

IIAS Reports *continued*

International conference report

State Policy and the Cultural Politics of Heritage-Making in East and Southeast Asia

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WHY IS IT THAT, AT THIS POINT IN HISTORY, heritage has become a pertinent issue across the world? What's at stake in the process of heritage-making in our societies today? These were the two main questions raised during the conference on *State Policy and the Cultural Politics of Heritage-Making in East and Southeast Asia*, held on 16-17 January 2014 at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore, and co-organised by ISEAS, the Singapore Research Nexus and Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore (NUS), and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS).

The conference brought together scholars from different regions of varying academic seniority. From more than 200 submissions, the conveners – Hui Yew-Foong (ISEAS), Daniel Goh (NUS) and Philippe Peycam (IIAS) – selected 21 papers and organised them into seven thematic panels, with the last two focusing on heritage in Singapore.

With his insightful, thought-provoking keynote speech entitled *The Politics of Materiality: Monuments and Manners in the Construction of National Selfhood*, Michael Herzfeld (Harvard University) set the tone for the conference, challenging the participants to reconsider some of the common reified dualisms (for example, tangible/intangible, formal/informal, material/symbolic, structure/practice, and state/people) that inform the discourse of heritage. At the same time, he situated heritage politics in the context of its linkages to colonialism and its reproduction within the UNESCO multi-state schema.

In the first panel, entitled *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Its Discontents*, the presenters looked at state-sponsored heritage-making among the Kam minority community of Southwestern China, analysed the legitimization of religions as heritage in China, and examined policy and practice pertaining to Kantrum folk music in Thailand. The second panel, *Contesting Memories, Contesting Representations*, based on case studies in Sarawak, South Korea and Taipei, broadened the discussion by exploring how different political

and social forces – including urban governance, 'activism' (artistic activism), cinematic representation, and post-colonial constructions – competed for space in the sphere of memories and representations. The third panel, *Heritage and the Making of Cities and Nations*, presented a contrarian perspective on the 'legacy' of heritage in the politics of the changing nation-state, discussed how, in Jakarta, heritage can be embodied in modalities entangled within social and material relationships, and investigated the contestation of national independence heritage in Malaysia. The first day ended with a welcome dinner and speech by distinguished guest speaker Michael Hsiao (Academia Sinica), where he shared his observations on how the state 'imagines' heritage-making and collective memories in Taiwan in the past three decades.

The second day opened with the fourth panel, *The Vicissitudes of World Heritage Status (WHS)*. One paper analysed the role of Norodom Sihanouk's administration in the articulation of Preah Vihear as national heritage, while another investigated the processes of participation, institutional arrangements, spatial planning, resistance and alliances over WHS listing in Bali. A third paper highlighted the case of Hoi An and the problems that UNESCO WHS listing could lead to for vulnerable, less affluent sites. The fifth panel on *The Dark, the Vanishing, and the Forgotten*, looked at the conservation movements of underground war-related sites in contemporary Japan, questioned architectural heritage and gentrification schemes in Manila, and studied the cultural politics of making or not making colonial prisons into heritage sites in Taipei, China and Singapore.

In order to better engage local communities and state actors in Singapore on heritage issues, the last two panels were dedicated to *Heritage in Singapore: Challenges, Conversations and Consequences*. For the first of these panels, *Articulating Singapore's Cultural Resources*, the papers discussed the historical developments of heritage assessment in Singapore, the excessively top-down legal schemes that regulated its historical built environment,

Above:
The rediscovered Chinese cemetery at Bukit Brown in Singapore (Photo by Hui Yew-Foong).

and the potential of an intercultural approach in heritage interpretations in Singapore. The second panel, *Singapore – Sites of Aspiration and Memory*, examined the roots and spirits of the rediscovered Chinese cemetery at Bukit Brown, the contested urban landscape of Geylang Serai as a site for the Malay-Muslim community, and the history and repositioning of Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall in Singapore over the past six decades. TC Chang (NUS) wrapped up the conference with a short overview of the Singapore Research Nexus and its website www.fas.nus.edu.sg/srn, where academic publications, creative works and consultancy projects related to Singapore can be accessed.

The conference had started by questioning and challenging the premises of heritage politics and its associated discursive dualisms, as well as interrogating the complex interactions between different actors in the heritage-making process. These broad dynamics were then explored through the various case studies from different regions that were presented and debated at length. It ended by bringing these considerations to the Singapore context, providing a platform for policy-makers, civil society actors and academics, both local and international, to engage in the deliberation of heritage policy and politics and their implications on the ground.

Next conference and publication

Space does not permit a more detailed review, but a publication is being planned at this stage. The next conference in the series 'The Cultural Politics of Heritage-Making' will be held on 11-13 December 2014 at the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica (Taipei) and will focus on the role of citizens and civil society in the process of heritage-making. Further information will be made available at www.iias.nl/events-iias.

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For conference details, see:
<http://tinyurl.com/ISEASconference>