Death of a Hypothesis

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Chinese art in the balance.

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One of the obvious rules of our calling--and one not always observed--is not to do things the hard way when an easier way will suffice.

Some of us vividly remember the occasion when General Smith at the head of the IAC table referring to the National Intelligence Estimate under consideration asked how in the world it came to be there. Its subject was the UK. With something more than his usual asperity, and be it said, some disingenuousness, he fairly spat at one of his lieutenants, "If I want to know what the British are up to, I call them up and ask."

Perhaps more to the point is a story of a student who was taking Dr. Siegerist's course in the history of medicine at Hopkins. Someone had sent in a peculiar object and wanted to know what could be made of it. It was sculpted stone; its subject was clearly anatomical (some sort of organ from some sort of animal; and it was embellished with a good amount of cuneiform script). Dr. Siegerist gave it to the class as a problem in identification. One student took it to the professor of ancient oriental languages who read the inscription and said it was gibberish. He rendered a few passages out loud to prove it.

Another student looked long at the stone and decided it resembled no human organ. Thus skipping over his professor of gross anatomy he took it to a butcher. The butcher instantly and unequivocally identified it as a liver, in fact a sheep's liver. When the professor of ancient oriental

languages heard this, his thinking changed gears and an unexpected kind of sense began to emerge from the cuneiform gibberish. Suddenly he recognized some of the formularies of a spell or a charm or an utterance of divination. The hero to Dr. Siegerist was, however, not the professor; it was student number two who had made the essential contribution and had done it the easy way.

What follows is another piece of the same-but something by far closer to our professional calling. It is recounted here not only to praise the methodology of student number two, but also to make the point that the destruction of an interesting hypothesis is often as important a part of our trade as its confirmation.

Old Art for Cash

One morning while shaving, Intelligence Officer Jones had a bright thought--or so it seemed. If he could prove it out perhaps it would help explain how the Chinese Communists were getting some of the hard currency for sorely needed imports--foodstuffs, for example. Suppose, Jones thought, the Chinese, recognizing the great cash value of their national art treasures, decided to sell them. Why shouldn't they? Why should the Communist leadership sentimentally rate these relics of classical society and the rotten old empires as "treasures"? So long as rotten young Western capitalism did so rate them, why not realize the seemingly large amount of foreign exchange their cold-blooded sale would produce? Why not?

Jones speedily took his hypothesis to his professional colleagues. None of them knew much more about oriental art and its market than he. They too may have thought they recalled stories of Park-Bernet auctions where some bit of Tang or Ming sold for a very large sum. They did not, however, jump aboard Jones' hypothesis with his sort of enthusiasm. They confined themselves to a lukewarm comment that only served to spur Jones on.

Still doing it the easy way, he took the hypothesis to a higher level of expertise: to an orientalist who had engineered San Francisco's acquisition of the Brundage collection, who in turn took it to her colleagues and dealer friends. Her reports showed a lot of interest in the

proposition, but produced no evidence to confirm. Indeed what did come through was strictly negative.

Jones began to feel that he had given the hypothesis all the play it deserved and was about to let it die when two things occurred to revive it. The first was when Jones was informed that Newsweek sometime back had published an article to the effect that a Swedish dealer had purchased some treasures in Communist China and had exported them under license of the Chinese government. The objects in question were on their way to an oriental collection in Stockholm. The second was when Jones heard from an impeccable witness that a good many old and extremely costly Chinese rugs were appearing on the Hong Kong market. Surely these could not be considered as representing national treasures but they might be the indication of something that was.

Missed Magnitude

Jones decided to revive the enquiry. This time he would go to the real experts. He drafted a letter that went like this:

> Dear _____:
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> The other day some of us were talking about the growing tension between the Russians and the Chinese. One of my friends, who is particularly well informed in such matters, spoke of the new and dramatic turn for the worse in their relationship, and wondered in passing how the Chinese would be able to continue their very substantial purchases of foodstuffs and other raw materials in the world market if they can no longer count on the Russians and the European Satellites for financial help. Another member of the group suggested that if the Chinese Communist government finds itself really pressed for hard currency, it might turn to selling its national art treasures. It seems likely that if they should reach this point, they would probably do everything possible to conceal the matter. In that case, the only way we could find out would be through chance communications between museum personnel and others who work in the field of oriental art around the world.

With this piece of prose in hand he invited the curator of a famous oriental collection to lunch, gave him the necessary background, and made a cold pitch. What did the curator think of the idea? Would he be willing to send a letter like the above to his knowledgeable colleagues and show Jones what he got in reply?

To Jones' delight the curator was enthusiastic. Not that he gave a whoop for Jones' hypothesis, but for a totally different reason he was happy to go along. It was as the curator was explaining his own interest that he casually dropped an oblique half sentence that killed the hypothesis for Jones' purposes stone dead. The death blow was the curator's aside to the effect that the yearly sum spent worldwide for Chinese art was of the order of a million dollars. With this amount of hard currency the Chinese would have less than one percent of their annual outlays for imported foodstuffs.

Anti-Customs Consensus

What had caught the curator's interest was an excuse to poll the experts in his field of expertise. It seemed that the U.S. law forbidding the import of all goods of Red Chinese origin was a major headache to U.S. art collectors and U.S. and foreign dealers. Here is the reason: suppose Mayuyama and Company of Tokyo acquired a Chinese antique from a Japanese family that had owned it for a century. Suppose the American curator wanted to buy it for his museum. Before he could get the object into the United States he and Mayuyama would have to satisfy the U.S. customs people that the transaction would in no sense profit the Chinese Communists. The Japanese dealer would have to be able to prove that the object in question had left the Chinese mainland and had been paid for prior to the Communist takeover of 1949. Jones got the idea that our customs people were pretty hard to satisfy. Their attitude was understandably irksome to American collectors, not to say foreign dealers who were not getting the full good out of the affluent American market.

If the curator could get full and expert testimony to the effect that the Chinese were not willing to sell their art treasures and had not done so, then, he reasoned, he might have less trouble with U.S. customs.

Accordingly, he snatched at Jones' idea and Jones' draft letter; he added a paragraph of his own and sent it to some thirty colleagues. They were fellow curators of the world's most important museums of oriental art and the world's most important dealers.

If the hypothesis was not already dead as far as the curator was concerned, it speedily became so. All but one or two of the people queried answered. Most of them wrote after they had talked the matter over with other experts in the field. The twenty-eight replies that did come in represented the view of several score, and every single one responded with a shattering negative. A few did not confine themselves to saying they knew of no sales from the mainland, but quite gratuitously went on to indicate that they could not imagine the situation in which the Chinese regime would part with any of its treasures. Two indicated that they had had unsubstantiated reports that the Chinese were actually spending good hard cash to repatriate certain objects of art.

And what of the objects which Newsweek had reported on the way to Stockholm? One of the respondents had seen them and called them "rubbish"; another, "junk."

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