Is Naypyidaw, Myanmar's new administrative capital, becoming a "Legoland"? The military regime moved all ministries there in 2005 while it was still under construction. And after building replicas of the Shwedagon, the country's most sacred pagoda, and the Mahamuni, the country's most venerated Buddha image, there are now rumours that the military regime will erect there a replica of the famous golden boulder located at Kyaihtyo, a most sacred place for Burmese Buddhists. More than just a fortress located in the country's geographical centre, the military regime appears to be turning the new capital into a microcosm of the realm they control.

Paul Franck

Relics, replicas, and the generals in the "fairyland" of Myanmar

This is the latest example of the ruling generals' policy to engineer and re-create the country's cultural heritage, a policy started in the mid-1990s. With assistance from hand-picked Myanmar academics and developed within a regional context of promotion of "Asian values" (Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in 1997), this policy simultaneously constructs Myanmar's cultural heritage as a tool for propaganda and legitimacy, a commodity, and a means to restrict expressions of ethnicity and religion. These are all aspects that will be successively considered here.

'The origin of Myanmar is Myanmar'

On July 3-4, 2010, in Naypyidaw on the occasion of a research paper reading session attended by Myanmar academics, a decade-long government stance was re-affirmed in the following governmental statement: "The origin of Myanmar is Myanmar" and 'Myanmar is the land of human origin', a modification of the belief previously taught in schools that 'the origin of Myammar is Tagaung', the first legendary Myanmar kingdom.

Since the late 1990s, the generals have indeed embarked on a grandiose, but scientifically dubious, venture that seeks to 'construct' a supposed continuity between fossilized remains of present-day Myanmar people. At that time, Lieutenant General Secretary Khin Nyunt was at the forefront of this. He was reported by Myanmar newspapers to have said that there are "important historical links that Myanmar has evolved through Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, and different stages of civilization in their own nation."

In Myanmar this rhetoric emphasizing a primeval lineage is supposed to serve two main purposes. First, it is seen by the generals as a means to construct a national spirit towards a supposed common heritage while the legacy of Aung San, Myanmar’s independence hero, has been obliterated from a supposed common heritage while the legacy of Aung San, Myanmar’s independence hero, has been obliterated from

This recourse to monarchical trappings can be traced back to the military regime's abandonment in the early 1990s of its 'Burmese Path to Socialism' policy initiated almost thirty years before. In a complete reversal of policy, the junta began to re-construct the palaces of Bagan and Bago, from the 12th and 16th century respectively, face a lack of historical sources and architectural remains and have taken great liberty in interpreting what these two palaces would have looked like. While this is seemingly not in conflict with the government's policy of promoting: 'the correct knowledge and view' of Myanmar culture, it may also be viewed as the latest instance of a long-standing monarchical tradition of re-writing history.

Politically, too, the generals have sought to use the practices of Buddhist kingship in order to further assert their legitimacy. Just like former rulers during the monarchy, Than Shwe had a new umbrella hoisted on top of the Shwedagon Pagoda in 1999. He commissioned a replica of the Shwedagon named Uppatasanti Pagoda at his new capital.

The highly controversial reconstruction of temples in Bagan with modern construction materials was also done under the auspices of the generals, just as traditionally kings renovated the architectural legacy of their predecessors. But it is with the construction of Naypyidaw that these royal pretensions have so far culminated. For this labour-intensive and resource-consuming grand project was patterned on those developed by rulers from the last dynasty (1752-1885), when successive Chinese communities, even recent groups of migrants, enjoy economic and political retaliations by Beijing authorities, disrupting the ‘unity and stability of the Union’. And converted Christians have to repress any overt claims times public holding of religious festivities. Hindus, Muslims, and converted Christians have to repress any overt claims to cultural identity, as these are invariably interpreted as disrupting the ‘unity and stability of the Union’.

By contrast, owing to perceived closer cultural and religious affinities and because of the regime's fear of possible economic and political retaliations by Beijing authorities, Chinese communities, even recent groups of migrants, enjoy a great freedom of movement and entrepreneurship. Public expressions of cultural identity are also much tolerated as seen with Chinese New Year's celebrations. This selective treatment of religious and ethnic communities, and the regime's construction of a national cultural heritage as means to restrict expressions of ethnicity, religion, have led a single group – the Buddhist Burmese – to dominate the public cultural sphere.

This brief overview on the politics of cultural heritage in Myanmar has shown that, while both in discourse and actual policy, the junta's royal pretensions and the regime's construction of cultural heritage are not always what they seem. A striking example of this is Naypyidaw, a grandiose, but scientifically dubious, venture that seeks to "construct" a supposed continuity between fossilized remains of a supposed common heritage while the legacy of Aung San, Myanmar's independence hero, has been obliterated from a supposed common heritage while the legacy of Aung San, Myanmar's independence hero, has been obliterated from...