

**The Future of Asia's Past –
Bringing Conservation Philosophy into Practice
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Chiang Mai Orchid Hotel, Chiang Mai, Thailand
January 11, 1995**

Mr. Nicholas Platt, President of the Asia Society
Dr. Vishakha Desai, Vice President of the Asia Society
Mr. Athueck Asvanund, President of the Siam Society
Distinguished guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure for me personally to be among so distinguished a gathering, at such an important conference. My sincere thanks go to the Siam Society, the Asia Society and the Getty Conservation Institute for organising this momentous gathering.

The theme of this conference evokes excitement and vision. Some of you here may recall a piece of conversation in "Alice in Wonderland", by Lewis Carroll.

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
asked Alice.

"That depends a good deal on where you want to go," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where," said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go", said the Cat.

I have the distinct impression that the organisers of the present conference not only do know which way they want to go but also exactly where they want to lead us to!

The timing of this conference is indeed opportune. Last month's World Heritage Conference in Phuket has re-focussed attention on Asia's rich cultural heritage and natural splendour, and in doing so has highlighted the very real threats; posed by environmental degradation, uncontrolled development and, in particular, tourism.

The preservation of Asia's heritage, as called for by the international community, can no longer be neglected and must be given due priority commensurate with its significance.

At the same time, Asia has reached the point where responsibility for the conservation of cultural heritage now lies squarely with national governments. In most countries of Asia, the science of conservation has now advanced to the

stage where national institutions and experts can increasingly take on the task of architectural conservation themselves.

Heritage conservation is therefore, moving out of what may be termed the “colonial phase” – where academics and concerned institutions, mostly in developed countries, took the lead in preserving historic monuments and artifacts in developing countries – and into a new “nationalist phase” – where national experts are now in the vanguard of protecting their own cultural heritage.

It is thus significant that we are meeting in Chiang Mai, the seat of Lanna culture, for here the challenges and pitfalls facing heritage conservation in Asia are only too apparent.

Chiang Mai is the most important city in Northern Thailand. It was founded almost seven hundred years ago, during the reign of King Mengrai, the ruler of the Lanna Kingdom. According to old Northern scripts, King Mengrai chose the location and designed the square-shaped walled city himself.

From its inception until the Burmese conquest in the sixteenth century, Chiang Mai flourished as the capital of the Lanna Kingdom and the political, commercial and cultural centre of the North.

Following liberation and revival in the eighteenth century, the city resumed its role as the principal city of the North and continues to prosper today.

Chiang Mai will celebrate its seventh centennial next year. More than any other town in Thailand, the city has been fighting to preserve the past and its architectural heritage. And nowhere is this glorious past more evident than in the city's many temples; built in the typical Lanna style with multiple-tiered roofs, gracefully-curved eaves and a portico.

But Chiang Mai has also lost much of its appeal in recent years. The present-day city thrives on the site of its origin. Thus giving rise to the universal problem of conservation versus development.

The pace of commercialisation in Chiang Mai has outstripped the best efforts of town planners, resulting in unsightly high-rise condominiums and office buildings. The traffic situation is following the same vicious path as that of Bangkok, with consequent noise, air and visual pollution; and in addition, rubbish disposal remains a perennial problem for City Hall.

It is obvious too that Chiang Mai's precious cultural heritage is suffering under the strain of modern progress.

Hundreds of historic sites still languish in neglect, encroached upon by squatters or hemmed in and hidden by new buildings. Of those sites which are registered with the Fine Arts Department, many receive only marginal maintenance, there being too few personnel and funds allocated to undertake necessary repairs and restorations.

The remains of the ancient city walls, once a proud symbol of Chiang Mai's strength and purpose, have suffered long periods of neglect alternating with periods of hasty reinforcement.

And yet Chiang Mai is dependent upon the very development that is threatening its heritage, if it is to develop as a modern regional centre – part of the “economic quadrangle” being enthusiastically promoted by Thailand, Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Southern China.

What then can be done to preserve the city's cultural legacy, while at the same time allowing the benefits of development to flow freely?

Simply put, the aim should be to integrate development with preservation. The term sustainable development, which has come to define modern environmental thought, can be used in this context to describe the integration of cultural with commercial demands.

Such development is already appearing; all construction within the city walls is now required to uphold the local architectural identity, and the building of condominiums within the old city, or construction of tall buildings in the vicinity of temples, is strictly under control.

Furthermore, the people of Chiang Mai have added their voice to the conservation crusade. Public campaigns have been instrumental in preserving the rich cultural heritage of Northern Thailand. Strong opposition to the construction of a cable car up Doi Suthep resulted in the project being dropped, and public support for the control of high-rise buildings within the old city led to the drafting of the regulations I have already mentioned. These campaigns demonstrate the depth of community feeling which exists here, and the importance of public participation in the development process.

Chiang Mai is, in effect, a living ancient city, and has to live with all the problems associated with balancing the past and future. However, the solutions to the city's dilemmas demonstrate that conservation must be recognised as an essential part of development. It is important that the elements of cultural heritage, such as historic buildings and sites, should be counted as assets, not as burdens or obstacles to development.

Historical and cultural traditions are an important, enriching dimension of community identity. Active community participation is therefore essential to the process of sustainable development.

It is important, however, that the community contributes fully to the process of conservation, by which I mean there must be free access to any relevant conservation and development plans, Dissemination of this information at all public levels is essential to success.

Furthermore, education, both inside and outside the classroom, must play a strong role in creating understanding and pride in our cultural heritage. It is time

that conservation, for both natural and cultural environments, was taught on equal terms with other professional skills.

It is undeniable, however, that the preservation of our cultural heritage is expensive, and will become more so in the future as the pressures of development and tourism mount on historic sites.

Yet despite the costs of cultural conservation, it is no longer realistic to expect international agencies or foreign bilateral donors to continue to pay for this effort in the booming economies of Asia. Now is the time for the governments of Asia to take this responsibility upon their own shoulders.

Ways and means of providing for the expense of conservation in the national budgets must be identified. There is a need to rectify the current imbalance which exists between the promotion of tourism and the conservation of historic sites, for example. Too often, a tourism-orientated policy prevails, and sites are preserved only as tourist attractions.

Ideally, such a situation should be reversed so that historic monuments are preserved first and foremost for their cultural values, and not merely as showpieces to attract more tourists. It would be dangerous to establish too close a link between tourist revenues and conservation, which might lead to a risk of losing cultural and artistic independence.

Perhaps we should look to our common heritage to provide us with the answers we are seeking. Asia is a region of immense antiquity, with a correspondingly rich and turbulent history. Many countries in the region have inter-acted in the past, and benefited from cross-fertilisation in arts, religion and commerce.

Today, however, we are unable to appreciate the collective effort needed to preserve what is left of our past. This is due in part to the concern of each country with its internal affairs – economic growth and development particularly. It is also due to the current emphasis placed on the natural environment, rather than the cultural environment.

As an issue, conservation of the natural environment has taken centre stage in the last decade, culminating in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Global attention is now being given to issues such as biological diversity, climate change and protection of the Earth's ozone layer. The level of funding, the number of qualified professionals and the degree of public awareness are higher for the protection of tropical forests, or endangered species, than they are for restoring temples and ancient cities.

This imbalance stems in part from an imperfect understanding of our environment, and what it encompasses. Humans are intimately associated with not only their natural environment, but also their cultural environment. Together these two elements form the milieu within which our societies evolved and exist today.

Because of this disunion between culture and nature, development and conservation plans for our natural and cultural environments have progressed in different directions; they are no longer mutually sustaining or even inter-related.

But in fact they should be. To protect the environment, man must be able to live in harmony with nature – which means being able to cultivate its bounty without destroying its sources. Yet, aside from physical well being, man also yearns for spiritual enrichment, which is where culture plays such an important role. Our cultural heritage provides us with spiritual fulfilment, which alone distinguishes man from other species on Earth.

The time has come for us to recognise the relationship between man, nature and culture, and to formulate appropriate strategies to conserve our environmental legacy. We must be serious about protecting our heritage at all costs.

I would like to call for concerted action on three main fronts;

Firstly, the governments of Asia should start working together to restore cultural heritage with both national and regional significance.

The restoration of ancient cities such as Luang Prabang and Ayutthaya will have a significance far beyond national boundaries. Similarly, the preservation of Angkor Wat will ensure that the Khmer heritage is saved not only for the people of Southeast Asia but also for the rest of the world. Surely there is now enough wealth and expertise in the region for us to take a leading role in preserving our regional heritage.

Governments also have an important role to play as guardians of our cultural heritage. Throughout history, one of the most insidious threats faced by sites and monuments has been looting, dismantling and illegal destruction. National governments should now ensure that regulations prohibiting the encroachment on, or destruction and looting of, cultural property are in place and properly enforced.

It is now incumbent upon governments to take strong action in protecting the national heritage. However, protection must go hand-in-hand with development programs designed to benefit those communities living on or near historic sites. Local populations will have to play their part in safeguarding our national heritage, but they will only be able to do this if they have a fair share of the national resources.

Secondly, regional collaboration should not only be limited to government to government efforts. Aside from such initiatives, I would like to call for business to contribute to the preservation of our cultural heritage.

The private sector in Asia has been the prime mover in the economic development of the region, and now is the time for business to put its considerable experience and financial resources behind efforts to save our

cultural legacy. Here in Thailand for example, the Thailand Business Council for Sustainable Development and the Thailand Environment institute are currently discussing ways of supporting efforts to restore our ancient capital city of Ayutthaya. I believe the time is now opportune for more of such private-public partnerships in Asian heritage protection, and would urge businesses to explore options for taking action on heritage conservation.

Finally, the time has come for non-governmental organisations to take up a more prominent and effective role in the preservation of our cultural heritage.

As an example of an NGO playing a constructive and commendable role in protecting the nation's cultural legacy, I would like to cite the Siam Society, co-organiser of this conference. The Siam Society has an almost century-long tradition of fostering scholars and scholarship, both Thai and foreign. The Society has played an important role in not only the study and conservation of our region's cultural heritage, but also in the promotion of this heritage to the wider public.

Indeed, next month the Society will initiate its Historic House series, at the Bangkhunphrom Palace Seventh-Cycle Celebration. This series hopes to channel corporate sponsorship into the restoration of historic buildings in the Kingdom.

It is obvious however, that worthy organisations such as the Siam Society can only do so much with the limited funds and personnel they have at their disposal. It is for this reason that countries may wish to explore the establishment of an independent national "heritage trust", along the lines of the British National Trust. This Trust manages public properties all over Britain, with over two million members supporting its work. The establishment of such an organisation would give both financial and political independence to the conservation effort, as well as raise the profile of heritage conservation amongst the wider public.

Asia has now emerged as an International economic centre. As Asians, we are known for our hard-working ethic, and our striving to improve the standard of living for the billions of people living within our boundaries.

Let us therefore be unsparing in our efforts to ensure that our cultural legacy remains secure and undiminished, both for this and future generations. For if we can accomplish the union of conservation with development, and truly attain sustainable development, then we may look forward to the glories of our future, whilst benefiting from the richness of our past.

Let me end my address by quoting from Mr. Abba Eban, former Foreign Minister of Israel. He said, "history teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives." Perhaps now is the time to behave wisely together.