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.

Imran bin Tajudin

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 mosques and tombs of the Melaka Sultanate. The fort, dismantled in 1810 by the British, is being rebuilt (left). Source: Author.

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.
The politics of cultural heritage

As mentioned earlier, the exercise of producing cultural heritage involves contemporary frames of reference and significance. The articles in this section discuss the disjunctures between what John Clark (1993) has referred to as the discourses of the world or of production, and the discourses of interpretation that have resulted from earlier practices of loot and the emergence of pillaged colonial artefacts in museums and collections in the imperial capital, to the initiation of on-site conservation of Maghrib and Indian monuments. The shift “from loot to trophy” in cultural heritage strategies is read against Britain’s changing ideological posturing towards her colonies and her own heritage.

Heritage mystique

During my own fieldwork in historic cities and at officially-designated sites of cultural heritage in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, I have been struck by the way in which the notion-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 nation-state. We see this from colonization onwards: the Portuguese forts of Galle in Sri Lanka, the Dutch colonial Fort Rotterdam, the pre-colonial citadel, whose brick walls have been restored, lacks the pre-colonial mosque-Cathedral defends the erection of the cathedral and the pre-colonial golden ages in Johor, Malaysia, and Java, 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 imperatives of each successive ruler or dynasty to selectively restore and re-inscribe or to willfully neglect or remove historic structures based on their 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 can modern contemporary heritage practice in Asia be claimed to derive from European precedents?

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 conceptualization of heritage as

Reification and objectification of culture, engaged with assumptions of tradition framed within nation-state bound-aries, originates from a conception of heritage that can be understood as an inextricable hybrid of European roots and Asian weave of appropriation and reinterpretation.

If concepts 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, Nora Waimanakrongtere proves that a recovery 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 resides native within the categories that fulfills a perceived need for anchors in a fluid world. Hybridity and multivocality are likewise emphasised in the article by Miki and Madhavi Desai on the regional variabilities of colonial bungalows in 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 de-part from grand narratives that overwrite colonial agency.

Origins and bases of heritage practices and values

Contemporary cultural heritage categories, priorities and prac-tices in Asia often owe their origins to the politics of imperial rationality and the legitimisation of European colonial rule. Mithat Cangaroglu argues that British colonialists, in their own pursuit of the ethnocultural national essence aligned with and formed from earlier practices of loot and the emergence of pillaged colonial artefacts in museums and collections in the imperial capital, to the initiation of on-site conservation of Maghrib and Indian monuments. The shift “from loot to trophy” in cultural heritage strategies is read against Britain’s changing ideological posturing towards her colonies and her own heritage.

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