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Returning Southeast Asia's Past: Objects, Museums, and Restitution

LOUISE TYTHACOTT and PANGGAH ARDIYANSYAH, eds.

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Illegal trafficking of antiquities and/or illicit trade in antiquities or cultural property, as well as human fossils, has been a global problem for centuries and a major source of concern and topic of debate among cultural heritage managers and scholars (see, for example, Manacorda 2009; and Campbell 2013). Large numbers of ethnographic objects, archeological artifacts, and artworks have been smuggled from their places of origin, creating a loss of cultural heritage and exacerbating international organizational conflicts. In responding to such problems during the era of decolonization that followed World War II, many countries demanded the repatriation or return of looted, illegally sold, stolen artifacts. The past decade also saw the establishment of committees to cope with the issue, such as UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to Its Countries of Origin or Its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation. In Southeast Asia, many countries have lost items of tangible or material cultural heritage, leading to campaigns and requests for the return of the property. Several Southeast Asian countries were successful in having their antiquities repatriated. However, a new issue emerged afterward—how the returned antiquities were managed, preserved, and reinstituted. *Returning Southeast Asia's Past* discusses the issue using case studies from Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

This edited volume is divided into three main parts and consists of ten chapters (apart from the Introduction chapter) featuring case studies centering around the acquisition, protection, and restitution of looted and stolen artifacts. It should be noted that the majority of cases (seven chapters) presented in this volume are from mainland Southeast Asia, while there are three

chapters on cases in Indonesia. This might either show that mainland Southeast Asia is a prime region for looting, illicit trafficking, and trade in antiquities or reflect the biases of the editors. The volume focuses on material, physical, or tangible heritage and examines mainly historical artifacts in a temporal dimension (with the exception of a chapter on Ban Chiang's prehistoric objects). Books on such concerns in Southeast Asia are relatively rare. Paradoxically, looting, the return of antiquities, public engagement in heritage management, public education in archeology and heritage, and similar concerns have been reported on and widely publicized in Southeast Asia (see, for example, Tanongsak 2018; and Huang 2023). Therefore, although the volume is relatively selective in its focus, it is a very welcome and significant contribution *sensu lato*, especially for those involved in heritage preservation and management.

The Introduction provides background on the history of Western colonization and plundering of Southeast Asian tangible cultural heritage, mainly historical and religious objects. The chapter authors, also the editors of the volume, then move on to explain the organization of the volume into three main themes and briefly introduce each of the following chapters.

The first part consists of three chapters that focus on ownership of the past. A relatively short chapter by Gabrielle Abbe narrates an interesting but pitiful story of how cultural heritage in Cambodia was managed under French colonialism during the early to mid-twentieth century. Hundreds of artifacts that were called "left-overs" or "miscellaneous fragments" were sold by the colonizers in the name of protection. This practice would have been considered strongly unethical or improper in modern heritage preservation and management methods and would have been a cultural rights issue. The chapter indirectly helps to answer the question of "who owns the past" or reminds us about cultural rights to heritage. Chea Socheat, Muong Chanraksmeay, and Loiuse Tythacott present an insider or indigenous view on the significance of cultural heritage. Their chapter showcases the significant role of local people and authorities in the return and reinstitution of looted statues in Cambodia. Finally, the art historian Melody Rod-ari succinctly relates the history of discovery and smuggling of mainly bronze objects and painted ceramic vessels from the World Heritage site of Ban Chiang in Northeast Thailand to museums in the United States. The most thought-provoking point of this chapter is the final discussion on the lack of "public acknowledgement of holdings of Ban Chiang artifacts" within and outside Thailand. This part would have been more intriguing if it probed more intensively into the differences between cultural and legal ownership.

The theme of object biographies is explored in the four chapters of Part 2. John Clarke brings readers a lavish story of the Burmese royal regalia after their return from England to Myanmar in 1964. Clarke provides an interesting and detailed description of the life of the regalia and how the regalia were returned to their country of origin. When the regalia were put on display in museums in England, they were considered spectacular antiquities with high artistic value. However, after they were brought back to Myanmar they have held significant spiritual, historical, social, and

symbolic value for the people of Myanmar. Nguyen H. H. Duyen examines the display of stone Buddhist statues in a museum in Da Nang, Vietnam. The chapter makes a straightforward critique of why a group of Buddhist artifacts needs to be re-displayed so as to provide visitors with a more accessible and authentic interpretive display. This is a very important issue: it is important for museums and heritage sites in Southeast Asia to provide easy-to-understand, friendly, and impressive interpretations of objects, structures, as well as historic landscapes (see, for example, Tilden 1977) that use hypothetical models, reconstruction, graphics, and digital presentations. The third chapter, by one of the volume editors, Panggah Ardiyansyah, critiques the reinstitution of cultural property in Indonesia. The chapter focuses on a pair of nineteenth-century paintings made by a native Southeast Asian artist who was socially nurtured in Europe, rather than archeological artifacts or ancient religious objects. The paintings became an object of debate because they depict controversial historical scenes that created emotional conflicts between the Indonesian government and the general public. The chapter provides a thought-provoking discussion about the legal issues surrounding the reinstitution of repatriated objects. Jos van Beurden investigates the complicated nature of “colonial objects” that were transferred from the Netherlands to Indonesia and how local audiences and/or owners of these antiquities reacted to the return of their heritage.

The final part of the volume consists of three chapters dealing with the reinstitution of repatriated objects. Wieske Sapardan narrates the historical life of a stone Buddhist statue of Prajnaparamita in Indonesia and the multiple positive consequences of the return of the once-lost cultural property, which was more than a mere antique. Phacharaphorn Phanomvan focuses on the movement by a group of local villagers, activists, and scholars working for the return of a collection of bronze statues smuggled from a historic site in Northeast Thailand. The chapter emphasizes the successful use of social media in their reinstitution campaigns. The chapter goes on to discuss the use of antiquities in the promotion of nationalism by Thai government agencies, and centralized cultural heritage management. In contrast, the case under study represents a good example of bottom-up, community-based, public participation-oriented approaches for heritage protection and preservation. The final chapter, by Charlotte Galloway, highlights recent repatriation cases in Myanmar. Unlike other chapters in the volume, this one does not focus upon or present a specific case regarding the repatriation, reinstitution, and protection of Southeast Asia’s tangible past. Overall, this part of the book would have benefited from additional chapters dealing with the repatriation and return of antiquities within Southeast Asian countries themselves at the local and national levels. For example, there are a large number of artifacts in national museums in Bangkok and regional capital cities (e.g., Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand, Khon Kaen in Northeast Thailand, Songkhla in Southern Thailand) that have been removed or “transported” from their local places of birth or home. It would be interesting to know whether and how these items will be repatriated back to their place of origin.

Overall, the volume offers critical and fundamental food for thought and is spectacularly and

richly illustrated. However, there is some overlap in themes and issues in terms of the volume structure. It would have been helpful to highlight similarities with cases in other countries across Southeast Asia. The volume provides an interesting set of case studies that are crucial for the management of cultural heritage, authored by native scholars of Southeast Asia and experts in Southeast Asian archeology, history, and history of art and culture. It is a valuable addition to the study of cultural heritage management as well as archeology, architecture, history, museology, education, anthropology, and allied or related disciplines.

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Participatory Forest Management in a New Age: Integration of Climate Change Policy and Rural Development Policy

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Historically, local and indigenous populations have been stewards of tropical rainforests, including those in South and Southeast Asia. However, with European colonization, traditional forest management was supplanted by modern scientific forestry models. Post-colonization, the reins of tropical forest management were taken over by independent state governments that implemented centralized management, sidelining local participation.