et al., *Metodpraktikan: Konsten Att Studera Människor, Organisationer Och Samhällen*, Sjätte upplagan (Norstedts Juridik, 2024), 51.

¹⁰ Kristina Boréus and Charlotta Seiler Brylla, 'Kritisk Diskursanalys', in *Textens Mening Och Makt: Metodbok i Samhällsvetenskaplig Text- Och Diskursanalys*, Fjärde [omarbetade och aktualiserade] upplagan, ed. Kristina Boréus and Göran Bergström (Studentlitteratur, 2018).

¹¹ Esaiasson, 2024: 309–37.

¹² W. G. Gulland, 2018; Osvald Sirén, 1942; Osvald Sirén, 1943.



excavations carried out during large-scale infrastructure projects such as railway construction.¹³ Despite their relatively close publication dates, the two works thus reflect distinct epistemological and historical contexts. Their different positions make their writings particularly relevant for examining how national identity, professional background, and historical circumstance shape representations of Chinese art and the formation of cultural authority.

The analysis focuses on textual framing, language use, concepts, rhetoric, and discursive patterns, as well as on curatorial and collecting practices reflected in the texts. Particular attention is paid to processes of selection, contextualisation, institutional positioning, and recurring discursive strategies such as exoticisation, canonisation, and hierarchisation.¹⁴

1.2.2 Delimitations

This thesis is limited to a comparative analysis of selected writings by W.G. Gulland and Osvald Sirén, focusing on their representation of Chinese art, with particular emphasis on Chinese porcelain, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study examines two major publications by each author and does not seek to provide a comprehensive overview of their complete bodies of work.

Furthermore, the analysis concentrates on textual representation and institutional roles rather than on contemporary museum practices or current curatorial strategies. The thesis does not include visual analysis of the artworks themselves, nor does it assess the reception of Gulland's and Sirén's work in later or contemporary scholarship. Instead, it aims to clarify how their respective professional backgrounds contributed to the construction of cultural authority and the Western art-historical canon within a postcolonial framework.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory constitutes the central theoretical framework of this study, as it provides conceptual tools for analysing how Gulland's and Sirén's representations of

¹³ Anna Gremner, *Det Blåvita Guldet Från Kina* (AntikWest, 2005), 112.

¹⁴ AI-supported language editing, by CoPilot, was applied to enhance grammatical accuracy and clarity. Responsibility for the content and analysis rests solely with the author.



Chinese art were shaped by colonial legacies, discursive hierarchies, and institutional structures of authority. By situating their texts within a postcolonial framework, the analysis highlights how cultural authority was produced through processes of exoticisation, canonisation, and hierarchisation, and how these processes reflect broader patterns of Western engagement with non- Western art.

Although neither Gulland nor Sirén lived in formally colonised China, their writings emerged within global systems of knowledge production, trade, and museum practices that were deeply entangled with imperial power structures. Postcolonial theory therefore remains relevant, as it enables an examination of how Western representations of Chinese art were produced, legitimised, and institutionalised despite the absence of direct colonial rule. This framework allows the thesis to connect the authors' professional positions and historical contexts to broader epistemological structures that shaped Western understanding of Chinese art.

1.3.1 Postcolonial theory

A postcolonial perspective is essential to this thesis because it foregrounds the power relations that historically shaped Western interpretations of Chinese art and clarifies how these structures influenced both scholarly and non-scholarly forms of knowledge in the early twentieth century. Although China was not formally colonised by a European power in the same manner as many other regions, its art circulated within global systems of trade, collecting, and museum-making that were deeply embedded in imperial ideologies. A postcolonial lens therefore enables an analysis of how W.G. Gulland and Osvald Sirén, operating from different professional positions, contributed to the construction of Western cultural authority and canon formation.

In this way, the theory directly supports the thesis' main question about how their backgrounds shaped representations of Chinese art, and the supporting question concerning cultural authority in a postcolonial context.

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism provides a fundamental point of departure for analysing how Western scholars, writers, and collectors constructed representations of Asia that were closely linked to structures of power. Said argues that Orientalism is not a neutral body of knowledge but a discursive system through which "the Orient" was produced as an imaged space in Western scholarship, art, and political discourse.



These representations were shaped by historical and geopolitical contexts and functioned to legitimise Western political, cultural, and economic authority.¹⁵

Said emphasises that ideas, history, and cultural can be understood without considering the power within and over them. Orientalism, he argues, does not exist in a cultural vacuum but is a cultural and political phenomenon sustained through recurring modes of representation. These modes often rely on standardised tropes, such as mystery, decadence, craftsmanship detached from intellectual agency, or cultural stagnation, that appear across genres and disciplines.¹⁶ Identifying such tropes enables this thesis to examine whether Gulland's or Sirén's writing reproduce inherited orientalist narratives and how these narratives contributed to Western canon formation.

Although Edward Said has argued that cultural history cannot be separated from relations of power,¹⁷ the authors examined in this study occupied markedly different positions in relation to China itself.

Said states that representations about Orientalism were not neutral, they legitimised Western political, cultural, and economic authority.¹⁸ Said's analysis is particularly relevant for this thesis, as both Gulland and Sirén wrote about Chinese art at a moment when Western knowledge production was strongly shaped by orientalist assumptions. Gulland's position may have inclined him towards interpreting objects through categories of rarity, curiosity, and aestheticized difference, modes of representation that often align with orientalist fascination. Sirén, by contrast, operated within academic and museum institutions that were embedded in Eurocentric traditions of classifications and systematisation. Although his scholarly tone appears objective, it may nevertheless reflect orientalist hierarchies through claims of expertise, chronological ordering, and implicit comparison with European art.

A further crucial aspect of Said's theory is his emphasis on authority. Orientalism functioned as a system in which Western authors were empowered to define, describe, and evaluate the East for Western audiences.¹⁹ This insight directly supports the main

¹⁵ Said, 2000:66, 69, 78, 184.

¹⁶ Ibid.: 78, 146–47.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 69.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 260–61.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 87–89.



research question of this thesis. Said's framework makes it possible to examine why Gulland, despite his non-academic background, could speak authoritatively about Chinese porcelain, and how his commercial experience shaped this authority. Similarly, it enables an analysis of how Siren's academic credentials allowed his interpretations to be institutionalised through museums, publications and teaching.

Said also underscores the entanglement of culture and politics, arguing that seemingly apolitical scholarly works are shaped broader geopolitical power relations.²⁰ This perspective is vital for understanding early twentieth century writing on Chinese art, produced during a period marked by imperial interventions, unequal treaties, and Western dominance of trade in China. Through Said's theory, Gulland's and Sirén's texts can be understood not as isolated scholarly contributions, but as cultural products shaped by imperial contexts that informed their perspectives, authority, and evaluative frameworks.

Homi K. Bhabha's work further develops this analysis by drawing attention to the ambivalence inherent in colonial discourse. His concepts of mimicry, ambivalence, and the stereotype reveal how colonial representations simultaneously idealise and diminish the colonised culture.²¹ This perspective is particularly useful for analysing how both Gulland and Sirén express admiration for Chinese craftsmanship while situating it within Western evaluative frameworks. Bhabha's theory allows the thesis to identify tensions in their writings, such as whether Gulland's enthusiasm reinforces exotic difference, or whether Sirén's scholarly framing both elevates and constrains Chinese art through European standards of analysis.

Bhabha also challenges linear and homogenising narratives of national identity and history, arguing that cultural meaning is produced at the margins through negotiation and difference.²² The critique is relevant for examining how Gulland's and Sirén's texts construct cultural meaning and how such meaning, becomes a vehicle for intellectual authority within Western institutions.

²⁰ Said, 2000: 319-21.

²¹ Bhabha, 2003: 66-84.

²² Ibid.: 139-70.



Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work contributes a critical perspective on representation and voice. The well-known statement that "the subaltern cannot speak" highlights how marginalised groups are excluded from dominant structures of knowledge production. Spivak argues that Western intellectuals often speak on behalf of the subaltern, thereby reinforcing their silencing.²³ This insight is relevant to this thesis insofar as both Gulland's and Sirén's writings rely on sources, translations, and interpretive frameworks that mediate Chinese voices through Western discursive structures. Spivak's emphasis on critical self-reflection serves as a reminder that representation is inseparable from power.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of Europe as universal analytic category adds another important dimension. The notion of "provincializing Europe" exposes how European historical models have been presented as neutral and universal, shaping the interpretation of non-Western cultures. Chakrabarty argues that historical time is not natural but constructed, reflecting specific modern European ways of understanding the world. This perspective is particularly relevant for analysing Sirén's art-historical methodology, as the chronological narratives and evaluative criteria may reflect European epistemological structure when applied to Chinese material.²⁴

Chakrabarty's framework also illuminates Gulland's classificatory practices, which often rely on European market-based notions of value, taste, and authenticity. Incorporating Chakrabarty's theory makes it possible to examine how both authors imposed epistemic structures on Chinese art and how these structures contributed to Western canon formation.

Taken together, the theories of Said, Bhabha, Spivak, and Chakrabarty provide a coherent framework that enables this thesis to:

- Analyse how Gulland's and Sirén's professional backgrounds shaped their modes of representation,

²³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 292–308.

²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton Studies in Culture / Power / History (Princeton university press, 2007), 15, 73–74.



- Examine how these representations contributed to cultural authority, canon formation, and institutional influence,
- Critically investigate the mechanisms through which Western dominance in the interpretation of Chinese art was produced and sustained.

By applying postcolonial theory, the thesis not only describes *what* Gulland and Sirén wrote but also interprets *how* and *why* their representations took the form they did, and what this reveals about the historical processes that continue to shape the study of Chinese art today.

1.3.1.1 Canon

Canon formation constitutes an important supplementary theoretical perspective in this thesis. A substantial body of scholarship has addressed how artistic value, legitimacy, and hierarchy are constructed within art history, including contributions by Hubert Locher, Foteini Vlachou, Sally Price, Linda Nochlin, and Pierre Bourdieu.²⁵ Their work provides theoretical tools for understanding how canons are formed, maintained, and challenged within institutional contexts.

Rampley et al. expand this discussion by examining the development of cultural institutions and museums in Western Europe, highlighting the institutional processes through which canons are produced and sustained.²⁶ Guo Hui has analysed canon formation in early twentieth-century Chinese art history from a Chinese perspective, demonstrating how Western conceptions of fine art influenced the reconfiguration of Chinese art-historical narratives. Prior to the twentieth century, scholarly attention in China focused primarily on painting and calligraphy, while decorative arts received

²⁵ Linda Nochlin, *Linda Nochlin on the Body*, Pocket Perspectives (Thames & Hudson, Inc, 2024); Paris A. Spies-Gans, 'Why Do We Think There Have Been No Great Women Artists? Revisiting Linda Nochlin and the Archive', *The Art Bulletin* Vol 104 2022, no. Nr 4 (n.d.); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 11. print (Harvard Univ. Press, 2002); Foteini Vlachou, 'Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery', *Visual Resources* 32, no 1–2 (2016): 9–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973762.2016.1132500>; Hubert Locher, 'The Idea of the Canon and the Canon Formation in Art History', in *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, by Matthew Rampley et al. (BRILL, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004231702>; Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (University of Chicago press, 1989).

²⁶ *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, Brill's Studies on Art, Art History, and Intellectual History, vol. 4 (E. J. Brill, 2012).



limited theoretical engagement. In response to Western models of canonisation, a broader and more inclusive understanding of Chinese art began to emerge.²⁷

Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel's article "Art history and the global: deconstructing the latest canonical narrative" challenges the notion that global art history began with postcolonial turn of the late twentieth century.²⁸ She argues that earlier forms of global and comparative art history were marginalised as the discipline became institutionalised. Joyeux-Prunel emphasises the role of institutions and research networks, suggesting that the globalisation of the art market had played a more decisive role in shaping global art history than postcolonial theory alone.²⁹

James Elkin argues art history worldwide is shaped by Western frameworks. Even traditions like Chinese art history, though based on distinct sources, rely on Western interpretive methods and academic structures. Ancient Chinese texts exist, but they do not resemble modern art history, underscoring the dominance of Western models in the discipline.³⁰

Elkin further argues that art history remains structures around North Atlantic canon shapes the standards of legitimacy within the discipline, relegating non-Western traditions to the periphery. Even when scholars engage with distinct local sources, their work is often framed through Western academic conventions. Elkin's analysis underscores how language, particularly the dominance of English, reinforces hierarchies between centres and periphery.³¹

Foteini Vlachou further develops the discussion of canon, centre, and periphery by shifting the focus from geography to temporality. In her article *Why Spatial? Time*

²⁷ Guo Hui, 'Canonization in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Art History', *Journal of Art Historiography* (Jun 2014) 2014, no. 10 (2014): 2-4, 12,16, <https://doaj.org/article/27f4036d388b42e9a3202f5ffc802dd2#:~:text=Through%20an%20inter->

[textual%20reading%20of%20the%20publications%20on,formation%20happened%20during%20the%20Republican%20period%20of%20China](https://doaj.org/article/27f4036d388b42e9a3202f5ffc802dd2#:~:text=Through%20an%20inter-textual%20reading%20of%20the%20publications%20on,formation%20happened%20during%20the%20Republican%20period%20of%20China).

²⁸ Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, 'Art History and the Global: Deconstructing the Latest Canonical Narrative', *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 3 (2019): 413–14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022819000196>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 414–25.

³⁰ James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?*, Nachdr., The Art Seminar 3 (Routledge, 2010), 19–20.

³¹ James Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and Its Alternatives* (De Gruyter, 2021), 39–61, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110722475>.



and Periphery, she critically examines how the concept of the periphery in art history has traditionally been understood not only as spatially marginal, but also as temporally 'late'. According to Vlachou, national and regional art histories are often positioned as peripheral because they are perceived as delayed in relation to a presumed central and progressive timeline defined by Western Europe. This temporal framing reinforces hierarchical structures within the discipline, where artistic developments outside the centre are measured against a dominant narrative of linear progress.³²

Drawing on a Louis Althusser's theories on historical time, Vlachou challenges the notion of a single unified historical chronology. Instead, she argues that different social, cultural, and artistic formations operate according to distinct temporal rhythms that cannot be reduced to a centre- periphery model based on delay or imitation. This perspective destabilises the assumption that artistic production outside the dominant centres is inherently derivative or belated and instead emphasises the autonomy and specificity of peripheral contexts.³³

Vlachou further argues that simply expanding the canon by incorporating peripheral art histories does little to dismantle existing hierarchies if the underlying temporal and epistemological structures remain intact. Inclusion alone, she suggests, risks reinforcing marginality by framing non-central art as an addition to an already established canon rather than questioning the canon's foundational logic.³⁴ This critique is particularly relevant to the present thesis, as it underscores how Chinese art, even when acknowledged and valued within Western scholarship, may still be positioned as secondary or exceptional rather than integral to art-historical narratives.

The concepts of eclecticism, often used pejoratively in art history describe peripheral artistic practices, is also reconsidered by Vlachou. Rather than interpreting eclecticism as a lack of originality, she frames it as a productive strategy shaped by specific historical and institutional conditions. From this perspective, eclecticism reflects adaptive responses to multiple influences rather than artistic inferiority.³⁵ This re-evaluation is important for analysing how Chinese art has been described and

³² Vlachou, 2016: 14–16.

³³ *Ibid.*: 10–11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*: 12.



categorised in Western texts, particularly in relation to claims of authenticity, originality, and stylistic coherence.

Vlachou also addresses the terminological shift from ‘province’ to ‘periphery’ within art-historical discourse. While ‘province’ has historically carried connotations of inferiority and cultural dependence, ‘periphery’ is often perceived as more neutral and flexible. However, Vlachou cautions that the term periphery still operates within a hierarchical framework if it continues to be defined in relation to a dominant centre. Her analysis highlights how regions can simultaneously function as centre and peripheries depending on historical and institutional contexts, thereby complicating rigid spatial and temporal hierarchies.³⁶

In relation to this thesis, Vlachou’s framework provides tools for examining how Gulland’s and Sirén’s writings position Chinese art within Western art history. Her emphasis on temporarily and institutionally framing makes it possible to analyse whether Chinese porcelain is presented as part of a parallel artistic trajectory or as a belated counterpart to European art. By foregrounding the ideological nature of temporal hierarchies, Vlachou’s work supports a critical reading of how canon formation operates not only through inclusion and exclusion, but also through subtle narratives of progress, delay, and centrality.

Together, these discussions of canon, centre, and periphery provide an essential theoretical context for considering how Gulland’s and Sirén’s writings could be interpreted as engaging with, or potentially reproducing, Western art-historical authority and how Chinese art was situated in relation to the Western canon.

1.4 Analytical framework

The methodological approach of this thesis is interpretive, grounded in qualitative text analysis and informed by postcolonial theory. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis, CDA, the study examines how language, representation, and discursive strategies shape perceptions of Chinese art in the writing of W.G. Gulland and Oswald Sirén, through a close reading of their work. Postcolonial theory provides the analytical lens through which these texts are situated, highlighting how colonial

³⁶ Vlachou, 2016: 12–13, 14–16.



legacies, cultural hierarchies, and Western epistemologies influence textual framing, language, concepts, rhetoric, as well as curatorial and collecting practices, processes of selection and contextualization, institutional positioning, and discursive patterns such as exoticisation, canonisation, and hierarchisation.

The analysis proceeds by identifying recurring themes and discursive strategies, marking passages where language, concepts and rhetorical frame Chinese art in particular ways. These coded segments are then compared across two authors, in order to highlighting similarities and differences in representations. Attention is given to curatorial and collecting practices, processes of selection and contextualisation, and the institutional positioning of each author: Gulland as writing at a time of limited archaeological knowledge, and Sirén as benefiting from archaeological excavations in China. Through this comparative reading, the study traces discursive patterns such as exoticisation, canonisation, and hierarchisation, and situates them within a postcolonial framework. This approach makes it possible to demonstrate how the authors' differing positionalities shaped their portrayals of Chinese art and how these portrayals reveal broader processes of cultural authority and institutional influence in both colonial and postcolonial context.

The intention is not to foreground Sirén solely because of the Swedish background. Although Sirén was primarily active within the Swedish art and museum sphere and many of his books and articles were written exclusively in Swedish, he also reached audiences in England and in the United States. The decision to write this thesis in English is therefore deliberate. There is a significantly overrepresentation of research on Sirén compared to Gulland, and writing in English helps to place both figures on more equal analytical ground. Nevertheless, the aim is to approach both authors with equivalent critical attention and scholarly rigour.

The works by Gulland and Sirén were written more than a century ago. As a result, terminology and expressions that are no longer acceptable in contemporary academic discourse may appear in their texts. The presence of such language does not necessarily imply consciously superior attitude, but it must be acknowledged and contextualised within its historical setting.

As a researcher, several aspects must be considered, including ethical principles, norms, and legal framework. In this study, no major ethical concerns are anticipated.



However, had the study been founded or commissioned by an external party, transparency and openness would have been even more crucial.³⁷ Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research, requiring the researcher to critically reflect on the entire research process and acknowledge how pre-understanding may influence interpretation.³⁸ Principles of source criticism, such as authenticity, interdependence, contemporaneity, and bias, must also be taken into account.³⁹ The study primarily relies on Western literature, which may affect the perspectives and tendencies reflected in the analysis.

Taken together, this analytical framework enables the thesis to identify how Gulland's and Sirén's differing professional backgrounds shaped their representations of Chinese art and to analyse how these representations contribute to broader processes of cultural authority and canon formation. In this way, the methodological approach makes it possible to address both the main research question and the supporting question by revealing how discourse functions as a site in which institutional power, expertise, and historical hierarchies are constructed.

1.5 Literature Review

This section situates the present thesis within existing scholarship on Chinese art, postcolonial theory, and art-historical knowledge production. In order to provide a clear contextual framework for the study, a deliberately extended review has been undertaken. Rather than attempting an exhaustive survey of all scholars, this approach focuses on identifying key figures and debates that are most relevant to the research questions, clarifying how earlier work had addresses issues of representation, authority, and canon formation, and position the present thesis in relation to these discussions. By highlighting how prior scholarship informs the analytical frameworks of this study, the review also demonstrates how the thesis builds upon and extends exiting research through a comparative, discourse-oriented approach.

³⁷ 'God forskningsed (2017)', text, 12–14, 23, accessed 2 September 2025, <https://www.vr.se/analys/rapporter/vara-rapporter/2017-08-29-god-forskningssed-2017.html>.

³⁸ Marilys Guillemain and Lynn Gillam, 'Ethics, Reflexivity, and "Ethically Important Moments" in Research', *Qualitative Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (2004): 262–63, 275, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360>.

³⁹ Esaiasson et al.: 2024, 135–43.



1.5.1 Collection and connoisseurship in Chinese Art

In *Chinese Porcelain*, Cosmo Monkhouse traces the history of collecting of Chinese porcelain in Europe, identifying what he considers the earliest known example from 1171. He emphasises the strong European fascination with porcelain, particularly through the patronages of figures such as King Augustus the Strong of Poland and Elector of Saxony (1694-1705), whose collecting activities led to the establishment of the Dresden Collection. During the eighteenth-century, porcelain from China and Japan was imported in large quantities by the Dutch and English East India Companies, reflecting an intense European demand for Chinese material culture. In Europe there was a great desire for porcelain and other objects from China. Monkhouse distinguishes between what he terms ‘older’ and ‘modern’ collectors. Modern collectors, according to Monkhouse, primarily valued porcelain produced for the European market and were guided largely by aesthetic appeal, as China was reluctant to export older objects and there was little demand for them at the time. Older collectors, by contrast, sought to unite beauty and antiquity, placing increasingly emphasis on historical knowledge and craftsmanship. Monkhouse argues that true connoisseurship required not only familiarity with the literature on Chinese porcelain but also direct engagement with the objects themselves, guided by artistic excellence rather than commercial value.⁴⁰

Monkhouse also situates Chinese porcelain within the broader European enthusiasm for chinoiserie, a phenomenon that shaped taste and collecting practices across Europe. He highlights key historical developments, such as the establishment of imperial kilns under the Emperor Jingdezhen (Ching-tê),⁴¹ (1004-1007), where reign marks were inscribed on porcelain produced for the court.⁴² Many of the finest objects in European collections, according to Monkhouse, date to the Ming Dynasty and Kangxi and Qianlong periods, particularly examples in the *famille verte* and *famille rose* styles, known for great workmanship.⁴³

⁴⁰ Cosmo Monkhouse, *History and Description of Chinese Porcelain* (Cassell and Company Limited, n.d.), 1901:1–12.

⁴¹ The older spelling or name convention will be in brackets, the spelling will change due to author and date. Although this may serve to reinforce Western influence, it is done in order to facilitate the reader’s understanding.

⁴² Molin, 2025.; Monkhouse, 1901:17.

⁴³ Monkhouse, 1901:38–39.



Significantly, Monkhouse refers to objects owned by W.G. Gulland, describing them as among the finest in England and noting their display at the South Kensington Museum (now the Victorian and Albert Museum).⁴⁴ Gulland's knowledge of decorative motifs and their cultural meanings is highlighted, indicating his deep engagement with Chinese history and symbolism. Monkhouse also references Gulland's first edition from 1898,⁴⁵ suggesting the importance of his work within contemporary scholarship.

More recent scholarship reinforces the importance of examining collecting histories. Jason Steuber emphasises in his "Introduction", in *Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges* the need to understand 'who collected what during which period and for what reason', in order to critically assess how Chinese art is presented in museums today.⁴⁶ Wang similarly notes that Euro-American scholarship on Chinese art advanced significantly through a series of influential monographs, including those by Osvald Sirén's,⁴⁷ which shaped academic discourse and institutional practices.

Together, these studies provide essential context for understanding the collecting practices and scholarly traditions within which Gulland and Sirén operates. They clarify how connoisseurship, aesthetic judgement, and historical knowledge contributed to the formation of authority in Chinese art studies, offering a foundation for present thesis's comparative analysis of how Gulland's and Sirén's backgrounds shaped their representations of Chinese art.

1.5.2 Colonial and postcolonial context

In "Postcolonial Theory and the 'Decolonisation' of Chinese Culture" Ning explores how postcolonial thought can be applied to China, a country that was never fully colonised in the same way as India or Africa, but which nevertheless experienced

⁴⁴ Monkhouse, 1901:63–65.

⁴⁵ Ibid.: 158–60.

⁴⁶ Jason Steuber, 'Introduction', in *Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges*, ed. Jason Steuber et al., David A. Cofrin Asian Art Manuscript Series (University Press of Florida, 2014), 1.

⁴⁷ Daisy Yiyong Wang, 'C.T. Loo and the Formation of the Chinese Collection at the Freer Gallery of Art, 1915-1951', in *Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges*, ed. Jason Steuber et al., David A. Cofrin Asian Art Manuscript Series (University Press of Florida, 2014), 162.



cultural colonisation through Western discourse. Ning argues that China has long been positioned as the ‘other’ in relation to the West, defined not on its own terms but through the lens of European imagination. This process is closely tied to orientalism, where China is represented as exotic, passive and feminised a cultural space to be consumed rather than understood. Chinese porcelain serves as a striking example of this dynamic. Exported in vast quantities to Europe, porcelain functioned not merely as a commodity but as a medium through which Europeans constructed an imagined China. Landscapes, pagodas, and floral motifs were stylised to appeal to Western tastes, reinforcing decorative and fantastical perceptions of Chinese culture. In Britain, porcelain was reduced to ‘china’, a term that stripped the objects of cultural specificity and transformed them into a generic symbol of the Orient. Ning’s postcolonial perspective highlights how such objects embody cultural appropriation: produced in China but redefined by European consumers to project fantasies of power and difference.⁴⁸

A similar argument is developed in Reynold’s article “Chinese export porcelain and global spaces of imagination” Reynold demonstrates how porcelain was deliberate adapted to European taste, with decorative schemes designed to appear exotic and oriental. The frequent absence of Chinese figures allowed European viewers to project themselves into the scene, transforming the porcelain into a space for imperial imagination. Reynolds situates this phenomenon within British imperialism, noting how the consumption of Chinese porcelain was intertwined with global trade, the opium economy, and the asymmetrical power relations that culminated in the Opium Wars. Porcelain thus functioned simultaneously as a luxury commodity and as a cultural medium through which Britain constructed a controlled an image of China.⁴⁹

Qi Zhou’s study of eighteenth-century Chinese armorial porcelain further illustrates how such objects embodied both cultural hybridity and imperial power. Combining Chinese craftsmanship with European heraldic emblems, armorial porcelain functions as a marker of elite identity and status in Europe. Zhou argues that while these objects connected distant societies through global trade, they also reinforced colonial

⁴⁸ Wang Ning, ‘Postcolonial Theory and the “Decolonization” of Chinese Culture’, *A Review of International English Literature* 28:4 1997, no. October (1997): 34–43.

⁴⁹ Julis Reynolds, ‘Chinese Export Porcelain and Global Spaces of Imagination’, *The University of Kansas Journal of Undergraduate Research* Summer 2014-Spring 2015 (2014): 58–63.



hierarchies by appropriating Chinese motifs within European symbolic framework. Porcelain became a site where China was admired for its technical skills but subordinated as an exotic cultural backdrop. In this way porcelain became a site where China was ‘othered’, admired for its craftsmanship, but subordinated as a cultural symbol that reinforced Western dominance. Zhou argues that armorial porcelain illustrates how global commodities could simultaneously connect distant societies and reproduce colonial hierarchies.⁵⁰

These postcolonial studies provide a critical framework for analysing how presentations of Chinese art are shaped by imperial power structures and cultural hierarchies. They inform the present thesis’s examination of how Gulland’s and Sirén’s writing participate in, negotiate, or reproduce orientalist discourse and imagined construction of China.

1.5.3 Colonial Context and Western Engagement with Chinese art

Gulland was active in Asia during a period marked by the Opium Wars (1839-1842) and the resulting unequal treaties,⁵¹ often referred as China’s “century of humiliation”.⁵² During the colonial era, Western travellers could climb the social ladder and reach a higher status, a privilege tied to their mobility and networks of influence.⁵³

China’s image in the West had declined since the end of the eighteen-century craze for Chinoiserie. Chinese people were often stereotyped as addicted to opium and prone to perpetual civil war. However, this perception began to change in the 1930s. In late November 1935, London hosted a landmark exhibition of traditional Chinese art at the Royal Academy of Arts, featuring rare items from the Palace Museum. Drawing over 420,000 visitors and it marked a significant cultural milestone. Initiated

⁵⁰ Qi Zhou, ‘Porcelain, Power, and Identity: The Global Life of Chinese Armorial Ware in the Eighteenth Century’, *Arts* 14, no. 6 (2025): 17, 19, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts14060128>.

⁵¹ Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 72.

⁵² David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*, Oxford Scholarship Online Political Science (Oxford University Press, 2020), 190, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190265687.001.0001>.

⁵³ Perry Johansson, ‘Orval Karlbeck På Skattjakt: Historien Bakom Östasiatiska Museets Svenska Kinasamlingar’, *Nordisk Museologi* 2005, no. 2 (2005): 31, <https://doi.org/DOI:%252010.5617/nm.3313>.



by private collectors like Sir Percival David (1892-1964),⁵⁴ the exhibition also served diplomatic purposes. Amid rising tension in East Asia, particularly Japan's expansion into China, it functioned as a tool of cultural diplomacy, strengthening Britain's image and commercial ties with China. Historians now view the exhibition as politically significant, shaping British public opinion during the Sino-Japanese War and reflecting growing Western interest in Chinese culture. The event uniquely bridged art, politics, and international relations.⁵⁵

Sir Percival David's initiative aligned with a broader interest in cultural exchange. While collectors sought to enhance the prestige of Chinese art, the British government recognised the diplomatic value, using the exhibition to improve relations with China and signal respect for its civilization. China welcomed the initiative as an opportunity to assert cultural leadership and challenge Japan's influence. Despite logistical hurdles, including the need for naval protection and political tensions with Japan, the British foreign Officer secured royal patronage and military support, ensuring the exhibition's success. The 1935-36 Chinese art exhibition showcased over 3,000 objects, including more than 800 from China, mainly bronzes, porcelain, paintings and jade. The display followed a chronological format by dynasty, with special attention to the Ming dynasty. Despite some critic from European art purist, the public response was overwhelmingly positive, and the exhibition influenced fashion, scholarship and cultural appreciation across Britain.⁵⁶

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Sirén continued to lecture internationally, assembly collections and publish on Chinese paintings and sculptures. Sirén gave lectures in

⁵⁴ Sir David was famous for his large collection of Chinese porcelain. Even though he also was active in England he was not contemporary with Gulland. Kate Price, *The Percival David Foundation*, 11 November 2015, <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/centenarytimeline/2015/11/11/the-percival-david-foundation-of-chinese-art/>.

⁵⁵ Antony Best, "'To Contemplate the Soul of the Oldest Civilization in the World': Britain and the Chinese Art Exhibition of 1935–36", *The International History Review* 45, no. 2 (2023): 292–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2022.2120049>.

⁵⁶ Best, 2023: 295–98.



the landmark *the International Exhibition of Chinese Art* in London in 1936.⁵⁷ The lecture was entitled “The Chinese attitude towards painting”.⁵⁸

The exhibition and related activities transformed British perceptions of China, especially during the Sino-Japanese war, 1937-1945, positioning China as the bearer of civilization in contrast to Japan. Smaller follow-up shows reinforced this narrative.⁵⁹ This context illustrates that Western engagement with Chinese art was never neutral: it was mediated through colonial power structures, social networks, and diplomatic agendas, shaping both the circulation of objects and the framing of cultural authority.

1.5.4 W.G. Gulland

Very little scholarly research has focused specifically on W.G. Gulland. He is mentioned only briefly in Monkhouse’s *Chinese Porcelain*,⁶⁰ and his role is otherwise largely absent from broader art-historical literature. His collection, however, has been extensively documented in publications by the Victorian and Albert Museum, where many of his objects are preserved.⁶¹ Gulland is also referenced in Pierson’s research,⁶² though without sustained analysis of his intellectual or discursive position.

The absence of research positions Gulland as a particularly important case study. By analysing his writings and collecting practices, this thesis contributes new knowledge to the field and addresses a gap in scholarship, offering a counterpoint to more extensively studied academic figures as Sirén.

1.5.5 Oswald Sirén

Osvald Sirén has received substantial scholarly attention as a foundational figure in Western Chinese art history. Jason Steuber identifies Sirén as instrumental in legitimising Chinese art within Euro-American academic and museum context.

⁵⁷ Törmä, *Enchanted by Lohans.: Oswald Sirén’s Journey into Chinese Art* (Hong Kong University press, 2013), 126, 142.

⁵⁸ William Llewellyn Lytton, ed., *Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-1936*, 5th edn (Faber and Faber Ltd. Royal Academy of Arts, 1936), xii.

⁵⁹ Best, 2023: 299–303.

⁶⁰ Monkhouse, 1901.

⁶¹ *A Handbook to W. G. Gulland Bequest of Chinese Porcelain*, 1950.

⁶² Stacey Pierson, ‘Reinventing “China”: Provenance, Categories, and the Collecting of Chinese Ceramics, 1910-2010’, in *Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges*, ed. Jason Steuber et al., David A. Cofrin Asian Art Manuscript Series (University Press of Florida, 2014).



Through his monographs and curatorial work, Sirén established stylistic and historical categories that influenced museums acquisitions, and provenance research, and interpretive strategies.⁶³

Johan Ericsson describes Sirén as an art historian shaped by cultural- historical approach that emphasised the study of art in its place of origin. Initially trained in European art history, particularly Italian Renaissance art, Sirén later shifted his focus to East Asia, where he made his most significant scholarly contributions. His academic career began in Finland and later developed through institutional roles in Sweden, including his tenure at the National Museum in Stockholm, where he advocated for the creation of a dedicated East Asian department.⁶⁴

Magnus Fiskesjö, in his ‘Art and Science as Competing Values in the Formation of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm’, in *Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges*, explores how the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities (MFEA) in Stockholm was shaped by both scientific ambitions and aesthetic ideals.⁶⁵ The MFEA was founded during a period when Sweden sought to assert itself as a modern, scientifically advanced nation, the MFEA also reflected a growing European fascination with Eastern Asia art. King Gustaf VI Adolf’s support further reinforced the museum’s dual identity as both a scholarly and cultural institutions. Fiskesjö traces the impact of Eastern Asian art in Sweden prior to the founding of the MFEA where one of the most influential figures was Osvald Sirén, an art historian and curator who played a pivotal role in introducing Chinese art to Swedish and European audiences. Sirén was among the first in Sweden to treat Chinese art as fine art rather than ethnographic material. His scholarly publications helped establish Chinese art as a legitimate academic field in the West. Fiskesjö highlights how Sirén’s work laid the groundwork for an aesthetic understanding of

⁶³ Jason Steuber, ‘Perspectives on Collecting and Provenance: The Arts of China at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art’, in *Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges*, ed. Jason Steuber et al., David A. Cofrin Asian Art Manuscript Series (University Press of Florida, 2014), 271–73.

⁶⁴ Johan Eriksson, ‘Osvald Sirén, From Renaissance Italy to the Far East’, in *Swedish Art Historiography: Institutionalization, Identity, and Practice* (Nordic Academic Press, 2022), 157, 158- 159, 161, 162.

⁶⁵ Magnus Fiskesjö, ‘Art and Science as Competing Values in the Formation of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm’, in *Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges*, ed. Jason Steuber et al., David A. Cofrin Asian Art Manuscript Series (University Press of Florida, 2014), 75–76.



asiatica that would later shape the MFEA's curatorial approach. Sirén's influence was part of a broader European interest in East Asian art often entangled with colonial structures and exoticism. Yet Sirén sought to elevate artistic quality and historical depth rather than reinforce stereotypical notions of "the Orient".⁶⁶

Minna Törmä's *Enchanted by Lohans: Osvald Sirén's Journey into Chinese Art*, provides the most comprehensive analysis of Sirén's intellectual development. Törmä demonstrates how Sirén's European art-historical training shaped the analytical tools he later applied to Chinese art, illustrating how Western methodologies and hierarchies were transferred onto non-Western material.⁶⁷

A significant portion of her study focuses on Sirén's research journeys to East Asia between 1918 and 1935, which granted him access to archaeological excavations, photographic documentation, and influential international network of scholars, collectors, and dealers.⁶⁸

His first mention of Chinese art appeared in an article "Primitive and modern art" (Primitiv och modern konst) in 1915,⁶⁹ and in 1917 he published *Rhythm and Form*, introducing Chinese aesthetic to a Western audience. He emphasised rhythm as the essence of artistic expression, drawing connections between Chinese theories such as Xie He's six principles and Western formalist ideas.⁷⁰

It is believed that Sirén encountered Chinese art in the US for the first time in the 1910s. In 1919 he encountered the general director on the National Museums in Berlin, Wilhelm von Bode and his vision to form the museum to present art from the whole world, which reinforced Sirén's interest in broadening the canon beyond Europe. He financed his travels through essays and positioned himself as a cultural bridge between East and West.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Fiskesjö, 'Art and Science as Competing Values in the Formation of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm', 75–81.

⁶⁷ Törmä, 2013: 9–14.

⁶⁸ Ibid.: 1, 3–7, 12, 48, 52–53.

⁶⁹ Osvald Sirén, 'Primitiv Och Modern Konst', in *Ord Och Bild; Illustrerad Månadsskrift*, ed. Karl Wählin, vol. 1915 (Wahlström & Widstrand, 1915) 41.

⁷⁰ Törmä, 2013: 28–31.

⁷¹ Ibid.: 20–21, 52–53, 81–83.



1.6 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the research problem, presents the purpose and research questions, and situates the study within the theoretical framework of postcolonial scholarship as well as the methodology and analytical approach employed. It also provides a review of previous research on Chinese art, highlighting the contributions of key scholars and debates relevant to the study. Chapter 2 constitutes the empirical analysis, examining the works of Gulland and Sirén. Chapter 3 discusses the findings and situates them within broader scholarly debates. Finally, Chapter 4 presents the conclusion to the research questions.



2 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative text analysis of W.G. Gulland's and Osvald Sirén's writings on Chinese art. The analysis is based on close reading of their respective publications and focuses on how each author selected, described and evaluated Chinese objects, as well as how historical context, professional background and access to material shape their representations.

This chapter is structured around the two authors and examines their works separately to clarify their distinct modes of engagement with Chinese art. Gulland's writings are analysed in relation to his position as operating within Western collecting and museum networks, while Sirén's texts are examined in the light of his academic training, archaeological experience and institutional affiliations. Particular attention is paid to the objects discussed, the periods emphasised, the use of source, and the evaluative language employed.

Rather than offering a theoretical discussion, this chapter foregrounds empirical observations and recurring patterns in the material. Short reflective sections conclude each main part, connecting the findings to broader questions of representation and authority, while more extensive theoretical interpretation is reserved for the subsequent discussion chapter.

2.1 W.G. Gulland

It is unfortunate that, despite his connection with British museums, so little is documented about the life of W.G. Gulland from Brighton.⁷² Gulland primarily engaged with Chinese objects through Western collections and trade networks. However, William Giuseppe Gulland, born in 1841 in Fife, Scotland, came from a prosperous farming family. Early in life, he worked as mercantile clerk, a role that eventually led him to Singapore, where he became a respected merchant and a chairman of Paterson, Simon & Co, one of the colony's largest trading houses. His career in trade, particular in commodities such as rubber and copra, positioned him within Singapore's economic elite and earned him a seat on the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements. In 1886, he and his wife Julia Clementina Gulland, settled

⁷² Monkhouse, 1901:138.



at 30 Brunswick Terrace in Hove. It was likely here that Gulland began writing his two-volume work, examined in this thesis. These richly illustrated books, though printed in black and white to remain affordable, became foundational texts in the study of Chinese ceramics and were dedicated to his friend Augustus Franks of British Museum. Gulland was also active in local governance, serving on the Hove Board of Improvement Commissioners. Despite their large home, the couple lived modestly with three servants and had no children. Gulland died suddenly in 1906 at the age of 65, leaving behind a substantial estate and a remarkable legacy. His passion for Chinese, and Japanese porcelain resulted in generous donations to Victorian and Albert Museum (V & A) and Brighton Museum. In 1905, he gifted 180 pieces to V&A, and after his death, his wife continued the donations, culminating in a final bequest of 526 pieces in 1931. These collections remain invaluable, much of which is still exhibited today, testament to Gulland's dedication to sharing knowledge over personal gain.⁷³ It remains unconfirmed whether his donation was included in the large exhibition in 1935-36 in London.

In "Reinventing China: Provenance, Categories, and the Collecting of Chinese Ceramics, 1910" by Stacey Pierson identifies W.G. Gulland as an early and influential collector of Chinese ceramics in Britain. She emphasised that Gulland operated during a period when knowledge of Chinese art was limited, and that his collection was shaped by a mix of personal taste, availability, and contemporary Western perception of "China". Gulland exemplifies a type of collector who did not necessarily adhere to strict scholarly or institutional standards but instead collected based on aesthetic and cultural interest. Pierson shows how his collections helped shape Western understanding of Chinese ceramics, while also noting that such early collections have since been re-evaluated through more rigour provenance research. Pierson situates Gulland within a broader discussion of provenance, highlighting the origin and history of objects as an increasingly important factors in assessing authenticity, value, and cultural significance.⁷⁴

⁷³ 'The Regency Town House Brighton & Hove Heritage, Conservation, Community', n.d., accessed 13 November 2025, <https://www.rth.org.uk/local-history/brunswick-town/brunswick-terrace-30>.

⁷⁴ Pierson, 2014: 226–27.



In *A Handbook to W. G. Gulland Bequest of Chinese porcelain*, the author provides a detailed account of Gulland's donation to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Most of the items were donated in 1905, but the final pieces were added in 1931, following the death of his wife. The collection is notable for its quality, and several objects have since been loaned to other museums and schools of art. Gulland's primary interest in Chinese porcelain lay in its ornamental motifs and the ways in which European aesthetics had shaped its development.⁷⁵

Gulland, as a collector, was shaped by the Victorian era and he was part of the English tradition of history painting. His appreciation of painting was deeply rooted in the belief that every image conveys, or ought to convey, a narrative. This view is shared by many English observers, who considered the interest of a painting to lie in both its depiction and the story it tells. Gulland's volumes do not meet the standards of modern sinologist scholarship, but he was a true pioneer in two aspects: drawing attention to China and its art and adding personal experience that deepened his perspective. As a young man, he travelled to Singapore shortly after the English East India Company had relinquished its authority to the British imperial government. Gulland developed an intimate understanding of both China's coastal regions and its inland territories. He believed that meaningful comprehension of a country must begin with close familiarity with its geography, customs, and belief systems. In this light, W. G. Gulland deserves recognition alongside later, more distinguished sinologist and collectors.⁷⁶

2.1.1 Background

W.G. Gulland was a prominent Singapore merchant and advisor to the governor Sir Frederich Weld regarding conflicts with a group of Chinese merchants. Although colonial boundaries were being established to form distinct administrative and economic zones, many Chinese business activities largely ignored these divisions. Chinese enterprises had existed long before colonial power arrived, and in many cases, colonial governance relied on Chinese ability to operate beyond the limits imposed by Europeans. Without this mobility, colonial governments would have

⁷⁵ *A Handbook to W. G. Gulland Bequest of Chinese Porcelain*, 1950, 5–6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*: 23–24.



struggled to collect revenue, fund state development, and secure labour for essential work.⁷⁷

China's economic situation rapidly deteriorated in the beginning of the twentieth century. In the mid-1900s, European economic initiatives dominated Asia. China was both seen as a threat to Europeans and valued for its economic potential. Chinese merchants and migrants had established networks beyond the control of their own government. China was seen as wild, and it was important to gain control over them. The colonial governments had a gradual institutionalisation of racist attitudes and racist policies toward Chinese enterprises in the beginning of twentieth century.⁷⁸

2.1.2 Volume I

The volume is divided into approximately thirty chapters, such as Drama, Poetry, and Shapes, many with subheadings like Painted in Colors Under Glaze, further divided by topics such as Blue and White. Gulland devotes considerable attention and effort to the decoration of Chinese porcelain, exploring its symbols and meanings, from intricate patterns to representations of animals.⁷⁹ The two-volume work was conceived as a comprehensive handbook aimed at guiding collectors, scholars and enthusiasts alike.⁸⁰

He references several individuals whose identities are now unknown, though they were likely knowledgeable and held considerable authority in the field. The language is an older form of English, and illustrations are in black and white, organised by subject matter. Throughout the volumes, Gulland acknowledges the foremost experts of his time in the field of Chinese porcelain, drawing on their insights and adding his own observations.

Although Chinese porcelain was produced as early as the Han dynasty (206 BC- AD 25) and exported by the 13th Century, Gulland argues that it is unnecessary to look further back than the Ming dynasty when assessing its artistic and technical

⁷⁷ Carl A. Trocki, 'Boundaries and Transgressions: Chinese Enterprise in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth Century Southeast Asia', in *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed. Ai-hwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini (Routledge, 1997), 67–68.

⁷⁸ Trocki, 1997:70, 82.

⁷⁹ Gulland, 1918:19–131.

⁸⁰ Ibid.: vii.



achievements. He notes that the Chinese themselves regard porcelain from the early 15th century, particular during the Xuande (1425-1435) (Seuen-tih) period, as the finest. This, he suggests, is unsurprising given the Chinese reverence for history, a cultural trait that, while admirable, may also introduce a degree of bias in evaluation artistic merit.⁸¹

Gulland observes that fine arts in China have never held the same status as literature, which he attributes to limited encouragement historically given to drawing and painting. To European eyes, Chinese art often appears deficient in perspective and shading. However, Gulland stresses that Chinese aesthetics differ fundamentally from European ones. Chinese artists were guided, and perhaps constrained, by national tastes and traditions, maintaining the same stylistic framework for centuries.⁸²

The high cultural status of literature is further underscored by prominence of printing, drama, and poetry. As Gulland notes "...letters have along ranked above arms..." and the art of poetry has received significant attention.⁸³ He argues "Chinese history is more voluminous than interesting..." that although Chinese historical writing may appear excessively voluminous and at times unengaging, the traditions of drama and poetry provided artists with a vast reservoir of motifs and narratives, especially for porcelain decoration.⁸⁴ This cultural hierarchy remains relevant even to modern research.⁸⁵

Gulland provides detailed explanations of the techniques involved in decorating porcelain and highlights the consequences of the division of labour at Jingdezhen (King-te-chin).⁸⁶ Artists were treated as ordinary labourers, often specialising in a single element, such as flowers, mountains, or figures. This compartmentalisation, according to Gulland, resulted in the loss of individual expression and prevented the emergence of distinct artistic schools. Innovations in shape and form were frequently dictated by preferences of patrons, whether imperial or European, and many stylistic

⁸¹ Gulland, 1918:1–2.

⁸² *Ibid.*:7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*:13.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*:12.

⁸⁵ Molin, 'Kanon och materialitet, En komparativ analys av Tang dynastins Fat Lady och Ming dynastins blåvita porslin', 2025.

⁸⁶ King-te-chin is known as the porcelain city where everything was produced for the emperor



changes were externally driven. Exceptional pieces, he suggests, were often the result of special commissions that brought together the most skilled craftsmen. Painting itself was not considered an honourable profession, even with the imperial court.⁸⁷

Gulland cautions European readers against assuming that ornamentation functions in the same way across cultures. While ornament in Europe is often applied primarily for aesthetic pleasure, this exception does not necessarily hold true in Chinese contexts. He refers to narratives' origination from earlier dynasties, such as stories attributed to Tang dynasty scholars,⁸⁸ but clarifies that these were literary traditions rather than visual motifs directly translated onto porcelain.

Considerable space is devoted to animal imagery. Gulland notes that the tiger is among the most frequently depicted animals, despite the fact that few artists had ever seen one. In contrast, the lion, often shown playing with a ball, appears as a more mythical and symbolic figure. The tiger, by comparison, conveys a sense of raw power and danger.⁸⁹

Gulland also explains, with the aid of illustrations, the functional and aesthetic difference between plates and dishes used in China and those produced for export. He describes how both the front and back of plates were constructed according to specific principles, reflecting intended use and market.⁹⁰

When discussing blue- and- white porcelain, Gulland emphasises the subjective nature of judgements of quality. Generally, purer paste and pigment are considered indicators of excellence, though some collectors preferred pieces with a greenish tint, believing them to be older than brighter objects. During the Ming dynasty, particularly in the Chenghua (Ching-hwa) period (1465-1488) difficulties in securing high-quality cobalt affected production. Gulland notes that it was not until the Zhengde (Ching-tih) period (1506-1522) that cobalt from foreign sources appears to have been used. Even then, Chinese artisans continued to rely largely on native

⁸⁷ Gulland, 1918:15–17.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*:31-66.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*:85–86, 91-92.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*:116–22.



pigments, likely for economic reasons. Variations in blue tones are thus attributed to differences in pigment quality rather than stylistic intention alone.⁹¹

Gulland frequently references Albert Jacquemart, who studied Chinese porcelain as a part of the broader field of ceramic art. Jacquemart played a key role in expanding knowledge among collectors and museums, particularly through his categorisation of porcelain into colour-based families such as *famille verte*, *famille rose* and *famille noire*. Gulland also discusses the concept of *chinoiserie*, describing the European decorative style inspired by Chinese aesthetic during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹²

At Jingdezhen, reproductions of ancient pieces were produced, and in some cases, these were considered more aesthetically pleasing than the originals. Gulland argues that true connoisseurship in *chinoiserie* requires handling and examining many objects to distinguish originals from later reproductions. Gulland also offers practical advice on the domestic display of Chinese porcelain, recommending purpose-built cabinets and arrangements based on colour and material.⁹³

Although Gulland provides a detailed account of porcelain markings, he stresses that the most important factors in judging quality are the overall feeling of the object and the excellence of its decoration. Marks alone, he cautions, are unreliable indicators, as many fine pieces were never marked.⁹⁴

2.1.3 Volume II

Like the first, the second volume is printed without colour, but contains a substantial number of illustrations. Whereas the illustrations in the Volume I are grouped by subjects, those in Volume II are organised chronologically, offering a more explicitly historical framework.⁹⁵ The numbering is continuing from the first volume, suggesting the volumes to be read together. Gulland notes that sinologists had begun

⁹¹ Gulland, 1918:146–48.

⁹² Molin, ‘Chinoiserie och status; Kinesiska föremål i svenska hem på 1700-talet’, 2025; Gulland, 1918:166–98.

⁹³ *Ibid.*:241–45.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*:245–63.

⁹⁵ Gulland, *Chinese Porcelain Volume II*, 1918, xxix



adopting new systems for transcribing Chinese names, which affected the rendering of imperial dynasties and reign titles.⁹⁶

In this volume, Gulland examines the collections of prominent English collectors and provide highly detailed descriptions of individual objects. Many of these works were created specifically for the English market and imported directly. Material that did not fit into the structures of the first volume was included here, and Gulland acknowledges that the second volume was written partly for the purpose of entertaining his readers.⁹⁷

When dating porcelain, Gulland reiterates that quality, form, decorative style, and pigment use are more reliable indicators than inscriptions, which are often absent. His research draws upon the writing of Jesuit missionaries while also engaging with Chinese authors, whom he acknowledges for their detailed historical knowledge. He observes, however, that Chinese scholars frequently relied on earlier texts rather than direct observation.⁹⁸

The Yongzhen period (Yung-Chin) (1723-1736) is highlighted as particular significant, not only for the introduction of rose enamels but also for the refinement of shapes and the expansion of colour palette. By 1795, Canton had become the principal centre of foreign trade, although it did not house porcelain manufactories. White porcelain was transported there from other regions for decoration to Jingdezhen (King-te-chin) which remained the primal site of production and home to the imperial manufactory. Despite this, export continued to pass through Canton.⁹⁹

Gulland retains older spellings of Chinese names and dynasties, following the conventions used by Sir Wollaston Franks, a contemporary author in the field. Gulland remarks that certainty is difficult to achieve when studying China,¹⁰⁰ noting “If we are to believe Chinese historians...”,¹⁰¹ yet he nonetheless relies extensively on Chinese sources.¹⁰² His analysis proceeds chronologically, integrating historical,

⁹⁶ Gulland, 1918:xxx.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*: xxxi - xxxii.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*:272, 379.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*:272-275.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*: XXX, 276.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*:283.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*:279.



social, and artistic factors. Gulland maintains that the finest blue-and-white porcelain was produced at the end of the Ming dynasty.¹⁰³

The references cited in the volume span from 1697- 1901, and it is occasionally difficult to distinguish Gulland's own observations from those of his sources. The text appears to have been written in stages and later compiled,¹⁰⁴ resulting in a more conversational tone in certain sections.

Although Gulland explicitly describes himself as "Not being a scholar",¹⁰⁵ he examines English collections of Chinese porcelain with considerable thoroughness. He cites figures such as Louis Le Comte (1655-1728) a French Jesuit missionary, and references Tang dynasty sources. He argues that foreign influence on Chinese porcelain warrants further investigation and provides detailed description of examples from various porcelain families, such as the *famille verte*.¹⁰⁶

Several objects discussed come from the collections of Mr George. R. Davies, whom Gulland consider the finest judge of Chinese porcelain. Some of these works were produced for the Chinese market rather than for export.¹⁰⁷

Gulland also includes a brief discussion of international trade, expressing concern that outstanding Chinese objects in England might be sold to the United States, where he believed porcelain was more highly appreciated. He confines much of his discussion to the Ming period, noting that earlier objects were largely unavailable in England at the time. Despite this limitation, his chronological organisation, following Chinese dynastic succession,¹⁰⁸ proves effective and accessible.

The volume concludes with Gulland acknowledges deviations from his original plan and admitting certain errors. He expresses hope that these shortcomings may nonetheless serve as useful lessons for future students of Chinese porcelain.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Gulland, 1918:285, 296.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.: XXXVIII, 341.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.: XXX.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.:279, 307, 317, 321, 331.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.: XXI.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.:271, 347–50.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.:499.



2.1.4 Reflections of the findings

Before addressing the specific research questions, it is necessary to clarify why Gulland constitutes a significant case of analyse. His background as a merchant and a collector, rather than as a formally trained academic, places him in a distinctive position within the history of Western engagement with Chinese art. Gulland's writing emerged at a moment when European colonial expansion and global trade networks shaped not only the circulation of Chinese porcelain but also the frameworks through which it was studied, classified, and valued.

The case of W.G. Gulland demonstrates how non-academic actors could nonetheless exert significant influence on the representation and canonisation of Chinese art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His text combined enthusiasm with scepticism, admiration with exoticisation, and personal taste with hierarchical judgments. Although Gulland openly acknowledged his lack of scholarly credentials, his richly illustrated volumes and substantial museum donations ensured that Chinese porcelain entered Western institutions and became part of a cultural canon defined largely by European perspectives.

From a postcolonial perspective, Gulland's work illustrates that cultural authority over Chinese art was not produced solely through academic scholarship, but also through mercantile networks, private collecting, and curatorial practices. His reliance on European intermediaries, selective engagement with Chinese sources, and privileging of dynastic periods resonate with Edward Said's notion of Orientalism as a discourse that simultaneously admires and subordinates the "Other." The ambivalence evident in Gulland's writing echoes Homi Bhabha's analysis of colonial stereotyping, while the marginalised presence of Chinese voices aligns Gayatri Spivak's argument concerning the silencing of the subaltern. Furthermore, Gulland's chronological structuring of Chinese history reflects Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of historicism, in which European temporal frameworks implicitly organise non-European pasts.

Gulland's legacy lies in the ways his non-academic positionality shaped Western cultural authority. His contributions demonstrate that canon formation is neither neutral nor exclusively scholarly, but deeply entangled with colonial power structures, institutional practices, and discursive hierarchies. Recognising these dynamics makes it possible to critically reassess the foundations of Western art



history and to question how knowledge about Chinese art has been produced and legitimised.

By situating Gulland within his historical and colonial context, it becomes clear how his personal experiences, social networks, and collecting practices influenced his representation of Chinese art. His work illustrates how authority could be constructed outside formal academic institutions through connoisseurship, access, and the prestige of private collectors. At the same time, his texts reveal the broader mechanisms through which Western voices shaped knowledge about China, embedding China material culture within European hierarchies of taste and scholarship.

Several themes are particularly significant in understanding Gulland's contribution. First, his non-academic status did not prevent him from being recognised as an authority, especially through his connections with collectors and museums. Second, his methodology combined personal observation with references to Jesuit missionaries and Chinese authors, reflecting both engagement with Chinese traditions and reliance on European intermediaries. Third, his evaluative focus on periods such as the Ming and Yongzhen (Yung-Chin) dynasties contributed to the institutions such as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum illustrates how private collecting intersected with institutional authority.

Gulland's writings also reveal a series of tensions. Although he described himself as 'not being a scholar', his work carried significant weight in shaping Western discourse on Chinese porcelain. His engagement with Chinese sources coexisted with scepticism, as exemplified by his remark "if we are to believe Chinese historians...", which signals both reliance and doubt. Moreover, his classificatory practices and evaluative judgements-imposed Western categories of value onto Chinese art, reinforcing colonial hierarchies of taste. This dual movement, engagement alongside epistemic control, highlights the tension between genuine interest in Chinese culture and the imposition of Western interpretive authority.

From a postcolonial standpoint, Gulland's writings show how authority over Chinese art was constructed through Western collecting practices. His work embedded Chinese material culture within European systems of value while marginalising Chinese perspective. His confinement of analysis largely to the Ming period, based



on what was available in England at the time, further demonstrates how the canon was shaped by Western access rather than Chinese priorities. At this time, this limitation must be understood in relation to the historical scarcity of pre-Ming objects in Europe. Gulland's concern that significant objects might be sold to the United States further underscores how cultural authority was closely tied to Western ownership and competition.

Given Gulland's background as operating within global trade networks, one might expect his writing to be characterised by uncritical enthusiasm or aesthetic exuberance. Instead, his evaluations are often cautious, hierarchical, and restrained, shaped more by European classificatory frameworks than personal fascination alone. This restraint highlights how deeply Western norms of taste and authority structures even non-academic engagements with Chinese art.

From a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective, Gulland's volumes illustrate how textual choices, such as the selection of dynasties, references to European experts, and the structuring of porcelain categories, actively construct authority and reinforce Western hierarchies of knowledge. His engagement with Chinese sources, mediated through European intermediaries, and evaluative language highlight the dual movement of inclusion and control: admiring Chinese material culture while embedding it within Western classificatory frameworks. CDA makes visible how even non-academic writing participates in shaping discourse, canon formation, and the perception of cultural value.

2.2 Osvald Sirén

Sirén studied Chinese art *in situ* and followed objects from archaeological excavation to museums and scholarly interpretation. Unlike collectors who encountered Chinese art primarily through European markets and private collectors, Sirén engaged directly with material culture in China and traced its movements into academic and institutional contexts. His approach combined field-based research, art historical methodology, and close engagement with Chinese sources, positioning him as one of the most influential Western scholars in Chinese art in early twentieth century.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Sirén continued to lecture internationally, assemble collections and publish on Chinese paintings and sculptures. Sirén participated in the landmark *the International Exhibition of Chinese Art* in London in 1936. His



approached was based on overall impression and this kind of connoisseurship is at its vaguest and most subjective. But he adopted the Chinese art concept of *qi Yun*, which he emphasised is not the same as a rhythm, but it rather appears spontaneously like a flash. This elusive quality is believed to mark a genuine artwork and reveal the touch of a true master. Chinese art was surpassing Western traditions in sophistication.¹¹⁰

Sirén worked to understand Chinese texts to interpret the art more fully. He got familiar with Chinese collectors and connoisseurs and adhere to the established canon of Chinese painting as articulated by Chinese writers. His scholarship reflected both Western connoisseurship and Chinese aesthetic traditions. Sirén was sceptical towards the Western culture and the growing materialism. To him the spiritual values and theosophical thinking was the core. Sirén was interested first in Chinese paintings and then came the interest in archaeology, which can be seen as an effect of the interest in Sweden for Chinese archaeology at that time. There was a hunt among the Western countries to find evidence of the older dynasties. The Swedish Crown Prince and other leading Swedish experts were also excavating in China.¹¹¹

A key insight in Törmä's study is Sirén's position within extensive international networks of museums, collectors, and dealers.¹¹² His institutional authority, combined with his scholarly production, positioned him as an influential mediator between China and the Western art world. His impact extended beyond academia and directly shaped collecting practices and exhibition strategies in major museums. Törmä's study provides essential insights for this thesis, as it clarifies how Sirén's academic background, institutional affiliations, and historical context shaped his representations of Chinese art. Her analysis helps explain why Sirén's writings carried such authority within the Western canon and offers a crucial foundation for comparing his position to that of Gulland, whose non-academic and commercial background produced a distinctly different mode of representation.

2.2.1 Background

Osvald Sirén wrote for an audience that was already familiar with his scholarship. By the time his major surveys of Chinese art were published, he was an established and

¹¹⁰ Törmä, 2013: 33, 126, 142, 155–56.

¹¹¹ Ibid.: 46, 57–58, 107–12, 134, 138, 152–54.

¹¹² Ibid.: 18, 40, 84, 104–105, 112–14, 125.



widely respected art historian with an international readership. His books were issued by recognised academic publishers and addressed both specialists and educated readers interested in world art. Unlike earlier introductory texts, Sirén's work did not seek to legitimise Chinese art from scratch, but rather to consolidate and systematise an already emerging field of study.

Sirén's authority derived from decades of research, prolonged residence abroad, and sustained engagement with archaeological discoveries, museum collections, and Chinese historical sources. His readership included scholars, museum professionals, and collectors, and his publications were positioned as comprehensive reference works rather than popular introductions.

2.2.2 Volume I

The first volume covers Chinese art from prehistory to approximately 600 CE. Sirén presents the work as a synthesis of insights gained over fifty years of study, encompassing the full range of Chinese artistic production. Drawing on the expertise of specialists and recent archaeological excavations, he observes that interest in ancient Chinese art had grown substantially and that the audience for such studies had widened. While older handbooks remained valuable, new discoveries had significantly expanded knowledge and reshaped scholarly understanding. Sirén's aim is not merely to present selected objects, but to situate Chinese art within a broader cultural and historical context. He compares different artistic media and highlights stylistic developments across artistic disciplines. The book was planned as part of a two-volume series and written during a period when international contacts were limited, largely due to war, which complicated collaboration with foreign scholars and access to collections.¹¹³

The volume is divided into three main sections, beginning in the Bronze Age around 1400 BCE and concluding in 618 CE. It provides historical context for the early dynasties and examines bronzes, jade, paintings, ceramics, and other media.¹¹⁴ Sirén acknowledges that many links in China's prehistoric cultural development remain incomplete, yet he emphasises the remarkable continuity of artistic expression, describing it as a striking testimony: "... a continuity of development, which in itself

¹¹³ Sirén, 1942:5–6.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.:7.



constitutes a striking testimony to extraordinary artistic talent and spiritual character of the Chinese people.”¹¹⁵

Archaeological excavations of the 1920s form a cornerstone of the volume. Major discoveries at Yangshao (Yang- shao) led rise to the identification of ‘Yangshao pottery’, characterised by painted ornamentation and distinctive forms. Sirén notes that further discoveries emerge, terminology may evolve. He suggests possible connections between Neolithic ceramics in China and those of Babylon, Russia and other regions, while stressing that such comparisons require further investigation.¹¹⁶

The so-called ‘black pottery’ is seen as marking the final stage of China’s Neolithic culture. Its artistic significance lies in the purity of form and technical excellence, with vessels of varying size executed with remarkable precision.¹¹⁷ Knowledge of China’s Bronze Age had expanded considerably in recent decades, particularly through excavations revealing bronzes, jade, and ivory objects of profound importance. Sirén stresses:” China’s ancient bronze art belongs to the richest of its kind preserved from any early culture.”¹¹⁸

Chinese specialists assisted in deciphering inscriptions and symbols, and the volume is richly illustrated with photographs, drawings, and sketches, primarily in black and white, with a limited number of colour plates. Although foreign influences reached China, Sirén emphasised that they were absorbed into central cultural milieu. Motifs found on bronze weapons, bone artifacts, and regional material indicate familiarity with diverse materials and influences, including Iranian elements visible in animal - shaped handles. Sirén treats ritual objects, and bronze works as key sources for tracing the development of Chinese art during its first millennium. He compares Chinese materials with objects preserved in foreign museums, particularly in the United States, and incorporates borrowed images, maps, and artefacts. Each chapter opens with a historical introduction linking artistic developments to the rulers of the period.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Sirén, 1942.:10–11.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.: 14–19.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.:19–20.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.:25.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.:26–30, 63–76, 117, 132, 141–58, 246, 252.



Sirén notes that much of the surviving material from the Han dynasty consists of grave goods, while other artworks have perished. Han dynasty bricks, decorated with finely executed figures and animals, testify to highly developed craftsmanship, while clay models from tombs provide detailed reconstructions of buildings and daily life. Mirrors from the Sui period (581-619) are described as technically advanced and often decorated with animals in dynamic motion.¹²⁰

Sirén argues that the study of decorative arts ultimately points back to painting, particularly the highly developed figure and animal drawings of the Han period. Pictorial art, he maintains, reached maturity first and subsequently influenced other media. Already at this early stage, painting occupied a leading position within Chinese art, a role continued to hold in later centuries. Although few original works by early masters survived, later copies preserve both historical and artistic value.¹²¹

2.2.3 Volume II

This second volume spans the period from the beginning of Tang dynasty to the middle of the Qing (Ch'ing) dynasty and is divided into three main sections: the Tang dynasty and the Five Dynasties, the Song (Sung) and Yuan dynasties, and the Ming and Qing (Ch'ing) dynasties. Each section opens with a historical overview providing cultural and political context necessary to understand the artistic developments of the time.

Following the Tang dynasty, painting assumed a dominant position among the visual arts in China. Sirén argues that any general survey of Chinese art must therefore devote special attention to painting. Even a brief account, he notes, requires direct study of material preserved in East Asia, as well as familiarity with extensive Chinese historical literature. From a Western perspective, decorative arts, especially ceramics, also occupy a prominent position, largely due to their early and extensive importation into Europe. Sirén observes that Western scholarship often grants ceramics greater prominence than they hold within China's own artistic hierarchy, while architecture and sculpture have received comparatively limited attention.¹²²

¹²⁰ Sirén, 1942.:174–83, 220.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*: 290, 297.

¹²² Sirén, 1943:5–6.



Considerable space is devoted to architecture, including pagodas so richly ornamented that they appear more sculptural. Buddhist influence is tread across multiple media. Sculptural forms in contrapposto recall early Roman portraiture, an observation likely informed by Sirén's extended residence in Italy. While Buddhist sculpture dominates, other sculptural traditions retain historical significance, including large animal figures and clay used in tomb contexts. Painted grave sculptures depict women playing instruments or dancing, sometimes slender sometimes fuller in form, showing Iranian influence of clothing styles.¹²³ Women in fuller in form, often referred to as *Court Lady* or *Fat Lady*.¹²⁴

Sirén emphasises that foreign painters were active in China during this period, introducing external influences. However, the scarcity of surviving paintings complicates comprehensive analysis. Drawing on Chinese historical sources, Sirén notes that painters, particularly landscape artists, were often recognised by name, unlike artisans in other media. For Chinese artists, the subject mattered less than capturing the inner nature of the object, a process requiring inner calm and spiritual discipline. Under Emperor Hui Tsung, a painting academy was established, and Sirén discusses several masters in detail.¹²⁵

Landscape painting reached new levels of refinement during the Yuan dynasty. Ceramics and decorative arts are also examined, with references to collectors such as Sir Percival David (1892-1964) in England. During the Ming dynasty, cultural life underwent reorganisation and renewal, resulting in a national renaissance that established artistic patterns lasting into modern times. Sirén devotes extensive attention to Ming dynasty painting, particularly its final decades, supported by abundant historical sources.¹²⁶ Unlike other art forms, many paintings can be attributed to a specific artist, allowing identification like Western practices. Porcelain receives less emphasis, as it is already well represented in Swedish collections. Nevertheless, Sirén discusses the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen (Ching-te-chen), issues of marking and imitation, and the individuality achieved through brushwork and rhythm. By late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Chinese porcelain was

¹²³ Sirén, 1943:73, 75, 81–83, 136, 146–51.

¹²⁴ Molin, 'Kanon och materialitet, En komparativ analys av Tangdynastins Fat Lady och Mingdynastins blåvita porslin', 2025.

¹²⁵ Sirén, 1943:206, 255, 258, 271–72, 285–91.

¹²⁶ Ibid.:360, 430, 458–59, 563.



widely exported to Europe, when its colours and flowing forms aligned with Rococo taste.¹²⁷

2.2.4 Reflections of the findings

Osvald Sirén's dual positionalities, as both an academic scholar and a cultural mediator operating beyond strictly academic circles, emerges clearly from this analysis. In his historical survey of Chinese art, Sirén mobilises the authority of archaeology, stylistic analysis, and comparative frameworks to situate Chinese artistic traditions within a global narrative. His emphasis on continuity, technical excellence, and the spiritual character of the Chinese people reflects an academic ambition to universalise Chinese art through categories familiar to Western scholarship.

At the same time, Sirén's language occasionally invokes notions of innate artistic talent and spiritual essence, revealing how institutional authority could embed essentialist and hierarchical interpretations within the canon. When contrasted with collectors such as Gulland, who emphasised materiality, rarity, and visual appeal, Sirén's academic approach demonstrates how professional positionality shaped representation. The scholarly voice sought legitimacy through historical depth and comparative analysis, while the mercantile voice foregrounded possession and display. Yet both converges in reinforcing Western institutional narratives.

Sirén's scholarship, though grounded in decades of study, was not free from biases of its time. By translating Chinese art into categories legible to Western institutions, his work consolidated their interpretive authority. Together with collector-driven practices, this scholarly framing embedded Chinese art within Western structures of knowledge that simultaneously admired and subordinated it.

Applying CDA to Sirén's scholarship reveals how academic discourse mediates understanding of Chinese art through language, comparative frameworks, and institutional authority. By translating Chinese artistic concepts into categories intelligible to Western scholarship, Sirén consolidates epistemic authority while simultaneously recognising local traditions. His repeated references to 'innate artistic talent' and the spiritual character of works exemplify how essentialist and hierarchical

¹²⁷ Sirén, 1943.:581–88, 624–25, 651–52.



interpretations are embedded in scholarly discourse, illustrating the mechanism through which Western knowledge claims are legitimised even amid genuine engagement.



3 Discussion of Results

This discussion revisits the findings of the study in order to situate them within a broader theoretical and historiographical context. It also proceeds from the assumption that both texts must be understood as products of their specific historical, intellectual, and institutional contexts. By examining the writings of W.G. Gulland and Osvald Sirén through postcolonial perspectives, the analysis has demonstrated two distinct, yet complementary forms of Western authority contributed to the construction of knowledge about Chinese art in the early twentieth century. Using critical discourse analysis, CDA, these findings reveal how both collectors and scholars constructed Western authority over Chinese art through textual, institutional, and evaluative practices, shaping inclusion, assessment, and canon formation.

Although their approaches differ, Gulland operating primarily as a collector and intermediary, and Sirén as an academic art historical, both participate in epistemic frameworks that privilege Western modes of interpretation. Rather than excluding Chinese art, these frameworks incorporate it on unequal terms, shaping its interpretation through categories of value, chronology, and cultural meaning that reflect Western intellectual traditions.

The discussion that follows seeks to move beyond descriptive analysis by synthesising these findings in relation to key postcolonial concepts, including Orientalism, cultural essentialism, and subaltern marginalisation. In doing so, it aims to clarify the broader implications of this study of understanding the formation of Western authority in the historiography of Chinese art, as well as its continued relevance in contemporary scholarly and museological contexts.

3.1 Constructing Authority: Collecting, Scholarship, and the Western Interpretation of Chinese Art

The analysis of W.G. Gulland and Osvald Sirén clearly demonstrates how professional background, and social position shaped their authority in the Western understanding of Chinese art. Gulland, active as a merchant and private collector, established his authority through material expertise, extensive donations, and participation in museum networks, despite openly acknowledging his lack of formal academic training. His position within trade and colonial networks in Asia provided him with access to Chinese objects and contacts, facilitating both collecting and



knowledge dissemination. As noted, both by Monkhouse and Pierson, Gulland's collecting practices were guided primarily by aesthetic preferences, availability, and European classificatory framework rather than strict scholarly criteria. Though his two-volume work, Gulland contributed to the canonisation of Chinese porcelain in Britain, while simultaneously balancing personal taste with hierarchical judgements of artistic quality.

By contrast, Sirén established authority through academic channels, field research, and institutional work. His training as a European art historian, combined with extensive travel in China, enabled him to integrate archaeological discoveries, Chinese historical sources, and international museum networks into his analyses. Törmä emphasises that Sirén's methodology, with its focus on stylistic analysis and chronological placement, positioned Chinese art within a global art- historical discourse rather than as exotic or decorative. Through the publication of comprehensive monographs and participation in international exhibitions Sirén consolidated his scholarly authority and became a central figure in establishing Chinese art as a legitimate field of study in the West.

Despite their differing backgrounds, Gulland and Sirén share important similarities in how they constructed authority. Both relied on Western evaluative norms, Gulland through European aesthetic and collector perspective, Sirén through academic, historically informed frameworks, and both contributed to the canonisation of periods, notably the Ming dynasty. This parallel illustrates that authority was not solely dependent on academic credentials but could also be shaped through material exercise, institutional engagement, and international networks.

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for understanding these processes. Edward Said argues that Western contributions of the 'Orient' often combined admiration with domination; in Gulland's case, this is evident in his fascination with Chinese porcelain alongside the selection and categorisation of objects according to Western preferences. Similarly, Sirén's work, while academically rigorous, consolidating interpretive authority and embedding hierarchical understandings of culture within canon.



3.2 Orientalism as Inclusion: Hierarchies of Knowledge and Interpretation

The analysis of Gulland and Sirén illustrates how Western representations of Chinese art were structured through hierarchies of knowledge and mediated authority. Ning and Reynolds argue that China was frequently depicted as exotic, passive, and available for European consumption. This orientalist framing positioned Chinese culture as a site to be admired, classified, and appropriated, often prioritising Western perspectives over local voices.

Gulland's approach exemplifies this dynamic in practice. Although he occasionally references Chinese sources, his analysis relies heavily on European intermediaries and connoisseurial networks. This selective engagement enabled Gulland to produce accessible and authoritative texts for European collectors, and museums, yet it simultaneously subordinated Chinese epistemologies. His background shaped both what he could access and how he interpreted Chinese objects, privileging aesthetic and narrative frameworks intelligible to European audience.

Sirén in contrast, engaged directly with Chinese sources, archaeological findings, and field observations. Sirén's writing further demonstrates an explicit awareness that artistic hierarchies within China differ from those privileged in Western scholarship. His observation that painting occupies a more elevated position than decorative arts within China's own tradition, and his critique of the Western tendency to overemphasise ceramics, indicate an engagement with indigenous systems of value rather than an unreflective imposition of European priorities. This suggests a degree of cultural attentiveness that complicates a purely oppositional reading of his authority. Notably, this reflects a stronger emphasis on cultural contextualisation and situated knowledge than is often acknowledged in critique of early Western scholarship on Chinese art. Nevertheless, his interpretations were filtered through Western academic categories and universalising frameworks. Even when incorporating Chinese aesthetic concepts, such as *qi*yun, Sirén translated them into analytical structures legible to European scholarship. This illustrates how scholarly authority could integrate non-Western knowledge while simultaneously maintain Western interpretive dominance.



Both cases resonate with Spivak's argument regarding the marginalisation of subaltern voices. Whether through selective sourcing, as in Gulland, or through scholarly universalisation, as in Sirén, Chinese perspectives were mediated and often silenced. These practices demonstrate that inclusion in Western discourses was conditional: recognition was granted, but only through hierarchies defined by access, academic training, and institutional authority.

Ultimately, the comparison reveals that the representation of Chinese art in Western contexts was never neutral. Instead, it reflects a complex interplay of fascination, authority, and epistemic control. Gulland and Sirén's writing exemplify how collectors and scholars, operating in different social and professional background, contributes to a Western canon that admired, classified, and appropriated Chinese material culture while subordinating local voices.

3.3 Cultural Essentialism and the Ambivalence of Representation

The writings of Gulland and Sirén reveal how aesthetic evaluation was entangled with assumptions about cultural essence, reflecting both Eurocentric hierarchies and broader notions of Chinese artistic identity. Törmä highlights how Sirén's aesthetic theories, particularly his emphasis on *qiyun* and the spiritual character of Chinese art, positioned artistic quality as an expression of innate cultural essence. This approach, while academically rigorous, embeds an essential logic: the value and meaning of Chinese art are linked to presumed national or spiritual characteristics, legitimised through scholarly authority.

Gulland's assessments, as discussed by Monkhouse, similarly combine aesthetic judgement with historical prestige, but operate within a Eurocentric hierarchy of taste. His evaluation of porcelain considered both visual appeal and dynastic importance, privileging periods such as the Ming dynasty while measuring Chinese art against European criteria of craftsmanship and narrative. In doing so, Gulland constructs a layered hierarchy where certain objects and periods are valorised, reflecting broader Western notions of cultural superiority and collection authority.

Both approaches illustrate the ambivalence inherent in cross-cultural representation. Gulland's position as a collector allows for admiration tempered by selective valuation, whereas Sirén's scholarly training provides academic legitimacy to



essential claims. In each case, aesthetic criteria are inseparable from broader structures of power: the former rooted in connoisseurship and market authority, the latter in institutional and discursive authority.

The comparison underscores that representation is rarely neutral. Whether through the collector's eye or the academic's analytical framework, evaluations of Chinese art are filtered through cultural assumptions and disciplinary norms. Gulland and Sirén exemplify how Western frameworks simultaneously included and constrained Chinese art: included as objects of study and admiration, yet constrained by hierarchies of taste, essentialist interpretations, and institutional authority.

This ambivalence is also evident in Sirén's comparative method. While he foregrounds Chinese aesthetic principles and historical traditions, he repeatedly renders them legible through Western art- historical frameworks. His comparison of Buddhist sculpture to Roman portraiture through the concept of *contrapposto*, and his structuring of Chinese painting through categories such as masters, schools, and academies, situate Chinese art within familiar European analytical models. Such strategies do not simply erase cultural specificity but translate it into conceptual forms accessible to Western scholarship. This dual movement, the recognition of difference combined with interpretive translation, illustrates the complexity of Sirén's position as both mediator and authority.

3.4 Subaltern Presence and Epistemic Marginalisation

The analysis of Gulland and Sirén's writings demonstrates the limited agency of Chinese voices within Western discourse on Chinese art. Drawing on Spivak's assertion that 'the subaltern cannot speak', it becomes evident that the production of knowledge about Chinese material culture was largely mediated by Western perspectives.

Gulland's engagement with Chinese source is minimal; he relies primarily on European intermediaries, Jesuit accounts, and secondary literature. His texts rarely include perspectives from Chinese collectors, artisans, or scholars, leaving the subaltern almost entirely absent from the narrative. This selective sourcing reflects both practical limitation, such as access, and broader epistemic hierarchies privileging European knowledge.



Sirén in contrast, incorporates Chinese sources more extensively, including historical texts and insights from local experts. However, these voices are interpreted through Western academic categories, aesthetic frameworks, and institutional conventions. Even as Chinese perspectives are included, they are filtered and universalised, subordinated to the authority of Western scholar.

Together, these examples illustrate how epistemic marginalisation operates differently depending on positionality: Gulland's commercial and collector-based perspective produced exclusion through omission, whereas Sirén's scholarly framework produces exclusion through translation and reclassification. Both cases confirm Spivak's argument: without structural mechanisms for the subaltern to author their own representation, their perspectives remain largely inaudible within dominant discourses.

3.5 Historicism, Periodisation, and the Western Ordering of Chinese Art

Both Gulland and Sirén demonstrate how Western frameworks of historicism and periodisation shape the understanding of Chinese art, reflecting Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique that non-European histories are often organised through European temporal and analytical structures.

Gulland's analysis concentrates on the Ming and Yongzhen periods, a focus largely determined by what was available in English collections rather than by intrinsic cultural priorities. This selectivity should therefore not be understood primarily as an act of canon formation, but rather as a consequence of the material and institutional conditions that shaped Gulland's access to objects. His chronological emphasis reflects the circulation of objects within European collection and markets, rather than an evaluative judgement on relative importance of earlier periods.

Sirén, in contrast, constructs a more comprehensive chronological framework, tracing Chinese art from prehistoric periods through the Qing dynasty. This broader temporal scope was enabled by historical developments that transformed access to material culture, particularly archaeological excavations facilitated by expanding railway infrastructure in early twentieth-century China. These conditions made previously inaccessible objects and sites available to scholars such as Sirén, allowing for the construction of a longer and seemingly more continuous art historical narrative. While



his approach is academically rigorous and historically grounded, it nonetheless imposes a continuous and linear temporal structure familiar to Western historiography. By doing so, he universalises China's artistic development, situating it within a narrative of continuity and progress that aligns with Western scholarly conventions.

In both cases, the imposition of Western periodisation and historicist logic mediates the interpretation of Chinese art. Gulland's selective focus and Sirén's comprehensive chronology illustrates how European temporal frameworks not only organise knowledge but also contribute to the legitimations of Western authority over non-European cultural histories. This aligns with Chakrabarty's observation that the historicist lens often renders indigenous temporalities invisible, subordinating local conceptions of history to Eurocentric schemes.

3.6 Complementary Rather Than Opposition: Gulland and Sirén Reconsidered

When comparing Gulland and Sirén, it becomes evident that their modes of authority and representation, while distinct, were complementary rather than directly oppositional. Steuber and Törmä highlight how institutional and private forms of expertise both contribute to the formation of the Western canon of Chinese art.

Gulland exercise authority through material engagement, visual discernment, and collecting practices. His expertise was grounded in direct handling of objects, personal connoisseurship, and aesthetic evaluation. As a private collector and merchant, Gulland's influence operated outside formal academic institutions, yet his donations to museums and published volumes ensured that his perspective shaped public and scholarly understanding.

Sirén, on the other hand, embodied institutional authority and historical-analytical expertise. His scholarship drew upon archaeological research, Chinese historical sources, and comparative art-historical methodologies. Poisoned within museums and scholarly networks, Sirén's work reinforced formal structures of knowledge and contributed to legitimising Chinese art within Euro-American academic frameworks.

Importantly, despite their differing modes of authority, both demonstrates an awareness of importance of proximity to objects and contexts. Gulland's emphasis on



direct handling and visual familiarity, and Sirén's insistence on fieldwork and first-hand observation, point towards an early recognition of knowledge as situated and context-dependent rather than purely abstract.

Together, Gulland and Sirén illustrate two complementary pathways to Western recognition and canonisation of Chinese art. Gulland's material and aesthetic authority interacted with Sirén's historical and institutional authority, producing a layered discourse in which private collecting practices and academic scholarship mutually reinforced the perceived legitimacy of Chinese art. Their distinct positionalities demonstrate that the Western construction of expertise and cultural authority was multifaceted, incorporating both connoisseurship and institutional scholarship to establish the frameworks through which Chinese art was studied, valued, and displayed.

3.7 Contemporary Relevance: Museums, Decolonisation, and the Legacy of Early Scholarship

The legacies of Gulland and Sirén, studied by Monkhouse and Pierson, demonstrate how early collecting and institutional frameworks influenced both the formation and display of Chinese art in European museums. These foundational practices established conventions of taste, categorisation, and scholarly authority that remain visible today.

Gulland's donation to institutions such as the Victoria & Albert Museum and Brighton Museum exemplifies the enduring impact of private collectors on museum holdings. His selection, organisation, and presentation of Chinese porcelain not only contributed to public access but also framed the interpretive context in which these objects are still encountered. The emphasis on aesthetic qualities and dynastic periods continue to inform curatorial decisions and exhibitions narratives.

Sirén's institutional and scholarly influence similarly shaped contemporary understandings. His works with MFEA in Stockholm and his international collaborations established historical and stylistic categories that continue to underpin scholarly research and museum display. Sirén's approach emphasised historical continuity, technical mastery, and cross-cultural comparison, reinforcing the legitimacy of Western academic frameworks in evaluation Chinese art.



From a postcolonial perspective, both cases illustrate how objects and knowledge remain structured by Western power relations. The selection, categorisation, and interpretation of Chinese art in museums continues to reflect historical hierarchies, privileging certain periods, forms, and narratives over others. Recognising the roles of collectors like Gulland and scholars like Sirén is therefore crucial for contemporary efforts at decolonisation, as it highlights the embedded structure through which authority, value, and meaning have been constructed and transmitted.

3.8 Limitations and Reflections on Method

This study relies on qualitative text analysis, which offers deep insights into the ways Gulland and Sirén represented Chinese art but also carries inherent limitations. The method foregrounds language, terminology, and discursive patterns, making it particularly sensitive to the historical and cultural context in which the texts were produced. Both Gulland and Sirén employ period-specific language and conventions, which can obscure nuance for contemporary readers. Their writings should therefore be understood as historically situated rather than evaluated against contemporary scholarly standards. The conceptual frameworks they employ reflect the epistemological conditions of early twentieth-century knowledge production rather than individual intellectual limitation. Terms, spelling, and conceptual frameworks reflect their temporal and geographic positionalities, requiring careful contextual interpretation to avoid anachronistic readings.

Access to sources also shape the analysis. Gulland's work, while richly illustrated, is limited by what was available to him in England, and many of the individuals he referenced remain unidentified. Sirén by contrast had direct access to Chinese material culture, but his interpretations are mediated through Western academic categories and networks. Both authors demonstrate biases shaped by their social, professional, and cultural positions: Gulland's evaluations are influenced by aesthetic taste, European intermediaries, and collector priorities, while Sirén's scholarship reflects academic hierarchies, essentialist assumptions, and a universalising approach to Chinese art.

Another limitation lies in the secondary literature. While Sirén has been extensively studied, Gulland remains marginally researched, leaving gaps in understanding his intellectual and discursive strategies. This scarcity of scholarship constrains



comparative analysis and requires careful triangulation between his writings, museum records, and contemporary references.

Finally, text analysis cannot fully capture the material, sensory, or performative dimensions of Chinese art that both authors engaged with. Although it reveals patterns of representation, authority, and evaluation, it remains a mediated form of understanding objects that were historically experienced in specific cultural, aesthetic, and social contexts. Recognising these methodological limitations is essential to situate the findings appropriately and to maintain critical awareness of how knowledge about Chinese art has been produced, transmitted, and interpreted.

3.9 Concluding Synthesis

The analysing of Gulland and Sirén highlights how professional background, access, and positionality shape the representation of Chinese art. Gulland's identity as a merchant-collector, operating through trade networks and European intermediaries, produced forms of material, visual, and connoisseurial authority. Sirén's academic training, archaeological engagement, and institutional affiliations fostered a historical, analytical, and institutionally legitimised authority.

Across both cases, authority emerges not merely from expertise or aesthetic judgement, but from social, institutional, and cultural frameworks. Gulland constructed influence through collections, publications, and museum donations, while Sirén relied on scholarly networks, field research, and curated exhibitions. These complementary modes demonstrate that Western knowledge production encompasses both private and scholarly pathways, each contributing to canon formation and shaping interpretations of Chinese art.

The findings resonate with key theoretical perspectives. The critiques of Said and Bhabha illuminate how exoticism, ambivalence, and hierarchical representations permeate Western engagement with China. Spivak's notion of subaltern underscores the marginalisation of Chinese voices, even when local sources are employed, while Chakrabarty's critique of historicism highlights the imposition of Western temporal frameworks onto non-European cultural production.

In conclusion, Gulland and Sirén exemplify how Western structures, whether commercial, academic or institutional, mediate the understanding, evaluation, and



canonisation of Chinese art. Their differing methods and backgrounds illustrate that knowledge and authority are socially constructed, historically situated, and deeply entangled with power. At the same time, Sirén's scholarship demonstrates that early Western engagements with Chinese art were not solely characterised by ignorance or domination. His sustained attention to Chinese systems of value, his use of indigenous sources, and his insistence on cultural understanding point towards an emerging awareness of cultural specificity. Yet this attentiveness coexists with a continued reliance on Western comparative frameworks, revealing the inherent tension between recognition and rearticulation that shaped early art historical encounters with China. Gulland's engagement, by contrast remains primarily mediated through material and aesthetic authority, highlighting the complementary modes through which Western knowledge of Chinese art was constructed.



4 Conclusion

Having outlined the broader historical and colonial context in which Gulland and Sirén operated, as well as the central themes and tensions emerging from their writings, it is now possible to address the specific questions at hand.

Main question

How do W.G. Gulland's and Osvald Sirén's respective professional backgrounds, non-academic and academic, shape their representation of Chinese art?

A comparison between the two authors shows that their representations of Chinese art were fundamentally shaped by their differing positionalities: Gulland as a merchant-collector operating within networks of trade and private connoisseurship, and Sirén as a scholarly trained art historian embedded in scholarly and institutional structures.

Gulland's non-academic, mercantile positionality

Gulland's authority stemmed from connoisseurship, proximity to collections, and social networks rather than formal scholarship. His writing is marked by:

- a colloquial tone and selective use of sources, often relying on Jesuit missionaries or Chinese authors while simultaneously expressing scepticism.
- an emphasis on material features, dynastic prestige, rarity, and visual appeal
- an evaluating framework shaped by European taste, such as prioritising Ming and Yongzheng wares because they dominated English collections
- a collector's perspective, reinforcing the idea that knowledge and authority over Chinese art could be constructed through ownership display rather than scholarship

This positionality resulted in a representation of Chinese porcelain that oscillated between admiration and exoticisation, embedding Chinese art within Western hierarchies of taste and the competitive prestige economy of collecting.



Sirén's academic and institutional positionality

Sirén's representation is shaped by his scholarly training, archaeological engagement, and institutional roles. His work is characterised by:

- Historical contextualisation, drawing on excavation, stylistic comparison and Chinese textual traditions
- a universalising art-historical narrative, fitting Chinese art into Western categories of continuity, style and development
- references to both Chinese specialists and Western collectors, revealing his role as mediator between academic knowledge and institutional circulation
- a dual voice, simultaneously analytical and culturally essentialist, often interpreting Chinese art through generalised or idealised cultural characteristics, thereby revealing how aesthetic judgments were shaped by prevailing assumptions about cultural identity, such as spiritual character, rather than by formal art-historical analysis alone.

This academic positionally positioned Sirén as a cultural translator whose authority derived from institutional structures, comparative methods, and sustained research, even as his framework remained shaped by Eurocentric art-historical paradigms.

Taken together, Gulland and Sirén illustrates two distinct but complementary modes of Western authority: Gulland constructed authority *through objects*, collecting, describing and displaying them, whereas Sirén constructed authority *through knowledge*, contextualising, classifying and historically interpreting them. Yet both contributed to the same outcome: the placement of Chinese art within Western institutional frameworks and epistemologies.

Supporting question:

What do these representations reveal about the construction of cultural authority and institutional influence in a postcolonial context?

Viewed through a postcolonial lens, the comparison between Gulland and Sirén shows that cultural authority over Chinese art was not produced solely within academic institutions. Instead, it emerged from an interplay between mercantile,



curatorial, and scholarly practices, all operating within the asymmetrical power structures of colonial modernity.

Gulland and the commercial-curatorial construction of authority

Gulland's contribution to canon formation exemplifies how non-academic figures exercised cultural influence:

- his classifications and dynastic hierarchies reinforced Western frameworks of value
- his sceptical reliance on Chinese sources reflects Said's Orientalism
- the marginalised presence of Chinese voices mirrors Spivak's subaltern silences
- his chronological structuring aligns with Chakrabarty's critique of historicism, showing how Western expectations shape the narrative of non-Western histories.

His work demonstrates that collecting, rather than scholarship, could determine what entered museums, how Chinese art was catalogued, and which objects became canonical.

Sirén and the academic- institutional construction of authority

Sirén's work, although scholarly, was not free from colonial epistemologies:

- his universalising comparisons positioned Western art history as the interpretive centre
- his essentialist descriptions reflect ingrained Orientalist assumptions
- his emphasis on archaeological discoveries strengthened institutional authority by grounding Chinese art in scientific narratives
- his references to European collectors and tastes demonstrate how scholarship and collecting were intertwined

Sirén's authority shows how scholarly institutions translated Chinese visual culture into categories legible to Western audiences, thereby consolidating epistemic control.

Together, Gulland and Sirén reveal that:

- authority is constructed not only through academic expertise but also through access, networks and institutional visibility



- canon formation reflects Western availability, what had reached Europe, rather than Chinese cultural priorities
- the Western framing of Chinese art depended equally on scholars who interpreted and collectors who possessed
- Both voices, despite differing intentions, reinforced post-imperial hierarchies by filtering Chinese art through Western epistemologies, markets, and institutions.

The juxtaposition of Gulland and Sirén shows that Western cultural authority over Chinese art emerged from the convergence of commercial and scholarly legitimacy. Although their methods differed, their representations operated within similar discursive frameworks, shared by Orientalist assumption, Eurocentric historicism, and institutional power. Their combined influence illuminates how Chinese art was integrated into Western museums and scholarships not as an autonomous tradition, but as a cultural category produced, validated, and preserved through Western systems of knowledge, ownership, and interpretation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for reassessing the postcolonial legacies that continue to shape the study, display and valuation of Chinese art today.

While over a hundred years have elapsed since their composition, these works continue to merit careful reading and consideration, as they remain mutually complementary and offer insights that can be critically assessed from a contemporary perspective.

Future studies could explore how Western representations of Chinese art have influenced China's own perception of its cultural heritage and artistic identity. This could shed light on the reciprocal dynamics of cultural authority and how postcolonial legacies continue to shape both Western and Chinese understandings of art history.



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