

The Ongoing Plunder and Trafficking in South East Asia

In June of this year, in a ceremony associated with much pomp and political significance, the Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva handed over to Cambodian officials in Phnom Penh a number of Khmer treasures seized by Thai authorities from smugglers in 1999. The treasures included six massive stone heads of the Hindu God Shiva, dating from the 12th Century Angkorian era (Associated Press, 2009).

At the time of the ceremony the Cambodian Government indicated that the two sides had agreed to co-operate in stamping out smuggling of national antiquities which had already resulted in recent decades in widespread looting of Cambodia's ancient temples and archeological sites with many items, like those just returned, being taken across the border to Thailand for sale on the international market or to private collectors.



Nothing was said, however, about just how such large and heavy objects had been cut from their original sites and transported many hundreds of kilometers to places like Bangkok, a well recognized portal for the sale of illicit antiquities within the South East Asian region. Such objects could only have been removed and smuggled across international borders utilizing significant logistical planning and resources, and probably only with the assistance of corrupt officials prepared to turn a blind eye to items whose export was clearly illegal according to Cambodian law.

This case of smuggled Khmer treasures, happily returned in this instance to their owners, together with our own recent work in parts of Asia including Cambodia, Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand (see Alder, Chappell and Polk, 2009), provide examples of the organized character of the traffic in cultural heritage material throughout the region, including mainland China. The major traffic in Khmer material from Cambodia is certainly transnational, with the initial supply routes from the Angkor sites, for example, flowing onward through Thailand and from there to diverse venues in Europe and North America.

The original extraction of much of the material undoubtedly requires manpower and expertise at removal (especially in terms of large stone objects like those just mentioned). Payment has to be arranged for the extraction by agents who then must work through the transit problems. The objects have to be lifted and carried from the site of origin to some transit point. Documents also have to be arranged which permit some form of access to both export and import procedures. Dealers who are complicitous in this process must then be found so that the items can be placed on wholesale and ultimately on retail markets in destination countries. In turn, buyers must be found who are willing to purchase cultural heritage material without asking questions about provenance. Our observations in destinations like London, Paris and New York in the demand economies demonstrate that these goods can be exceptionally expensive for the ultimate consumers who often represent elite individuals and institutions.

The trade in plundered antiquities from South East Asia is far from new as the recent and well publicised Christie's auction in Paris of the art collection of the late fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent illustrates (see Barboza, 2009; Schuangqi and Ailing, 2009). Two 18th century Chinese bronze heads were sold at the auction for \$40 million. It was not disputed that the heads had been looted by British and French troops during the sacking of the Chinese Emperor's Old Summer Palace in Beijing in 1860. Prior attempts by a group of Chinese lawyers to stop the auction in a French court and retrieve the bronzes failed, but after the sale it was revealed that the winning bid had been made by a Chinese patriot who subsequently announced that he did not intend to pay for the bronzes as a signal of contempt for the sale process. The incident still highlighted a growing practice of wealthy Chinese and their supporters buying back portions of the nation's cultural heritage which had been illegally removed in the past. Chinese authorities, however, expressed displeasure with the auction results and indicated that in the future they would place far more stringent controls on the export of treasured cultural objects from the country (Lim and Wong, 2009). This announcement was preceded in January by the signing of an agreement with the United States banning the import of archeological material originating in China which was older than the end of the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 907), and of monumental sculptures and wall art at least 250 years old, unless accompanied by a valid export license (Government of the United States and Government of the People's Republic of China., 2009). It remains to be seen whether these measures will do anything to curb the major international

market in illicitly obtained and exported Chinese antiquities which has been carried on for decades with relative impunity through 'free port' portals like Hong Kong and Singapore. Draconian penalties imposed under Chinese law, including the death penalty for the crime of smuggling cultural relics, seems to have had little if any impact on this trade (Lize, 2004)). Our own research in both Hong Kong and Singapore suggests that the market remains largely undiminished although the prevalence of fake cultural objects has increased markedly over recent years. These fake objects are often of high quality in their own right, emanating from well established 'factories' in mainland China (Gluckman, 2002). Additionally, with the rapid development of a large and affluent middle class on the mainland the internal market for Chinese cultural objects has grown exponentially. Little is known about the organisation and structure of this market, nor the extent to which it is being fuelled by illegally excavated local cultural objects. In recent interviews Hong Kong dealers have indicated that many of their customers are now from the mainland, purchasing items previously smuggled in the past out of China.

Until now the predominate and contemporary debate about the protection of cultural sites, and the repatriation of previously plundered objects, has tended to center upon countries and regions far removed from South East Asia. Considerable and recent attention has been focused, for example, upon the return of items stolen from source countries like Italy and Greece (Gill, 2009), or from conflict zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan (Brodie, 2009; Hashemzai, 2009). Italy, in particular, has been quite successful in obtaining the restitution of many valuable objects from prominent museums and art institutions in the United States as a result of resolute and effective law enforcement investigations. These investigations have uncovered sophisticated and elaborate illicit schemes by which plundered objects have been transported from excavation sites, through layered levels of dealers, onto the so called legitimate market for antiquities (Watson and Todeschini, 2006). A number of prosecutions of well known dealers and museum officials have also flowed from these law enforcement activities. There is now some encouraging evidence to suggest that those engaged in meeting the demand for cultural objects from sources of dubious or illegitimate origin may have become more cautious or circumspect about the provenance of their wares (Gill, 2009). Consumers may also be less willing to accept without question the authenticity of objects offered for sale. These developments have not gone unnoticed in South East Asia but their impact has been at best muted. To the best of our knowledge none of the source countries within the region have established any specialized law enforcement group to tackle the trafficking of cultural objects. Our discussions with local law enforcement officials also suggest that not only do they lack the expertise to investigate and prosecute this type of organised crime but it is a form of wrongdoing which is not even ranked as having any priority in their respective investigative arenas. In marked contrast to drug and human trafficking the plunder of cultural objects, and the associated destruction of heritage sites, remains largely outside the purview of traditional law enforcement throughout the region. Regrettably, as we have already noted, there would also seem to be some evidence that this illicit trade is being facilitated by corrupt law enforcement officials, rather than hindered by their activities.

As we have stated at some length elsewhere remedying this situation requires far more than the bolstering of law enforcement in source countries like those mentioned in South East Asia (Alder, Chappell and Polk, 2009; Chappell and Polk, 2009). Imaginative demand reduction activities in wealthy industrialised countries, including sustained public persuasion campaigns to avoid purchasing looted objects, offer in our view the most hopeful vehicles for change. Only

then will Khmer treasures, Chinese antiquities and other heritage items be truly safe.

* **Duncan Chappell** is Professor of Law, University of Sydney. **Kenneth Polk** is Professor of Criminology, University of Melbourne.

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