

Penn Museum

UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM
of ARCHAEOLOGY and ANTHROPOLOGY

Cultural Property Advisory Committee
Cultural Heritage Center
Department of State, Annex 44
301 4th Street, SW
Washington DC 20547

January 27, 2013

Dear Colleagues:

I am an archaeologist who has worked primarily in Thailand and Laos since 1978 and I am currently writing from Laos where I have been undertaking a study season since December 2012 concerning excavations I have conducted in previous years. Since I do not work directly in Cambodia, you might wonder why am I writing in support of the extension of the Memorandum of Understanding Between the Government of the United States and the Kingdom of Cambodia?

In mainland Southeast Asia, no country is an island, no country is isolated from the others. The issues of heritage management and looting interweave throughout the region with its porous borders and its regional efforts to address common regional problems through ASEAN. The MOU with Cambodia sets a critical example for the rest of the region where most other countries lack MOUs. It is essential that the MOU with Cambodia be renewed in order to make better headway in this region for countries to take collective responsibility for their cultural resources. Especially if MOUs are subsequently backed by financial and expertise resources, these MOUs can have a real and tangible impact on a nation taking ownership of their cultural heritage and learning to both manage and promote sustainable uses of cultural resources. Not only Cambodia, but all other countries of Southeast Asia need legal, logistical and financial support in their efforts to develop and manage archaeological and other cultural resources.

I have firsthand experience of the devastation to knowledge and the destruction of economic opportunities wrought by looting. As an Expert Witness in a Justice Department investigation, I authenticated more than 10,000 looted artifacts from hundreds of archaeological sites. These artifacts owned by collectors and museums in the United States came from Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand. Not only is this the equivalent to the destruction of hundreds of books of knowledge of the human past, more than 100 years of potential archaeological investigation, but the communities that might have developed their local economies with legitimate archaeological research and sustainable tourism have lost those resources.

Archaeological sites are non-renewable resources. Local communities might not realize this loss unless a much more concerted effort is made to demonstrate that these resources can be the basis of long term benefit to local regions. Therefore not only is the MOU important for restricting importation of archaeological materials into the United States, but it is also critical for helping efforts to invest in these resources as a means for economic and social development in nation states.

This very year in Laos, a very promising site that might have been the subject of large scale excavation for my project, the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project, was completely decimated. The nearby village sold the contents of the site to "Chinese". This site might have filled a major gap in understanding

of the region of a few thousand years. It had the potential to bring scholarly and touristic funds straight into the pockets of nearby villagers for years to come. But no longer. This is hardly a unique story. Hundreds of villages throughout Southeast Asia have lost their precious resources through ignorance, weak government enforcement, greed at levels ranging from the local headman to a bribed customs agent to wealthy US museums and private collectors.

In short a strong case can be made that the US State Department's best interests concerning finding ways to promote international peace through economic and cultural development that reaches to the most local of a country's fabric are fabulously served by undertaking every effort to support archaeology, heritage management, economic development through cultural resources, and strengthening legal structures that sharply discourage site destruction and the import/export business of archaeological materials.

I urge you to renew the MOU with Cambodia without hesitation.

Sincerely,

Joyce White, PhD
Associate Curator for Asia
Director of the Ban Chiang Project
Co-Director of the Middle Mekong Archaeological Project

NOTE: Please accept this pdf without my written signature. I have no scanner to hand in my circumstances in Laos. If you wish to see more of my work in Laos and Thailand, go to:

<http://penn.museum/sites/mmap/>

<http://penn.museum/ban Chiang/>