

European lessons for Asian heritage studies

The heritage industry in Europe is grounded in a historically recent idea of the nation-state. That idea was exported to various Asian countries, which often transformed it along with associated notions of history and heritage. This brief essay examines some of the lessons to be learned from European experiments with heritage promotion and conservation (notably in capital cities) and warns of the dangers of repeating or even exacerbating the less salutary effects of those experiments in Asian contexts and especially that of Thailand, the country of the author's principal research focus in Asia.

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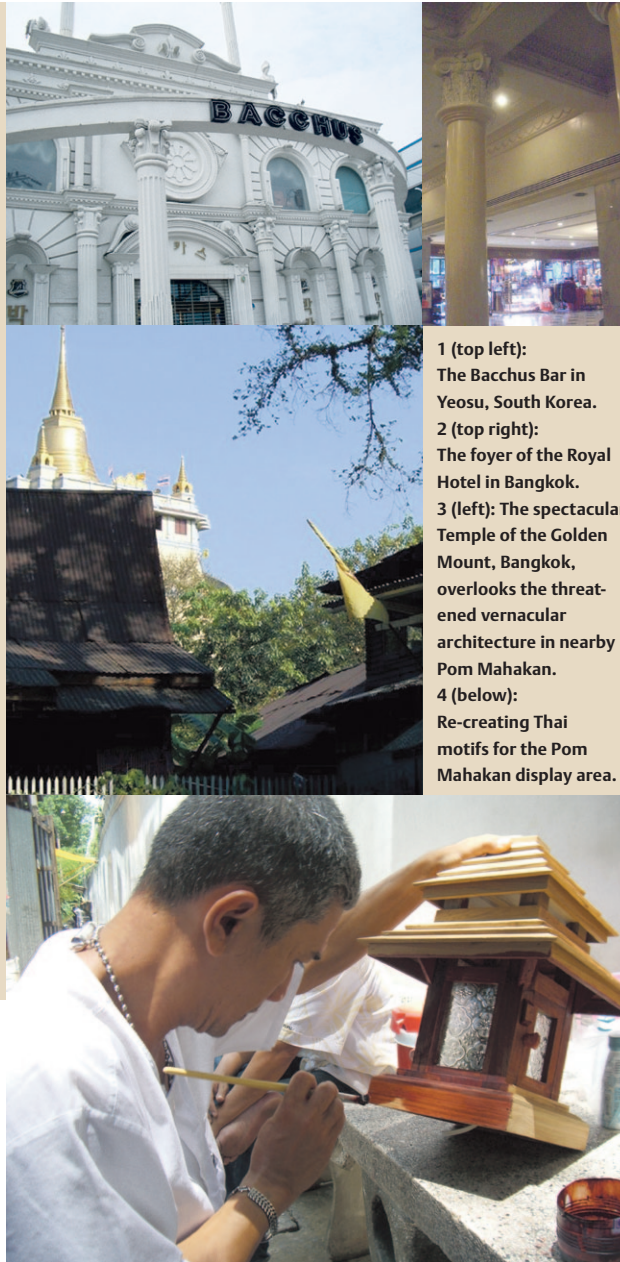
RAJADAMNOEN AVENUE, the grand sweep leading down toward the ritual grounds in front of Bangkok's famed Grand Palace, has recently been dubbed the future "Champs-Élysées of Asia". Such reconfigurations are signs of a subaltern cultural politics. Despite protestations of never having been colonised, and perhaps with more defensive zeal than unequivocally postcolonial countries with more clearly identifiable grievances, Thailand follows a model of respectability that owes much to a Western bourgeois aesthetic (Peleggi 2002). Thai planners and politicians, largely Western-schooled, envision a city of neoliberal shopping malls purveying "Thai tradition" amid a gentle sea of green parks and shaded avenues and peopled, to judge from the available architectural drawings, by strolling citizens who look anything but Thai.

There is another Thailand, however, and it is not nearly so complaisant. While –perhaps sincerely–expressing adherence to the fundamental principles of the current political order and cheerfully committed to the preservation of a heritage (*moradok*) retrofitted to reflect the essence of "Thainess" (*khwaam pen thai*), this Thailand is fiercely egalitarian. It is the Thailand that generated the Assembly of the Poor in the 1990s (Massingham 2003) and that periodically takes to the streets in paroxysms of anger against the increasing replacement of the old feudal order by a perhaps equally repressive class structure. In what Peter Jackson (2004) has called a regime of images, this Thailand must also represent itself through adroit management of the official forms of Thai identity; just as the existence of slums is masked by the erection of billboards when important dignitaries come visiting, so the persistence of such an egalitarian substrate is masked by the polite performances of bureaucrats and citizens acting together to recall the formalities of the old feudal system (*sakdinaa*) –performances that encapsulate the tension between hierarchy and egalitarianism through ironic and ambiguous displays of politeness (*marayaat*). This concealed, culturally intimate Thainess is less permeated by European models, although it also looks to Western ideals of "democracy" as the key to political legitimacy.

The European inheritance in heritage

We cannot understand the development of heritage politics in Asia without looking closely at what has happened in Europe. There are at least four reasons for this. One, clearly, is the long and complex history of the European colonization of Asian lands and its impact even, or especially, on the few that did not fall directly under European rule. A second has to do with the emergence in Europe of a notion of culture as a national "thing" or possession, spawning a host of national museums of culture in Asia that similarly represent the nation-state as a homogeneous multiplication and extension of the property-owning individual at the dawn of capitalism. The third reason for which the study of heritage in Asia should be viewed in part from a Western perspective is that the West has itself suffered a series of embarrassing setbacks in the various attempts to create an enlightened understanding of heritage. And the fourth issue concerns the actual permeation of local architectural styles by Western classicism, from the elaborate extravaganza of the Bacchus bar in Yeosu, South Korea (fig. 1), to the classical column

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1 (top left): The Bacchus Bar in Yeosu, South Korea.
2 (top right): The foyer of the Royal Hotel in Bangkok.
3 (left): The spectacular Temple of the Golden Mount, Bangkok, overlooks the threatened vernacular architecture in nearby Pom Mahakan.
4 (below): Re-creating Thai motifs for the Pom Mahakan display area.

capitals adorning the historic Royal Hotel at the bottom end of Bangkok's Rajadamnoen Avenue (itself a piece of the egalitarian history of Thailand's student resistance to dictatorship despite its name and dynastic trappings) (fig. 2). I will briefly address each of these matters in turn.

First, then, the history of colonization: it simply does not make sense to speak of Asian heritage as though the colonial past had no impact on it. The very notion of a national heritage is, in some degree, a Western invention, variously transformed through its Asian incarnations.

That observation leads straight to the second point. The European nation-state, anthropologist Richard Handler (1985) has argued, extends the idea of the person as defined by the ownership of personal property to that of a nation defined by owning a distinctive, inalienable collective culture. National museums, from Greece to Thailand and from Norway to South Korea, display cultural fixity rather than dynamic change and variety.

The objectification of culture as a fixed object rather than a fluid process may have been necessary for the creation of national unity, but –partly for that reason–it often promotes negative effects. It excludes local and minority identities and represses reinvention and divergence even by members of the mainstream. It also sets a terrible model of exclusion that is fiercely imitated by local (and often separatist) movements seeking to repel outsiders in the name of cultural purity.

A xenophobic view of heritage

Such exclusion is a serious issue in Europe, where –this is my third key point–local irredentists sometimes translate racist and anti-immigrant postures into violent discrimination. The rise of the far Right in France, Italy, and Austria is closely associated with destructive cultural politics; the restriction of foreign ("ethnic") foods in some Italian cities is the distractingly trivial thin end of a dangerous wedge assiduously driven between local communities and immigrant groups.

Clearly there are compelling lessons to be learned from Europe here –above all, that "local history" and "local knowledge" are not necessarily "better" than the reified "national" ones. Some local movements do serve admirably to protect the interests of oppressed ethnic and social groups; others, however, provide a disingenuous excuse for acts of horrific intolerance. The reification of culture guarantees nothing except the serious threat of eventual breakdown in cultural fluidity and interaction.

On the other hand, national master plans that claim to seek urban "development," "improvement" or "renewal" –all euphemisms for an architectural eugenics designed to isolate and marginalize potentially restive working-class populations –actually often entail the destruction of vernacular or extremely old architecture as well as the repression of dissident and marginal populations. In this context Mussolini's depredations in Rome or some of the more recent demolition of the medieval core of Barcelona come particularly to mind. Threats to the physical presence of local communities in the name of urban beautification and a repressive understanding of "heritage" are now rampant in Asia as well (see fig. 3).

One notably pernicious version of this process is the deliberate spatial isolation of temples and palaces that previously had an organic relationship with the social life of streets and markets. This deliberate deracination, or "spatial cleansing" (Herzfeld 2006), appears in the lofty separation of the Acropolis from the busy city life of Athens, the separation of previously well integrated temples (*wat*) from the old, noisy, messy markets that animated them in Thailand, and the current assault on modern Romans' sense that the ancient buildings around them are part of the fabric of their city –a city from which residents are also increasingly alienated physically by an epidemic of evictions. Stylistic formalism buttresses such changes. In 19th-century Greece, neo-classicism, largely orchestrated by West European architects (Bastéa 2000) and embraced by a rising bourgeoisie, served to mask or destroy older, vernacular cultural dynamics. Thus, when it now reappears in East Asia, it is not hard to see what cultural hierarchies it is expanding into new spaces.

Towards multiple heritages

Yet there are alternatives. In Thailand, some communities endorse official images while also recording local resistance to city and state authority. In the small urban community of Pom Mahakan in Bangkok, a highly stylized museum area, with a pavilion specifically dedicated to "local wisdom," yet ornamented with conventionally Thai motifs, houses the documentation of nineteen years of struggle against eviction (fig. 4). Here contrasted but also convergent forms of heritage bespeak a valuable debate over the basis of legitimacy. This, I suggest, is an example worthy of study and emulation.

A benign heritage policy respects all social and cultural groups and their capacity for creative change, adaptation, and redefinition. As the roiling Preah Vihear dispute between Thailand and Cambodia, violent hostilities between Hindu and Muslim groups over the Babri/Ayodhya mosque/temple in India (Ratnagar 2004) and Israeli-Palestinian tensions over the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem all demonstrate, neither state and state-based institutions nor political and religious organizations offer much hope today for such engagement.

Yet this is an effort that must be made. A culturally open record of conflict, one that also shows clearly how all preservation inevitably also entails selective destruction and the displacement of living populations, might be distasteful or embarrassing to state and international authorities, but, for the same reasons, it would generate valuable lessons for future generations. A spirit of mutual generosity is one that encourages the greatest possible array of distinctive voices. Such is the real challenge of heritage. What national government will dare to break with the prevailing, narrow vision and work to achieve a culturally pluralist vision for the future of the past?

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