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Fakes plaguing Chinese antiques market drive boom in research

Art advisers and dealers have been building private libraries of auction and exhibition catalogues in a bid to plug gaps in provenance

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China's art advisers, auction houses and dealers have been building private reference libraries for experts and clients

A growing desire to understand and prove the provenance of goods in the fake-ridden Chinese antiques market has led to a boom in old auction and exhibition catalogues. This trade has been driven by China's tens of thousands of art advisers, auction houses and dealers, who in recent years have been building private reference libraries for experts and clients. Book collectors and dealers in Hong Kong and Europe have been quietly doing a thriving business in catalogues for exhibitions and auctions of Chinese arts and antiques.

While China has always had a black market for imported art publications that cost a few dollars each, in-demand catalogues command prices in the thousands of dollars. One of the most sought after, for example, is the 127-page, 1950 catalogue for an exhibition of archaic Chinese jade at Florida's Norton Gallery and School of Art. Written by the renowned Chinese art dealer CT Loo, the finest examples can be purchased for around \$500. Meanwhile, the 244-page *Illustrated Catalogue of Chinese Government Exhibits for the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London, Volume II: Porcelain*, has English and Chinese text, and was printed in 1935 and today costs \$1,500.

Buyers are also keen on catalogues of famous international auctions of Chinese arts. While more recent publications cost just a few dollars as used books, a two-volume set in good condition of Sotheby's catalogues for the sale of the Hong Kong shipping tycoon TY Chao's antiques collection goes for at least \$1,300 at rare book dealers. The auctions were held in Hong Kong in 1986 and 1987.

Since collectors in Japan and South Korea were big buyers of important Chinese works from the early 1900s, some book dealers are betting on catalogues from auction houses in those countries. The most desirable are publications dating from after 1912, when the Chinese Republic was established, to the 1960s. Japan and South Korea are key sources for some of the finest works of Chinese arts that have come to auction in recent years.