

**Statement by Dr. Anne Underhill, Department of Anthropology, Yale University
Before the Cultural Property Advisory Committee
Regarding the Proposed Renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between
the United States and the People's Republic of China**

June 5, 2023

There are several reasons to continue the 2019 MOU between the governments of the United States and the People's Republic of China about restrictions on the importation of Chinese archaeological materials to the United States. My comments, which I make on behalf of myself and the Society for American Archaeology, will focus on two of the conditions for the creation and renewal of MOUs. First, China remains committed to the protection of archaeological sites and their remains, including the reduction of theft and the reduction of trafficking of ancient objects. Second, it continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to providing access to its archaeological heritage through a variety of means, even during the most challenging period of the COVID pandemic. These activities include significant collaborations with American and other foreign professional archaeologists and students that benefit both sides.

China is taking further steps to protect its archaeological resources

During the past few years, the government of China has developed measures to target different components of the chain of crimes involving ancient objects and to facilitate communication between relevant units such as the police, customs, and courts. It is working to improve legal methods of stopping illegal trafficking of objects and improving public awareness about protecting cultural heritage. From 2021 to 2022 China collaborated with other countries that are signatories to the 1970 UNESCO Convention to develop and implement effective measures to prevent and stop illicit trafficking of cultural property. In October 2022 two governmental units began a collaborative effort to target different kinds of crimes regarding objects and larger items such as stone carvings at archaeological sites, grottos with temples, old buildings, and museums. Last year these units also established an information center regarding crimes about ancient objects. In 2022 the State Administration of Cultural Heritage increased its staff members and departments devoted to protection of ancient objects and sites. Each year different training programs devoted to cultural heritage protection take place, as well. In February 2023 seven governmental units announced a plan for 2023–2025 to combat and prevent crimes regarding ancient cultural materials, calling for more prevention measures, more effective mechanisms to respond to security risks, and better coordination between relevant units responsible for the protection of cultural heritage.

Another development is an increase in “indoor excavations,” for which entire depositional matrices are transported to covered labs for careful excavation in safe conditions. There are also more efforts being taken to protect archaeological sites during conventional excavations. A common method of protecting sites (after excavations as well) is the hiring of guards from local communities. I observed enhanced protection methods at excavations in Shandong province during 2018 and 2019, construction of metal fencing around the affected areas, and limited access to visitors. There were carefully managed visits by local residents eager

to understand more about their heritage, and I contributed by explaining the excavation process to some of these visitors. Another ongoing educational effort by professional archaeologists is public lectures in local schools to inform children about the importance of site protection for providing information about their area's cultural heritage. I gave lectures at elementary and middle schools in rural and urban areas in Shandong in 2018 and 2019 and also during the years of my collaborative excavation (1999–2001). One 2019 invited lecture I participated in was hosted by the local police. As I toured different schools, I was impressed by the initiatives of teachers and students to develop activities relevant to archaeological heritage, such as replication of Neolithic pottery. I continue to be impressed with the commitment of professional archaeologists of Shandong University, some of whom I've had the privilege of knowing since 1994, to communicating the importance of protecting sites and artifacts with local leaders in government and museums. American archaeologists on other collaborative projects have had similar experiences over the years, including public conferences and interviews with the media about the worldwide appreciation of China's archaeological heritage.

China continues to be open to collaboration with international archaeologists and to scientific exchange

Collaboration between American and Chinese professional archaeologists and students has continued to thrive since 2019. With the recent easing of COVID travel restrictions, several bilingual archaeologists from different academic institutions in the United States have accepted invitations to return to China to continue collaborative research. This work over the past 10 years (and more) has involved excavations, surveys to find new sites, analysis of remains using new scientific methods, and increased publication in both English and Chinese. One resulting benefit is greater understanding of the past in areas such as Gansu province, which have not received much attention in recent years. Another benefit is the continued willingness on both sides to learn about new archaeological methods and theoretical approaches to interpreting lifeways in the past. During the past decade, for example, collaborative research (including my own) using techniques to examine pottery such as petrography to infer location of production and residue analysis to infer vessel function, has increased. New questions are being asked about the past, such as the lifeways of ordinary families, rather than focusing exclusively on elites. At the same time there has been an increase in the desire by young Chinese archaeologists to publish in English, with foreign collaborators or on their own. The worldwide dissemination of their work also is relevant to their career enhancement. The demand is so great that the China content of long-standing journals published in the United States and the UK such as *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, and *Antiquity* has substantially increased, even during the past few years of COVID restrictions. Major presses such as Springer, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford University, and Cambridge University have devoted increased attention to publishing books on Chinese archaeology. New journals have been created to provide more opportunities for publication about Chinese archaeology in English. As a former associate editor for one of these, I have observed a steady increase in the quantity of submitted articles and in the abilities of young scholars from China to express themselves in English.

Educational opportunities for American and Chinese students have continued during the past decade. These include participation in Sino-American collaborative excavation and survey projects. Dozens of Chinese undergraduate archaeology majors and graduate students have

gained experience in such projects and have benefited from the opportunity to communicate with foreign researchers. Students also accompany foreign scholars in China who conduct research on previously excavated objects (one will work with me in July to study Neolithic pottery in museums). Also, COVID did not cause any decline in applications from students in China applying to American PhD programs. The benefits of programs enhancing communication among students from different countries such as ours at Yale continue for American-born and Chinese scholars long after graduation day. During the years of COVID restrictions, American institutions such as Yale continued to host visiting PhD students from China for one year who had fellowships from the Chinese Scholarship Council. I hosted visiting Chinese PhD students during 2020, 2021, and 2022 who were grateful for the opportunity to learn about new approaches in archaeology and to experience life in the United States. Another benefit of the presence of China-born students in American universities for any length of time is increased awareness of archaeological research in different areas of the world. Some Chinese universities have launched their own collaborative research projects in countries such as Honduras. I have also seen Chinese students in American universities benefit from courses such as mine about diverse approaches to museum practices and protection of cultural heritage in other countries.

Over the past decade American graduate students continued to participate in fieldwork in China and to analyze diverse materials for dissertation research. My own students who have done this include American-born individuals and those born in China who sought archaeological training in the United States. As I write this, two of my graduate students are participating in an excavation project in Shandong province, and one of these students was invited to visit institutions in other provinces as well. Students in American archaeology graduate programs greatly benefit from the opportunities to communicate with Chinese students whether they are one-year visitors or fellow graduate students. The mutual understanding and mutual respect they gain with respect to their peers and their host country provide a productive pathway for effective collaborations in the future. I have already seen new and effective collaborations develop among the young professional archaeologists. The sharing of ideas is beneficial to Chinese graduate students who must follow strict rules for their dissertation research; excavation is only permitted for professional archaeologists. In addition, collaborative projects have brought new research opportunities for American and other foreign professional archaeologists from the United States, Canada, the UK, and other areas who possess certain analytical skills, even if they are not proficient in Chinese. Courses including the archaeology of China continue to be in demand at American institutions, and these greatly benefit from communications among professionals from both countries. Interactions between American and Chinese archaeologists have continued to thrive, despite the challenges of COVID and increased tensions between the United States and China in other realms during the past five years.

Recent developments regarding Chinese museums

Much effort continues to be devoted to providing the Chinese public with information about archaeological discoveries. According to a recent online report, over 1,000 new museums have been built in China during the past five years. Another important development is a push for museums to greatly increase online content using innovative technologies for educational purposes. Many archaeology exhibitions in Chinese museums I have seen already employ innovative technological methods to educate the public about life in the past, and the galleries tend to be packed with people of all ages. Some museums even have prepared exhibitions about

archaeology in other parts of the world. In July I will see two recently constructed museums in Shandong for the first time. At the onset of my collaborative archaeological survey and excavation project with Shandong University in Rizhao City during the late 1990s there was no museum in the area. Afterward I watched a large museum being constructed to house the artifacts from several years of our team's fieldwork. Prior to COVID I was permitted frequent access to help research our recovered artifacts, and I was impressed by the strict procedures ensuring safety of the objects in locked spaces. In July I will visit a new museum in Rizhao.

Another recent trend is an increase in development of museum exhibitions about the archaeology of China in foreign museums. For example, objects from the Qin and Han periods excavated from Shaanxi province were sent to museums in Peru (2016) and Japan (2022). In 2017 *The Age of Empires: Chinese Art of the Qin and Han Dynasties* took place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and included many significant objects that had never been sent abroad. Other relatively recent exhibitions about Chinese archaeology took place in Saudi Arabia (2018), Qatar (2016–2107), Lithuania (2017), and Latvia (2016). Important initiatives in museum practices also took place in recent years. In 2015 an international training center for conservators was established at the Palace Museum in Beijing. In 2017 the government published a report about the first national survey of ancient objects that was begun in 2012. Significantly, on November 9, 2021, the Chinese government announced a countrywide plan for cultural heritage protection and establishment of a national database that will be more accessible to local governments with the aim of enhancing site protection and sharing of information among museums about conservation practices.

Brief Summary

There is much evidence for the continued commitment by diverse groups of people in China for protecting and sharing China's archaeological heritage. During the past few years, additional measures have been taken to protect excavated objects and enhance efforts to protect sites during the excavation process. Important efforts have been taken to prevent different kinds of crimes, to increase personnel involved in protecting ancient objects, to provide effective training, to improve coordination among relevant units, and to raise public awareness. Museums throughout the country are working to develop detailed databases of objects that can be shared with relevant parties responsible for cultural heritage management. There has been a great increase in museum construction during the past few years coupled with more diverse efforts to educate the public about archaeology. Students, scholars, and museum specialists from China, the United States, and other foreign countries have benefited from productive interactions, and more should be possible during the next five years. I thank the committee for its time and consideration.