Frontispiece: Is Cultural Sustainability Diminishing the Heritage Enterprise?
Is Cultural Sustainability Diminishing the Heritage Enterprise?

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Abstract

There is evidence of a gathering disconnect between practices oriented to the conservation of material heritage and those that would focus on the sustainability of local culture. Especially in present Asian societies, the latter is increasingly threatened by projects in national(istic) development, also by often unquestioning turns to Western models of historical conservation and its marketing, in part in the name of the tourism enterprise. However, the responding movement to champion cultural sustainability, in the face of rampant development and urbanisation, threatens to relegate the heritage enterprise to the sidelines. The paper is built around three reviews, first of the 2014 conference of the Association for Critical Heritage Studies, second of Denis Byrne’s *Counterheritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage Conservation in Asia* (Routledge, 2014) and third *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* (2014).

Keywords: Heritage, cultural sustainability, conservation, development, impacts
Introduction

During a research grant writing workshop in 2012, a group of Australian and USA colleagues,¹ working in Southeast Asian heritage, made the following observations. Fragile heritage of historic towns increasingly faces an uncertain future in Southeast Asia because hard won gains to protect and manage these special places are being overtaken by unprecedented transformations throughout Asia, the speed and scale of which challenges contemporary heritage conservation (Daly and Winter 2012). In Asia, heritage conservation has, on the whole, been on two-levels: indigenous practices (with a long history) and more recently adopted/adapted ‘western’ scientific approaches. Further, heritage and tradition are increasingly being asserted by their many stakeholders within Asian national imaginaries of modernity, powered by globalisation and consumer capitalism, rather than within overriding universalist or generalizing frameworks. This dynamic renders the heritage of the region highly vulnerable, especially as present materialist approaches to conservation are often ill-equipped to do anything other than acknowledge the changes and transformations being wrought as ‘threats’. It was noted that new approaches were necessary to produce a conceptual apparatus, attendant policies and the crucial skills that would enable the integration of macro development and sustainability challenges into heritage policy, practice and management. Indeed, the current trajectories for development and growth put many of Southeast Asia’s urban heritage environments at a tipping point. Therefore, it was argued, an innovative approach to conservation and development in vulnerable historic towns is needed to supplement and re-configure the existing preferential focus on materiality of place in order to refocus the interests of the living communities that produce and animate the life of these historic towns (see Denes, 2012a).

¹ The workshop participants were Professor Tim Winter, formerly University of Western Sydney and now at the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific, Deakin University; Professor Helaine Silverman, Director of the Collaborative for Cultural Heritage Management and Policy at the University of Illinois; Assoc Professor Robyn Bushell, Assoc Professor Emma Waterton, Dr Denis Byrne and Dr Russell Staiff all from the Institute of Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney.
Small historic urban environments in Asia are fragile by their age, material and other pressures. These special places are now experiencing vast socio-economic transformations (spatial, cultural, social, economic, technological) resulting from high national GDP growths of 8-11% and massive intraregional developments that are being engineered by this growth (Aus. Gov., 2011). Not only are the historic built environments in small cities and towns directly subject to national development agendas, they are being packaged and legislated into ‘heritage’ – ‘heritage’ having been recently folded into particularly Asian understandings of modernity and sustainability (see Daly and Winter, 2012; Winter, 2010). For many observers, these agendas as they relate to Asia’s World Heritage urban landscapes, for example, have reached a tipping point because the unprecedented cultural, social, economic and physical changes brought about by accelerated urbanization, movements of populations into cities and, in the case of heritage cities, increasingly large scale tourism, all of which cannot be reversed (Staiff and Bushell, 2013; Bushell and Staiff, 2012; Winter, Teo and Chang, 2009). ‘Heritage’ – cultural and natural, tangible and intangible – is particularly vulnerable to the macro forces around it. Also vulnerable are local indigenous approaches to protecting sacred and special places, which are based on long-standing traditions and knowledge practices (Byrne, 2015; Denes, 2012a; Denes, 2012b; Karlstrom, 2009).

Importantly, there is a widespread though contested understanding that there is an ‘Asian way’ of approaching conservation. This ‘Asian way’ encompasses a number of converging and, at times, conflicting notions: that impermanence is central to Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia; that indigenous ways of conservation have a long history; that intangible heritage often has primacy over material heritage; that European standards and approaches have been and continue to be utilized; that community based ‘heritage’ is not historically something new; that ‘heritage’ is indistinguishable from culture, tradition and history; that loss/destruction/re-creation is part of the everyday; that the metaphysical is integral to knowledge practices (see Fong et al., 2012; Byrne, 2015).

In 2002, a groundbreaking study of cultural heritage and the disappearing ‘Asian’ city was published (Logan, 2002). It represented the first systematic survey and analysis of the modernist urban
transformations many cities in Asia (East, South and Southeast) were undergoing and the effects this was having on cultural heritage conservation policy and practice. The dominant themes of globalization, tradition, modernity, the pace of change, urbanization and development were identified as significant dimensions of the heritage story. Further, the study identified the way ‘heritage’ was differently conceived and practiced in Asian societies especially with the emphasis on intangible heritage and knowledge practices. The argument of the study was that development and cultural heritage needed to accommodate each other and that there is need for a balance in the planning and execution of heritage conservation. Although recognizing that Eurocentrism was an issue, especially in heritage praxis, the studies in this volume wavered between, on the one hand, a western analysis of modernity-development-heritage (that is, Asia was following the western trajectory of modernization and urbanization and therefore the conceptualization of the problem of conservation of heritage could be understood similarly) and, on the other hand, the proposition that perhaps such a western trajectory was an inappropriate theoretical scaffolding in various Asian contexts.

In the intervening years the themes have not changed, but it is clear that what was called for in the late 1990s and early 2000s was insufficient and, in the new century, has been overtaken by vast inter-regional infrastructure development projects (high speed trains, major highways, bridge-building, airports, river ports and sea ports). With increasing pressures and accelerated growth, the fragility, vulnerability and fate of historic urban landscapes are even more threatened than a decade ago (Winter and Daly, 2012). The physical survival and cultural sustainability of these places is a critical subject for study. So is ‘heritage’ morphing into something we could call ‘cultural sustainability’? Certainly, heritage protection and management can no longer be divorced from many other attempts to preserve cultural traditions, folklore, arts and crafts, languages, cultural rights, minority cultures (and so forth); thus the vulnerability of historic heritage places is linked to the vulnerability of many other cultural productions and forms in Southeast Asia (see for example Barry, 2013). It is now widely acknowledged that the crucial, but relatively recent, role that intangible heritage has come to exert has changed the heritage dynamic considerably; today ‘heritage’ embraces many more cultural productions than in the past and the focus is no
longer just exclusively on built heritage. There is, nevertheless, a view that the theory and practice of heritage continues to do important and distinctive work and so to subsume this work into ‘cultural sustainability’ is not necessarily the way to go in terms of the practice of heritage and the politics of heritage protection.

The way I wish negotiate this debate about heritage and cultural sustainability is to (1) reflect on the research presented at the recent 2014 Association of Critical Heritage Studies conference and (2) review the work presented in two recent publications, Denis Byrne’s new book, Counterheritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage Conservation in Asia (2014) and the important compendium of essays, The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research (2015), a magisterial tome of 530 pages with 38 contributors and edited by Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, both heritage scholars with a prodigious publication output.

The Association of Critical Heritage Studies Conference

In December 2014, the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS) held its second biennial international conference at the Australian National University in Canberra, the capital city of Australia. Over 260 papers were presented and some 280 delegates attended.2

If there was any commonality across such a diverse number of presentations it would be this: that heritage is something people do, heritage is actions and processes, heritage is a social practice, heritage is about identity formation, heritage is about memories and memorialization, heritage is about politics, knowledge/meaning making and power, heritage is about story-telling and artistic production, heritage is about performance and ritual, heritage is about community and human rights activism, heritage is about emotions, feelings, nostalgia (in a positive sense of reclaiming the past) and about spirituality. The idea of heritage being more akin to a verb than a noun is at the core of the description of heritage in the 21st century as being ‘post-fabric’. Of course, the idea of heritage being actions and processes is not entirely new and has been nascent for some time. It is

2 The full program with abstracts can be downloaded at: http://archanth.anu.edu.au/heritage-museum-studies/association-critical-heritage-studies/conference.
well known in the indigenous and vernacular conservation practices of Asian societies where constant re-creation is part of protection. In the West, the idea that heritage is about doing has always had currency but the emphasis was on actions to material fabric in order to save it. In recent times, however, the idea of ‘heritage as action’ in a social sense has come to the fore in heritage thinking. The publication of Laurajane Smith’s *The Uses of Heritage* (2006) is often cited as the watershed moment in the ascendency of the idea of heritage as a verb. So, this ‘post-fabric’ proposition was the starting point for many of the papers presented at ACHS. And because it is impossible to summarize all the papers, I want to focus on just a representative few.

I begin with one of the most theoretically adventurous papers given by Rodney Harrison and called ‘Assembling the Future’. He takes as *a priori* the indivisibility of culture and nature and the enfolding of the human and the non-human, both propositions relatively common place in recent epistemology. Harrison suggests that heritage activities are more to do with assembling possible futures than the past *per se* and in so doing highlights the idea that heritage is about the past in the present for the future. But, in heritage thinking, what exactly is meant by the ‘future’? He notes how, critically, heritage activities are consistently premised on the present/future, protecting and conserving for future generations. He wonders about how much we pay attention to the caring for the present/future in our thinking and in our heritage practices as opposed to caring for the past/present? Harrison suggests heritage is a space in which various futures are imagined and are assembled; that heritage involves new assemblages (bringing together things, discourses, practices, politics and so forth) in order to shape the present/future. Consequently, he asks: what are these imagined futures in the heritage business? Are they ever articulated? Of course, we cannot know the future in any definitive sense (and that is why he insists on ‘futures plural’, there are many possible futures). But he is adamant that he is not insisting on some sort of utopian blueprint for the future but, rather, a recognition of the future in heritage work and a recognition that heritage is part of future building (see Harrison, 2013).

Anna Karlstrom analysed the centre-periphery divide in heritage in Southeast Asia. By examining the ancient Dong Son bronze drums in Laos, she asks where these are situated in the national
heritage imaginary? Is there equal room for the perception of the drums as powerful mediators of spiritual values at the local community level with the way they have been appropriated into national heritage discourses in Laos? Do local heritage perceptions matter? Are they seen as a threat to authorized national heritage discourses? What are the implications of the exclusion of local perceptions from national heritage and, its opposite, the exclusion of national heritage perceptions and constructions by local communities? In the authorized national heritage discourse, the Dong Son bronze drums are represented in ways not understood by the local communities who care for them. These communities are wary of even revealing their custodianship of these drums for fear they will be taken away by government officials and relocated in museums. How does this multiple heritage work on different scalar levels and how are such different aims able to co-exist? Or should the periphery (local communities) be regarded as the centre and so produce a very different heritage enterprise (see Karlstrom, 2009). Many other papers at the ACHS conference focused on so-called minority heritage – that which is not state sanctioned or ‘authorized’ heritage. If there was a theme to these papers it was the importance of heritage to minority groups in Asia as a means of articulating identity, safeguarding culture, strengthening communities and mobilizing political claims. In some cases it was about the very survival of ethnic groups.

A large number of papers addressed what can, in some ways, be regarded as the current trend in heritage studies: memory and affect. The so-called ‘affect turn’ in the humanities and social sciences as it applies to heritage studies is multi-various and expressed in different registers (for an overview see Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). Collectively, it has been called ‘non-representational theory’ and ‘new materialism’ as a way of suggesting that these studies deal with things that are not, or are beyond, being represented and that the focus on materiality today is not the same as older versions of materiality governed, in a Cartesian world of perception, by a clear separation between subject and object. In my own work it is about the role of emotional engagement and bodily responses to heritage visitation as I seek to better understand the heritage tourism phenomenon as being more than reading a heritage site like an encyclopaedia in stone,
that is, going beyond the meaning-making and knowledge production function of heritage places when they are encountered by visitors (Staiff, 2014; Staiff, 2012).

For John Giblin, an archaeologist who has extensively researched heritage in post-conflict communities in Africa, the emotional connections to material culture in times of healing and re-building after the trauma of war, and in some cases genocide, indicate the powerful mechanism heritage offers for reconciliation and reconstruction of lives, communities and cultures. The aura of heritage objects in this process is as important, perhaps more so, than the knowledge associated with material culture (see Giblin, 2014). One of the key themes of the work on affect animating heritage and heritage producing affect has been the significance of recognizing that ‘things’, material objects, have agency. While this idea of ‘thingness’ is not at all new in Asian cultures – the aura of materiality has always been crucial to perception and understanding – western scholarship has only recently re-embraced this idea. (Notions of the animate world of things lost its potency in the West after the age of the Enlightenment.)

Andrea Witcomb’s work investigates the many ways emotions and feelings are mobilized at different types of heritage sites and with different aims: sometimes to prompt memory and self-reflection; sometimes to produce a dialogue; sometimes to stimulate extreme emotional states as a mode of experience; sometimes to engender poetic responses in visitors, sometimes to ameliorate, sometimes to feel what it is like to be another (for a summary of her work see Witcomb, 2015). Laurajane Smith, while acknowledging the crucial work memory and affect are having on heritage studies and on heritage thinking, was insistent that emotions are culturally and socially mediated and have moral and political consequences/impacts. The politics of emotions is a crucial dimension of the heritage business and cannot be ignored. Ross Gibson, long a commentator on affect, investigated the interplay between the ethereal and the material and what he called ‘ethereal culture’ versus ‘interpretative culture’ or ‘event logic’ as opposed to ‘thing logic’. The former relates to the imagination, is embodied, sensual/somatic, ephemeral, is performative, is about memory, art, music, dance, poetry, is about conjuring and is about spirituality. The latter is about monuments, objects, written records, representations, conservation practices and management.
regimes. He argues that heritage embraces both and that it is the interplay between the two that makes heritage what it is (see Gibson, 2006).

I will close this partial summary of the ACHS conference with the paper given by Denis Byrne, an archaeologist who has written extensively about Asian heritage (see below). In his keynote address he reflected upon the amount of forgetting that goes into the making of heritage places; that official or authorized narratives of places often displace other meanings, associations, connections and memories that people have about the place being deemed ‘heritage’ (see Winter, 2007). His stark example was the suppression of the memories and the narratives of the political massacres that occurred in Bali after the 1965 coup and the rise to power of the Suharto regime in Indonesia, and the effacement of the traces in the places where the massacres occurred. This ‘forgetting’ enables the myth of Bali as an ‘island paradise’ to be perpetuated by the tourism industry. Further, he asks about, what he calls, ‘no places’, places that have certain histories that are enacted by people linked to such places, who maintain connections and association, who even care for such places, but these places fall outside of the national heritage agendas and outside the purview of those who police such agendas. From an authorized heritage perspective, Byrne regards places like this as ‘no places’. However, the effects of the associations, perceptions, attachments and actions of the people engaged with ‘no places’ are very real. Places like this can produce empathy, love, longing, grief, excitement, exaltation, enchantment, horror, memory and a sense of loss; these places are not passive or inert, but they work on those who are connected to them and who feel such places are inseparable from their identities, from their being. So what to do about the constant attempt to efface alternative histories and alternative heritages? As heritage practitioners, Byrne argues, we are called to be alert to such ‘no places’ and the associations people make with places that do not register on the authorized heritage agenda. Imagination and empathy is critical to doing so. It is not just a matter of critical distance from heritage places (in order to conserve and manage them) but also a matter of developing a critical proximity and being aware of the powerful forces of embodied subjective engagements people have with the past (in all its forms, material and immaterial). For Byrne, and I agree, heritage practitioners should not be part of any forgetting or of the effacement of the past (see Byrne, 2007).
While one could mount a convincing argument that ‘cultural sustainability’ underpins much of the work being done by scholars who attended the ACHS conference, I think the papers presented equally demonstrate, quite powerfully, how the term ‘heritage’ continues to mobilize enormously important work, locally, nationally and globally, and how ‘heritage’ continues to be a touchstone for an assemblage of ideas and actions that are in many ways more precise than anything the term cultural sustainability can yield. At the moment, ‘heritage’ has a resonance and an identity that is palpable in a host of social, political and cultural contexts.

New Publications

The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research

Until quite recently, heritage as a field of study and a practice has been remarkably self-contained. Much of the heritage literature has been generated from within the ‘profession’: by practitioners of conservation (especially architects and archaeologists), by those within heritage governing bodies like ICOMOS, by those managing heritage sites, by those implementing government policy (planners and bureaucrats). This managerial-operational dimension of heritage research was, of course, crucial to the way places were/are protected, conserved and managed. However, this inward looking way of thinking about heritage meant that much of the discussion was between like-minds similarly professionally engaged. This is not a criticism but an observation. Today, it is very clear that this is no longer the case. Research has exploded in many new directions that encompass the political, social and cultural dimensions of heritage making. The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research (2015) is an illuminating indicator of the state of heritage research in this more plural manifestation of heritage.

One of the strengths of this compendium is the diverse and multidisciplinary backgrounds of the authors who write from experiences around the world, although I have to note that given the amount of heritage research being undertaken in Asia (especially in China and Japan), this part of the globe is under-represented. The researchers come from archaeology, anthropology, art history, geography, economics, tourism studies, heritage and museum
studies, environmental management, business and management studies, media and cultural studies. The 32 chapters (plus an introduction) are organized into seven parts. Part 1 looks at the problems of defining ‘heritage’ and the enduring legacy of key concepts like discourse, authenticity, representations, performance, memory, place, community, dissonance, and identity. Some of these terms are being re-evaluated – for example, authenticity – while others provide new challenges. Part 2, as the editors claim, ‘examines the various contexts from within which heritage emerges as an active cultural process’ (p.11). What happens to the past when, under the aegis of disciplines like archaeology, architecture and history, heritage comes into view? What is the nature of this entanglement? And what happens to the past/heritage when it becomes implicated with tourism? Whose past is represented? What sort of place making happens in heritage-tourism landscapes? More recently geographers in their quest to go beyond representations of places and monuments have turned their attention to the embodied and affective engagements of people with their surroundings including heritage places. Geographers and anthropologists have also been active in researching the relationship between heritage and place-based identity politics.

Part 3 focuses on heritage as a cultural experience, looking at heritage as a constitutive part of culture more broadly, as part of the ‘everyday’, as an active construction/making that occurs within and without representations, especially the latter. The writers in this section extend approaches to heritage that rarely gain traction in heritage policy or standard textbooks. Part 4 is concerned with heritage as a locus for contestation, issues to do with power and the politics of control, with marginalization, with the rise of rights approaches to heritage, with social justice and with post-conflict uses of heritage. The politics of heritage has been expanded from the way the state uses (and abuses) heritage to the way heritage is utilized by ethnic groups, by immigrant communities, by indigenous people in post-colonial settings and, increasingly, the way heritage is used in international diplomacy. Part 5 explores a concept that has a long history of research in heritage studies: identity. That it still has such powerful efficacy is testament to its ongoing significance. And identity relates to a host of heritage issues: community, ethnicity, nationalism, religion, language, arts and
crafts, music, performance, socio-economic class and cosmopolitanism. The sense of belonging and identity when examined in relation to place-attachment or, in the case of intangible heritage, cultural productions, continues to be a site of vital research and reflection in heritage studies. Part 6 looks at the way heritage is used quite directly in social processes and the ways it is employed for economic, political and social ends. Sometimes the use of an authorized heritage by the state and supra-national bodies can be important to providing a sense of social cohesion, produce measurable conservation outcomes and provide a resource for tourism. There are, therefore, significant national, economic and development outcomes. But these conscious uses of heritage can have all sorts of unintended effects and can inspire opposition at all scalar levels, local, national and international. We cannot avoid the conclusion that all heritage making is political. Part 7 is a conclusion. One essay, like Harrison’s paper (see above), calls for a recognition of the vitality and perhaps the imperative of regarding heritage from the perspective of future scenario building, to consider the heritage process from the perspective of likely future challenges (climate change, technological changes and innovation, even greater modernization, waste issues, ecological damage, population growth and movements and so on). What does the future tell us about the conservation of the past for the future? From the perspective of the future, what is it that is worth keeping/conserving/restoring, and what is not? Of course, that question, reassuringly, is at the core of the heritage enterprise, however one conceives of ‘heritage’.

**Counterheritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage Conservation in Asia**

As Byrne writes, one of the ‘great elisions effected by heritage expertise in Asia is that in which the supernatural disappears from view’. This book, the result of many years of work and living in Asia, is an important corrective to the hegemonic heritage discourse that now permeates Asian heritage practices to a greater or lesser degree. This authorized discourse (Smith, 2006) had its origins in the West and brought to Asia, along with other major enterprises like modernity and nation state building, something of a suspicion about the supernatural and the West’s disenchantment with spiritual immanence in material things. Science-based heritage conservation has eschewed
the efficacious nature of material culture. In a complex analysis of conservation practices by experts in the West and in Asia, Byrne traces the pejorative attitudes to the supernatural and to what amounts to an anti-superstition campaign in Asia by heritage practitioners and the government organizations that support their work.

In essence Byrne appeals for a different approach to heritage restoration and conservation of, say, temples, that twins two fields of expertise: that of religious expertise and that of heritage expertise. Byrne recognizes that heritage conservation is both a physical intervention and a social practice, that material culture is maintained/sustained because it is rooted organically within social practices. What is acknowledged here is that Asian conservation is not so much about protecting the way a building or structure looks but what a building does. What is protected is function rather than form (the very antithesis of much western heritage conservation). In Thai restoration of temples and stupas, for example, a lot of new fabric is added to the so-called ‘ruins’. For western restorers, a building is surface all the way through; it doesn’t have an internal life, a resonance, an essence of something other than its materiality. Western practices are about containment of decay and solidification to prevent dispersion. However, in Asia, many monuments like stupas, Byrne argues, encourage dispersion: people taking the power of the material out with them in the form of fragments (and so on) thus ensuring the radiant power of the stupa and the ongoing efficacy of spirits (phi). People living in Southeast Asian Buddhist societies want their stupas to look like stupas and narrative murals of the life of the Buddha to be complete. The idea of leaving a stupa in a ruinous state or a fresco incomplete with great gaps in the narrative may appeal to western restorers but it’s not something that sits easily within Buddhist communities.

It is not possible to give other than a brief summary of some of the ideas in Byrne’s book. Overall, the dominant theme is in the form of an appeal to take seriously the interaction between devotees and religious objects and places in heritage practices so that the supernatural-miraculous power of old temple fabric is as uncontroversial in heritage practices as the scientific approach to restoration.
Conclusion

With regards the heritage and cultural sustainability debate, I think an often heard phrase and an often seen t-shirt slogan all over Southeast Asia sums it up: ‘same, same but different’. The agendas of those who advocate a more inclusive thinking about cultural sustainability in a time of unprecedented change and transformation do indeed match many of the agendas of contemporary heritage thinking and practice. There is overlap and there are many shared concerns but as this brief summary of the ACHS conference and new publications reveals, heritage has a potency that has not been exhausted, and if anything seems to be ever more vital.

Tim Winter (2013), in a provocative essay, warns that with the considerable broadening out of the thinking and the research around ‘heritage’, with the considerable self-reflection, critique and theorization that has now become an integral part of heritage work, there is a danger of advocating something that comes very close to being ‘anti-heritage’. He has identified a strand of anti-heritage thinking in the very considerable critical literature of recent years (a critical disposition epitomized by a body like ACHS and its associated journal the International Journal of Heritage Studies). As the newly installed president of ACHS, he has called for an ongoing radical critical thinking but one that never loses sight of why heritage is crucial. Echoing this view, I think cultural sustainability, while important conceptually, slightly shifts the focus away from the very raison d’être of the heritage enterprise: the protection and conservation of parts of our planet for the future. This may be hair-splitting and time will tell but for me the heritage enterprise (in its much expanded form) is more important than ever. Same, same but different!
References


