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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Repatriation and Decolonization of Geology Collections in an Evolving Sector

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Abstract

The repatriation of geological specimens can be regarded as a barometer of the progress of decolonization. The ongoing proactive repatriation of four dinosaur eggs and a *Confuciusornis sanctus* specimen from the Manchester Museum to China is discussed. Except for this example, proactive repatriation of geological specimens does not yet happen. This paper is a call to those who look after geological collections to check that collections were legally acquired and to welcome repatriation requests and the opportunities presented by them.

Keywords: Repatriation; Decolonization; Manchester Museum; Fossils; Dinosaurs

Introduction

The decolonization of museum collections is gaining momentum. There is a greater appetite to develop richer, fuller collection histories reflecting Black and Indigenous Peoples and making collections more relevant to audiences (Brulon 2022).

Decolonization can be defined in many ways. Here we use the definition in Gelsthorpe (2021:): 'For museums, decolonization should mean stepping back, looking at what and who we value and how the museum and collections have been shaped by colonizing forces. Decolonizing is about being open and honest about the impact on and role of people in the past and present, particularly Black and Indigenous peoples. Decolonization is not limited to repatriation and goes beyond ethnography collections.'

Decolonization of natural history collections has begun, kick-started by the seminal paper by Das and Lowe (2018) and momentum is growing (e.g. Ashby and Machin 2021). However progress on the decolonization of geological collections has been slow, with only a handful of papers directly challenging the status quo such as Gelsthorpe (2021) and Hearth and Robins (2022). Of the 46 links to resources and publications gathered by the Museums Association on their website (Museums Association 2024), only three reference natural history collections and none directly reference geology collections. There seems to be a strong correlation between progress on decolonization practice in ethnographic collections and the number of publications and resources available. At present, decolonizing geology collections is not a prominent part of museum practice discourse.

This paper focuses on the repatriation of geological specimens, however, this might occur, as a barometer for the progress of decolonization. Decolonization is not limited to repatriation but is also about telling the stories of everyone involved in the acquisition of objects, particularly Black and Indigenous Peoples and acknowledging the role of colonialism. Decolonization offers opportunities to work collaboratively with Black and Indigenous Peoples in an equitable partnership.

Acquisition of Geology Collections

Collections may be decolonized reactively, in response to repatriation requests, or proactively, following initiatives by the current custodians. Objects are acquired into museum collections mainly through donation, purchase or collecting in the field. Permission from landowners for the collection of objects is required and collectors must adhere to national and international laws. Museums that are part of the UK Museum Accreditation Scheme administered by Arts Council England (2018) are required to have collections development policies and adhere to ethical guidelines. Other countries such as the USA (American Alliance of Museums 2024) and Australia (Arts Tasmania 2023) have similar schemes. It is often difficult to demonstrate that these rules have been followed, even for new acquisitions and curators have to accept the assurance of donors or vendors that objects have been collected legally. Historic collections may be associated with limited provenance data if they were collected for reasons other than their present use.

Manchester Museum has a collection of around 250,000 rocks, fossils, and minerals. The collection dates back to the 1820s (Alberti 2009). Manchester Museum's collection has mostly been acquired from gifts, transfers (for example from Salford Museum and the Imperial Institute) and some active collecting. Substantial gifts of collections in the early years of the Museum coincided with the height of the British Empire and the collection inevitably reflects this. Minerals acquired by the Imperial Institute for example were explicitly acquired as 'a centre and clearing house for information, investigation and exhibition of the natural resources of empire' (Furse 1926). 'It may not have been initiated by the nature and culture of empire, but the Manchester Museum was certainly consolidated by colonial material' (Alberti 2009). Staff at Manchester Museum never intentionally set out to put together a collection that represented the riches of the empire but did so by default through the inherited motivations of the collectors who donated their objects (Gelsthorpe 2021). Collections were often donated by academics associated with Manchester University such as William Crawford Williamson, or were acquired when opportunities arose either locally, nationally or internationally to develop the collection for teaching, research or display.

Manchester Museum's geology collection has been amassed primarily in the name of science as tokens of what was found, where and when. These objects do not reflect who was involved in their collection and until recently have ignored stories about their colonial history.

Repatriation in the Wider Museum Sector

Repatriation of ancestral human remains from museum collections has been happening for over forty years (Clegg 2020). More recently, cultural material, some of which was acquired during times of colonial violence, such as the Benin Bronzes (Phillips 2022), has begun to be returned (Chow 2023). Even the most high-profile of contested collections in the UK, the Elgin Marbles (also known as the Parthenon sculptures), have been the subject of new documentaries, books, and news reporting. The British Museum is under pressure to return them to Greece (Scott 2023), but cannot because they are not legally able to do so without an Act of Parliament. Arts Council England has reflected this sector change by publishing new guidance on restitution and repatriation (Arts Council England 2023). Other guidance on the restitution and return of collections from university museums has been released by the International Council of Museums (ICOM Committee for University Museums and Collections 2021).

There is a growing awareness of the role of colonialism in the history of how scientific specimens have been acquired by museums, and some countries are beginning to ask for their objects back. A request has been made by the Minister of National Assets, Chile, for Darwin's Ground Sloth (*Mylodon darwinii*) to be returned from the collection at the Natural History Museum, London. Some Tanzanian politicians have asked for the return of the iconic sauropod dinosaur *Giraffatitan brancai* from the *Museum* für Naturkunde, *Berlin,* originally collected from today's Tanzania when it was a German colony (Vogel 2019). However, there are not many examples of natural history repatriations requests that have been fulfilled.

A recent example of the repatriation of a fossil is the non-avian dinosaur '*Ubirajara*.' It will be returned to Brazil from a German museum after allegations of theft (Rodrigues 2023). The authorities in Brazil state that permission to export the fossil was not obtained and due legal process was not followed. The repatriation follows two years of negotiation between the German and Brazilian authorities and an online campaign (#UbirajaraBelongsToBrazil) citing paleontological colonialism. A vehement defense of the right to retain the specimen in Germany was presented by the authors who published the specimen. The paper describing this specimen (published by Smyth et. al. 2020) was withdrawn by the publisher when the ownership of the fossil was challenged. There is a suggestion that publication pressure could have resulted in unethical and illegal behavior (Raja and Dunne 2021).

The Chinese fossils discussed in this paper do not come from areas of China that were formerly colonized by European countries and their acquisition does not date from the time of the British or other European empires. However, there are strong similarities between the barriers to the repatriation of the specimens in this case study and the barriers experienced when undertaking repatriation to previously colonized countries. There is arguably a power imbalance between China and the Western museum sector, and the same collections management processes and bureaucracy applies to both this case study and fossils acquired from formerly colonized countries.

Repatriation of Chinese Fossils from Manchester Museum

In 2021, staff at Manchester Museum began the formal process of repatriating four dinosaur eggs (and shell fragments) and a *Confuciusornis sanctus* fossil bird, all originally from China (see **Appendix 1** and **Fig. 1**). The fossils had been acquired by various means between 1999 and 2001. The fossils were acquired by John Nudds, who was the Keeper of Geology at the time, probably as part of the redevelopment of the Museum's Fossils Gallery which opened in 2002. No written record of the reasons for acquisition survives. Writing at the time about the ethics and science of acquiring fossils, Nudds (2001) wrote: 'I introduce here the concept of "rescue purchase", whereby a palaeontologist, on recognizing a new or unique specimen for sale, be allowed to use professional judgement to purchase that specimen, even though it may have left its country of origin illegally.'

The development of Manchester Museum's Lee Kai Hung Chinese Culture gallery (which opened in 2023) prompted a re-examination of the due diligence undertaken when the Museum acquired its Chinese fossil collection. It was found that these specimens did not have the associated export license or Ministry of Land and Resources registration number which were required at the time; this means the specimens were not legally exported by Manchester Museum. The export of vertebrate fossils without this documentation has been illegal since 1982, as clarified in other legislation in subsequent years (Liston and You 2015). These national frameworks have been difficult to enforce, but there are several documented cases of the theft of dinosaur eggs and other fossils from China resulting in jail sentences (Schmidt 2000).

Figure 1. Fossils to be repatriated from the Manchester Museum to China. A) LL.12395, *Oviraptor* dinosaur egg, Cretaceous, China. B) LL.12418, *Confuciusornis sanctus*, Cretaceous, China

Bryan Sitch, the lead curator of the Chinese Culture Gallery made contact with staff at the National Museum of China in Beijing (Sitch 2021) to begin the process of resolving the legal status of the fossils. Three options were explored: to obtain retrospective export paperwork and establish Manchester Museum's ownership; to transfer ownership to a Chinese institution and borrow the fossils on long-term loan; or to unconditionally return the fossils to China. The Museum was clear from the start of the process that Chinese colleagues should make the decision. This approach was taken when ethnographic material was recently repatriated by Manchester Museum to Australia and was approved by the Museum's collections development panel. Staff at the National Museum of China responded that the 'Director of Tsinghua University Science Museum would like to receive the fossils and is very glad to hear that we are willing to return the material'.

Subsequent discussions between all parties concluded that the fossils were better returned to the collections at The Institute of Vertebrate Palaeontology and Palaeoanthropology (IVPP), Chinese Academy of Sciences where the fossils would be part of their world-leading research on *Confuciusornis* (e.g. Zhang *et al.* 2008). These discussions were supported by Fang Zong, the Project Assistant for the Chinese Culture Gallery who is a Mandarin speaker. At the time of going to press with this article, staff at Manchester Museum were in the process of preparing papers to send to the Board of Governors at the University of Manchester for approval to 'dispose' of the fossils from Manchester Museum's collections and transfer them to China. This is described as a 'disposal' as the specimens are being removed from the permanent collection. 'Disposal' is a formal procedure detailed in the Spectrum 5.1 standard, one of the requirements of the UK Museum Accreditation Scheme. It is hoped to give further details of the repatriation and use of these collections in a future publication when the process is complete.

The process of disposing of objects from Manchester Museum is complex and time-consuming (**Fig. 2**). Many people have been involved in the process so far, including curators, conservators, the Registrar, marketing and senior leadership staff who all have a role in the maintenance of high ethical standards and potentially sensitive international negotiations.

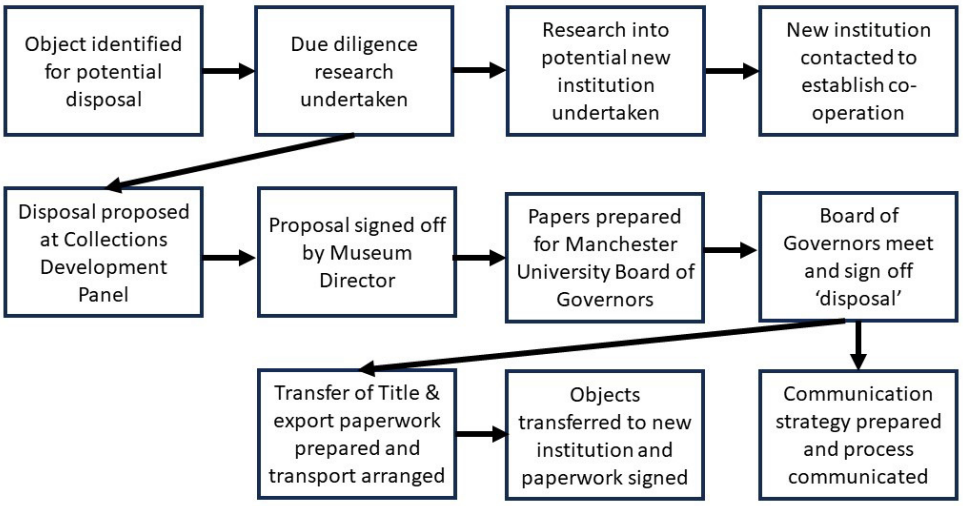

Figure 2. Flowchart showing the repatriation process at Manchester Museum, part of the University of Manchester.

Re-labelling and Re-explaining

Alongside the process of transferring the Chinese fossils back to China, Manchester Museum initiated a redevelopment project that opened in February 2023. Part of this is a new exhibition known as the Belonging Gallery. It draws upon collections and multiple cultural perspectives to reflect on how people come to know what belonging means for them, other people, species and places. The author thought this was a good place to tell the story of the repatriation of these fossils to the public in an accessible way, both questioning where these fossils belong and celebrating the collaborative work undertaken to make it happen. Stories are told through the work of twenty comic artists, one of whom, a Chinese comic artist called sunshine gao, told the story of Chinese fossil repatriation (**Fig. 3**). The theme of the story is that new partnerships can be developed that enrich the work of both Manchester Museum and Chinese institutions.

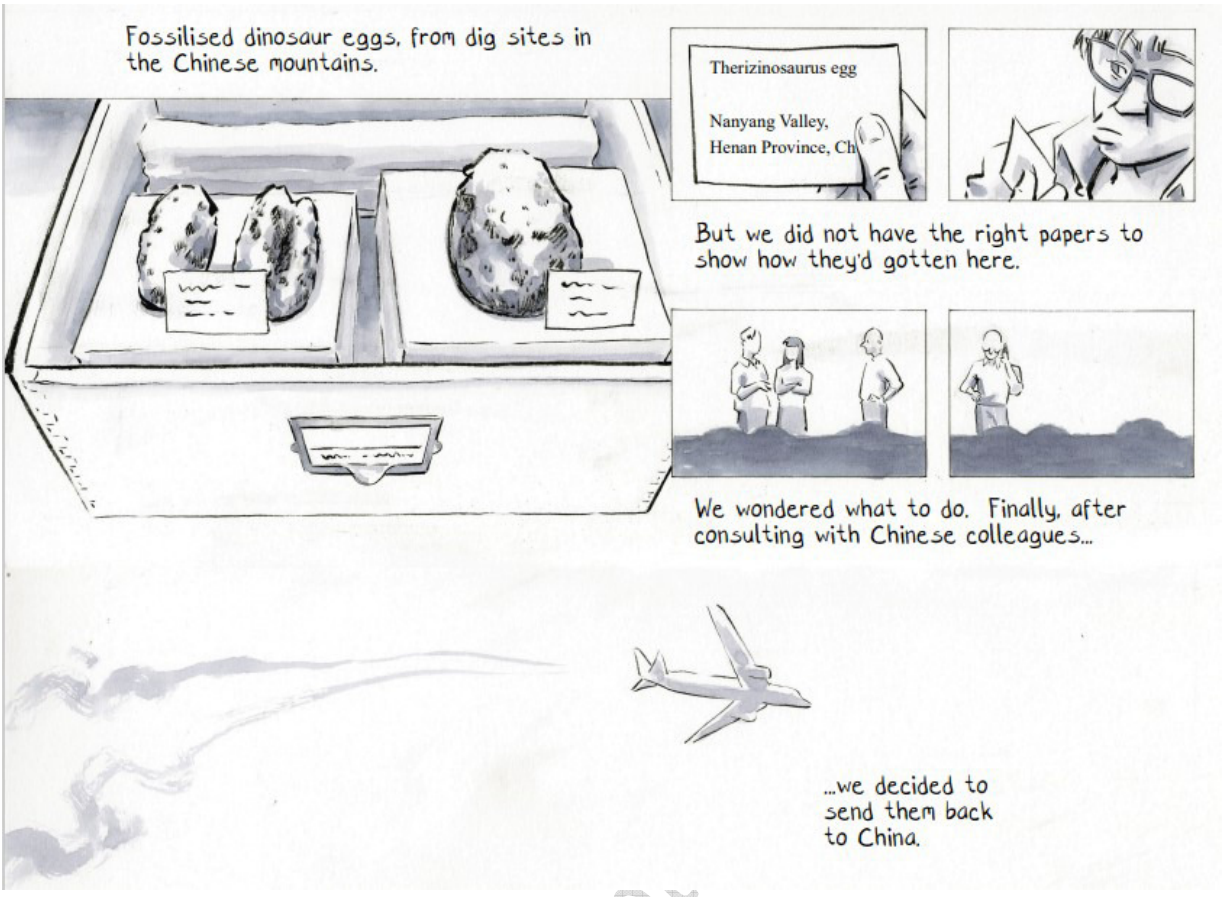

Figure 3. Excerpt from the Belonging Gallery comic showing the repatriation of the Chinese fossils. sunshine gao.

We undertook a re-examination of how Indigenous Peoples and ancestral lands are acknowledged elsewhere in the Museum's geology displays, apart from the Chinese fossils, through working with artists indigenous to the original sources of objects or stories in the Belonging Gallery, and wider work led by Manchester Museum's Curator of Indigenous Perspectives, Alexandra P. Alberda. This new approach helps museums tell richer histories and acknowledges the experience and land rights of Indigenous Peoples (Whitmore and Clarkson 2024). The story of the people involved in mining the museum's South African gold and Sierra Leone diamond specimens was included in our mineral displays in 2020 (Gelsthorpe 2021), but Indigenous Peoples were not acknowledged anywhere in the Museum's Fossils Gallery.

The initial idea was to update the labels associated with objects that originated from formerly colonized countries to acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples from whose ancestral lands the fossils came. Unfortunately, the lack of specific locality information for many of the fossils made this impossible. For example, fossil *Ankylosaurus* plates (LL.12280) on display are recorded as coming from Argentina, but according to the 2010 census data, there are 35 different Indigenous Peoples living in the modern-day country (International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs 2024). So, the question is which one to acknowledge to be meaningful?

As a first step to meeting this challenge, it was decided to include the following statement next to the Museum's new *Tenontosaurus* display in the new Dinosaur Galley:

> Some of the fossils in this gallery come from countries that have been colonized, such as Canada and America. April the *Tenontosaurus* is one of them. These fossils were collected from the ancestral lands of Indigenous Peoples, who have little or no say in what happens to them.
>
> Our future work will make more of the rich cultural views of Indigenous Peoples and the research of palaeontologists from formally colonized countries. We will research to acknowledge the often difficult past and include these histories to better tell the stories of these fossils and life on Earth.

Discussion

Repatriation as a Barometer for Decolonization

Repatriation of objects from museums can only tell a limited story of the progress of decolonizing our institutions. At best, it is an outcome of a new relationship with source nations or peoples, such as the start of the process to repatriate the Benin Bronzes or the repatriation of Manchester Museum's Chinese fossils. These new relationships can be the source of new information, richer stories and new collaborations. At other times, where decolonization is about telling richer histories and fostering a sense of belonging, repatriation may not be a relevant outcome (Gelsthorpe 2021).

The wider museum sector is gradually moving to proactive approaches to repatriation. Progress is slow but going in the right direction. More discussions and research about decolonization are taking place (such as the Natural Science Collections Association's conference 'Changing the World: Environmental Breakdown, Decolonization and Natural Science collections') and new ethical guidance on acquisitions and repatriation is available. In geology, outside Manchester Museum, the author could only find examples of unwelcome repatriation requests coming from external organizations or groups that have been challenged by the institutions that received them. There is clear evidence some paleontologists from countries in the global south such as Brazil want their fossils back (Araujo-Junior 2023).

Barriers to Repatriation

Repatriation in the museum sector is not an easy thing to do. Museum curators are trained to celebrate their collections, support their use for research, learning and exhibitions and work with conservators to care for the objects so they are still around to be appreciated by future generations. If fossils are no longer in the collection they can only be indirectly used to deliver these aims.

Curators have a wide variety of responsibilities, from collections management, delivering exhibitions, teaching and public engagement and rarely have time to properly research the history of their collections and the legal and ethical status of ownership. There is a lack of confi-

dence in addressing repatriation amongst scientifically trained curatorial staff and a lack of understanding of the decolonial context of collections. This reflects the fact that there have been only a small number of publications on the subject (as detailed above). Equally, there is a reputational risk from not addressing contested objects. Geology curators have a responsibility to raise awareness of the issues and opportunities around repatriation. This work is made easier at Manchester Museum because geology staff can draw upon the expertise of colleagues, such as the Museum's Curator of Indigenous Perspectives, to enable decolonizing activities.

There is much bureaucracy around repatriation such as preparing papers, coordinating with board meetings (**Fig. 2**) and brokering international negotiations. Requests from source nations or Indigenous Peoples are often met with a straight 'no', such as when the legal restrictions set out in the British Museum Act 1963 (UK Public General Acts 1963) are cited by the Natural History Museum London. The Pergamon Museum in Berlin, Germany, has repeatedly refused to repatriate the Ishtar Gate to Iraq (McFadden 2019). In 2017, the Victoria and Albert Museum London received a request from the Welsh MP Guto Bebb for the return of two firedogs taken from Gwydir Castle in Conwy, north Wales. A museum spokeswoman said: "The V&A was gifted these firedogs by a benefactor in 1937" (Still We Rise 2020). The firedogs have not been returned. Other requests such as that made by Brazilian authorities discussed earlier, face years of resistance and legal wrangling about ownership.

The case study of Manchester Museum's work to repatriate the Chinese fossils demonstrates that even when the repatriation is largely undisputed, the repatriation process is complex and can take years. The process is in place for good reason to ensure that institutional policies are followed and the UK Museum Accreditation status is maintained. But perhaps it is time this process is re-examined. If the process were simpler could more objects with a strong case for repatriation be returned to their source nations or peoples? The current processes mean that countries outside Europe and North America are always at a disadvantage when it comes to their cultural heritage distributed across Western museums. Firstly, source nations or indigenous peoples have to know that these objects exist in Western museum collections and then have to navigate museum policy, legal status, and potential contact details to start the process. For the most part, those representing source nations or Indigenous Peoples have to play by the rules of European and North American museums.

What is unusual about Manchester Museum's work to repatriate its Chinese fossils is that it was proactive. No request was made by the Chinese authorities, and staff at Manchester Museum initiated the process to resolve the legal status of the fossils, whatever the result might be. It was seen as an opportunity to develop new partnerships and international goodwill.

Ways Forward

This case study maps out the pathway for repatriation from research to the return of geological specimens. In detailing the process, the author encourages further repatriation work both at Manchester Museum and other institutions. It is a starting point to improve and critically as-

sess the repatriation process and develop richer histories and relationships in the future. This work is particularly needed in geology collections where it is rare.

There needs to be a collaborative and open-minded approach to repatriation requests. Geological specimens should be put in a wider context beyond their role as scientific records or items for public display. The starting point ought to be the wider opportunities for relationship building, sharing knowledge and rich histories. Museums need to be proactive with a targeted approach to researching the legal and ethical status of collections in museums e.g. Chinese and Brazilian fossils where legal status is relatively clear.

Due diligence for new acquisitions in museums should be carried out rigorously and if standards are not met, new acquisitions should be refused. New rocks, fossils and minerals should be acquired in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, and museum professionals should ask themselves and partners questions about where they are best used and cared for. The needs of scientific researchers or public display in the West need to be better balanced with the rights of source nations or Indigenous Peoples. Land rights are particularly relevant to geological specimens.

There should be a culture change in the museum sector by those who work with geology collections so that collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and rigorous establishment of legal requirements become the norm. This has begun, but it is particularly slow in geology. Equitable collaborations with scientists and Indigenous Peoples from outside Western Europe should be fostered. *Nothing about us without us* should be at the center of decolonial work. Ancestral Indigenous Peoples should be acknowledged where possible when displaying or researching specimens and alternative belief systems respected. Curators need to be conscious that the legacies of colonialism are alive today. Legal systems, land ownership and the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples are still happening. Some of our work in museums that excludes Indigenous Peoples or ignores ancestral land rights should cease (Liboiron 2021).

Conclusions

At its best, repatriation rights some of the wrongs of colonialism in the acquisition of geological specimens by returning specimens that should not have been removed in the first place, and it builds new relationships and a sense of belonging. Repatriation can help tell richer stories of how a museum came into being, and develop better scientific research, cultural understanding and social cohesion. If not done well, it can be tokenistic and can focus on what is lost rather than what is gained. With the exception of the case study described in this paper, proactive repatriation of geological specimens has not yet happened. This is because of the culture of the sector, in particular for geology, and the barriers that make repatriation a long and difficult process. The repatriation of geological specimens to source nations or Indigenous Peoples lags behind other museum subject areas, particularly ethnography.

This paper is a call to action for museums that hold geological collections to actively check that their collections were legally acquired and if this cannot be proved, organize their return. Requests for repatriation should be welcomed and curators should look at what opportunities

repatriation may represent. Museum staff should all be asking: what can be gained through repatriation, not what might be lost.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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Appendix 1

List of Manchester Museum fossils from China to be repatriated.

Number	Identification and age	Locality	Provenance
LL.12393	Five *Oviraptor* dinosaur eggshell fragments, Cretaceous, Upper, Nanxiong Formation	China, Nanxiong County, Fuko Town	Collected by Museum staff in China, 1999
LL.12262	*Therizinosaur* dinosaur egg, Cretaceous, Upper, Nanchao Formation	China, Henan Province, Nanyang Valley	Acquired by Museum staff as a gift from a dealer at the Tucson Mineral Show, USA, 1999
LL.12394	*Oviraptor* dinosaur egg, Cretaceous, Upper, Nanxiong Formation	China, Nanxiong County, Fuko Town	Purchased by Museum staff in China, 2001
LL.12395	*Oviraptor* dinosaur egg, Cretaceous, Upper, Nanxiong Formation	China, Nanxiong County, Fuko Town	Purchased by Museum staff in China, 2001
LL.12418	*Confuciuornis sanctus*, Cretaceous, Lower, Chaomidianzi Formation	China, western Liaoning Province, 25 Km south of Beipiao City, Sihetun	Purchased by Museum staff at the Tucson Mineral Show, USA, 2000