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In 1942–43 a force of possibly 200,000 to 300,000 people, working under the supervision of the Imperial Japanese Army, constructed a railway from Kanchanaburi in western Thailand to Thanbyuzayat on the Andaman Sea coast of Burma (now Myanmar). The purpose of this railway was to provide a supply link between the Gulf of Thailand and Burma, which the Japanese had occupied in early 1942. The sea route via the Straits of Malacca had become unreliable after the Battle of Midway in June 1942 and a new, more secure, overland route was needed to maintain the Japanese armies in Burma as they planned to invade India.

The Thai–Burma railway was completed in a little over a year, a remarkable achievement given that it stretched some 415 kilometres over remote and rugged mountains on the Thai–Burmese border, in a region which became disease-infested and inaccessible during the monsoon season. However, the loss of life was enormous. Possibly 100,000 Asian labourers (rōmusha) and around 12,000 Allied prisoners died during the railway’s construction, from a mix of malnutrition, disease and overwork.²

The railway merits attention as a case study of the memory of the Second World War because of its intrinsic significance as a major war crime and the fact that the workforce that constructed it was exceptionally multinational. Japanese military personnel and engineers, colonial Korean guards and over 200,000 Asian labourers, including Malayan Tamils, Javanese, various ethnic groups from Burma and smaller numbers of Chinese and Vietnamese all worked on the railway. Added to this already diverse force were some 60,000 Allied prisoners of war: mostly British, Australian and Dutch (including Eurasians) who were captured during the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia in early 1942. Not surprisingly, each of these groups remembered the railway in ways that were again wide-ranging. Their memories were mediated through their different experiences – some had been perpetrators of violence, some bystanders and many, victims – as well as the wider narrative of the war experience that evolved in each of the countries from which they came. Hence, the memory of the Thai–Burma railway proved to be asymmetrical across the national groups involved in its construction. In turn, the heritage of what remained of the
Figure 5.1 Map of Thai–Burma Railway (source: The Australian National University, ANU College of Asia and Pacific, CAP CartoGIS. © The Australian University, CAP CartoGIS).

railway came to have varying significance and meaning, and was capable of ‘being interpreted differently within any one culture at any one time, as well as between cultures and through time’. 5

For all the mediation of memory through these national experiences, in recent decades it has been possible to discern, in Thailand at least (the Myanmar sections are still largely closed to public access and hence not covered by this study), some evidence of transnational memory making, between Westerners, Japanese and the local Thai population. These practices owe much to the agency of individuals in memory making, and they have not ultimately resulted in deeply established joint commemorative
practices. Hence, they are likely to prove fragile. On balance, therefore, it would seem that it is the multiplicity of meanings, rather than shared transnational memories, that will characterise the memory and heritage of the Thai–Burma railway in Thailand in the future.

The Thai–Burma railway: sites of memory

In the years after the Second World War, only a limited section of the Thai-Burma railway would become a site of memory, in the sense of being ‘marked’ by collective memory, as a result of which ‘the events linked to [it were] made memorable; [and were] inscribed in geographical space’. This was because the entire infrastructure of the railway was dismantled soon after 1945. Allied military leaders, like the Japanese, recognised the railway’s strategic value, but the track had been extensively damaged by Allied bombing in 1943–45 and it needed considerable investment to repair and upgrade. There also seemed little prospect of the railway’s generating sufficient revenue to cover its costs, particularly given that the sea lanes of communication in the region were open once again. Hence, the government of Burma removed the track and equipment on its territory, while the Thais bought from the victorious Allies the 280 kilometres on their side of the border. The £1.25 million thus raised was used primarily to compensate those countries – Burma, Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies – from which the Japanese had commandeered track, rolling stock and other equipment during the war.

For about a decade, then, the railway in its entirety disappeared into the jungle and under agricultural land. However, in the late 1950s, Thai authorities reopened some 130 kilometres of the line in the south. Terminating in the small town of Nam Tok, this rail line was intended to service the needs of the local economy and commuters. This development meant that at least this section of the railway regained the visibility that would enable it to evolve into a major site of memory in the subsequent decades, though it is more appropriate to speak of a chain of interconnected ‘sites’ of memory at various points along the railway’s route.

The most important of these sites was, and remains, the multi-spanned steel bridge in Kanchanaburi which was built by British prisoners in 1942–43. The significance and meaning that this bridge acquired was somewhat accidental and illustrative of the power of film to shape cultural memory and the definition of what constitutes heritage. In 1957 the commercial film The Bridge on the River Kwai was released in the West to great acclaim. Both its plot, and that of the novel by the French author, Pierre Boulle, on which it was based (with some variations), bore little resemblance to wartime reality. Although the main character, played by Alec Guinness, would later be linked to a British officer at the prisoner-of-war camp at Tha Markam, Philip Toosey, in fact there had been no British officers who assisted the Japanese in the building of the railway to the point of madness. Nor did any of the
688 bridges constructed during the war actually cross the Kwae Noi (as the Thais call it). Rather the river flowing under the bridge at Kanchanaburi in 1942–43 was the Mae Khlong.

Nonetheless the film, which won seven Oscars in 1958, generated such a growth in tourism to Kanchanaburi that the local residents renamed this stretch of river, the Kwae Yai. Thus they acquired a ‘Bridge on the River Kwai’ which, despite its looking completely different from the wooden bridge in the film, became the basis of an ever burgeoning tourist industry. In a striking example of multiple meanings being associated with a site, the bridge also became central to the identity of this Thai town. The bridge is now for Kanchanaburi what the Eiffel tower is for Paris. It is advertised ubiquitously on marketing material for the town and province, and each November forms the centrepiece of a Sound and Light show which commemorates the anniversary of the bombing of the bridge in 1944 – an attack in which a number of civilians were killed and which remains therefore part of the local memory of the war.

The growing tourism associated with the bridge ensured that other sites along the line also acquired visibility and prominence. Capitalising on a perceived appetite for what would later be called dark or thana-tourism, the Thai authorities billed the train journey to Nam Tok, ‘The Death Railway’. Tourists were enticed to make the journey by the prospect of seeing the dramatic Chungkai cuttings, excavated by British POWs on the outskirts of Kanchanaburi, and the spectacular Wampo ‘viaduct’ some kilometres further along the line. The latter, which has become the archetypical heritage of the whole railway, is a long set of connecting bridges, supported by a wooden trestle structure, clinging to the edge of limestone cliffs high above the Kwae Noi. Within Kanchanaburi town itself, meanwhile, the two Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries, Kanchanaburi and Chungkai, which were built after the Second World War to contain the exhumed remains of some of the prisoners who died in Thailand, also became part of the urban landscape and tourist industry. (A third cemetery can be found at the Myanmar end of the railway, in Thanbyuzayat.) A brief visit to the main war cemetery is now an integral part of any schedule for tourists visiting Kanchanaburi or making their way north to the national parks for which the province is renowned, although one can only speculate as to what the many Thai visitors make of the Christian and imperial iconography of the cemetery.

To these sites along the operating railway was added, in the 1980s and 1990s, a new site of memory, Hellfire Pass (Konyu Cutting). Some kilometres beyond the Nam Tok terminus, this dramatic cutting – at 75 metres long and 25 metres deep, the longest and deepest along the railway – had been reclaimed by the jungle after the war. However, a group of Australian ex-prisoners of war rediscovered the cutting in the early 1980s and, with the assistance of the Australia–Thai Chamber of Commerce, raised the funds for its development. Given that Hellfire Pass had been excavated
by hand during a period of intense hardship for the prisoners of war, it soon became a focus for Australian commemorative activities. In 1987, for example, it began to be the site for a service on Anzac Day, Australia’s premier day of war remembrance. (The ceremony continues to this day.) By the mid 1990s, the Australian government had secured the permission of the Thai government to build an interpretative centre above Hellfire Pass, thereby joining the veterans in the proactive commemoration of war.

Originally criticised for being unduly Australian in focus, this memorial museum reflected a wider tendency, most evident in relation to Anzac Cove, Gallipoli, for Australians to claim, as their own, sites of war memory in other sovereign countries – a form of extra-territorial heritage. But since its opening in 1998, Hellfire Pass has progressively acquired a wider significance. Of the 90,000 visitors to the memorial in one recent year, over 50 per cent were Thai. Many other national groups, including Europeans and Australians, also visit the museum, Hellfire Pass and the walking trail along the rail track beyond it.8

A second Australian intervention in Kanchanaburi, although this time by an individual, came five years later in the form of the Death Railway Museum located next to the Kanchanaburi war cemetery. Created by Rod Beattie, an Australian expatriate who had developed a passionate interest in the railway and played an active role in the development of the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum and walking trail, the Thailand–Burma Railway Centre (TBRC) was, and remains, consciously differentiated from the government museum. Its displays are more multinational in their coverage and they are complemented by a research centre and customised tours for ‘pilgrims’ seeking to return to sites of their own, or their family member’s, wartime experiences.

### Multiple and asymmetrical memories

Hence through a variety of processes, a number of sites along the railway’s route in Thailand have come to speak to the memory of war. But they are not, as yet, well integrated in a way that tells a transnational story of the railway’s history. Nor are other potential sites of significance to prisoners of war – for example, the camp sites in which they lived while working on the railway, or the more remote sections of the railway’s route beyond the Nam Tok terminus – marked in any visible manner. Rather, these sites remain generally invisible. Some have actually been submerged in a major reservoir. Others have been subsumed into recreational resorts created along the banks of the scenically attractive Kwae Noi. Occasionally, these resorts acknowledge, even exploit, their wartime heritage: the Sunsaikok resort lying beneath the Wampo viaduct, for example, is advertised as having ‘a breathtaking view of the world famous Death Railway Bridge’.9 But generally tourists relax in swimming pools and play on high-rope courses, unaware of the troubled past of the land around them.
There is nothing remarkable in this. Heritage and the hierarchy of memories that it represents are always partial reflections of the past. To quote Jennifer Jordan, ‘[f]ew places bear the traces of their past unaided’; and what we remember, at the collective level, is shaped by changing values and ideologies and the agency of individuals, organisations and governments, often interacting with each other.10 These processes of memory formation are always complex, involving, as they do, attempts on the part of the state to bind its citizens into a collective national identity and the ‘social agency’ of individuals and groups seeking recognition and a place in collective narratives of the past.11

In the case of the railway, these processes have been given additional complexity by the fact that there have been multiple agents of memory at work, with varying and sometimes dissonant memories of the past. As the building of the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum indicates, Australians have been the most interventionist of the external agents of memory. The scale of the Australian losses in Japanese captivity helps explain this. Although Australians accounted for only 2.8 per cent of the POW deaths on the railway, this constituted 7 per cent of the total 39,649 Australian deaths suffered during the Second World War. Across Asia over 8,000, or 36 per cent, of the more than 22,000 Australian prisoners of the Japanese died.12

The experiences of these prisoners became widely known within Australian communities soon after the war ended. Ex-prisoners published graphic (and sometimes semi-fictional) accounts of their experiences, accounts which, in some cases, sold millions of copies and remained in print for decades.13 Other memoirs of the POW experience joined them in the 1960s.14 Not only did these books familiarise the wider population with the narrative of captivity; they often positioned it within the dominant national discourse about war, known as the Anzac legend. According to this foundational narrative, which originated in the bungled Gallipoli campaign of 1915 but over the twentieth century became a complex signifier of Australian national identity, Australians in wartime manifested the qualities of resilience, resourcefulness, disrespect for authority, independence of mind and, above all, loyalty to, and compassion for, mates (or comrades). Prisoners of the Japanese, even though they were defeated, were able to depict themselves as mates and survivors against the odds: in effect, wartime variants of another national stereotype, the ‘Aussie battler’. Moreover, their suffering meant that when the new memory ‘boom’ of the 1980s and 1990s occurred, bringing with it a privileging of trauma and victimhood, prisoners of war were a natural focus of commemoration and remembrance.15

During the 1980s and 1990s, Australian prisoners acquired a renewed prominence in oral histories and radio documentaries, memoirs and wartime diaries.16 A number of new memorials to POWs were also erected in Australia: notably at the Royal Military College, Duntroon; at Benalla, the home town of the POW surgeon, Sir Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop; and at
Ballarat, the home of another doctor on the railway, Albert Coates. Meanwhile tours of ‘pilgrims’ – ex-POWs, their families and, in time, students – returned to the Thai–Burma railway.\textsuperscript{17} The apotheosis of this process was the aforementioned decision of the Australian government to build the memorial museum at Hellfire Pass.

Other countries have not been as interventionist in the Thai landscape as the Australian government. In part, this is because their governments have had a more limited conception of their role in extra-territorial commemoration. In addition, other groups of prisoners of the Japanese seem not to have achieved the same prominence in their national memory of Second World War as have the Australians. In the United Kingdom, for example, the dominant memories of the war are those of the European and Mediterranean theatres: Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, the 1940 Blitz, El Alamein and D-Day. The war against Japan takes a secondary place in this pantheon of memory, particularly as it represents the relegation of Britain to a secondary role in the Pacific vis-à-vis the United States, and the post-war collapse of British imperial power in Asia. These uncomfortable memories, moreover, originated in what the British called the ‘Far East’, an imaginative as well as a geographical term.\textsuperscript{18} If there was a British myth of captivity to emerge from the Second World War, it was that of Colditz, the fortress in Saxony where high-risk prisoners spent countless hours devising ingenious schemes of escape.\textsuperscript{19} In contrast, the representation of British prisoners of the Japanese in cultural media such as The Bridge on the River Kwai and another fictional representation, King Rat (published as book in 1962 and a film in 1965) was less flattering.\textsuperscript{20}

To some degree, it must said, this situation has changed over the last 20 years. Ex-POWs have successfully agitated for the compensation long denied them and more recent commemoration of the Second World War has given prominence to the POW experience. For example, the Imperial War Museum ran an exhibition in 2009 to 2010 on POWs, including those captured by the Japanese. But for all this, in the mid-1990s the British government showed little interest in being actively involved in the creation of the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum, believing that such collective acts of remembrance were more appropriately delegated to veterans’ associations.\textsuperscript{21}

In the Netherlands, meanwhile, the memory of prisoners of the Japanese was more prominent.\textsuperscript{22} Although their suffering lacked the moral dimensions of the narrative of resistance and collaboration under Nazi occupation, POW experiences were integrated into Dutch historiography of the war, fiction, school textbooks and public memorials. In large part this was due to the importance of the Dutch East Indies as a colony over four centuries and the significant numbers of soldiers and civilians, including Eurasians with Dutch citizenship, who were captured by the Japanese in 1942. After Indonesia gained independence, many of these migrated to the Netherlands, resulting in nearly 3 per cent of the Dutch population in
1960 having experienced occupation under the Japanese, a greater percentage than any other Allied population.

Yet like the British, the Dutch government has not been particularly interventionist within the Thai landscape. Preoccupied in the immediate post-war years with the Indonesian independence struggle, they agreed to their dead being interred in the British Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries in Thailand and Burma. These multinational cemeteries logically formed the focal point for later remembrance and commemorative practices by Dutch ex-POWs and their children. They also became a ‘fixed part of every royal Dutch visit to Thailand since Queen Juliana’s visit in 1963’.23 The only exclusively Dutch war memorial in Kanchanaburi is a small Catholic church, Beata Mundi Regina, built next to the Kanchanaburi war cemetery in the 1950s with funding provided by a self-appointed carrier of memory, the then Dutch ambassador to Thailand.24

None of the other Western nations whose citizens worked on the railway – Canada, New Zealand and the United States – had numbers large enough for their experiences to become central to the national memory of the Second World War. Of some 650 Americans, many of whom survived the sinking of the USS Houston in the Battle of Sunda Strait on 28–29 February 1942, only 132 died on the railway.25 The New Zealander and Canadian dead were far fewer.26 Hence like the Dutch, these national groups have tended to link their commemorative practices to the established Australian rituals. New Zealand ‘pilgrims’, for instance, now adorn the rock faces at Hellfire Pass with memorabilia during ceremonies on Anzac Day, a day of commemoration common to both nations.27

Most striking in their absence from the commemoration of the railway are the groups who suffered most grievously, the Asian labourers or rōmusha. This might be explained by the fact that, since they were illiterate, they left few of the records of captivity that so powerfully engaged the cultural imagination of Western countries. But perhaps more important was the fact that the rōmusha were colonial subjects during the Second World War. They had few natural champions among their imperial rulers and, when the countries from which they were drawn gained independence, they struggled to secure a place in the dominant narratives of national building and the liberation struggle against imperial powers and the Japanese.28 Possibly this was because the story of the rōmusha had a deep moral ambivalence for some post-independence leaders in South East Asia. In Burma, for example, it is estimated that 44 per cent of the 90,000 rōmusha working on the railway died.29 But their recruitment for labour service was possible only because of the collaboration with the Japanese of local leaders such as Ba Maw.30 In Indonesia, also, the ‘founding father’ of independence in 1949, Sukarno (Kusno Sosrodihardjo) was complicit in the recruitment of the rōmusha. Not only did he actively encourage his unsuspecting compatriots to volunteer for labour overseas,
he even took part in a crass propaganda stunt in 1944 in which he posed as a römusha.\textsuperscript{31} As Sukarno conceded publicly two decades later:

In reality [the römusha] were slaves and I was the one assigned the task of enlisting them [for the Japanese]. Thousands never came back. They died in foreign lands…. Yes, I knew about them. Yes, yes, yes, I knew they’d travel in airless boxcars packed thousands at a time. I knew they were down to skin and bone…. In fact it was I – Sukarno – who sent them to work. Yes, it was I, I who shipped them to their deaths. Yes, yes, yes, yes, I am the one.\textsuperscript{32}

In the official narratives of the late Sukarno period, then, the pre-1945 past was negated except ‘as a prelude to revolution, and pointing to an elusive messianic future’. While the römusha may have been remembered by their families,

the major national institutions [were] not much interested. The one strong organisation which drew political capital from excoriating the memory of the Japanese occupiers and their collaborators, the communist party (KPI) was brutally removed from the debate in 1965–66.\textsuperscript{33}

The Malay and Tamil römusha, for their part, remained for some years after the war marginalised members of British colonial societies (though the Indian government did seek compensation for Indian workers on the railway).\textsuperscript{34} Such commemoration of the Second World War as there was in Malaya in the immediate post-war years was by the Chinese community, who remembered the sook ching massacres: massacres which, being targeted at the Chinese, had the effect of reinforcing their sense of Chinese nationalism.\textsuperscript{35} After independence in 1957 there was ‘an official forgetting’ of the Japanese occupation because of the divisiveness of the period for the major ethnic groups: the Chinese memory being one of victimhood, while the Malay and Indian elites viewed the war as a time of national awakening on the road to independence. In the emerging national narrative of Malaysia, the labourers who were sent to their death on the Thai–Burma railway had no place.\textsuperscript{36}

Hence, in Kanchanaburi there are few visible memorials to the römusha. Off the familiar tourist track, at the back of a local Thai–Chinese cemetery which abuts the main Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery, is an obelisk in their memory, maintained by the local temple. According to local sources, a mass grave of römusha was found nearby.\textsuperscript{37} Within the Second World War and JEATH museum near the famous bridge (described below) can also be found a glass display case containing the remains of over 100 römusha exhumed in the 1990s. However, it seems that it is only in the last decade that the governments of the successor states of
the British Empire have acknowledged any custodianship of a memory of the rōmusha. Recent Remembrance Day (11 November) ceremonies at the Kanchanaburi ceremony, for example, have included representatives of Malaysia and India who have laid wreaths before the Cross of Sacrifice.\textsuperscript{58}

Not surprisingly, there is also a relatively light footprint in Kanchanaburi of the Japanese memory of the railway, given the ongoing inability of successive Japanese governments to acknowledge fully their accountability for aggression and inhumanity during the Pacific War. Although Japanese politicians have showed since the 1990s some willingness to express ‘remorse and apologies’ for Japan’s ‘aggression and colonial rule’, and private and public museums and grass roots organizations have commemorated the suffering of all victims of war, many of those injured by the Japanese – for example, the 200,000 Asians forced into prostitution as ‘comfort women’ – are still seeking adequate compensation.\textsuperscript{59} Conservative politicians and activists also continue to deny or whitewash Japanese atrocities while those Japanese school textbooks which acknowledge the nation’s role as a perpetrator are condemned as exhibiting a form of ‘masochism’ and as incompatible with Japanese national history.\textsuperscript{40}

Japanese engagement with the memory of the railway in Thailand therefore has been largely at the level of individuals. Most notable of these has been Takashi Nagase (Fujiwara), an interpreter who witnessed prisoners being tortured on the railway and accompanied Allied War Graves units retrieving bodies for reburial in 1945. In the 1995 British POW memoir, \textit{The Railway Man}, released as a commercial film in 2013, he forms a central character.\textsuperscript{41} In a life-long journey of reconciliation, Takashi Nagase organised reunions of ex-prisoners and ex-Japanese military personnel, published an account of the railway, and built temples at Three Pagodas Pass on the Thai–Burma border and near the bridge on the River Kwai.\textsuperscript{42} His River Kwai Peace Foundation has also provided thousands of scholarships to disadvantaged students in Kanchanaburi.\textsuperscript{45}

Meanwhile other Japanese individuals, who are resident in Thailand, have developed their own practice of assembling at a memorial erected by the Japanese command in March 1944 to mark the completion of the Thai–Burma railway. Located near the ‘bridge on the River Kwai’, this obelisk is flanked by plaques in the various languages of the prisoners and rōmusha on the railway. Over the years it has become a Buddhist shrine, where individuals and associations, such as the local Japanese–Thai Chamber of Commerce, regularly lay wreaths. According to the local Thai gatekeeper, the Japanese cry on such occasions.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{Thai memory and heritage}

In this kaleidoscope of asymmetrical memory, the most important agents, particularly so far as protecting the heritage of the railway is concerned, are the Thais themselves. Yet for them the memory of the Second World
War is particularly ambiguous and unsettling. When confronted with the Japanese demand for free passage by its troops through Thailand on 7–8 December 1941, the right-wing government of Phibun Songkram capitulated after only token resistance by Thai troops. Later that month Thailand signed an agreement with the Japanese, and then, on 25 January 1942, declared war on Britain and the United States (a decision which split the government with some members defecting and later forming a resistance movement to the Japanese, the Seri Thai).  

In Thai historiography this collaboration with the Japanese is depicted as a pragmatic accommodation to the realities of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Thais were faced with a ‘devil’s choice’ in which capitulation was the only option by which they could preserve some semblance of their sovereignty. There is some merit in this argument, given that the Western powers could manifestly offer Thailand no protection from Japanese attack. But in this narrative of ‘flexible, survivalist diplomacy’ the building of the Thai–Burma railway on Thai soil, if it is mentioned at all, becomes an imposition of the Japanese on the Thais, not an atrocity in which they were complicit.

This amnesia is facilitated by the fact that the Thai liberal government which replaced Phibun Songkram in 1944 managed to be ‘cleared of war guilt’ in the eyes of the United States at least. Hence, few of today’s Thais (if those interviewed for the research informing this chapter are representative) know of the role their countrymen played in the construction of the railway: the fact that the Thai government was compelled to loan some 491 million baht to the Japanese to fund the railway; that food and other supplies for the railway personnel was supplied by local traders; and that, initially at least, Thai nationals worked on the railway. The latter practice ceased when tensions arose between the Japanese military and the Thai workers, thanks to the arrogance of the Japanese, their requisitioning of temples and their discourtesy to priests. But the Thai government then pressured the local Chinese to make up the shortfall of workers. Of the 5,200 Chinese–Thais provided between December 1943 and February 1945, 500 died.

If there is a narrative about the railway in today’s Thailand, it is one of the local people being ‘generally sympathetic and generous’ witnesses of atrocity. They took pity on the POWs, supplying them secretly with food, clothing, money, medicines and even radio parts so that they could communicate with the outside world. Yet, even this is a minor theme in Thai historiography and the ambiguity of the Second World War in Thai national memory is evident in the fact that Thailand, unlike Singapore, the Philippines and Burma, does not have a national day remembering its wartime experiences.

A further issue complicating Thai attitudes towards the Thai–Burma railway is their more general conception of heritage, including war heritage. As Brian Graham, G.J. Ashworth and J.E. Tunbridge reminds us,
heritage, like memory, is a construct, shaped by the present and purposely
developed in response to current needs.\textsuperscript{55} Hence, in today’s Thailand,
where the monarchy, Buddhism and nationalism form the ‘trinity’ of the
political consensus, ‘heritage’ is focussed on monumental sites that affirm
these values.\textsuperscript{56} Almost invariably the places seen as most significant are
palaces and ruins of ancient cities and temples, some of which are formally
recognised as UNESCO World Heritage sites.\textsuperscript{57} Sites of battles in earlier
centuries against Burmese invasion, such as the Nine Army Battle Historical
Park, some 40 kilometres north of Kanchanaburi town, are also given
prominence.

Little positive value is attached in Thailand to the practice which has
fuelled much of commemoration globally: namely, the addressing of past
traumas as a means of resolving contemporary problems of disadvantage
and prejudice. While many countries, including post-apartheid South
Africa, have exposed their ‘difficult histories’ of dispossession, colonisa-
tion, genocide and slavery, in the belief that this is a precondition of
reconciliation, Thailand places more importance on forgetting the com-
plexity of the past as a means of moving forward. As Thongchai Win-
ichakul said when writing about the 1996 commemoration of the
October 1976 massacre at Thammasat University, the Thai political
culture ‘normally does not recognise this means [i.e. talking about the
past with pride and confidence] of coming to terms with the past by
speaking out or sharing their stories as a way of healing’. Thailand rather
is a society that tries ‘to foster harmony by avoidance, rather than by an
inquiry into the truth’.\textsuperscript{58}

Moreover, in heritage practice in Thailand, there is little formal engage-
ment with the global phenomenon of dark or thana-tourism. Notwith-
standing the promotion of ‘The Death Railway’, Thais (our research
suggests) seem to struggle to understand why Western ‘pilgrims’ are
attracted by ‘sites associated with death, suffering or the seemingly
macabre’.\textsuperscript{59} Many of the surviving sites along the railway have therefore, as
we have seen, been developed as commodities for consumption in the
global tourism market rather than as sites of mass death which, for the
families of the victims, have a semi-sacred quality.

This is not surprising. Throughout the world the memory of war has
become commodified, and death has ‘become a commodity for consump-
tion in a global communications market’.\textsuperscript{60} Many of those who visit death-
related sites around the globe, moreover, are not necessarily ‘engaged in a
dark experience’. Often they are seeking leisure or pursuing an educa-
tional experience, rather than engaging in deliberate acts of commemora-
tion.\textsuperscript{61} However, the catering for these touristic markets risks trivialising
war memory and offending visitors whose purpose is to undertake a ‘pil-
grimage’ of remembrance and fulfil some sense of familial duty and social
obligation.\textsuperscript{62} At the bridge on the River Kwai, for example, fridge magnets
proclaim tritely that ‘Memory … can make that moment last forever’.
Others flaunt images of emaciated and semi-naked POWs, as do dining table place mats!

Possibly the attitude of the Thais to the heritage of the railway is influenced also by the fact that sites of mass death and burial sit uneasily with Buddhism. Since many victims of the Japanese died violent and horrific deaths, far from their families, the former camp sites along the railway are potentially unsettling. The spirits of the war dead were not appropriately consoled by the living, nor encouraged to leave this world. They may still trouble the landscape. Better then, perhaps, to leave unclaimed those sections of the railway which have returned to the jungle – or to leave unacknowledged the dark history of the tourist resorts along the Kwae Noi.

For all these reasons the remaining sections of the railway in Thailand are not protected by formal heritage regimes. Despite significant and persistent foreign interest in the railway, the Thai government has shown no inclination to nominate the railway for World Heritage status. As it happens, it would struggle to meet the requirements for World Heritage inscription of having 'outstanding universal value', and to fulfil any of the six cultural criteria required in this process. In addition, since the vast majority of the railway’s original infrastructure – the rails, the railway stations, the rolling stock and particularly the wooden trestle bridges so central to cultural memory – have been lost, much of the railway’s claim to authenticity is compromised.

The railway’s length in Thailand is not even subject to robust local heritage protection. Thailand has a hierarchical system of heritage management, with national government controls applying only to heritage features of national significance, regional controls to those of regional significance, provincial controls to sites of provincial significance, and municipal to those at this level. Over the years the maintenance and development of the railway therefore has been fragmented between several agencies, including the State Railways of Thailand, the Kanchanaburi municipality and the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Only some of these are concerned with heritage preservation and none with the commemoration of war.

Local carriers of memory

The nature of Thai attitudes to memory and heritage has several implications for the Thai–Burma railway. First, its physical remains and environment are not accorded the protection that Westerners would expect of heritage with such multinational significance. Key sites are at risk of decay: for example, the Wampo viaduct where the overhanging cliff is cracking and threatens the stability of the railway below. Other sites are a mélange of commercialism and random commemorative activities. The precinct of the bridge in Kanchanaburi is scattered with war memorials, which seem to be used largely as photo opportunities by tourists. Among them is a
bronze plaque installed by an Australian periodontist, Ross Bastiaan (one of many that this highly motivated individual has placed at historical sites around the world). An installation of three large letters spelling out W-A-R; and a large wall, briefly telling the history of the railway, in English and Thai. Amid the bustling markets stalls, it is hard to avoid the impression that the Thai authorities responsible for this public space attach most value to the physical infrastructure of the railway: the impressive bridge with its solid concrete piers and the wartime locomotives on display nearby. Across the river a Thai–Chinese temple and massive statue of Buddha, constructed in 2011, has severely compromised the wider heritage environment of the bridge. Previously the far bank of the river was vegetation, which the visitor could imagine as resembling the landscape of the war years.

To find the railway depicted as the tragedy that its victims remember, the visitor must look to lesser-known sites in Kanchanaburi town. These have been developed not by public agencies but by individuals, whose varying motives illustrate the multiplicity of meanings that have come to be invested in the railway’s history. This first of these is a small museum in the house of Nai Boonpong Sirivejabhandu in the old sector of the town. A canteen contractor to the Japanese during the war years, Boonpong had access to the POW camps as far north as Tha Khanun. Working secretly with a clandestine civilian resistance organisation in Bangkok, the V organisation, he used

![Figure 5.2 The bridge on the River Kwai, and the Buddhist temple constructed in 2011 (source: The late Kim McKenzie by courtesy of Sophie Jensen).](image-url)
this access to supply medicines, extra food and even radio parts to the POWs. After the Second World War, Boonpong became something of a transnational hero. He was awarded medals by the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, and in the 1980s was honoured in an Australian medical exchange scheme for Thai surgeons, named jointly with Weary Dunlop. When opening the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum in April 1998, the Australian Prime Minister John Howard spoke of the ‘sacrifice’ and ‘selfless actions’ of Boonpong and his wife. He presented their grandson with a certificate of appreciation, marking Australia’s ‘enduring gratitude for the virtuous deeds of your grandparents and … the warmth of our friendship which has grown ever stronger since the war’.66

A second site is the Second World War and JEATH (Japan, England, Australia, Thailand and Holland) Museum located in the immediate vicinity of the bridge. Built by a local Thai–Chinese businessman, Prayong Chansiri, this museum is not devoted to the history of the Thai–Burma railway as such. It is more a memorial to Chansiri’s father, who died as a consequence of injuries incurred during Allied bombing of Kanchanaburi in 1944.67 In its courtyard and multiple galleries, war memorabilia and weaponry of all kinds mingle eclectically with Thai cultural artefacts. There are effigies of Hitler, Stalin, Tojo and other Second World War leaders, bomb casings, Buddhist figurines, a car used by the Japanese, a wartime locomotive and a memorial to a Thai soldier ‘who love a country more than life’. Yet for all this museological confusion, within the museum there is much that speaks to the railway’s history and the suffering of those who worked on it. Graphic dioramas and murals show prisoners bloodied and wounded in the bombing of the bridge, toiling in their camps, incarcerated in cattle trucks or suffering under Japanese guards along the railway. There is also, as mentioned, a case containing the remains of unidentified rōmusha. These are positioned in a chamber devoted to the history of the Second World War and, in a gesture that is manifestly multicultural, are flanked by a Buddhist shrine and a famous image of an Australian prisoner of war being decapitated by the Japanese, not on the railway but at Aitape, New Guinea.68

Chansiri’s self-appointed role, it seems, is to use the horrors of war, and the pain the railway’s construction caused families such as his, to build a case for peace among nations. ‘Peace is the Behaviour Merit’, ‘War is Sinful Behaviour’ and ‘The Phenomenon of War Brings Adverse Effects to Society’ declare the placards in the entrance courtyard. It is a transnational message with Buddhist tones within a deeply personal museology. To the Western eye, some scenes resonate with the Christian narrative of the suffering of Jesus. A diorama showing a group of prisoners helping a collapsed colleague echoes the pietà by Michelangelo in St Peter’s Basilica in Rome, while the bodies of those killed in the bombings have markings that resemble Christ’s stigmata.
This narrative of peace is evident in a third local site of memory, also called the JEATH museum, located further down river in Kanchanaburi. Managed by a Buddhist temple, Wat Chaichumpol, the museum was created in 1977 at the instigation of the then chief abbot with the aim of providing tourists with some historical information about the Thai-Burma railway. The acronym JEATH was adopted when local people rejected the original title: ‘Death’. The museum takes the form of a prisoner-of-war hut, with bamboo platforms on either side of a long aisle. Its displays include a serendipitous collection of reproductions of visual material, extracts from POW accounts and images donated by artists. The message of the museum is clear: ‘Dear visitors’, its promotional pamphlet declares, ‘JEATH museum has been constructed not for the maintenance of hatred among human beings, especially among the Japanese and allied countries, but to warn and teach the lesson of HOW TERRIBLE WAR IS. MAY PEACE ALWAYS CONQUER VIOLENCE’. The flags of many nations fly outside its gates.

The international vision of the JEATH museum is evident also in the newspaper articles, faded photographs, and letters of gratitude from ex-prisoners on display at the museum. These attest to the relationships that have developed over the years between the local people and the men once involved in building the railway, and to the desire to build friendships that transcend nationality and different historical experiences. That this tradition is now embedded in temple practice is evident from the fact that a later abbot has visited the statue of Weary Dunlop in Benalla, Victoria, and performed Buddhist ceremonies in memory of cross-cultural friendships.

Shared or transnational memory?

Each of these three sites in Kanchanaburi speaks to a memory of the railway which extends beyond the local. But whether they can be read as evidence of an emerging transnational memory is more debatable. Each site is fragile, physically as well as in terms of the agency which sustains it. The Second World War and JEATH museum is dependent on the passion and investment of one elderly man. Boonpong’s house relies on the commitment of his family, while the street in which it is located, despite its obvious heritage value, seems to be in a state of disrepair. The JEATH museum at the temple, meanwhile, is showing severe signs of decay in the tropical climate. To judge by the significant investment in the adjoining temple precinct, the renovation of the museum does not seem to be a priority.

More importantly, if we accept Jay Winter’s proposition that collective memory needs to be seen as ‘the process through which different collectives … engage in acts of remembrance together’, then the claim of these sites to represent a transnational memory is thin. None of them have given birth to joint acts of remembrance in which cultural and national
differences are subsumed within a new transnational synthesis which reflects different ways of remembering the past. Indeed the Second World War and JEATH Museums and Boonpong’s house seem to attract few foreign visitors.

The rituals and practices that do attract significant crowds in Kanchanaburi are those which reinforce national rather than transnational memories. The Sound and Light show held at the bridge, for example, is clearly aimed at a Thai audience. The crowds are largely local and the language of the presentation, in 2011 at least, was Thai. Admittedly, in the previous year the spectacle had shown signs of acknowledging transnational memories of the railway. Called The War is Over it depicted three families – Thai, Western and Japanese – all damaged by the Second World War and sharing a common humanity and suffering. The narrative was delivered in English as well as Thai. Yet the local reaction to this version of the Sound and Light, even though it included the obligatory fireworks display, was so negative that the following year the more traditional spectacle was reinstated. At its climax was the popular stream train, crossing the bridge, hooting dramatically into the night air. The language in which the narrative was delivered was Thai.

Anzac Day ceremonies at Hellfire Pass and the Kanchanaburi war cemetery, for their part, are delivered only in English. Organised by the Australian and New Zealand embassies in Bangkok, they are, in Kanchanaburi at least, attended by officials of many countries. Local town authorities and Thai military personnel are present, for security as well as symbolic purposes, and participate by laying wreaths at the Cross of Sacrifice. But the ceremony is unashamedly a transplanted cultural form, adhering to the long-established template and Christian ritual of Anzac Day ceremonies in Australia and New Zealand.

In conclusion, it would seem likely that, as the individuals who created the local museums in Kanchanaburi age and die, their attempts to create a more inclusive memory of the railway will themselves dissolve. As Jay Winter again reminds us, all commemoration and remembrance is dependent on the agency of individuals acting in groups of two to groups in their thousands. ‘When such people lose interest, or time, or for any other reason cease to act; when they move away or die, then the collective dissolves, and so do collective acts of remembrance.’

The Australian-funded memorial museum at Hellfire Pass may prove more lasting, if only for political reasons. So long as the Australian government has the will to maintain it, the Thai authorities will probably not risk damaging the strong and multi-faceted diplomatic relationship between the two countries. But, on the other hand, the legal basis to Australia’s tenure of the land is weak, and at the time of writing in 2013, the Royal Thai Army, which controls the site on which the memorial museum resides, had closed to tourists half of the walking trail which stretches beyond Hellfire Pass.
What seems beyond doubt is that the ‘Bridge on the River Kwai’ will remain the dominant site of memory of the railway. It will continue to be core to the local economy and identity. Foreigners will continue to visit it, bringing with them their own memories of the past. But the character of the precinct, and the commemorative practices associated with it, will be determined by local priorities and Thai usage. Hence the Thai–Burma railway will testify not so much to the power of shared, transnational memory but rather to the manner in which the significance of sites of memory can change with the passage of time and be invested with multiple meanings.

Notes

1 The research for this chapter has been supported by the Australian Research Council; the Australia-Thailand Institute, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; and the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Many of the observations and conclusions herein are the result of seven field work visits to Kanchanaburi in 2007–13.
5 Some of the proceeds were also put into a reparations fund. See Paul Kratoska, ed., The Thailand–Burma Railway, 1942–1946: Documents and Selected Writings, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2006), 50.
7 For dark tourism, see John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster (London: Continuum, 2000).
17 Bruce Scates, Anzac Journeys: Returning to the Battlefields of World War II (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ch. 4.
18 For the memory of the Far Eastern prisoners of war in Britain, see Sibylla Jane Flower, ‘Memory and the Prisoner of War Experience’, in Blackburn and Hack, Forgotten Captives, 57–72.
20 For ‘King Rat’, see Hack and Blackburn, ‘The Bridge on the River Kwai and King Rat’, 162–166.
23 Raben, 100.
24 Fieldwork, April 2011.
26 As indicative see Gun Plot, ‘Where the Dead of the Thai–Burma Railway lie Buried’, www.gunplot.net/kwairailway/siamburmarailway.html, viewed 1 September 2013.
27 Fieldwork, 25 April 2012.
28 For the shaping of the Burmese narrative of wartime resistance by the military junta from the 1950s on, see Kevin Blackburn, ‘War Memory and Nation-building in South East Asia’, South East Asia Research, 18, no. 1 (2010): 17–22.
37 Fieldwork, November 2007.
38 Fieldwork, November 2010, April 2012.
43 Inscription on the statue of Nagase Takashi at JEATH Museum, Kanchanaburi.
44 Fieldwork, April 2011.
48 Syamananda, 187.
53 Jayanama, 196, 258.
54 Blackburn, 28.
55 Graham et al., 2.


64 As of 2007 (A.B. Arrunnapaporn, ‘Interpretation of Atrocity Heritage of the ‘Death Railway’ of the River Kwai’, PhD thesis [Silpakorn University, Thailand, 2007], 36, 146–147), the railway was not on the Thai national heritage list. Subsequent research suggests that this remains the case.


66 Speech supplied by Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra, under Special Access, Document series 981481.

67 Interview with Chansiri, November 2010.


69 Interview with Phramaha Tomsna Tongproh, November 2010.

70 Interview with Phramaha Tomsna Tongproh, November 2010.


72 Winter, 4.