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Winter, T and Logan, W 2014, Asian Cities: Cultural heritage and the interplay between nation building and internationalism, *Historic Environment*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 1-6.

Available from Deakin Research Online

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Asian Cities: Cultural heritage and the interplay between nation building and internationalism

Tim Winter and William Logan

It is over a decade since the volume *The Disappearing Asian City* (Logan 2002) was published. An edited volume bringing together a number of experts on the region, the book identified the threats facing buildings, archaeological sites and the historic character of cities, as well as the myriad of challenges of raising civic and regulatory awareness about the value of cultural heritage in times of rapid transformation. It was a set of concerns and arguments that remain as pertinent as ever. Those who have lived and worked in different parts of Asia over the past decade on cultural heritage issues, frequently use the terms 'extraordinary' or 'bewildering' to describe the scale and speed of transformation that has taken place. Indeed, for those concerned about maintaining continuities between past and present – whether they be social, spiritual or material - the development of cities, the wholesale movements of communities in and out of urban landscapes, together with the dramatic increase in industries like tourism, has often been disorienting, and in some cases deeply confronting: both professionally and emotionally. And yet, to focus on loss and destruction would miss a whole set of other fascinating, emergent and important trends. As numerous publications in the intervening period have shown, cultural heritage has become a topic of intense interest and debate in the majority of Asian societies, for a host of reasons (Askew 2010; Broudehoux 2004; Pai 2013).

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one perceives the angel of history. His face is towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Benjamin 1940: 392-3)

Taken from Walter Benjamin's musings on the rise of a European modernity, this 1940 description of Paul Klee's painting *Angel of History* strikingly captures many Asian contexts over the past decade or so. Across much of the region, the second half of the twentieth century was defined by major, and in some cases prolonged, social and political turmoil. For those countries advancing out of periods of conflict and violence – whether it be domestic or international – or struggling to forge culturally and politically cohesive societies after eras of colonial rule, the storm of progress, a rush towards modernity, has often found its energy and its momentum by staring back at the past and embracing histories that are contemplated for both their wreckage and immutable grandeur. In such contexts, cultural heritage has been caught up in a series of contradictory and paradoxical trends. As governments have sanctioned the demolition of entire

neighbourhoods, even cities, they have simultaneously established new institutions designed to promote heritage conservation and awareness. And as countries have gone into battle over the 'authentic origins' of textile designs or the ownership of archaeological sites, they have also found new ways to cooperate and share mutual pasts through the language of heritage. Of course, contradictory trends, missed opportunities, and reasons for despair and optimism have defined heritage movements throughout the world in the last 150 years or so. In this respect Asia is not unique. But as Winter and Daly (2012) suggest, it is the speed and scale of Asia that sets it apart from many other regions and moments in history. Over a number of years since the early 2000s, China, India, Malaysia, South Korea and Vietnam are among those that have seen GDP growth rates hovering near or around the double-digit level. Equally, in other years, other countries have been defined by economic stagnation and domestic unrest. This, coupled with the scale and enormous diversity of Asia – culturally, politically and historically – also means it would be naïve to try and pin-point some key 'over-arching trends' surrounding the region's cultural heritage. Rather, publications such as this special issue of *Historic Environment on Asian Cities* can only seek to provide indicative examples, and qualitatively rich insights into various situations and contexts.

Accordingly, the issue opens with an explication of how the language and values of heritage have shifted over the last decade or so in the small, landlocked country of Laos. Colin Long tracks the fading of socialism with national day commemorations, and the coterminous rise of Royalist iconography. Crucially, far from being an isolated phenomenon, this shift reflects broader current trends across Lao's capital, Vientiane, and the development of its built environment and urban spaces. For Long, the quiet abandonment of socialism has created a new dynamic of urban development, one oriented by various new influences, including private, family and international investment. One important trend is the influx of regional investment, with Chinese and Vietnamese funds driving significant parts of the city's infrastructure, including its museums and cultural institutions.

Transformation is a theme that also underpins the paper by Kecia Fong on Mandalay, Bagan and Yangon, three sites that constitute much of the discussion around heritage conservation in Myanmar today. After decades of military rule, the country is undergoing a series of economic and social reforms, such that cultural and civic identities are being actively remade. There has been a spectacular level of international interest and inflow of capital in recent years, albeit in geographically imbalanced ways. Yangon has been the recipient of the bulk of the attention. For this reason, after brief interludes into Mandalay and Bagan, Fong's analysis turns to the complex 'geographies of knowledge' that have formed around conserving one of Southeast Asia's most extensive and well-preserved colonial cities. This wave of international attention has

been accompanied by a complex domestic situation, wherein a nineteenth-century cosmopolitan urban space has been enmeshed in a modern, post independence political culture oriented by an inward looking homogenising nationalism. Historic representation is thus left with tensions between accounting for histories of transnationalism or cultural pluralism and state-civic anxieties over maintaining social cohesion.

Moving South to Malaysia, Khoo Salma Nasution addresses the familiar and perennial challenge of World Heritage induced tourism pressures. Fascinatingly, Nasution identifies the problems created by the transnational



Figure 1: Historic Zheng Qing Guan Daoist temple carefully protected amid high-rise buildings in central Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, October 2013 (Source: William Logan)

economies of birds, or, to be more precise, the by-products of swiftlet nesting practices. In the urban precinct of Penang's George Town, swiftlet farming has emerged as a lucrative business. Nests, made of bird saliva, are harvested in response to rising demand for the 'bird's-nest' delicacy, which is now widely consumed for its perceived health benefits across Southeast Asia and China. Whilst swifts naturally roost in caves and houses, farmers have enticed birds to roost in human habitats. In George Town the scale of this practice has grown rapidly in recent years, such that entire streets and neighbourhoods have been colonised by tens of thousands of birds. Not surprisingly, pollution and environmental degradation has followed. Whilst the public health contradictions associated with this industry are intriguing in themselves, Nasution highlights the problems this is causing for those heritage buildings that lie within the zoned regions of the world heritage site. From there the paper considers the challenges of tourism induced development and encroachment which have emerged since World Heritage listing more broadly.



Figure 2: Development of Jade Street historic precinct, Kunming, China, October 2013 (Source: William Logan)

Moving closer to the western frontiers of Asia, we turn to the issues facing Baghdad, Iraq. Diane Siebrandt takes up the issues of identity, belonging and attachment in a city ravaged by war and violence. Her paper opens with a reminder of the cultural and historical significance of Baghdad: 'a cultural capital of the world' in Siebrandt's terms. As she notes, the city continued to prosper well into the 1980s, and the Ba'ath Party continued to support traditional arts under the guise of Arab nationalism. In the wake of repeated violence, the city's character was profoundly changed with concrete barriers and armed checkpoints becoming commonplace. And yet Siebrandt traces the persistence of tradition and cultural practice; processes that form a resilience of attachment to place and identity for residents living through horrific circumstances. It is a story that weaves together poetry with gardens, festivals with refurbished public spaces.

In the article by William Logan the theme is the links between image making, nation building and the appropriation of Hanoi's heritage in such processes. Drawing on his repeated visits to the city, Logan tracks a number of factors shaping the emergence of heritage related discourses and initiatives since the 1990s. The interplay between nationalism and internationalism is once again pivotal here. Tourism, inflows of foreign capital and the 1000th anniversary of the city's founding are identified as among the factors behind world heritage nomination and the remaking of the city's historic quarters. In offering a critical reading of such events, Logan suggests the domestic pressures behind World Heritage listing are indicative of the wider politicisation of World Heritage, not just at the inscription stage but also affecting its mechanisms for providing oversight of properties on the list.

Turning to Sri Lanka, Anoma Pieris examines tensions over cultural heritage vis à vis shifting national aspirations. Accordingly, she examines the capital cities of Colombo and Sri Jayewardenepura and the entanglements of heritage during a 26 year civil war. As Pieris indicates, in 1978 the government of Sri Lanka moved its administrative capital from Colombo to the suburb of Kotte, located just a few kilometres away and the site of the pre-colonial city of Jayavaddanapura (city of victory). Colombo, the capital of successive European colonisers was recast as the country's 'commercial capital'. It is a story of competing inscriptions of national meaning, one that has revolved around class, caste and religious differences. Self-rule and political turmoil form the wider backdrop of an account that focuses on themes of dereliction and revival and the eventual 'worlding' of Colombo as an international city. It is within these

challenging circumstances that Pieris considers the role of cultural heritage in nation building and identity formation.

Taking up the theme of cultural diplomacy Amy Clarke's paper considers the case of Kolkata, India. As the final resting place of an estimated 2,000 Scots, Kolkata's cemetery continues to be of significant cultural and historical importance to Scotland today. The site has become the focal point of a Protocol of Co-operation between the two countries, designed to facilitate Scottish involvement in conservation projects. Cooperation, nationalism and global prestige are all in play in Clarke's intriguing account of the project and the institutional relationships that formed around it. Clarke pursues questions such as why Scotland's historic presence in Kolkata is so important to modern-day Scotland, and what is driving the use of heritage as a foundation for diplomatic ties. In considering the implications for the city itself she also examines what these projects tell us about Kolkata's future as a destination for tourism, and the likely implications it will have for the city's international image. Cognisant of the dynamics of diplomacy and its tendency to uncritically celebrate uplifting stories, Clarke highlights the gap between good intentions, proclaimed aims and the lack of attention paid to project outcomes. However, the paper neatly steers us away from concluding that the project was a failure by highlighting the other political and diplomatic agendas at play in such a situation.

The issue closes with a book review and a short commentary by Anne Warr on Shanghai. Warr's essay explores four key periods in the city's history that have contributed to the character of Shanghai today: the Taiping Rebellion of 1853-1864, the Nanjing Decade of 1927-1937, the Maoist Period of 1949-1976, and Post-Mao Capitalist-Communism era of 1976 onwards. As Warr shows, each period was underpinned by a particular political ideology concerning China's view of itself in the world; processes that are manifest in the city's built space today.

Finally here, we would like to acknowledge the considerable support Tracy Ireland and other members of the organisational committee for the 2014 conference marking the Centenary of Canberra. Without their time, efforts and generosity, this special issue would not have been possible. As the following pages indicate, this issue represents the first of several outcomes of the conference.



Figure 3: Jade Street historic precinct combines restoration, adaptive re-use and modern infill (Source: William Logan)

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