

TESTIMONY ON BEHALF OF  
THE ASSOCIATION OF ART MUSEUM DIRECTORS  
REGARDING A REQUEST FROM THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA  
TO  
THE CULTURAL PROPERTY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

1:00 p.m., February 17, 2005

Given by  
Katharine Lee Reid  
Director  
The Cleveland Museum of Art

I am Katharine Lee Reid, Director of The Cleveland Museum of Art. I have spent my professional career as a curator, deputy director and director of what is termed "a universal art museum." My positions have included curatorships at the Toledo Museum of Art, the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago, the Ackland Art Museum at the University of North Carolina, and Assistant and then Deputy Director at the Art Institute of Chicago, Director at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and now in Cleveland. While my expertise is in post Renaissance European Art, I have experience in Asian Art, especially in Japan and China. Every museum in which I have worked has collected and done exhibitions in Asian Art. My father, Sherman Lee, involved me in his own activities as Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art and as an Asian Art expert.

The Cleveland Museum of Art has one of the finest collections of Chinese art and antiquities in the United States. This collection, begun in the earliest years of the museum's almost ninety year history, was created in large part through acquisitions, acquisitions made over decades under the direction of directors and curators who have added significantly to the understanding, scholarship and appreciation of the culture and arts of China. Cleveland, the United States and the world have been enriched and informed by this collection, which is admired and studied by many, including generations of Chinese scholars. The collection is, however, not static, but rather vibrant and continues to grow and evolve through new acquisitions. If museums such as Cleveland can no longer acquire examples of one of the world's great civilizations, collections will lose a vital part of their value to the United States and the world, the ability to add new insights and new areas of knowledge and understanding of China and its cultural heritage. Perhaps even more important they will lose the ability to add to the discourse between cultures that can only be found in a museum with a comprehensive, diverse collection, one that is constantly growing and evolving.

The Committee has before it a request of immense scope both in terms of the centuries involved and the types of objects. If granted in its current form, collecting Chinese antiquities and cultural objects, ancient and "modern" will be severely curtailed, if not eliminated. Such a result would be a blow to museums like Cleveland that preserve, display, study and explain works of importance. The public, who are the constituency of our museums, will lose a central element of these great museums - the ability to grow and evolve, to adapt through acquisitions to new research and new discoveries that broaden and enhance our understanding of the Chinese culture.

We acknowledge and applaud the legitimate interest of countries to protect and preserve their cultures and to study *in situ* examples of those cultures that are discovered through excavation. China has immense numbers of archeological objects unearthed everyday. We encourage China to create a legitimate method for allowing a trade in these objects, both domestically and by export. Such a trade can help to preserve and protect cultures that are in danger of destruction through modern construction, illicit excavation and haphazard discovery. Other countries with significant and ancient cultures have been able to do so. Japan is an excellent example. Furthermore, while China appears interested today in the protection of many types and eras of its culture, history, even recent history, has not always demonstrated such sensitivity. Vicissitudes of government, war and religion have led to destruction or simply neglect of cultures and objects which, but for their preservation in museums like Cleveland, would be lost to the world.

To single out the problem of illicit exports to the US does not fully reveal the economic reality of Chinese cultural relics - an issue not really addressed in the Request of the Republic of China for a bilateral agreement imposing US import restrictions on Chinese cultural relics.

Moreover, due to the growth of market forces in China, the internal demand for cultural relics - evident in the art sales in China and Hong Kong - appears to be growing much stronger than the demand from without. Thus the US import restrictions may not resolve the tensions of economic forces that have been exacerbating the problems. And if such restrictions are not applied by ALL market nations, the situation will not be remedied, especially if effective enforcement measures are not implemented by China, the source country.

For these reasons, before the United States acts, consideration should be given to whether steps cannot be taken by China to assist in the protection of cultural property. Perhaps the most important step is developing a meaningful licit market for cultural relics, one that is not only available domestically, but also to those from outside China. Currently, objects of high quality are available for domestic, but not international, acquisition, an approach that does nothing to discourage the illicit foreign market. Allowing China more time to define and develop this market before imposing US import restrictions seems logical. China can and should develop appropriate criteria for domestic protection. For example, immovable relics that are site-specific - such as sites of ancient cultures, ancient tombs, architectural structures, cave temples, paintings and carvings on walls - should be protected and their sale restricted or prohibited. As for movable relics - such as metal works, ceramics, sculptures, paintings, calligraphy, textiles, lacquer wares, wood and bamboo objects - even though they may be recovered archaeologically, trade, both domestic and foreign, can be allowed and controlled by legal means. The criteria of assessment can be based on the uniqueness, quality, and relative significance of a particular piece in the context of the surviving examples of the same type currently protected in China. The effectiveness of the Japanese model - which allows the export of works of high quality that are not unique or irreplaceable - is worth following. Paradoxically, the success of Japan in protecting cultural heritage is accompanied by an art trade policy that is generous, rational, and effective.

We support the continuing collaboration between the great institutions of China and those here in the United States. Since its founding, The Cleveland Museum of Art, through the display, study and research of works from China, has contributed to the understanding and appreciation by those here in the United States and abroad of China, its people and their immense creativity and we are committed to continuing to do so. We recommend that the Committee proceed cautiously with this request while encouraging the Chinese government to modify its immense breadth and depth, rather than ask the Committee to do so, and implement any request only in conjunction with a sincere commitment by China to create and maintain a legitimate and significant trade in cultural objects.