

Penang's Blue Mansion

The **Cheong Mansion**, also known as the 'Blue Mansion' because of its indigo exterior, is a landmark on Penang, an island off the west coast of Malaysia. The building was built more than a hundred and twenty years ago by Cheong, who had left South China in 1856 to make his fortune. Labelled 'China's Rockefeller', Cheong is another Asian **spectacular rags-to-riches story**: a 16-year-old Chinese boy who sailed to Jakarta (known as Batavia then), and found work as a water carrier, then started his own business, and gradually owned plantations, tin mines, railways, a shipping line and banks throughout Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and China.

Cheong's mansion, a 19th Century 'Straits Settlements' **architectural classic**, won Unesco's Heritage 2000 award, after more than a decade of restoration. In 1990, local architect, Lawrence Loh, bought the run-down mansion, and has helped to restore it as both a historical and contemporary icon in Penang. The two-storey building contains thirty-eight rooms, with a courtyard in the centre of the complex. While the building is primarily Chinese in style, with its intricate decorative, other influences are included, such as gothic windows, Scottish cast iron work and art nouveau stained glass panels. Today, the mansion is a part of the tourism landscape, providing sixteen guestrooms for tourists to experience a part of the past. In Georgetown, the capital, there are Chinese temples and rows of shop houses in narrow lanes. The Chinese influence in Penang is obvious, in its inhabitants, businesses, lifestyles, food and architecture.

Cheong, who built the Blue Mansion for his seventh wife, is now a prominent figure in the history of the island, which had been established as a British trading post in 1786. He represents one of the masses of Chinese who migrated to Penang in the 19th century, and made their lives while preserving their customs and traditions in foreign lands.

Saving Angkor Temples

In November 2003, Unesco organised a two-day international conference on the **restoration of Angkor Wat and a complex of temples in Cambodia** that have become popular destinations of international tourism. At the conference, Dominique de Villepin,

France's Foreign Minister, suggested a "new action plan" to cover the following ten years of preservation and development efforts at Angkor.

The conference dealt with tourist development and management of the site of Angkor; development in the nearby city of Siem Reap; and development of the neighbourhood between Siem Reap and Angkor. Unesco are drawing up a "Charter of Angkor" for an international revitalisation of other post-conflict world heritage sites in such countries as Iraq or Afghanistan.

As part of an international co-operation, a French-Japanese project is already in progress; it is aimed at saving a number of significant temples and other smaller ancient structures in Angkor – the area was the capital of the Khmer Empire from the late ninth century to the fifteenth century CE. Several of the twelfth century monuments have deteriorated during decades of conflicts and neglect in the war-torn Southeast Asian country.

It was only in 1991 that a peace treaty was implemented. Angkor Wat was recognised as Unesco World Heritage in 1992, and the International Coordination Committee was established the following year, after the first Unesco inter-governmental conference in Japan. Since then, the committee has been involved in clearing an estimated 25,000 land mines, a large amount of which surrounded the temples. It has also reduced the incidence of looting of statues and friezes from the lesser known and more vulnerable temples, and has built a new Visitors' Centre.

Currently, many projects in Angkor that involve various nations are being overseen by the committee:

- A Japanese team is training a new generation of Cambodian archaeologists and architects;
- A Japanese team – having completed work on the northern library of the Bayon – is restoring the causeway across the moat of Angkor Wat and the twelve towers of Prasat Suor Prat (opposite the Terrace of the Elephants);
- A German team is preserving the 1,850 Apsara stone reliefs inside Angkor Wat;
- A French team is reconstructing the Baphuon temple (inside Angkor Thom), using the "anastylosis" technique (removing all 300,000 stones of the temple-mountain and then rebuilding it);
- A Chinese team is restoring Chau Say Thevoda (near the Eastern Gate of Angkor Thom);

- A Swiss team is reinforcing the structures of Banteay Srei (32 kms northeast of Angkor Wat);
- An Indian team is involved in the structural preservation of Ta Prohm (near the East Baray); and
- SPAFA, regional cultural heritage centre based in Bangkok, is engaged to design the new National Museum at Siem Reap, with gallery displays including statues brought out of storage from the Angkor Conservatory.

Cambodia's archaeological heritage: loss of artifacts to private collectors

Just as in Siem Reap where the ravenous energy of business and tourism is gradually gobbling up the area around the 9th century glory (Angkor Wat) of the Khmer Kingdom, so is the **heritage of Cambodia being traded at obscenely affordable prices**. Bit by bit, piece by piece, the wealth of the ancient civilisation passes from one collector to another; admirer to profiteer; opportunists to tourists, etc.. Reporter Samantha Brown filed an *AFP* report, to inform of trade taking place in markets all over Phnom Penh, and the country, where "ancient beads are snapped up at two for a dollar, while 15 dollars secures a 3,500-year-old stone tool". With sales of such ordinary antiquities, she reported that experts warn of a slow robbery of Cambodia's rich history that "archaeologists are only just beginning to study after decades of conflict ended here in 1998".

Archaeologists are concerned that such items as beads, ceramic pots, tools and bronze bracelets that were looted from sites, are being sold on the market. They believe that the situation is contributing to the irretrievable loss of Cambodia's prehistory. Impoverished Cambodians sell the findings from the sites and mines - remnants of the war - that are cleared, preventing historians and archaeologists from making sense of a site that's been looted, failing to assess and examine the artifacts. **The discovered objects are transferred to local markets where both Cambodians and tourists buy them, and which can also be obtained in the international black market.**

The Angkor Wat temple site has been recently taken off the list of UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger, when it, ironically, had been listed because

of illicit excavation and pillaging, among other reasons. Now, artifacts all over the country are slipping from the hands of those who should study them. These objects from diverse sites, including burial areas, contain information that larger and more prominent pieces, such as stone statues, do not. **Some of these artifacts are believed to be unique in the region.**

Samantha Brown wrote that the Cambodian government is planning to raise awareness, and impress upon the people and the communities on the needs for protection and preservation of the antiquities. The report added that there are laws in place, but enforcement was poor. A group, Heritage Watch, is planning to inform the locals of the artifacts' value, and aims to build museums in the concerned areas.

Inca heritage, Peru

Similar to the situation in many ancient sites, such as Cambodia's Angkor, the former Inca capital of Cuzco, Peru is suffering from human threats to its fragile heritage. Stone and rock surfaces are being further damaged by the accumulated salts of hands that touch them (visitors and tourists, please keep your hands to yourselves). With pollution, lichen, extreme temperatures, poor conservation and a lack of civic conscience to defend archaeological heritage in Cuzco, **humans touring the area are also greatly contributing to the deterioration of its rock walls.**

Picasso masterpiece edges out Van Gogh's as most expensive painting

Picasso's 1905 painting 'Garçon a la Pipe' - or Boy with a Pipe - was sold for \$104m (£58m) at New York Sotheby's in May, to an anonymous bidder.

The event overtook the record sale of Vincent Van Gogh's 'Portrait of Doctor Gachet', which was sold for \$82.5m (£46m) in 1990.

Garçon a la Pipe shows a young Parisian working boy with a crown of garlanded roses, and a pipe in his left hand. It was created when Picasso was twenty-four years old.

The painting had been put up for auction from among a collection of about thirty paintings that once belonged to New York's Whitney family. John Whitney, who was a former US ambassador to England, obtained 'Garçon a la Pipe' in 1950 for \$30,000 - £16,800 at

current values. **The painting, exuding an image of adolescent beauty, is considered one of the most beautiful of the Picasso's Rose Period collection, and a significant work by the celebrated artist during the early part of his career.**

In November 2000, Picasso's 'La Femme aux Bras Croisés' (Woman with Crossed Arms) was sold at an auction for \$55m (£30.6m); it was the previous most expensive painting of Picasso, who now has four of the top ten most expensive paintings sold at auction. Van Gogh is second, with three.

Thai Artists in Laos

Six artists of Thailand will trip about in Laos as part of a project, 'Thai-Lao Artistic Cultural Ties', which aims to improve relations between Thailand and Laos in the arts and cultural sphere.

In February, the participants will start their travel from Luang Prabang in the north of Laos, and will have the opportunity to appreciate the scenery, and observe the way of life of the locals, their traditions and customs. They will also be in dialogue with Laotian artists, learning from each other, and reflecting on their own work. Photographer Surat Osathanugrah, who is president of the Photographers' Association of Thailand, will be documenting the journey with his camera, while the artists sketch and look for ideas and inspiration. When they return to Thailand, each artist will complete five works for exhibition. The other artists are Chiranan Pitpreecha (SEA-Write Poet Laureate in 1989); Prayad Pongdum (National Artist in Visual Arts); Thavorn Koudomwit (Vice-Rector of Art and Culture at Silpakorn University, and Outstanding Artist in Visual Arts); Pichai Nirun (National Artist in Visual Arts); and Pratuang Emjaroen (reknown artist).

Preah Vihear Temple as a World Heritage Site

Cambodia has requested Unesco to designate the Preah Vihear ruins a 'World Heritage Site'. Such recognition is envisaged to garner financial resources and interna-

tional technical assistance in restoring the Preah Vihear temple and site, which is situated in the north of Cambodia, but more accessible from the northeast Thailand province of Si Sa Ket.

The example of Angkor Wat, the major site in Cambodia that is of great historical and cultural significance, has encouraged the Cambodian government to obtain similar status for its Preah Vihear site. Angkor Wat was declared a world heritage site in 1992, and along with its fame, has attracted multi-national co-operation in the restoration of the ancient complex of monuments.

There has been a history of contention between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear site, with both countries claiming ownership of the historical treasure. In 1962, the International Court of Justice recognised that the site and monuments on it belong to Cambodia.

The Khmer ruins and temple were closed to public access during the civil upheaval in Cambodia, and the reign of the Khmer Rouge. It was opened to visitors again in 1998, but was in adverse conditions. The four-storey high Baphuan-style sandstone temple is located on the top of a six hundred-metre escarpment, and was built during the reign of Jasovarman I (889-910 AD).

Presently, the Cambodian authorities are amenable to the idea of receiving assistance from Thailand; they are cautious, however, about attempts to shape the restoration effort to reflect Thai cultural influence, and about any manipulation to gain control of the temple.

The Cambodian government is anxious to avoid conflicts, in view of the fact that the site is a major source of tourism revenue; each year, an estimated one hundred thousand Thai visitors come to Preah Vihear, from Si Sa Ket province, raking in thirty million baht (US\$750,000) in entrance fees. During a recent bi-lateral meeting on the restoration of the ancient temple, the Cambodian Senior Minister to the Prime Minister's office, Sok An, stated that Thai help with the conservation of the monument would be acceptable, after Unesco has decided whether to list Preah Vihear a world heritage site.