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 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 European lessons for Asian heritage studies.

1. By Western classicism, from the elaborate extravaganza of the enlighened understanding of heritage. And the fourth issue of heritage in Asia should be viewed in part from a Western perspective between the early 18th century and the 20th century. A third, and perhaps more important, is the perspective 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.

2. The Fundamental Principles of the Current Political Order

3. The Culture of Respectability

4. The Regime of Images

5. The Thai Regime of Images

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The heredity of Asia 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.

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.

There is another Thailand, however, and it is not nearly so compliant. While – perhaps sincerely – expressing adherence to the fundamental principles of the current political order and cheerfully committed to the preservation of a heritage (maruyaat) retrofitted to reflect the essence of “Thaiess” (khaiom pen thu), this Thailand is fiercely egalitarian. It is the Thailand that generated the Assembly of the Poor in the 1990s (Ratnagar 2004) and that periodically takes it 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 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 are the narratives 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 self-definition. As the assembly between Thailand and Cambodia, violent hostilities between Hindu and Muslim groups over the Babri/yahyda 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 involves local resistance to state and international authorities, but, for the same reasons, how it can 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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