Heritage beyond the boundaries: a manifesto

The notions of 'heritage', nowadays shared worldwide, were originally shaped following European cultural backgrounds and are mainly based on material authenticity, aesthetic qualities, and historical and artistic values. Disseminated on an international scale, first by the colonial powers, then by organizations such as UNESCO, and appropriated and reassembled by local agents, these notions deeply influence the way heritage is currently defined and managed on the global level. An emergent thinking developed by researchers, but also by international organizations, institutions, and practitioners in the field of *critical heritage studies* has recently started to call into question the dominant paradigms that influence heritage recognition, and to evaluate the relevance of these paradigms outside Europe, in particular in postcolonial contexts. We have observed that the current avenues of inquiry in heritage studies are keen on producing well-argued critiques of institutional heritage practices, but show some difficulties in proposing positive and forward-looking approaches for dealing with heritage in contemporary societies.

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A manifesto

This text was generated in response to the manifesto produced by the *Association of Critical Heritage Studies* in 2011. A team of MA students and PhD candidates, enrolled in the Leiden University program *Critical Heritage Studies of Asia and Europe* have compiled this text, with support from the MA program coordinator, Adèle Esposito, and independent researcher, Ian Dull. This manifesto aims to foster debates, raise critiques, and inspire new ideas that deepen the understanding of the complex phenomenon of heritage in contemporary societies. Based on our research in various contexts of Asia, we wish to make some preliminary statements, which may help to problematize contemporary heritage approaches and elaborate on policies and management measures.

Asia is characterized by a high diversity of religious, linguistic, and cultural contexts. We have observed that, while national institutions tend to endorse internationalized heritage discourses and to conceive heritage through the filter of postcolonial cultural influences, numerous social groups and individuals show an emerging concern for heritage and contest national policies. Productive confrontations – sometimes open conflicts – encourage us to critically address the politics of heritage in Asia and to consider this continent as an inexhaustible source for productive critics of current heritage assets.

Plural views and dynamic struggles for power

Entering the 21st century, as an increasing number of Nation States implements heritage policies, official institutional apparatuses need to consider other ways to inform, interact and reassess with stakeholders, citizens and the public, regarding a shared but distinctively experienced heritage. Policies often remain embedded in too general conformist frameworks that are further restricted by diplomatic terminology. As a consequence, a statically upheld concept of heritage as apolitical is still disseminated in large parts of the world. We believe that in order to raise a general awareness of heritage as a fluid multivalent concept, it is necessary to reveal the politics underlying heritage in order to undercut the invention of tradition inherent in it and understand the different localized perspectives by policy-makers, governments and communities that continuously modify heritage-making processes. This can be achieved by incorporating legal inclusions of ethical argumentation in relation to heritage, with legal recognition of local, possibly ethnic, notions towards heritage.

Nationalistic discourses on heritage and assessment reports of institutional conservation projects generally hide conflicts: they reflect an artificial harmonious relationship between the stakeholders involved in heritage conservation, around a supposedly shared heritage culture. However, behind this cover, heritage is the playground of plural views and dynamic struggles for power. The denying of controversies perpetuates a superficial understanding of the politics of heritage and underestimates the creative potential of conflicts. We consider conflicts surrounding heritage as productive opportunities for engaging negotiations between the stakeholders. Far from being flattening compromises, negotiations and consultations that encourage all parties to include transparency and motivations of interest, are processes through which innovation is defined, by the combination of various meanings and approaches to heritage.

Material stability and cultural anchors

Global heritage discourses emphasize heritage practices when they are associated with the conservation of physical artifacts. In these discourses, heritage conservation is described as *intrinsically ethical,* as it supports the construction of local identities and enhances tourism development. However, these discourses rarely take into consideration the implications of heritage conservation for people who live in the proximity of celebrated heritage sites. Our research on Shangri-La (Tibet) and Borobudur (Java-Indonesia), has shown that villagers suffer disfranchisement and marginalization as a consequence of institutional heritage recognition and tourism-driven development (fig. 1). They lose the power to give voice to their cultural representations, to own, use, and benefit from the space where heritage is located. We argue that heritage sites must not only be considered as a cultural commodity, but also as the living environment of the inhabitants who seek material stability and cultural anchors. We defend the right of the people to achieve cultural and economic self-determination through the use of heritage.

Ideas of authenticity

Heritage, as an institutional practice, is highly political and hierarchical. Dominant social agents, political and cultural elites, decide which legacies deserve special attention, while others – that may have fundamental values for other social groups – lie outside heritage recognition. Our research has shown that this selective process is particularly strong in the field of 'intangible cultural heritages'. Why should a performative genre be superior to another within a cultural discourse? National institutions tend to overlook this question and to take superiority for granted, when providing a tentative list of 'cultural masterpieces' to UNESCO. When the Peking Opera was inscribed on the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 2010, for example, very little was said to argue for the genre's preeminent status (fig. 2). It was described as the national opera *par excellence,* based on the fact that Chinese intellectuals had invented this genre in the early 20th century, with the ideology of cultural nationalism as a backdrop. These "politics of significance" (Herzfeld 2000) beg to be deconstructed. Institutional bodies must deepen their awareness of the regimes of values, which influence their selections.

'Authenticity' is an essential qualifying factor defining the value of cultural heritage. In institutional heritage conservation, and especially in those programs led by international organizations, judgments of authenticity mainly lie with the experience of the past in terms of the form, the function, as well as the material value, sometimes regardless of heritage evolution through time. In line with the Nara Document of Authenticity of 1994, we find there is a need to contribute to a broader understanding of this criterion by different population groups in different periods, and that the Asian contexts we have studied offer complex ideas of what *is* authentic and *why*. Authenticity shall be perceived in different contexts in which all kinds of interactions between heritage and people are taken into account. Our research on *Hallstaat See* in Guangdong has shown that the replica of the World Heritage Site of Hallstaat (an Austrian city) challenges the internationally shared notion of authenticity based on the cult of the 'original'. We have discovered that the promoters and the users of the new city attach cultural meanings and social values to the 'copy' that are related to the fascination with foreign heritage and culture. Analyzing the case of *Halstaat See,* authenticity and fakeness appear to be relative and questionable categories. This extreme example leads us to question the plurality of visions encompassed by the notion of authenticity. Yet previous research has often ridiculed and condemned these kinds of projects. Breaking with this judgmental attitude, we call for further research, aiming to understand the social, political, and cultural contexts, which give rise to specific, sometimes disruptive, ideas of authenticity.

Dear readers of The Newsletter, you too are welcome to respond to this manifesto. Do you work on heritage in the context of Asia? Would you like to make a statement drawing on your own research?

You are invited to submit a short article (max 400 words) before 15 Dec 2014, to the following email address: **criticalheritagestudies@gmail.com**

Selected contributions will be published in the next issue of The Newsletter (issue #70, February 2015).
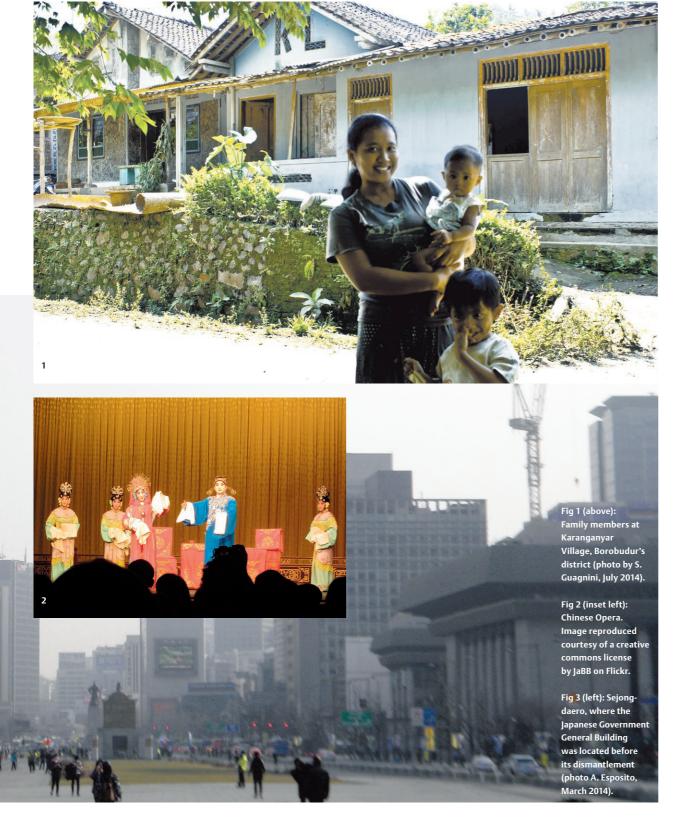
Condemnation of memory

Institutional heritage in modern Western societies is a process of accumulation and classification of objects (Harrison 2013). In the contemporary world, which is already overwhelmed by data, the indiscriminate collection of heritage artifacts and sites might result in a sterile archival census of past remains. As argued by Harrison (2012), an artifact, despite being considered as valuable in the past, might have lost its qualities for present societies. For this reason, various social agencies must undertake a conscious and honest process of heritage assessment to judge *what* has value today, for *whom,* and *why.* We even assert further by saying that the results of this process may imply that certain legacies from the past can be destroyed, because they lack importance in contemporary times, or because they embody negative values that societies wish to 'evacuate'. The history of humankind presents numerous cases in which heritage was deliberately negated. In the Roman Empire, this practice was defined as *damnatio memoriae* [the condemnation of memory] and was applied to people and objects representing dishonor or betrayal of the state. To us, this kind of approach is authoritarian and violent – it perpetrates a top-down perspective – yet we defend one's right to get rid of negative heritage, as a conscious act. In Korea, for instance, the Government General Building, built by the Japanese administration in front of the *Geunjeongjeon* royal palace in Seoul, was demolished between 1995-1996 after a long debate because it represented a negative symbol of colonial imperialism (fig. 3). However, the dome and other parts of this building have been preserved inside the Independence Hall Museum of Cheonan. In this way the negative memory was not completely destroyed but consciously decontextualized and reinserted in a new narrative. We support conscious destruction as a practice diametrically opposed to manipulative and authoritarian oblivions, which avoid uncomfortable reflections on history and national traumas. Societies that are aware of what they destroy, and that present a collectively-shared reasoning behind these acts, should be respected.

Taking stock of transformations

Endowed with authenticity, conserving material heritage was long considered an end in itself. While that tradition is not over, critiques of it have meant that alternative justifications for heritage conservation are increasingly prevalent: identity, development, and tourism represent the most common few. Yet employing heritage to work for so many aims only reinforces the concept of its uniqueness. Indeed, what other cultural product is tasked with so much political and economic work? Nowhere is this truer than in cities, which serve as economic, political, cultural, and social hubs, and host any number of the diverse representations of these pillars of society. Where heritage once struggled to survive in cities facing development, 'heritagization' is now a default, with the use of heritage districts to promote urban economic development and revitalization for touristic pleasures an almost ubiquitous desire. In opposition to the diversity of city forms and the buildings within them, the logics, and the heritage they produce, stay the same. Gentrified streets reign, alienating residents from their cities, despite all of the talk of localized identity and development. The consistent use of these same logics worldwide represents a new form of authenticity. Where authenticity responded to scientific needs, identity, development, and tourism only respond to new incentives. Though the impact of heritage in a number of domains cannot be denied, why must heritage be a necessary discourse in every place? Heritage is no doubt one of the defining methods of our time for taking stock of geographical, social, and cultural transformations, yet, as with any methodology, we must inquire into which phenomena it is best suited to study. One cannot forget that heritage and the past it includes form only one portion of human lives in the present.

A special thanks to Rebecca Bego, Siobhan Campbell, Sonja Laukkanen, and Non Arkaraprasertkul for their participation in our informal 'Manifesto writing sessions'. And, last but not least, our gratitude to professor Michael Herzfeld for inspiring us.

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Fig 1 (above): Family members at Karanganyar Village, Borobudur's district (photo by S. Guagnini, July 2014).

Fig 2 (inset left): Chinese Opera. Image reproduced courtesy of a creative commons license by JaBB on Flickr.

Fig 3 (left): Sejong-daero, where the Japanese Government General Building was located before its dismantlement (photo A. Esposito, March 2014).

Non Arkaraprasertkul, from Harvard University, and a postdoctoral fellow at the New York University in Shanghai, has responded to this manifesto with the following text.

Toward affordable and diverse urbanity: historic preservation of a global city

My research deals with the preservation of historic housing in the center of Shanghai, known as lilongs. Shanghai's government regards the historic preservation of select sites, including the *lilongs,* as essential to the branding of a city with global ambitions. Yet, there is little consideration for the ways in which existing residents of said 'historical monuments' fit into the overall architectural preservation of the sites. Hence, we are seeing an interest in architectural preservation rather than a preservation of culture and way of life. How did I arrive at such a conclusion? The answer to such a process lies in both the planning policy and the historic preservation program. You may wonder why designated historic structures are not clustered in groups but scattered around the city. That's because the Shanghai government handpicks 'worthy' structures to preserve, making the 'unworthy' structures available for immediate bulldozing. As a result, you find many 'preserved historic sites' in the middle of surrounding high-rise buildings, and the remaining residents, who are mostly older, find such encroachment to be daunting. They are used to shopping at cheap street markets, but due to the new urban development, find themselves surrounded by 'modern' supermarkets where fruit and vegetables cost ten times more. The same changes apply to the residents' social lives that they used to share with neighbors from nearby communities. Once the network of cross-community friendships and contacts is gone, remaining residents are unable to maintain the sense of a neighborhood, and they may eventually move.

I believe that there is a possibility for the preservation of both architecture and community culture. Even though Shanghai technically belongs to everyone, no one with an income lower than that of the upper middle class will want to travel to the city if it becomes too expensive. In addition, the monotony of having just one class of residents in a city is a kiss of death for urban livability. If the only method of preservation is one that emphasizes architecture at the expense of older residents who become displaced (even if they choose to be displaced for the money offered to them), we will end up with a proto-upper middle class city that lacks diversity and community culture. We should not just aim for preservation of architecture and culture, but we should aim for diversity. I believe that if we create a livable environment for the residents, they will want to stick around to tell stories of the past to the younger generations and the newcomers to the city. Isn't that what preservation is all about?

People criticize the 'Disney Land' approach to preservation because it only maintains the architectural façade, not the social structure. Thus, most people visiting a renovated *lilong* will know little, or nothing of the history of the place, and will simply see that it 'looks old and different'. But I believe that the new and the old can co-exist. The old residents are also happy to see the city grow and develop, and they want to be a part of it despite their age. So it is unfair to think that because they are old and probably poor, they should not be living in the city center. In fact, because they are old and know the place well, they care most for the place. Going back to what the urbanist Jane Jacobs used to say, the sense of belonging 'from within' is precisely what creates the sense of safety and community – not the security cameras and guides in pretentious old-looking uniforms hired to symbolize, in the most superficial way, some sense of history.