

Pull-out supplement

theFocus

Cultural Heritage

The term “heritage” shares with another equally slippery word “tradition” the basic meaning of that which is handed down. It is thus by definition a dynamic and subjective notion, and is laden with an even greater connotative burden when the term “culture”, the sum of human endeavours, is appended as an adjective. Cultural heritage projects mediate what we behold, and what we are told, of the past – they involve representations and narrations of, and interventions on, aspects of the histories of specifically-defined communities within contemporary frames of reference and signification. The articles in this section focus on the histories and motivations behind how cultural heritage has come to be produced, framed or presented. Agency and intent is highlighted in questioning what aspects have been selected and why others are excluded, how they are narrated and when these developments took place.

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Chinese-style gateways in Makassar, Indonesia (above) and Melaka, Malaysia (right), two of numerous examples erected since the first decade of the twenty-first century in historic areas of cities in Malaysia and Indonesia as part of efforts to create Chinatown-themed areas. Source: Author.



Porta de Santiago (above), the only remaining fragment of the Portuguese fort of A Famosa, Melaka, Malaysia which was built in 1511 using stones pillaged from the mosque and tombs of the Melaka Sultanate. The fort, dismantled in 1810 by the British, is being rebuilt (left). Source: Author.



The politics of cultural heritage

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THE PRODUCTION AND PRESENTATION of “cultural heritage” today is typically orchestrated through the discursive frameworks defined by political entities. Indeed, existing frameworks for the promotion and management of cultural heritage privilege the nation-state as primary agent. Through heritage legislation and listing, restoration and conservation, and didactic valorisation, government authorities involved in the business of defining, creating and promoting “cultural heritage” select and frame specific aspects of the past to fix and propagate specific ideas regarding identities.

Discursive perspectives

The politics of narrating and representing cultural heritage can be investigated through the discourse between the producers of cultural heritage projects and the interpretations they produce; the multivalent histories of cultural practices and forms of the heritage entity in question; the knowledge, practices and perception of local communities and experts; and the reception and reaction of audiences or visitors, intended or otherwise. The state (and other actors) have entered the discursive framework through their production of socio-cultural narratives for heritage sites as didactic tools in identity construction and management.

As mentioned earlier, the exercise of producing cultural heritage involves contemporary frames of reference and signification. The articles in this section discuss the disjuncture between what John Clark (1993) has referred to as the discourses of the world or of production, and the discourses of interpretation. Such disjuncture is specifically investigated by examining the role of colonial and early nationalist perspectives or imperial practices in promoting the recognition and currency of certain cultural objects and practices as heritage; where contemporary strategies stand in relation to this legacy; and how they are informed by political or economic priorities or ideological agendas.

UNESCO's World Heritage Program provides a dominant framework for cultural heritage intervention and promotion; here the nation-state is the agent for proposals, and is the recipient of the mandate and funding for further action. Another impetus, and one which is increasingly bound to the World Heritage List, is tourism and the revenue and prestige it generates for the host country or site. Yet there are other sources of initiative, legitimacy and motivation. Communities may possess specific mechanisms by which groups or individuals are empowered to act as custodians, or through which aspects of socio-cultural practices are performed regularly. State disempowerment or suppression of these alternative agencies and mechanisms constitute yet another layer of politics.

Heritage mystique

During my own fieldwork in historic cities and at officially-designated sites of cultural heritage in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in 2005 and 2008, I observed first-hand how local understandings of cultural heritage may take shape precisely in reaction to state discourses on national, regional or ethnic identities. We are given a stark reminder of the phenomenon of popular self-deception in David Lowenthal's (1998: 249) observation, in the context of the reconstruction of “British Heritage”, that

— Lack of hard evidence seldom distresses the public at large, who are mostly credulous, undemanding, accustomed to heritage mystique, and often laud the distortions, omissions, and fabrications central to heritage reconstruction.

While we often hear of how official sites exclude local communities, I have also observed the challenge of encouraging local residents in historic city quarters to engage with aspects of heritage in their midst that had not yet received official recognition.

Conversely, local communities can also act as creators of heritage mystique. The pseudo-Chinese forms in San Francisco's Chinatown, for instance, began as part of a self-Orientalising exercise by local Chinese landlords to promote the area as a tourist attraction in order to save the community from eviction. In contemporary Malaysia and Indonesia, in connection with tourism promotion by local Chinese business interests, we witness a process I have referred to elsewhere as Chinatownification: large areas of old towns that were formerly more ethnically diverse have today been re-inscribed architecturally and in heritage representation as ‘Chinatown’.

Recuperating hybridity as productive discourse

Heritage production by the state typically involves the celebration of a primordial national essence aligned with the re-imagined culture(s) of the modern nation-state's majority or dominant group(s) to the exclusion of minority groups. Michael Herzfeld argues that the conceptualisation of heritage as

reification and objectification of culture, entangled with assumptions of tradition framed within nation-state boundaries, originates from Europe, and consequently “heritage” can be understood as an inextricable hybrid of European roots and Asian weave of appropriation and reinterpretation.

If conceptions of ‘cultural heritage’ are understood to be tied to the teleological genealogies of the modern nation, can we then hope to discuss it in ways that transcend the latter's artificial boundaries, and avoid committing interpretive violence on history? Using Sri Lanka as case study, Nira Wickramasinghe proffers that a recuperation of the notion of hybridity highlights multiple antecedents in cultural production, and can serve to counter the prevalent popular self-deception that some stable, immutable “essence of the past” infuses national or even ethnic identities – a fiction that fulfils a perceived need for anchors in a fluid world.

Hybridity and multivalency are likewise emphasised in the article by Miki and Madhavi Desai on the regional varieties of colonial bungalows of India, whose developments are read against their socio-political contexts of production and use, particularly the agency of local Indian builders, buyers and occupants. The article demonstrates the potential of micro-regional perspectives on heritage from the colonial era to depart from grand narratives that over-emphasise colonial agency.

Origins and bases of heritage practices and values

Contemporary cultural heritage categories, priorities and practices in Asia often owe their origins to the politics of imperial rivalry and the legitimisation of European colonial rule. Mrinalini Rajagopalan historicises British strategies towards “heritage”, from earlier practices of looting and the emergence of pillaged colonial artefacts in museums and collections in the imperial capital, to the initiation of on-site conservation of Mughal Indian monuments. This shift “from loot to trophy” in cultural heritage strategies is read against Britain's changing ideological posturing towards her colonies and her own heritage.

Hazel Hahn discusses the heritage of countries from the former French Indochina, beginning with colonial attempts to define this heterogeneous entity, united only by their subjugation under French rule, through architecture. Specific emphases and omissions in this endeavour changed in tandem with French colonial interests and scholarship; Hahn compares these with the cultural heritage outlook in the postcolonial nation-states of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

In a broad survey of the Islamic World, Hasan-Uddin Khan presents the challenges posed by the continued or intensified use of mosques and their multi-cultural, temporally layered composition against theories on conservation and physical “preservation”. He suggests that necessary changes could be conceptualised in relation to the “integrity of aesthetic feeling, meaning and use”. Community agency in maintenance and restoration is discussed vis-à-vis the role of the state, the impact of tourism as source of revenue and the support of state-centric agencies such as UNESCO.

Revivalism: The nation-state as architect and client

The articles on new administrative cities and heritage policies in Malaysia and Indonesia by Sarah Moser and in Myanmar by Paul Franck focus on the state as primary agent and discuss how state projects create cultural heritage anew. Seen in conjunction with Hahn's article on French Indochina, one can read in these projects a systematic bias towards majority ethnic groups who dominate the state apparatus, and the concomitant obscuration of minority groups in these official narratives.

The architectural forms used for state edifices in Malaysia and in Indonesia's Riau Islands, in Myanmar, and in French Indochina vary from pan-Islamic and Buddhist “classicism” to royal revivalism. Arguably, we can see parallels between the creation of these revivalist, syncretistic state symbols and the revival of Graeco-Roman forms as markers of European identity in Neo-Classical, Romantic and Baroque architecture. In French Indochina, we see a direct link via the French colonisers who assumed the task of re-inventing what they understood to be the classical styles suited for their colonies. In fact, both in British Malaya (Malaysia) and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), colonial architects initiated the use of pan-Islamic forms in ‘Indo-Saracenic’ designs for government buildings and new mosques. Classicist revivalism in the service of state notions of identity in Europe and Asia, though not contemporaneous, both show the selective use of re-imagined glorious pasts.

(Re)inscribing glorious pasts: Asia-Europe engagements

The growing sophistication of the heritage industry is reflected in the complexity of state narratives and physical interventions on cultural heritage sites that are increasingly articulate in pre-empting criticism by recourse to arguments about the restoration of past glory and restitution of honour besmirched by perceived past injustices. These narratives justify an emphasis

3: Interpretive map from the Dutch colonial Fort Rotterdam, Makassar, Indonesia and the pre-colonial Somba Opu citadel with a vernacular house theme park containing houses from the highlands that never existed in pre-colonial Makassar city. Source: Author.



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in certain readings of identity while suppressing other interpretations or removing other layers. While the incidents involving the Babri Mosque in India require no introduction, an earlier, pertinent example bears reiteration: the removal from the Parthenon of all medieval Christian, Renaissance and Ottoman accretions by the Greek state in the mid-19th century and again in 1975. Conversely, the official brochure for the Cordoba Mosque-Cathedral defends the erection of the cathedral by referring to the restoration of Catholicism to its rightful position; the reader is sternly reminded that the insertion of the cathedral in fact protected the mosque from further destruction.

In connection with the notion of glorious pasts, it is interesting to note how Franck observes that Myanmar's generals, in carrying out projects that re-inscribe the past, have simply appropriated a strategy previously employed by Burmese royalty, and how Moser interprets references to historic royal architecture in new projects as a signifier of the rejuvenation of pre-colonial golden ages in Johor, Malaysia and Riau, Indonesia. To what extent do heritage projects by the modern state in Asia owe their practices and persuasive logic to pre-colonial precedence, particularly to the royal imperative of each successive ruler or dynasty to selectively restore and re-inscribe or to wilfully neglect or remove historic structures based on its preferred vision of the past? How does this history compare with pre-modern and modern European notions and practices of “cultural heritage”—and conversely, how much can contemporary heritage practice in Asia be claimed to derive from European precedence?

Meanwhile, postcolonial Asian cities that have lost their pre-colonial heritage to European conquest have turned to the restoration of European forts, often with financial aid from the former coloniser, as a means to achieve recognition by UNESCO. Some have succeeded in this venture: the Portuguese forts of Galle in Sri Lanka and of A Famosa in Melaka, Malaysia, are two examples. Melaka, which received UNESCO listing in 2009, privileges the rebuilding of its Portuguese fort over archaeological research on the pre-colonial city, of which few significant vestiges remain (fig. 2). Fort Rotterdam, the Dutch fort in Makassar, Indonesia, is preserved with all buildings nearly intact; conversely Makassar's pre-colonial citadel, whose brick walls have been restored, lacks any extant original buildings and is occupied by a vernacular house theme park (figure 3). These examples appear to indicate that prioritisation of European colonial heritage remains prevalent, while portrayals of the Native as alternately rural or regal, harking back to colonial representations of the colonised Other, enjoy continued currency.

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