

Of pop, kitsch, and cultural heritage



Culture is the great shaper of human will and desire; the social binder of a shared yearning for value and taste: the love of common language, cuisine, and way of life. It is the connector of future-looking volition with past-derived identity; a juncture where expectation can be challenged by deep-felt questioning. Yet, will and desire are restricted by the extent to which imagination can fancy desirable objects, and imagination is culturally determined.

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The sense of culture being what shapes and directs these innermost impulses stands out in the word's underlying trope. The Romance word *culture*, from Latin *cultura*, is an agrarian metaphor conveying a figurative sense of tilling, cultivating, and guarding (*colere*) through education. Similar senses of restraint and refinement emerge in the words for culture employed in the languages of the two historically dominant hubs of Far Eastern civilization, China and India. The Chinese word for culture, *wénhuà* (文化), signifies 'transformation through literacy', pointing to the centrality of writing in Chinese society. The Hindi term for culture, *samskr̥ti* – whose very form suggests its rootedness in Sanskrit, India's classical language of erudition – connotes a 'creation of sophistication' as opposed to things in their unmodified, natural, and vernacular form, called *prakṛti*. Thus, the underlying universal figure of pre-modern words for culture is an imposition of discipline and artifice.

From humanism to modernity

It is only in the last 150 years that *culture* has taken on the broad meanings it holds today. Before then, culture signified the edifying, didactic ideals of sixteenth-century humanism with its focus on what now has become known as 'fine culture'. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the word has been stretched to encompass common customs and trends, changing its import from being what directs towards a higher ideal to being that which more generally shapes desire and will to conform to a social collective of shared tastes and interests. In other words, culture has gone from Plato to pop.

With the newfound immensity of its semantic range, culture has come to occupy center stage in modern society, turning into the very defining trait of a people. No longer reduced to an elitist quest for refinement, it is every person's possession, characterizing the modern ideal of individualized expression and originality. This breadth of meaning induced the so-called 'cultural turn' in anthropology and the humanities, where the question is no longer the historical 'How was it really?', but rather 'How was it for him, or her, or them?' In light of this, a critical understanding of 'Asian heritages,' which since 2010 has been one of the three thematic foci in IIAS' research agenda,² requires awareness of what it is that gives a privileged status to 'cultural heritage' in the contemporary multivalent notion of culture.

The pop-heritage dichotomy

Cultural heritage is one of several forms of fine culture belonging more clearly to the old humanist, edifying ideal, as opposed to the underlying folk culture. This calls for drawing a distinction between heritage and pop. What divides the two is primarily whether or not the cultural expression is rooted in history.

Heritage and pop both center on the present, but aim at the past and future respectively. Heritage, on the one hand, operates through a logic of shaping the imagination of present social identities by means of reference to the past seen, for example, by the way in which national identity is anchored in a country's history. Pop culture, on the other hand, is first and foremost characterized by its entertainment value derived from its ability to fulfill present desires, driven by an expectation of forthcoming satisfaction and social belonging. Therefore, pop demands constant renewal, a steady stream of novel offers in music hits, fashion trends, or sporting events, whereas heritage represents immutable tradition and permanency derived from its representation of history. This implies a diachronic linkage of the past and the future to the present within the synchronic opposition between heritage and pop.

There is though a marked difference in the status ascribed respectively to heritage and pop evident in the culture-politics of most nations, when the fine arts, heritage monuments, and museums are financially favored over pop cultural events. The privileged status of cultural heritage is not only due to its historic edifying purport but is also politically determined in terms of how heritage plays a central role in the creation and redirection of national identity. For heritage is not a given; it does not simply exist 'out there'. Rather, it is made significant in the present via its narrativity.³ This view is quite unlike the opinion of Gjorge Ivanov, President of the Republic of Macedonia, who in the context of discussing the ongoing dispute with neighboring Greece concerning the right to use the name 'Macedonia' defended his country's effort to

construct numerous new monuments to Alexander the Great 'of Macedonia' by stating, "It is not our fault there is so much history in our region".⁴ Such privileging of cultural heritage as important for the nation is rooted in the fundamental relationship between heritage and history.

The history-heritage complementarity

History and heritage have complementary but opposite movements. While history is a movement from the present to the past, heritage is a movement from the past to the present. The historian must rely on present sources – the library, manuscript, or artifact – as witnesses of the past, constructing a memory not of the past itself, which no longer can be perceived, but of what the extant sources have to say about the past. Heritage involves a countermovement to history, utilizing historical narratives about the past to ascribe special meaning to a present physical object or intangible cultural practice, imbuing a contemporary cultural phenomenon with historical status. In the eloquent words of Ricoeur: "Before presenting themselves as master craftsmen of stories made out of the past, historians must first stand as heirs to the past. This idea of inheritance presupposes that the past in some sense lives in the present and therefore affects it."⁵

The movement of heritage from the past to the present is of consequence for academic policy when a research facility such as IIAS makes 'Asian Heritages' one of its foci. The study of heritage places the past in modernity in a mode that differs from that of history. In general, there may be a tacit sense that specialists of the past, especially those working on pre-modern periods, are somewhat lost in an endless antiquarian quest for intellectual relics, out of touch with the recent political pressures for the university to become more relevant to contemporary society, the private sector, and the labor market. By subsuming history under the rubric of 'heritage', the historian is forced partly to shift his or her focus from the past to the present, having to take into consideration the contemporary dimension and relevance of the historical narrative of the past. The intended and unintended theoretical, pragmatic, and institutional outcomes of this conceptual reorientation will first become fully clear in the years to come.

No longer being an empirical object of experience, the past, however, is absent in the present. Hence, the notion that something is 'old' and therefore 'important' or 'meaningful' as a memory is not an actual experience but an imagination that first becomes suggestive when the object or cultural practice at hand becomes associated with a historical narrative. The cultural determination that lies at the very root of such historicizing is occasionally confronted when visiting regions that are still relatively unaffected by modern Eurocentric notions of history, where the Western traveler may look with incomprehensiveness when confronted with the local inhabitants' preference for a nice fresh look in their Himalayan temple,

Fig.1 (above): The Tibetan Black Hat Lama Karmapa (1924-1981) with a background of skyscrapers. Modern mural in a seventeenth-century Buddhist temple in Sikkim, India. Artist unknown.

A meditation on cultural heritage and its intimate relationship with history

which is achieved by painting over centuries-old murals (fig. 1). Here a conceptual clash occurs between the modern sense of the worth of heritage and a traditional feeling of the importance of performing religious worship using fresh offerings.

Heritage as a modernist term

The confrontation between culturally determined historicist and non-historicist outlooks underlines that the very idea of 'heritage' is associated with the modern view of the past, which, in turn, is dependent on its conception of the present. As 'legacy', cultural heritage denotes certain forms of culture that are considered to have been handed down from the past. For Chinese and Indians alike, 'cultural heritage' (文化遗产 *wénhuà yíchǎn*, *sāmskr̥tik virāsāt*) signifies an ancestral inheritance (遗产 *yíchǎn*, *virāsāt*), a patrimony which in East Asian Confucian or Indian Śāstric senses of filial piety demands respect and obedience. Yet, 'heritage' also implies a renewal, the passing from one generation to another, pointing to how society ceaselessly reconstructs a sense of continuity and belonging within the unstable dynamism of the modern mind-set. The fact that heritage is installed in modernity – in the present – puts it within the stream of the massive cultural reproduction that is a characteristic feature of contemporary society. It is only within modernity that cultural heritage becomes significant as a term, because its meaning arises through modernist historicism. Consequently, it necessarily follows that pre-modern societies could not possess any 'cultural heritage'.

To be sure, pre-modern societies had cultural memory in the form of 'traditions' handed down from ancestral generations. However, to render modern society meaningful as 'modernity' with the sense of incessant development, innovation, and novelty this word implies, pre-modern society – without doubt anachronistically – is logically forced to be seen as its opposite, namely undeveloped, stagnant, and traditional. Koselleck thus argued that the very notion of temporality differs entirely in pre-modern and modern societies, in that the pre-modern notion of time is 'continuity', whereas modern time is 'progress'. 'Cultural heritage' possesses no semantic contrast in pre-modernity, for 'heritage' becomes meaningless as a distinction when simply everything in the so-called 'stagnant' Antique and Medieval societies is 'tradition' and is handed down. Consequently, 'cultural heritage' is strictly a modern idea that could first come to be with the rise of modernity, the modern sense of history, and the invention of the museum in eighteenth-century France.

The contextual site of heritage

The museum is a story told in stone and artifact, whether it refers to a concrete institution housed in a building or merely is insinuated in a figurative sense superimposed on a landscape, neighborhood, or community, for instance designating certain quarters of a town as 'the old city', treating a building as a historic monument, or viewing a community of traditional artisans as representing an intangible cultural heritage.

The museum puts the historical artifact on display, robbing the object of its common import and utility ('Do not touch!'), instead imbuing it with a special narrative significance that only emerges with the historical consciousness of being in a museum as a site of intentionally visiting the past. Heidegger once wrote: "The 'Museum' now is no longer the place for storing what is past but the place for exhibiting what is planned that appeals, educates and thereby commits ... Exhibition means that what is shown is already principally rendered stable."⁶

Heritage is significant in its solemnity [...] Pop is significant in its expectation [...] Only kitsch is insignificant, bound as it is to a satirical narrative of the past that defies seriousness.

Fig. 2 (below): 'Trying Out a Batik Dress' by Liú Kàng (1997). Oil on canvas.

In other words, exhibiting a thing is an artifice that requires a plan, a contrivance that commits the viewer to the show that is being put on. Exhibition renders the object 'uncanny' in a Freudian sense, creating a cognitive dissonance of unfamiliarity with the otherwise familiar.

The *artifice* of the museum and the privileged status this ascribes to the *artifact* raise the question of where the borderline lies between heritage and pop. If what demarcates cultural heritage from pop is the former's association with the imaginative power of a historical narrative, what stands between them is 'kitsch', seeing that numerous cultural sites are as kitschy as they are exhibits of heritage.

The kitschy in-between

Being the opposite of *avant-garde*, kitsch has been defined as "a worthless imitation of art" producing what Theodor Adorno called a "false consciousness". The reference to *imitation* presupposes a legacy of what has formerly been established as art having a conceived worth. In other words, kitsch requires art to be seen as heritage. It should be added that since the full spectrum of culture thus encompasses heritage, pop, as well as kitsch, it may be worthwhile to consider whether it is truly justified for IIAS to limit its cultural research-focus exclusively to heritage at the expense of ignoring pop and kitsch.

Like heritage but unlike pop, kitsch entails a historical narrative. The historical dimension of kitsch is evident at the Wolf's Lair, a WWII military installation in Kętrzyn, Poland. This encampment has not (yet) been developed as a tourist attraction by the local government, but because of its importance in history, books, and movies as an essential command center for Hitler, many sightseers nevertheless visit the place, where local vendors offer them the kitschy opportunity to have their picture taken in Nazi uniforms.⁷ To be seen as 'kitsch', the object requires a historical narrative, but it is an ironic narrative that invokes the past without meaning it for real. This is not to say that irony has no will to power and that the display of kitsch does not involve an effort to commit the viewer to its artifice. The emptiness of such machination still rings true in what Heidegger wrote some seventy years ago shortly before the war: "'Kitsch' is not the 'inferior' art but the very best skill that is devoted to what is empty and is not fundamental, which in order still to secure itself a significance seeks support in the public advertising of its symbolic character."⁸

The artificial absence of meaning, which causes kitsch to seek significance symbolically, is what sets kitsch apart from heritage and pop. Heritage is significant in its solemnity, in its association with a romantic or tragic narrative of the past that respectively reinforces or contests the implied senses of national or social identities. Pop is significant in its expectation, a comic forward-looking hope to the future. Only kitsch is insignificant, bound as it is to a satirical narrative of the past that defies seriousness. The romantic, tragic, comic, or satirical narrativity of culture, which allows an object to be read as heritage, pop, or kitsch, turns the cultural artifact into a 'text', and it is through this textuality that culture weaves the past and the future into the present, fashioning the multi-dimensionality of culture.

To begin with, the substance of culture, its 'sub-text' so to speak, is the *presence* in which the cultural object is encountered, its concrete form. If, on the one hand, the sub-text is read as heritage or kitsch, its presence becomes hyperlinked with a narrative 'hyper-text' of a *history*,

a historical imagination. If, on the other hand, the sub-text is read as heritage or pop, its presence is imbued with an epithet, an 'epi-text' as it were, in the form of the *significance*, or value, with which the object is ascribed as an authored work.⁹

To characterize the contrivance of the ascribed epi-textual significance, the Japanese art-historian Kazuko Okakura once declared that "People criticise a picture by their ear."¹⁰ In other words, it is often first when hearing that a cultural object possesses a pedigree of having been produced by an esteemed artist that art becomes appreciated as 'art' whether it is likeable or not; likewise, with heritage and pop. This is though not so with kitsch, which as imitation lacks the worth ascribed to heritage and pop, given that a significant context of production and authorship is entirely immaterial.

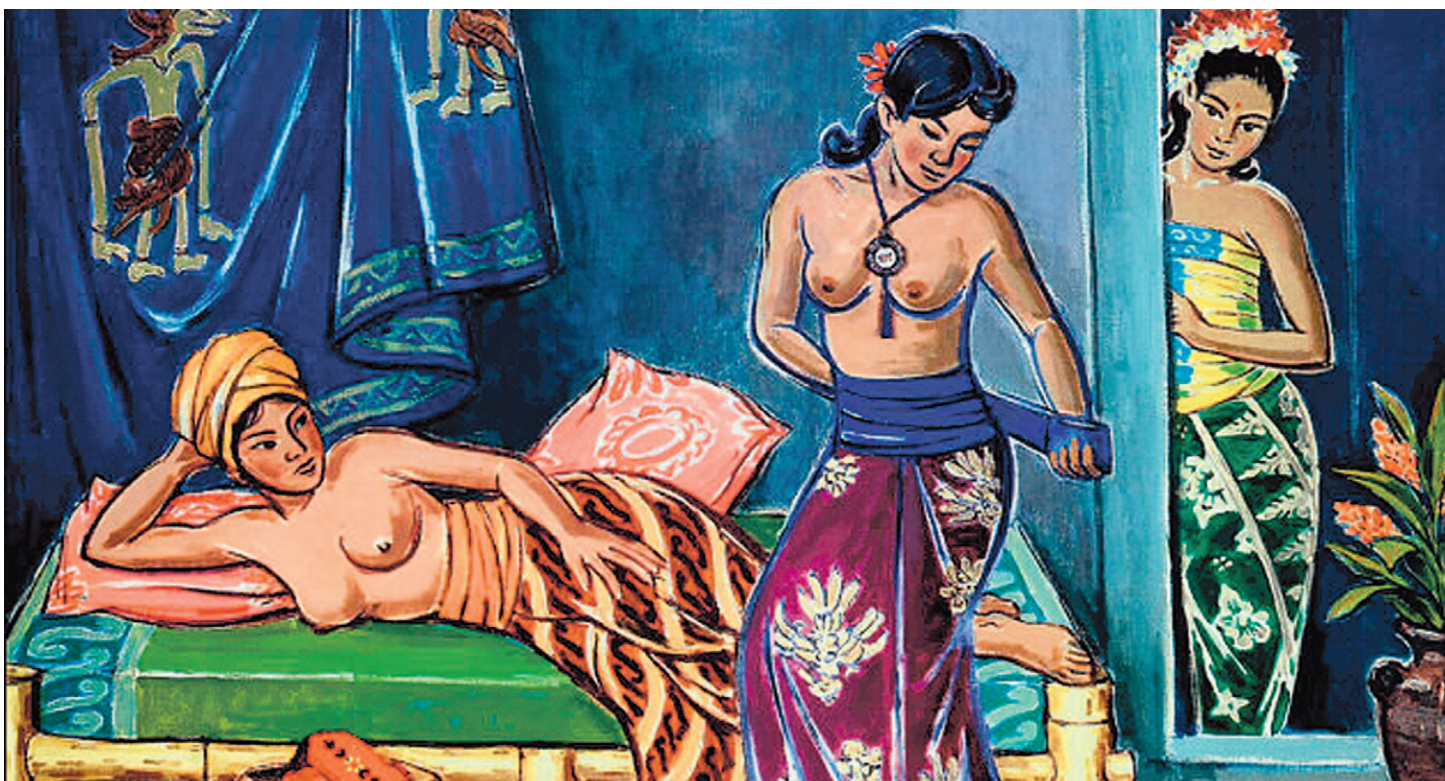
When kitsch is placed as the intermediary between heritage and pop, it becomes possible to triangulate heritage, kitsch, and pop in terms of their sub-textual presence, hyper-textual history, and epi-textual significance. In view of this, cultural heritage possesses presence, history, and significance. Pop entails presence and significance but no history. Kitsch has presence and history, yet lacks significance. The culture-political privileging of heritage is accordingly to be found in its three-dimensionality as opposed to the two-dimensionality of pop and kitsch.

The demarcation of heritage as a critical term

Pop and kitsch demarcate the notion of heritage. Respectively highlighting its epi- and hyper-textual dimensions, they allow for a deeper level of the 'heritage' notion. In the contemporary epoch, Asian heritages invariably come into view in the specific context of postcolonialism, the discussion of which has been initiated in The Newsletter by Michiel Baas,¹¹ whose considerations included citation of a painting by the Singaporean artist Liú Kàng (刘抗, 1911-2004). However, aside from the context-specific interpretation that the work of art receives within the postcolonial narrative, a figurative statement about the multidimensionality of perspectives that Liú's art demands may also be uncovered in the painting, which cuts to the deeper, decontextualized level of 'heritage' that may symbolically invest the picture with the three dimensions outlined above.

Three figures appear in the painting (fig. 2). In the center stands a woman, who is trying on a batik dress. Occupying the cardinal position in the scene, she represents heritage as a mere sub-textual *presence*, her downcast eyes allowing the viewer to behold her uninhibited by any concern of being caught gazing. To the left, on a couch behind her, lies another woman who observes the woman standing in the center. Her gaze of looking from behind represents the *historical narrative* of heritage or kitsch, whose hyper-text may be seen symbolized in the traditional Indonesian *Wayang* shadow-puppet motive on the blue cloth hanging to her rear. To the right stands a third woman who looks straight at the viewer. The directness of her gaze inquisitively questions the beholder, producing a hermeneutical self-awareness of the epi-textual *significance*, which if ascribed would make the picture 'heritage' or, if not, would render it 'kitsch'. Whether as heritage or kitsch, the presence of an object construed as a relic provokes a memory and both modes serve a function in negotiating the imaginary linking of the present with history, inscribing the present with a past.

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Notes

- Rubin, M. 2002. 'What is Cultural History Now?', p.81. *What is History Now?*, D. Cannadine (ed.).
- Peycam, P. 'IIAS in the new era,' *The Newsletter* no.55 (Winter 2010). Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies, p.3. <http://iias.nl/the-newsletter>
- Throughout the article, the notion of 'historical narrative' should be understood as theorized by Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit.
- Interview aired on the *Euronews* TV network, 23 June 2012.
- Ricoeur, P. 1994. 'History and Rhetoric', transl. Epstein, *Diogenes* vol. 168, pp.22-23.
- Heidegger, M. 1997. *Besinnung*, Gesamtausgabe vol. 66, p.32. Transl. Emad & Kalary. 2006. *Mindfulness*, p.25.
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- Heidegger, *Besinnung*, p.31. *Mindfulness*, p.24.
- For the terms sub-text, hyper-text, and epi-text, see Kragh, U.T. 'Textory: An Epistemology for Text-Based History,' *History and Theory*, forthcoming.
- Okakura, K. 1906. *The Book of Tea*. Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, p.85.
- Baas, M. 'Renewing Postcolonial Dialogues,' *The Newsletter* no.59 (Spring 2012). Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies, pp.24-25. <http://iias.nl/the-newsletter>