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THE ROLE OF THE MUSEUM AND OTHER AGENCIES IN THE PRESERVATION OF MATERIAL CULTURE*

Lucas Chin

INTRODUCTION

With rapid industrial development and socio-economic changes that are taking place combined with the natural causes of decay, our heritage is being increasingly threatened. Landscapes, historical sites and historical buildings have been randomly destroyed, relics in places of worship and archaeological sites vandalised and looted and traditional art objects abandoned and lost.

As the topic of this paper is material culture, perhaps it is important for us to define what the term means. To me, I would simply interpret material culture to mean objects made by the people whether these objects are for some specific rituals or for the people's daily use. In other words, material culture is synonymous with ethnographic material, a term I believe more commonly used by museum professionals. I would like to add that material culture in this context also includes heirlooms such as trade items like jars and other ceramic vessels, cannons, kettles and other brass containers and beads. In short, material culture is part and parcel of our heritage.

As we all are aware that when our people have become modernised, they would readily give up many of their traditional rituals and practices. Thus items such as idols (woodcarvings), containers, etc. associated with these practices would no longer be needed and would be discarded. Eventually the skills of making such items would be forgotten and lost forever. Modernisation has also brought about other changes. For instance, traditionally made cooking pots were being replaced by aluminium ones, mortars for pounding padi by rice-mills and storage jars by plastic buckets, just to mention a few examples here.

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The present generation too through education, again a process of modernisation, no longer placed much value on the heirlooms that they had inherited. They readily disposed of these heirlooms and used the cash to buy

* This paper was presented at the Sabah Museum Seminar and Conservation Workshop held in conjunction with its 25th Anniversary celebration in July 1990.