

Archaeological Institute of America

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February 3, 2005

Mr. Jay Kislak
Chair, Cultural Property Advisory Committee
U.S. Department of State
301 4th Street S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20547

Dear Mr. Kislak:

As President of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), I am writing to express my strong support on behalf of the AIA for the request by the People's Republic of China for U.S. import restrictions on Chinese archaeological material from the Palaeolithic to the Qing Dynasty under Article 9 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention. Founded in 1879, and chartered by an act of Congress in 1906, the Archaeological Institute of America is the oldest and largest non-profit archaeological organization in the United States. Our more than 8,000 members include not only professional archaeologists and students but also a majority of members from all walks of life. This diverse group is united by a shared passion for archaeology and its role in furthering human knowledge about our common past.

The rich archaeological heritage of China, stretching over more than seven millennia, is being jeopardized by the extensive looting and plundering of archaeological sites to feed the illicit antiquities market. Objects stemming from looted sites are ripped from their contexts and stripped of the knowledge that they would otherwise convey. Scholars, students and members of the public who are interested in China's past are robbed of vital information about when, where and how these artifacts were produced, who made them, and what functions they served in their original societies—i.e. were they used locally or traded over great distances, did they have religious meaning in their culture or did they function in funerary ritual, everyday life, or in complex long-distance trade networks? Without context we have no knowledge of what materials were found together and in what relationships. We don't know whether they were deposited in homes, tombs, temples, shops or were simply discarded on trash heaps.

Widespread and unchecked pillaging of sites can mean the destruction of whole sites in search of the few "precious" and most marketable artifacts. Such destruction not only obliterates the context of the artifacts that do enter the market, but also destroys other artifacts considered less valuable on the market, but in reality no less important in terms of the information they have to convey. In addition the architecture associated with the site—the tombs, monuments and other buildings—may be badly damaged by heavy digging equipment, and painted or sculpted decoration may be hacked off the walls and added to the loot. This effectively leaves little or

nothing for future scholars to study, and in addition, precludes any possibility that the local people could benefit by future tourism that would be attracted to a properly excavated and conserved site with its monuments and associated artifacts intact.

MOUs between the United States government and countries requesting protection under Article 9 of the 1970 UNESCO Convention are effective in stemming the tide of plundering and interrupting the flow of illicitly excavated antiquities to the U.S. market. They help countries in which these illegal activities occur help themselves, preserving their precious archaeological and cultural heritage for their own people and for everyone. A model example is the MOU with Italy in which the Italian government agreed to a series of long-term loan exhibitions of archaeological materials to travel to the U.S. so that many members of the public could enjoy them and learn from them. Italy also agreed to make it easier for U.S. scholars and students to study, publish and organize exhibitions of Italian archaeological materials to the benefit of many in this country. These kinds of agreements promote international understanding and scholarship for the benefit of citizens of both agreeing countries. The Public summary of the request by the People's Republic of China indicates an interest in these same kinds of cooperative activities.

In short, I strongly urge the Cultural Property Advisory Committee to grant the request of the People's Republic of China and recommend that the United States provide import restrictions on the categories of Chinese archaeological artifacts listed in their request.

Sincerely yours,

Jane C. Waldbaum
President, Archaeological Institute of America