

Dear Members of the Committee:

My name is Cindy Ho. I am the Founder of SAFE (Saving Antiquities For Everyone). SAFE is a group of volunteers from all walks of life dedicated to raising public awareness about the importance of preserving cultural heritage worldwide and addressing the destructive effects of the illicit antiquities trade.

I am not an archaeologist, a scholar or a collector. I happen to be of Chinese ancestry, but I speak to you as a member of the American public and a citizen of the world. And it is in this capacity that I urge you to grant China's request for import restrictions on archaeological and ethnographic materials your full support.

I founded SAFE in May 2003, shortly after news broke about the ransacking of Iraq's museums. Even though I am unfamiliar with Islamic culture or Iraq's heritage, I viewed the looting of the Baghdad Museum as a wake-up call, not just for Iraq, but for endangered cultures everywhere. The destruction brought about by the global trade in illicit antiquities is enormous by any measure. According to U.S. National Central Bureau of INTERPOL "The annual dollar value of art and cultural property theft is exceeded only by trafficking in illicit narcotics, money laundering, and arms trafficking." Yet the looting and smuggling of cultural heritage is no less destructive, because the damage it causes to developing nations and our knowledge of history cannot be undone.

Once an artifact is ripped from the ground, most of the knowledge it contained is lost – forever. Once a nation is robbed of its most precious non-renewable resource, its cultural heritage, it is gone – forever. All mankind becomes poorer in the process, no matter where we live, where we were born or where our ancestors came from. It is with this same sentiment that I came here today, to speak in support of China's request.

When ancient artifacts are trampled on by looters in their violent attempts to get to more beautiful pieces that bring in more money, or tossed about because they are not "important" enough or sufficiently "marketable", a little piece of my identity – and the identity of every one of us -- is trampled on and tossed about. Without the knowledge that these artifacts can impart, they are simply curious items that may or may not appeal to one's aesthetics.

When a robber blasts open an ancient tomb with explosives in Chifeng, Inner Mongolia, what is stolen along with the jade, stone, silver, lacquer and pottery, is the irreplaceable insight ... countless details that can only be gathered by archaeologists that illustrate how my ancestors—our ancestors—lived, what they ate, how they farmed, how they thought and what they did.

As we know from countless news and Chinese government reports, looting is rampant throughout China: the Ancient Tombs at Reshu in Qinghai Province, the Zhao Mausoleums in Hebei, Loulan and Niya in Xinjiang, and Jingzhou in Hubei. The list goes on. In all, more than 220,000 tombs in China have been violated over the past five years, according to a 2003 report.<sup>1</sup>

According to He Shuzhong, Director of China's National Administration of Cultural Heritage, the banks of the Yangzi River that once inspired China poets and painters for centuries are now pitted with more than a thousand looters' holes.

An article in Taipei Times reported that, "In 2002 Chinese customs authorities intercepted 8,780 [of] relics prohibited from leaving the country and that was just the tip of the iceberg... Customs officials check only 5 percent of goods destined for overseas."

The article concluded with "One of the most famous smuggled objects, a bronze "bonanza" tree made during the Han Dynasty nearly 2,000 years ago, fetched US\$2.5 million and was unearthed in the Three Gorges area of southwestern China. It was sold to an American billionaire.

What compels these Chinese people to break open coffins and tear apart mummies for money when capital punishment is the usual sentence for such crimes? The answer: poverty, ignorance, and greed fueled by the global trade in illicit antiquities. This trade is driven by a huge appetite for the exotic and beautiful— particularly in Western countries, such as the United States.

The US market for Chinese antiquities is enormous, as we can see in the five catalogs from Christie's and Sotheby's spring and fall 2004 Chinese art auctions. Twice a year, these two auction houses offer up thousands of pieces of archaic bronzes, ceramics, lacquer, stone, textiles, scroll paintings and calligraphy, gilded books, wall hangings, architectural panels, porcelain, and other works of art. The total sales that year in these antiquities from Sotheby's alone amounted to over \$15 million. That's how big the market is.

The per capita income of a Chinese farmer is \$254, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. If one night's digging can earn a farmer what amounts to a year's worth of toiling in the fields, the monetary reward is an irresistible lure. To the farmer, the fact that the farmer's earning is a mere fraction of what the objects can fetch in the US market is immaterial.

In Hannah Beech's "Spirited Away", the 2003 article from *Time* magazine (Asia edition), a looter from the outskirts of Luoyang was paid \$70 for a tri-color statue that sold for \$18,000 in New York. He was arrested and executed for the crime. This could happen anywhere in the world.

The pillaging of archaeological sites and the trade of illicit antiquities are not uniquely Chinese. Many other culturally rich countries suffer from the same problem, so much so that they have requested—and were granted—import restrictions on antiquities from entering the US. In fact, beginning with El Salvador, a total number of eleven countries have been granted this request.

Why? Because the most direct way of removing the incentive to loot is to sever the chain of supply and demand. Imposing import restrictions on Chinese antiquities into the US removes a huge outlet for these treasures. They will diminish the incentive to loot in order to satisfy the urge to possess yet another piece of Chinese porcelain in a rich man's home.

Bilateral agreements work. That is why countries such as Peru and Italy and Mali -- and now China -- request them, and more importantly, why the US grants and renews requests for them when the situation warrants. Unless we think there is something inherent in the Chinese make-up that makes them unworthy of our assistance, it would seem natural to grant this same request to China.

Import restriction through bilateral agreements has a track record of success. In this room just last year, Professor Malcolm Bell spoke about how a similar agreement with Italy has brought about improvements to protecting that country's cultural heritage. President Bush himself spoke of the positive outcomes from the agreement with Peru. Indeed, since the MOU with the US in 1997 almost 300 valuable artifacts have been returned to Peru. Dr. Dougald O'Reilly, Director of HeritageWatch, Cambodia, wrote me just yesterday, that "US import restrictions have worked in other countries...and that auction sales of Khmer antiquities have dropped since the introduction of import restrictions to the USA." In fact, the number of Khmer artifacts entering the United States after 1999 dropped nearly 80%.<sup>1</sup> There is no reason why similar successes won't result from an agreement with China.

What China has in common with these other countries that have been granted the request for import restrictions is a long, rich cultural history. There's much to loot, much to desire, much to lose, but above all, still much to gain. Since China—the second largest country in the world—is many times larger in size than these individual countries there is just that much more at stake.

Most of the ancient history of China is unknown because it is still unexcavated. One of the biggest archaeological mysteries in China is the joint tomb of China's only Empress Wu Zetian, and her husband Emperor Li Zhi. Called Qianling, it is the only tomb in China that holds two emperors and the only Tang tomb that has not been looted. It has yet to be excavated because for half a century, the proper time to excavate Qianling has been heavily debated. While the Chinese government is concerned about security and looting, archaeologists are eager to study the buried artifacts, which are tantamount to completing our knowledge of the Tang Dynasty. Attempted robberies—although presumably thwarted—have made everyone uneasy.

What is buried in Qianling will remain forever unknown if the pillage in China continues. We will never know what the ancient bamboo tablets with ancient inscriptions had to tell us just as the stories of daily life are lost when cylinder seals from Ancient Mesopotamia are looted. Nor will we ever understand the history of the ancient Northern People, the Chu Culture, much like the Vicús people of Peru, whose culture we know little about because of the illicit antiquities trade.

Bilateral agreements call for scholarly exchange and joint archaeological excavations, granting China's request could be a step towards unlocking Qianling's mysteries. Already, China and the US have many joint excavation and study programs in Hebei, Henan and Jiangsu provinces. The preservation projects in Dunhuang have been carried

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<sup>1</sup> The number of artifacts being sold by Sotheby's dropped 78.26.

out for a long time. With Japan, and more recently, with the US, but there is so much more to be done.

Signing the bilateral agreement is a good-faith effort on the part of the US to encourage more exchange. The benefit to American scholarship is considerable. It helps our museums and institutions financially as well, as popular loan exhibitions of properly excavated antiquities have shown. It is the best way to bring the wonders of the China to a broad public audience. After all, as beneficiaries of a common shared cultural heritage, everyone can enjoy and learn from the past, not just a select few who can afford to buy these objects for their private viewing.

Looting and the illicit antiquities trade are man-made problems, this means that as humans, we can at least try to stop it. Isn't this the reason why China is asking for our help? To put an end to—or at least try to stem—the destruction of China's most valued non-renewable resource: its 7,000-year cultural heritage? China is asking for a chance, and as an American, I urge the Committee to recommend granting China's request for help.

This is the right thing to do, both ethically and legally, in the global effort to protect the world's cultural heritage. According to Classical Archaeologist Dr. Marina Papa-Sokal, the US was in 1983 the first major art-importing country to ratify the 1970 UNESCO Convention on Illicit trade in antiquities. The 1970 Convention now has 100 state parties including France, the UK, Switzerland and Japan. Why not take the lead now by granting China's request?

I would now like to present to the Committee these petitions that SAFE has gathered from our website, representing the public's support of China's request. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Founder/Executive Director  
SAFE