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## **CURATING THE ORIENT: CHINESE AND JAPANESE ARTIFACTS IN AVETIK ISAHAKYAN'S DOMESTIC SPACE AND THEIR INTELLECTUAL IMPLICATIONS**

**Keywords:** Avetik Isahakyan, Chinese art, Buddhism, Soviet art, Sino-Soviet Friendship Association, Orientalism, Yeghishe Charents.

### **Abstract**

The literary oeuvre of Avetik Isahakyan (1875–1957), the eminent Armenian poet and public intellectual, exhibits pronounced Orientalist motifs, epitomized by works such as *Abu Lala Mahari*. While his contributions have been contextualized within fin-de-siècle global literature, this study eschews conventional literary analysis in favor of an interdisciplinary interrogation of the Chinese and Japanese artefacts housed within his residence, now the Avetik Isahakyan House-Museum. We posit that these objects constitute a material archive of cross-cultural engagement, offering unprecedented insights into the interplay between collecting practices, intellectual networks, and aesthetic influence.

Leveraging previously unexamined archival documents from the Isahakyan House-Museum, this investigation delineates the poet's reception among Chinese literary circles, evidenced by mid-century translations of his works and official correspondence with the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association. We identify a hitherto undocumented exchange of Buddhist iconography between Isahakyan and the modernist poet Yeghishe Charents, underscoring the role of material culture in Armenian avant-garde sociability. Furthermore, we correlate Isahakyan's academic formation in philosophy at the Universities of Leipzig and Zurich with the presence of East Asian philosophical figurines—

depicting deities and sages such as Laozi and Shou Xing—in his workspace, suggesting their function as epistemic objects rather than mere decor.

This study advances three interrelated scholarly interventions: (1) it systematizes the study of Armenian writers' engagement with Asian material culture; (2) it reconstructs fragmentary evidence of Sino-Armenian intellectual exchange under Soviet modernity; and (3) it recalibrates Isahakyan's creative process as one mediated by transnational object-relations.

## **ԱՆԻ ՄԱՐԳԱՐՅԱՆ**

*Արվեստաբանության դոկտոր*

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*ՀՀ ԳԱԱ արվեստի ինստիտուտի ասպիրանտ*

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## **ԱՐԵՎԵԼՅԱՆ ՀԱՎԱՔԱԾՈՒՆԵՐ. ՉԻՆԱԿԱՆ ԵՎ ՃԱՊՈՆԱԿԱՆ ԱՐՎԵՍՏԻ ՆՄՈՒՇՆԵՐԸ ԱՎԵՏԻՔ ԻՍԱՀԱԿՅԱՆԻ ՏԱՆԸ ԵՎ ԴՐԱՆՑ ՄՏԱՀՂԱՅՄՈՒՆՔԱՅԻՆ ՆՇԱՆԱԿՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ**

**Բանալի բառեր-**Ավետիք Իսահակյան, չինական արվեստ, բուդդայականություն, խորհրդային արվեստ, Չին-խորհրդային բարեկամության ընկերություն, օրիենտալիզմ, Եղիշե Չարենց:

### **Ամփոփում**

Ավետիք Իսահակյանի (1875-1957)՝ հայ մեծ բանաստեղծի և հասարակական գործչի ստեղծագործություններում ակնհայտ են արևելյան թեմաներ, որոնց ամենավառ օրինակը «Աբու-Լալա Մահարի» պոեմն է: Մինչ այժմ նրա գործերը վերլուծվել են համաշխարհային գրականության համատեքստում, սակայն մեր ուսումնասիրությունը կենտրոնանում է բանաստեղծի տանը (ներկայումս՝ Ավետիք Իսահակյանի տուն-թանգարան) պահպանված չինական և ճապոնական արվեստի գործերի վրա՝ կիրառելով միջառարկայական մոտեցում:

Օգտվելով Իսահակյանի տուն-թանգարանի արխիվային նյութերից՝ մենք վերհանում ենք բանաստեղծի ստեղծագործությունների ընկալումը

չինական մշակութային շրջանակներում: Այս մասին վկայում են 1950-ականներին կատարված թարգմանությունները և Չին-խորհրդային բարեկամության ընկերության հետ նամակագրությունը: Հատկանշական է, որ առաջին անգամ հավաստվում է բուդդայական արձանիկների փոխանակումը Իսահակյանի և Եղիշե Չարենցի միջև: Բացի այդ, մենք ուսումնասիրում ենք, թե ինչպես է Իսահակյանի՝ Լայպցիգի և Ցյուրիխի համալսարաններում ստացած փիլիսոփայական կրթությունը կապված նրա աշխատասենյակում պահպանված արևելյան իմաստասերների (Լաո Յզի, Շոու Սին) արձանիկների հետ:

Այս ուսումնասիրությունը կարևոր է երեք առումներով. 1) այն համակարգված կերպով վերլուծում է հայ գրողների հետաքրքրությունը ասիական մշակույթի նկատմամբ, 2) վերականգնում է խորհրդային շրջանի հայ-չինական մշակութային կապերի պատմությունը, 3) նոր լույս է սփռում Իսահակյանի ստեղծագործական աշխարհի վրա: Այսպիսով՝ բանաստեղծի տուն-թանգարանը դառնում է գլոբալ մշակութային փոխանակումների վկայություն:

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## **КУРИРУЯ ВОСТОК: КИТАЙСКИЕ И ЯПОНСКИЕ АРТЕФАКТЫ В ДОМАШНЕМ ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ АВЕТИКА ИСААКЯНА И ИХ ИНТЕЛЛЕКТУАЛЬНОЕ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ**

**Ключевые слова:** Аветик Исаакян, китайское искусство, буддизм, советское искусство, Общество советско-китайской дружбы, ориентализм, Египше Чаренц.

### **Аннотация**

Литературное творчество Аветика Исаакяна (1875–1957), выдающегося армянского поэта и общественного деятеля, демонстрирует выраженные ориенталистские мотивы, наиболее ярко воплощённые в таких произ-

ведениях, как «Абу-Лала Маари». Хотя его творчество уже рассматривалось в контексте глобальной литературы fin-de-siècle, данное исследование отходит от традиционного литературного анализа в пользу междисциплинарного изучения китайских и японских артефактов, хранящихся в его доме, ныне Доме-музее Аветика Исаакяна. Мы утверждаем, что эти объекты представляют собой материальный архив межкультурного взаимодействия, открывающий уникальные перспективы для понимания взаимосвязи между коллекционированием, интеллектуальными сетями и эстетическим влиянием.

Опираясь на ранее не изученные архивные материалы Дома-музея Исаакяна, данное исследование выявляет восприятие творчества поэта в китайских литературных кругах, что подтверждается переводами его произведений и официальной перепиской с Обществом советско-китайской дружбы в середине XX века. Мы идентифицируем ранее не документированный обмен буддийской иконографией между Исаакяном и поэтом-модернистом Егише Чаренцем, подчёркивая роль материальной культуры в армянском авангардном сообществе. Кроме того, мы устанавливаем связь между академическим образованием Исаакяна в области философии в университетах Лейпцига и Цюриха и наличием в его рабочем пространстве восточноазиатских философских фигурок — изображающих божеств и мудрецов, таких как Лао-цзы и Шоу-син — что указывает на их функцию в качестве эпистемических объектов, а не просто элементов декора.

Данное исследование предлагает три взаимосвязанных научных подхода: (1) систематизирует изучение взаимодействия армянских писателей с азиатской материальной культурой; (2) реконструирует фрагментарные свидетельства армяно-китайского интеллектуального обмена в условиях советской модерности; (3) переосмысляет творческий процесс Исаакяна как опосредованный транснациональными объектными отношениями.

## Introduction

Avetik Sahak Isahakyan (1875–1957) was a principal Armenian poet, writer, and public intellectual. Born in Alexandropol (modern-day Gyumri), he studied at the Gevorgyan Seminary and attended lectures at the University of Leipzig. His political activities with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation resulted in his imprisonment by Tsarist authorities in 1896. His early poetry collection, *Songs and Wounds* (1897),

and later *The Songs of Haiduks* (1899–1906), addressed themes of national identity and resistance. Exiled in 1911, he documented the Armenian Genocide in *The White Book*. Following his return to Soviet Armenia in 1926, he served as Chairman of the Armenian Writers' Union (1946–1957) and was a recipient of the USSR State Prize in 1946.

In 1945, the government of Soviet Armenia awarded Isahakyan a house for his 70th birthday. Designed by architect Pertchanoush Msrian and constructed from black polished tufa, the two-story residence, with its triangular cupola and entrance porch, reflects the form of an Armenian chapel. Isahakyan resided there from 1946 until his death. In 1958, the Council of Ministers of the Armenian SSR issued Decree 67-P, formally reestablishing the residence as a memorial museum. The building was subsequently modified: a large hall and studies were added to the second floor, and the wooden balcony and staircase were faced with stone. The museum opened officially on October 31, 1963. It has since undergone two renovations, with the current installation being the third permanent exposition. The institution's mandate is the academic conservation, research, and exhibition of Isahakyan's personal archive and belongings, serving as the central repository for his material legacy.

The museum's holdings constitute a permanent collection of over ten thousand cataloged items, encompassing manuscripts, printed books, photographic materials, sculptures, paintings, personal belongings, and various documents that comprehensively document the poet's life and creative output. A notable aspect of the permanent exhibition is the writer's personal assemblage of decorative objects, which reflects his curated aesthetic environment and includes items of Iranian, Indian, Japanese, and Chinese origin. This aligns with Isahakyan's recognized scholarly interest in Eastern cultures. A dedicated display within his study features a selection of Indian and Chinese statuettes acquired abroad. The institution's official records indicate that «Rather valuable is the Chinese statuette (Show-Sin), presented by Yeghishe Charents. Under the pedestal, Charents had carved with a nail: "To dear Avetik, from Charents. 24/VI 1937". » Furthermore, the museum states that «These original statuettes had been the silent witnesses of the creative work of the Master. »

Jules David Prown's seminal material culture methodology (Prown, 1982: 1-19) provides a critical framework for this analysis. His tripartite model mandates a systematic investigation, beginning with the deductive description of an artifact's physical properties—its material, form, and construction. This is followed by the deduction of its sensory and functional engagement, culminating in speculative interpretation against its cultural context. For Isahakyan's collection, this method moves beyond provenance to interrogate how the materiality of Chinese and Japanese objects—their substance, craftsmanship, and aesthetic—mediated the owner's intellectual relationship with the Orient, revealing embodied beliefs and cross-cultural valuations within the domestic sphere.

Hereby, this study will employ a multi-faceted methodological framework to elucidate the significance of East Asian artifacts within Avetik Isahakyan's collection, with a particular emphasis on objects of Chinese origin. The inquiry will commence with the systematic cataloging and formal description of all Asian objects d'art within the museum's holdings. Subsequently, the research will undertake a dual-contextual analysis: first, reconstructing the specific socio-historical and cultural milieux—both local and global—of these artifacts, whether acquired or gifted. This will be juxtaposed with a comparative analysis of analogous collections held by contemporaneous Armenian intellectuals within Isahakyan's circles to identify patterns of acquisition and aesthetic valuation.

The final analytical phase will synthesize these findings within the broader framework of Sino-Armenian cultural interactions of the period, critically incorporating archival documents from the Isahakyan Museum. This triangulation of object-based, comparative, and archival methodologies is designed to critically assess Isahakyan's role within these transnational cultural processes. The ultimate objective of this research is to produce a seminal evaluation of these artifacts' importance, thereby filling a critical scholarly void. As the first comprehensive study of its kind, it will pioneer an art-historical and cross-cultural examination of these objects, moving beyond mere provenance to interpret their function as material evidence of intellectual exchange and the construction of a globalized aesthetic sensibility among fin-de-siècle Armenian intelligentsia.

This work will establish an essential foundation for all subsequent academic inquiry in this previously neglected field.

### **Cataloging the Chinese and Japanese Artifacts in the Isahakyan House-Museum and revealing their socio-historical context**

During a research visit in summer 2024 to the Avetik Isahakyan House-Museum, we documented a notable assemblage of Asian artifacts within its permanent collection, comprising objects originating from Chinese, Japanese, and Indian cultural contexts. Located in the second-floor exhibition hall and in the study, several dedicated display cases house a series of figurines that formed the focus of our preliminary analysis. It is worth noting that any current classification remains provisional. A definitive categorization—including determinations of cultural attribution, function, and age—would require comprehensive in situ material analysis, advanced technical examination, and broader art historical contextualization. The present findings thus serve as an introductory framework for understanding the presence and significance of these artifacts within Isahakyan's intellectual and domestic landscape.

The Japanese artifacts within the collection comprise several distinct objects reflective of early 20th-century decorative and artistic production. Among these is a decorative porcelain plate, densely composed with a dramatic narrative scene depicting a conflict between a horned dragon (ryū 龍) and samurai warriors (bushi 武士), exemplifying the period's fascination with historical and mythological themes rendered in a vibrant, export-oriented style. Also included is a small-scale lacquer box of dark emerald green coloration, adorned with a motif of a dragon in pursuit of the flaming pearl (hōju no tama 宝珠の玉), an emblematic symbol associated with wisdom, spiritual energy, and celestial power within East Asian iconography. Further contributing to the assemblage are two miniature netsuke (根付) figurines, intricately carved and likely fashioned from ivory or wood, situated within the writer's study. Netsuke (根付) are minute, intricately carved toggles—traditionally fashioned from ivory, wood, or lacquer—that functioned as cord fasteners (sagemono) for suspended containers (inrō, tonkotsu) within Japanese Edo-period male

attire, evolving by the Meiji period into esteemed collectible sculptural objets d'art valued for their technical virtuosity and iconographic diversity.

It is particularly noteworthy that the Chinese and Japanese artifacts within the collection do not exist in isolation; rather, they enter into a deliberate and harmonious dialogue with Armenian artistic and archaeological objects, Egyptian artifacts, Iranian figurines and brassware, an Indian statuette of Ganesha, and various Buddhist sculptures—including depictions of elephants. This curated assemblage transcends mere eclecticism, functioning instead as a coherent intellectual project that constructs a synthesized image of «the East.» Through this material constellation, the collection gives tangible form to the writer's personal perception and conceptualization of Eastern civilizations, reflecting a cosmopolitan worldview mediated through objects.

Below is the cataloging attempt of the Chinese artifact in Isahakyan house-museum's permanent collection.

In the permanent collection hall, the second floor:

1. The small-scale, hand-carved figurine depicts Shou Xing (寿星), the deified anthropomorphism of the Southern Polar Star (Canopus) and member of the Fú Lù Shòu (福禄寿) trinity, a Daoist and folk group of stellar deities associated with blessings, rank, and longevity (shou, 寿). The iconography conforms to established conventions: an elongated bald head (toulu, 头露), long beard, and the attributes of a peach of immortality (shoutao, 寿桃) and a dragon-headed staff. Rendered with a matte, unwaxed surface and standing on an integral pedestal, the figure's uneven edges and nuanced carving indicate artisanal fabrication, suggesting a probable late 19th-century origin. This object exemplifies the popular veneration of Shou Lao, a deity whose worship transitioned from ancient astral rites to a personal cult of longevity and auspiciousness.

2. The Chinese porcelain figurine exemplifies the early 20th-century production of Fen Cai (粉彩) or famille-rose porcelain, emulating the aesthetic traditions of the Qing Dynasty. It depicts Shou Lao (寿老), the deity of longevity (shou 寿), rendered with clear facial features conforming to the conventional elderly type. His wide-sleeved yellow robe is



ornamented with repeated shou (寿) characters, a direct visual invocation of longevity. The figure holds the standard attributes of a peach of immortality (shoutao 寿桃) and a dragon-headed staff (zhang 杖), completing the orthodox iconography associated with this member of the Fu Lu Shou (福禄寿) trinity.

3. The smaller-scale figurine (smaller than the previous Shou Lao statuette) depicts Lu Xing (禄星), the deity of prosperity and rank within the Fu Lu Shou (福禄寿) trinity. Rendered as an imitation of blue-and-white porcelain (qinghua ci 青花瓷), its orthodox iconography includes the futou (幞头) scholar hat, signifying bureaucratic rank, and a scroll, denoting scholarly achievement. The figurine's commercial style, scale, and derivative aesthetic indicate it was mass-produced for a dual market: for domestic devotional display within a popular religious context and for sale to tourists as a piece of cultural souvenir art.

4. The gilt bronze figurine depicts the Buddha seated in dhyanasana (meditation posture) with hands in dhyana mudra (meditation gesture), his eyes closed in a state of deep contemplation. The robe is meticulously rendered, covering the left shoulder completely, draping across the chest to reveal the upper edge of the undergarment—a treatment reflecting established sculptural conventions. The figure's styling, modest scale, and gilding exhibit a strong visual resemblance to Ming-dynasty bronze castings. However, such gilt bronze figures proliferated in Western collections in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many produced during that period in workshops in Beijing and Shanghai specifically for the lucrative foreign market. These objects responded to collector demand by expertly mimicking earlier Ming and Qing styles, placing this piece within the context of export production.

5. The gilt bronze figurine represents the Medicine Buddha, identifiable by his attributes: one hand is held in a gesture of blessing (varada mudra), while the other cradles a healing herb plant, such as the myrobalan. Seated upon a lotus pedestal, the figure is executed in a style that consciously evokes the Ming dynasty, particularly in the rendering of the robe and the serene facial features. However, its production is

consistent with 20<sup>th</sup>-century imitative practices, where workshops, often in major urban centers, produced vast quantities of Buddhist figures in archaic styles for the foreign art market and tourist trade.

6. The gilt bronze figurine depicts the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, identifiable by his multiple arms—here six—and an elaborate, high ornamental crown. Rendered in a style that evokes the Ming dynasty, the figure exhibits finely cast details and a serene countenance with subtly feminized features, a common characteristic in later depictions of bodhisattvas. Seated upon a lotus pedestal, the piece demonstrates a conscious historicism in its aesthetic. However, characteristics such as the precise yet somewhat rigid execution and the overall condition of the gilding suggest a 20<sup>th</sup>-century production.

In the study of the writer, on the first floor, in the antique cabinet:

7. The small-scale, dark wood Buddha figure, likely not hand-carved, depicts the seated deity in a state of meditation (dhyanasana), with eyes closed and hands in a subtle, intertwined gesture suggesting a variation of dhyana mudra. The robe, which fully covers both shoulders in the «double-robed» style, is schematically rendered, indicating production for a broad market. The figure is seated upon a simplified lotus pedestal (lotus asana), a common symbolic representation of purity and enlightenment in Buddhist iconography.

8. The small Chinese rosewood carving depicts Bùdài (布袋), the popular folk deity of abundance and contentment, immediately recognizable through his characteristically exaggerated exposed belly and benevolent countenance. The iconography follows established conventions: one hand touches his earlobe—a gesture symbolizing the granting of wishes—while the other holds a wish-granting fan (shànzi 扇子). The closed eyes and serene facial expression convey profound spiritual fulfillment, representing a classic portrayal of this syncretic Mahāyāna Buddhist deity within the Chinese sculptural tradition.

9. Carved from two-toned beige and dark brown soapstone, this small figurine depicts the laughing, portly figure of Bùdài (布袋). The masterful exploitation of the stone's natural veining accentuates the figure's defining attributes: a broadly smiling face and a prominently exposed,

oversized belly—a direct allusion to his epithet as the «Laughing Buddha» and a symbol of boundless generosity and contentment. This material selection and cheerful rendering are characteristic of decorative objects produced for both domestic and tourist markets during the late Qing and early Republican periods.

10. This petite, blackwood carving depicts Shou Lao (寿老), the deity of longevity, identified primarily by his characteristically high and elongated forehead (toulu 头露). The absence of his typical attributes—the peach of immortality (shoutao 寿桃) and dragon-headed staff—is notable, suggesting a simplified decorative interpretation, or a focus on the deity's physiognomy as the primary symbol of wisdom and long life. This reduction to essential features is often found in smaller, vernacular carvings intended for personal devotion or as modest scholarly accoutrements.

11. The most emblematic object in the collection—distinguished by its socio-historical context, function, and subsequent repurposing—is a soapstone figurine that also embodies the ideological and personal affinity between Avetik Isahakyan and Yeghishe Charents (1897–1937), the latter widely recognized as «*the main poet of the twentieth century*» in Armenia. (Figure 1)

The figurine, carved from black and brown soapstone (*huashi* 滑石), represents the Daoist sage Laozi (老子) mounted on a black ox (*qingniu* 青牛) and holding a scroll (*juan* 卷). This iconographic configuration alludes to the legendary account of Laozi's withdrawal (*chushi* 出世) from China. According to the traditional narrative, disillusioned with the moral decline of society, Laozi departed westward on a qingniu. Upon reaching the Hangu Pass (函谷关), he was persuaded by the gatekeeper Yin Xi (尹喜) to commit his teachings to writing, producing the *Daodejing* (道德经). The figurine thus condenses two key symbolic moments: exile and revelation. The ox connotes endurance and steadfastness, while the scroll evokes the foundational text of Daoist philosophy (*daojia sixiang* 道家思想). Soapstone, valued in Chinese decorative arts for its malleability and chromatic variety, was frequently employed for such carvings. Objects

of this type were popular within Ming- and Qing-dynasty scholarly culture (*wenfang yongpin* 文房用品), where they served as implements of contemplation (*mingxiang* 冥想) and cultural refinement (*wenya* 文雅). Comparable examples continued to be produced into the twentieth century, often for the tourist and export market, sustaining classical Chinese themes in portable decorative form.

Vigen Isahakyan, in his memoir *My Father*, highlights the shared fascination of his father and Charents with Eastern traditions and figurative representations of the Buddha. He recalls that in 1936, when he asked Charents about his current work, the latter replied: «*Now I read more than I write. I am obsessed with the writings of Eastern philosophers-poets, I'd like to explore Buddhism, get to know "Nirvana"...*» (Isahakyan, 2000: 532). James R. Russell, professor of Ancient Near Eastern, Iranian, and Armenian Studies, who has written extensively on the modernist dimensions of Charents, similarly remarks on «*Charents's mystical religious fervor, his fascination with the Buddha and Freud*» (Russell, 1996/1997 (1999): 17–35). Charents's renowned poetic cycle *To the East* demonstrates his engagement not only with Iranian and Middle Eastern traditions but also with broader Asian inspirations.

Material evidence of Charents's interest is preserved in the collection of his Yerevan house-museum, which contains Asian and Asian-inspired artifacts: a monumental bronze Buddha head, likely of Thai provenance; Chinese figurines; Japanese woodblock prints; and a large Chinoiserie panel, possibly acquired in France. This collection underscores his intellectual curiosity toward Eastern civilizations. Within his artistic milieu, Charents's Buddhist preoccupations circulated widely: he was depicted in meditative or Buddha-like poses in works such as Aleksandr Bazhbeuk-Melikyan's *Mahatma Charents* (1936), which draws a parallel with Mahatma Gandhi (Charents, 2019: 3) (it portrays Charents seated like a Buddha figurine, wearing his Middle-Eastern hat and Chinese shirt), and Martiros Saryan's *Charents with Buddha Figurine* (1933), where the Chinoiserie panel and Buddhist figures owned by Charents form part of the composition, visually transforming the poet himself into a Buddha figure with exaggerated almond-shaped eyes (Charents, 2019: 207).

Vigen Isahakyan records another encounter in 1936, when his father visited Charents's home and examined his study. Avetik Isahakyan's attention, as Vigen recalls, «*was captured by several Chinese and Indian statuettes, which Charents probably acquired in Moscow and Leningrad antique stores.*» At that moment, Isahakyan remarked to Charents: «*Yeghishe, see, you like Buddha and Eastern figurines, like me. I have a small collection of them; I take them with me wherever I wander.*» The publication *Isahakyan Relics*, dedicated to the collection of the Isahakyan House-Museum, corroborates this proclivity, noting that during his student years in Germany, Isahakyan cultivated an interest in philosophy and diverse religious traditions, as well as in statuettes and objects that symbolized them, which explains the richness of his personal collection (Khorenyan and Mesropyan, 2018: 41).

These recollections demonstrate how ideas and artistic inspirations associated with Buddhism, Chinese traditions, and Japanese culture circulated among Armenian intellectuals of the interwar era. Their discussions of spirituality and Nirvana reveal that, although the figurines—through their stylistic and symbolic characteristics—were culturally distinct and appeared «other» in relation to Armenian heritage and Soviet-era artistic norms, intellectuals such as Isahakyan and Charents did not perceive them as mere exotic curiosities. Rather, they sought to engage deeply with their multilayered mysticism and antiquity.

Returning to the Laozi figurine preserved in the Isahakyan House-Museum, its provenance further illuminates Charents's final days. In the summer of 1937, shortly before his arrest, Charents asked his wife Isabella to deliver a gift to Avetik Isahakyan for his birthday—though the latter was in October. Charents explained: «*I would love Avetik to have a memory from me.* » According to Vigen Isahakyan, Charents then selected a Chinese figurine from his desk—«*made of nephrite stone, it portrayed Confucius seated on an ox.* » Before handing it to Isabella, he inscribed its pedestal with a fork: «*To my dear Avetik, Charents, 24/VI, 1937*» (Isahakyan, 2000: 582). Vigen adds that the figurine always remained in their home: «*Years passed, many people came and went, but the figurine*

*of wise Confucius was always in its place; my father kept it with high regard in a glass cabinet. »*

Although the figurine was in fact a representation of Laozi, not Confucius, and although it is carved from soapstone rather than nephrite, the piece acquired profound symbolic value. The official website of the Isahakyan House-Museum further complicates its identity by presenting it as a figure of Shoulao (寿老). Nevertheless, despite such misidentifications, the object constitutes a material link between two of Armenia's foremost intellectuals of the twentieth century. While knowledge of Chinese iconography in Armenia at the time was limited, Isahakyan and Charents exemplify an earnest fascination and pursuit of understanding that transcended mere exoticism.

Thus, the Chinese and Japanese figurines in Isahakyan's collection, whether acquired personally or received as gifts, functioned as material embodiments of his intellectual and aesthetic engagement with Asian cultures and religious philosophies—interests cultivated during his student years in Europe. His seminal poem, *Abu-Lala Mahari*, composed and published between 1909 and 1911, manifests the impact of these encounters, displaying pronounced Arabic and Iranian influences in its lexicon, imagery, and structural composition (Harutyunyan, 2015: 201–207). Although direct references to East Asian sources are less explicit, the poem's ideological substratum reveals conceptual parallels with Daoist and Buddhist thought, particularly in its recurrent motifs of asceticism, self-isolation, introspection, and the pursuit of spiritual self-realization. In this sense, Isahakyan's engagement with Asian philosophies was mediated less through textual or visual imitation and more through the internalization of contemplative and ethical paradigms, which subsequently informed both the thematic and ethical dimensions of his literary production.

During the early twentieth century, Avetik Isahakyan's intellectual formation in Europe might have exposed him to prevailing currents of Orientalism, which emphasized the aesthetic, philosophical, and ethnographic study of Asian cultures. While studying in Switzerland and Germany, Isahakyan might have encountered both textual and material representations of Chinese and Japanese thought, reflecting the broader

European fascination with East Asia. European intellectuals and collectors of the period, including figures such as the German sinologist Richard Wilhelm and the French scholar and collector Émile Guimet, frequently integrated Chinese and Japanese figurines, bronzes, and scrolls into domestic and scholarly interiors, using these objects to materialize contemplative and ethical paradigms derived from Daoism, Confucianism, and Zen Buddhism. Similarly, collectors like Henri Cernuschi and Ernest Fenollosa treated Asian artifacts as instruments for aesthetic refinement, ethical reflection, and engagement with non-Western cosmologies. These practices also provided Isahakyan with both a model and a framework: the placement of figurines and small-scale objects within domestic spaces as mediators of intellectual inquiry and philosophical reflection.

### **Avetik Isahakyan's oeuvre linking Armenian and Chinese intellectuals in the postwar period**

The postwar Soviet context, particularly following World War II, further structured the parameters of permissible engagement with Buddhism. The re-establishment of the Central Spiritual Board of Buddhists of the USSR (TsDUB) in 1946 institutionalized a highly regulated form of Buddhist practice, simultaneously facilitating ethnographic, aesthetic, and academic access while suppressing doctrinal or ritual continuity. Major repositories, including the Hermitage and the Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow, curated extensive Buddhist collections, often looted from closed monasteries, framing Buddhist material culture as an object of historical, artistic, and ethnographic study. Scholarly production by figures such as Yuri Nikolaevich Roerich and Fyodor Ippolitovich Shcherbatskoy codified Buddhist philosophy and linguistic analysis, providing a legitimate intellectual framework for engagement. Within this epistemic environment, Isahakyan's literary and material interests converged on asceticism, self-contemplation, and ethical introspection, articulating Buddhist-inspired motifs in both poetic form and visual curation.

The archival holdings of the Avetik Isahakyan House-Museum provide crucial evidence not only for understanding the writer's intensified

engagement with Chinese culture in the postwar period but also for reconstructing previously underexplored dimensions of Sino-Armenian cultural interaction under Soviet auspices. Among these documents, the archival item no. 2241, issued on the official stationery of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association (SSFA), situates Isahakyan within broader mechanisms of transnational cultural diplomacy. In the 1940s, Sino-Soviet relations were shaped by wartime collaboration against Japanese expansion, followed by postwar strategic and ideological realignments. The establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union on October 3, 1949, immediately following the proclamation of the PRC on October 1, was prefigured by a clandestine visit in March 1949 by Liu Shaoqi, representing Mao Zedong, to Stalin, in which the impending establishment of New China and its international recognition were explicitly discussed. Within this context, the SSFA, formally established in 1946, functioned to institutionalize bilateral cultural exchange, mediate Soviet ideological influence, and coordinate academic, artistic, and public initiatives across China (Yu, 2005: 100–111).

In the early 1950s, the SSFA and the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries organized delegations, reciprocal visits, and pen-friend exchanges, alongside systematic translation and publication of Soviet literature and theory into Chinese. The archival document from Isahakyan's museum, dated August 1955—coinciding with the apex of SSFA cultural activity—was addressed to the Armenian Society of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries for transmission to Isahakyan. Authored by Ge Baoquan (戈寶權, 1913–2003), a prominent Chinese cultural delegate, translator, Xinhua News Agency Moscow correspondent, Acting Counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in the USSR, Deputy Secretary of the SSFA, and Vice President of the Chinese Research Association of Soviet Literature, the letter demonstrates both personal and institutional recognition. In Russian-language script, Ge Baoquan addressed Isahakyan as «Varpet» («Master»), emphasizing the honor of translating his works into Chinese in 1946 and commemorating their meeting in Yerevan in May 1955. The letter enclosed the October 1946 issue of *Literature and Culture of the USSR*, containing six of



Isahakyan's poems and Lev Penkovski's article, «Avetik Isahakyan—the Laureate of the Stalin Prize, » personally translated by Ge. Moreover, the letter details ongoing translation projects, including Isahakyan's *Songs of Alagyaz* and Khachatur Abovyan's *Wounds of Armenia*, intended for publication in the journal *World Literature* (《译文》/《世界文学》), whose early-1950s issues systematically foregrounded Soviet authors and literary theory, reflecting coordinated state editorial policy under the China Writers 'Association (中国作家协会). Ge Baoquan further proposed a standalone volume of Isahakyan's translated works and requested a photograph and personal note from the writer for Chinese readers, highlighting the confluence of personal initiative and institutionalized transnational cultural circulation.

Archival item no. 8933 in the holdings of the Avetik Isahakyan House-Museum contains the October 1955 issue of the Chinese periodical *World Literature* (*Shijie Wenxue*), which includes translations of works by Avetik Isahakyan and Khachatur Abovyan, thereby continuing the trajectory of Sino-Armenian literary exchange and reflecting the recognition and appreciation afforded to Isahakyan by Chinese cultural elites and high-ranking officials. On the title page of this issue, a handwritten Armenian note by the poet Gevorg Emin (1919–1998) addresses Isahakyan as «Dear Varpet» («Master»), stating: «*On the occasion of your birthday, I was having a toast for you with my Chinese friends, who asked me to give you this book or journal.* » Emin further directs Isahakyan to pages 20–21, where photographs of Isahakyan and Abovyan are included. The note is dated «29 October 1955, Moscow. » At this time, Emin was serving as the Yerevan correspondent for the Moscow literary weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, an institution with close ties to the Sino-Soviet Friendship Association (SSFA). Emin's own literary output demonstrates sustained engagement with Chinese culture and philosophy. In one poem, he cites Laozi, «Let the stream flow» (Emin, 1962: 122), and in another, dedicated to Vladimir Mayakovski, he deploys China as a metaphor, invoking the imagined response of the Chinese army to poetic utterance:

And this Chinese poet,

If you care to believe,  
When the victors entered Beijing,  
The kulins asked of you  
To read your songs,  
And when from *The Left March*  
You shouted a line—  
The entire Chinese army—  
As if in unison, justly—  
Responded...  
With a Chinese accent...

This intersection of archival evidence, personal correspondence, and poetic allusion underscores both the transnational circulation of Armenian literature in mid-20th-century China and the aesthetic and philosophical engagement of Armenian intellectuals with Chinese thought.

Cui Feng, in his dissertation on World Literature periodical archives, included archival records on publications related to Armenian literature. (Cui, 2012: 67). Armenian literary contributions were prominently represented, particularly through Avetik Isahakyan (1875–1957), who served as chairman of the Armenian Writers 'Union, an academician of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, and a deputy to the Supreme Soviet (Cui, 2012: 67). The October 1955 issue of the periodical included thirty-two translations, among them one short story from Armenia and seven poems by Isahakyan, translated by Ge Baoquan (戈宝权). These encompassed three patriotic works—*To My Motherland I*, *To My Motherland II*, and *Song of the Birds*—and four poems addressing love and sentiment—*If I Were a Gust of Wind*, *When I Die*, *A Passionate Lark Sings*, and *Shahro* (Cui, 2012: 67). Additionally, in May 1960, the periodical featured two Armenian folk tales by S. Kursk (斯·库尔斯克), further consolidating the representation of Armenian narrative culture (Cui, 2012: 61). These translations illustrate the centrality of Armenian literature in Sino-Soviet cultural exchange and the strategic importance accorded to works from the Soviet Union's constituent nations (Cui, 2012: 73). This translation was also documented in 1958 with the publication of

the Chinese selection 《希望的旗帜——亚美尼亚作家短篇小说选》 (*Hope's Banner: Selection of Armenian Short Stories*), attributed to Avetik Isahakyan and other Soviet Armenian authors, and translated by Rong Rude (荣如德) and colleagues, through the People's Literature Publishing House (人民文学出版社).

To understand the popularity of Isahakyan's works at the time, the interest of Chinese elites and audiences in Armenian culture and literature must be considered, which is a very fragmentary and poorly explored aspect, often preserved in material culture monuments or memoirs. In 1927, Yegiazar Martiros Gabuzyan (pen name: Dancho) produced a cartographic representation of China in Armenian, published by the Pethrat Publishing House and lithographed under catalog no. 1184. Measuring 71 × 51 cm and drawn to a scale of 1:8,000,000, the map is preserved in the National Library of Armenia. It delineates China's boundaries, provinces, hydrological systems, and toponyms, thereby constituting one of the rare Armenian-language cartographic works on East Asia (Sargsyan-Stepanian, 1957: 50). The appearance of this map coincided with the consolidation of Armenian communal life in Harbin, where Armenians had settled since the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway (1898). Following the Russo-Japanese War, the Armenian population expanded, leading to the establishment of the Armenian National Organization in 1917, formally recognized in 1919. By 1923, the community had erected the Armeno-Gregorian Church on Sadovaya Street, which, under Fr. Yeghishe Rostomiants, became the religious and cultural center of Armenians in Manchuria and wider China. This institutional framework facilitated cultural continuity through education, performance, and social welfare. (Mouradian, 2017)

The Armenian Soviet Union state periodical «The Agitator's Notebook» (1949: 32–46) dedicated an article in Armenian to its readers, celebrating the formation of the Chinese Republic and the Establishment of Communism in China.

In late 1949, Mao Zedong arrived in the Soviet Union. At that time, the People's Republic of China had not yet concluded its civil war, and his visit to Leningrad was conducted in secrecy. The leadership of the State

Hermitage Museum was informed of the arrival of a guest of very high rank. On the day of his arrival, Nevsky Prospect was placed under strict security. On his first full day in Leningrad, Mao Zedong visited the Hermitage, which was closed to the public. He was received by Joseph Abgarovich «Hovsep» Orbeli (1887 – 1961), a Soviet-Armenian orientalist, public figure, and academician, who guided him through the museum's collections with the assistance of an interpreter. Mao expressed particular interest in the works of Rembrandt.

Boris Borisovich Piotrovsky (1908 – 1990), in his memoir *Pages of My Life*, noted a later inquiry from the USSR Ministry of Culture regarding a supposed gift, a painting titled *The Yellow Stork*, allegedly presented to Mao Zedong by the Hermitage. Piotrovsky denied that such a gift had been made. The confusion stemmed from a later visit by Guo Moruo (1892 – 1978), courtesy name Dingtang, a Chinese author, poet, historian, archaeologist, and government official, and John Desmond Bernal (1901 – 1971), an Irish scientist and public intellectual. Upon their departure, Orbeli gave Guo Moruo a small yellow porcelain toy in the shape of a duck, asking him to convey it to Mao Zedong on behalf of his son, Mitya. This object was later mistakenly recorded as a painting called *The Yellow Stork*. (Piotrovsky, 1995: 257–258)

Between 1954 and 1958, Sino-Soviet cultural relations were concretely expressed through major art exhibitions that both showcased Soviet artistic production and reinforced ideological alignment. The first large-scale event, the Exhibition of Economic and Cultural Achievements of the USSR, was held in Beijing from October 2 to December 26, 1954, attended by Chinese leaders Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoqi, alongside Soviet officials Nikita Khrushchev and Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan, the Armenian-born statesman integral to both diplomatic and cultural coordination (Bai, 2023: 201–215)—the fine arts section, organized under A. I. Zamoshkin, director of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, presented 280 works, including revolutionary historical paintings and Stalin Prize recipients. Soviet-Armenian painter Dmitry Arkadyevich Nalbandian contributed prominent canvases, including «The Great Friendship», depicting the 1950 Mao–Stalin meeting during the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of

Friendship, Alliance, and «Mutual Assistance, and Power to the Soviets, Peace to the Peoples», commemorating the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets (Bai, 2023: 201–215). Subsequently, the Exhibition of Works by Soviet Artists (1955–1957) was presented in Beijing (July 8–21, 1958) and Shanghai (August 1958), featuring 543 works from the 1957 All-Union Art Exhibition. It was in this exhibition that G. S. Khanjian's «On the Shore of Sevan» appeared, incorporating distinctly Armenian motifs within socialist realist representation (Bai, 2023: 201–215). The exhibitions collectively highlighted contributions from multiple Soviet republics, establishing Armenians' active participation in shaping transnational artistic and ideological networks between the USSR and China.

An exemplar from the oeuvre of the preeminent twentieth-century Chinese artist Qí Báishí (齊白石, 1864–1957), his 1956 work *Mandarin Ducks in Lotus Pond*, accrues significant art-historical value not only for its artistic merit but also for its exceptional provenance, which illuminates a scarcely documented facet of collection history: the Armenian collector of Chinese pictorial art. This painting was acquired directly from the artist in Běijīng in 1956 by Shavarsh Simonyan (Šavarš Simonjan, 1912–1974), who served as Minister of Education of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1954 to 1973. Simonyan obtained the work as a diplomatic gift during an official cultural delegation to the People's Republic of China, convened to facilitate Sino-Soviet exchange, with the presentation occurring during a visit to Qí Báishí's studio—an event that frames the painting as a material artifact of cultural diplomacy. The work remained in Simonyan's personal collection until his death in 1974, after which it was retained by his descendants until its consignment to auction by Bonhams in 2013. This singular provenance is further contextualized within a broader pattern of the dissemination and reception of Qí Báishí's legacy within the Soviet sphere, a phenomenon corroborated by contemporaneous ephemera such as a 1958 USSR postage stamp bearing the artist's likeness, a 1957 Soviet postcard reproducing this very composition, a monument at the Chinese Palace in Zolochiv Castle, and a sustained corpus of Russophone art-historical scholarship from the 1960s and 1970s

that sought to analyze and canonize his work (« Qi Baishi: Mandarin Ducks in Lotus Pond,» Bonhams, 2013, LOT 628).

The series of exhibitions, official delegations, and cultural exchanges between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union in the mid-twentieth century generated interest among Armenian intellectuals, particularly members of Avetik Isahakyan's circle. These transnational encounters stimulated engagement with Chinese material culture, motivating the acquisition of artifacts and, in some cases, travel to Asia. Documentary and material evidence attests to the possession of various Chinese artifacts by the prominent Armenian poet and public intellectual Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869–1923). A notable item within this collection was a Chinese travel box, accompanied by a famille rose porcelain tea service, whose decorative program—featuring intricate narrative scenes with human figures, floral patterns, and auspicious iconography—aligns with prevalent aesthetic conventions in Chinese material culture. The artifact's provenance is further elucidated by an Armenian-language inscription in ink on the box's exterior base, which reads: «To dearest Hovhannes, from Mamikon Grigoryan, 6. 02. 1919.» This dedicatory text serves as a tangible record of the donor's identity, thereby illuminating yet another social practice of gift exchange among the Armenian intelligentsia, wherein objects of Chinese origin were strategically employed to forge and sustain intellectual bonds. The Yerevan house-museum of composer Alexander Spendiaryan (1871–1928) preserves the Chinese robe of his spouse as part of its collection. The female painter Mariam Aslamazyan (1907–2006) undertook trips to China and Japan in the early 1960s, resulting in still life and portrait works incorporating Chinese masks, Japanese masks, and other East Asian objects (Aslamazian, 2022: 137). The celebrated female writer Silva Kaputikyan (1919–2006) retained soapstone Chinese figurines gifted by the art historian Ruben Zaryan (1909–1994). Martiros Saryan (1880–1972) integrated Tibetan thangka and Chinese Shou Lao figurines into his still life compositions. In August 2025, the Saryan House-Museum exhibited two Chinese antiquities from his collection: a 19th-century carved red lacquer cinnabar vase-urn and a

guardian mask. Saryan had intended to travel to China, Japan, and India, but these plans were interrupted by World War I (Saryan, 1980: 13).

These examples underscore the transnational circulation of objects and iconographies, revealing Armenian engagement with East Asian material culture and the complex interconnections of Sino-Armenian cultural exchange under Soviet frameworks, which we intend to explore in upcoming publications.

### **Conclusion**

This study situated the Chinese and Japanese artifacts within the Isahakyan House-Museum within a dual analytical framework: the localized Soviet-Armenian intellectual network and the transnational circuits of East Asian cultural circulation. By systematically tracing acquisition channels, collection typologies, and socio-historical vectors, the research reframed these objects not as incidental curiosities but as intentional nodes within a curated assemblage, reflecting patterns of intellectual mediation and material culture circulation.

The analysis demonstrated that Isahakyan's engagement with East Asian material culture, though lacking direct field experience in China or Japan, was mediated through interlinked epistemic networks, including correspondence, translations, and the shared orientalism of Armenian and broader Soviet intellectual contemporaries. For the first time, these artifacts have been catalogued and correlated with archival documentation, revealing a previously unexamined trajectory of Sino-Armenian cultural interaction in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This orientation was shaped by intersecting factors: global modernist interest in Asian philosophical aesthetics, Soviet-mediated intellectual exchanges with China, and an Armenian intellectual preoccupation with Buddhist and Daoist conceptual frameworks.

The study interrelated multiple dimensions: the physical embedding of artifacts within domestic space, Isahakyan's standing within Sino-Armenian intellectual exchange networks of the 1950s, and the instrumentalization of China and East Asia as conceptual metaphors in contemporary Armenian literary praxis. These vectors revealed a modality

of indirect intercultural engagement, mediated through third-party actors, epistolary exchange, and material proxies, constitutive of Armenian modernist self-conception.

Despite ongoing questions regarding the precise provenance of certain items and the extent of institutional affiliation with entities such as the Soviet Society for Friendship with Asia (SSFA), this analysis provided a chronologically and methodologically structured account of extant evidence to date. Consequently, these objects operate as materialized nodes within a transcontinental epistemic network rather than as ornamental exotica. Their significance lies in their capacity to illuminate intellectual trajectories, creative praxis, and cosmopolitan orientations of Armenian collectors, constituting a discrete chapter in the historiography of Sino-Armenian cultural relations.

Moreover, this study enabled a deeper understanding of Avetik Isahakyan's intellectual and personal character, revealing his systematic engagement with Chinese sources, his capacity to integrate foreign philosophical and aesthetic frameworks into Armenian literary practice, and his mediating role in fostering Sino-Armenian cultural exchanges. These insights position Isahakyan not merely as a literary figure but as an intercultural conduit and cosmopolitan intellectual whose curiosity and erudition shaped the contours of mid-20th-century Armenian engagement with East Asia.

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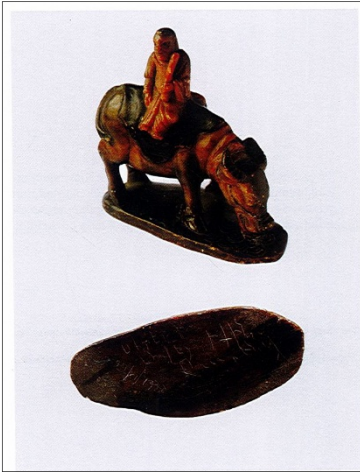


Figure 1. The Chinese figurine, carved from black and brown soapstone (*huashi* 滑石), represents the Daoist sage Laozi (老子) mounted on a black ox (*qingniu* 青牛) and holding a scroll (*juan* 卷), a gift from Yeghishe Charents,

housed at Avetik Isahakyan's House-Museum, Yerevan, Reference: Yeghishe Charents, *To the East* [Yerevan: Yeghishe Charents House-Museum, 2019], p. 91, ill. 8.

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