

Invited Paper

Editorial: Culture, Heritage and Tourism in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

This editorial brings together several issues on which I have been working during the past two decades. Studies of tourism development in Southeast Asia were still in their infancy in the early 1990s when I became involved in a multidisciplinary programme of research to investigate various dimensions of tourism in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore. But the importance which governments in the region from the 1980s onwards gave to the promotion of the tourism industry in their national plans was a major factor in the expansion of academic research in this field of studies. Tourism studies have acquired scholarly respectability and my recent interests have since moved into an examination of the relationships between culture, identity, heritage and tourism in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on the comparison of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the region.

Keywords: Culture, heritage, identity, tourism, Southeast Asia

CULTURE AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

What I want to emphasise, as John Clammer has done eloquently before me (2009, p.9-11), is that Southeast Asia is characterised, though it is not clearly and unequivocally defined by cultural diversity and openness. It has a long history of cultural connections with other parts of the world, and it demonstrates the importance of physical migrations and cultural flows into, across and out of the region, which have generated cross-cultural encounters and social intercourse. These interactions have in turn resulted in cultural hybridisation, synthesis and mixed communities, in the phenomenon of pluralism or multiculturalism within national boundaries, and in the co-existence of culturally different majority and minority populations. A major arena within which culture and cultural change operates across the region is that of tourism and the cross-cultural, cross-national and cross-ethnic encounters which it engenders.

The processes of cultural differentiation and interaction have made Southeast Asia one of the most culturally complex and fascinating regions in the world. Indeed, there are those who have argued that it is 'the ubiquity of publicly displayed cultural forms' (Bowen, 1995, p.1047-1048) and the fact that Southeast Asia is 'arguably the best place to look for culture' (Steedly, 1999, p.432-433) which serve to define it as a region. The centrality of culture has in turn prompted social scientists of a particular theoretical persuasion, to pursue these cultural expressions relentlessly and develop a particular way of perceiving and analysing culture in the region (Bowen, 2000; and *see* King, 2001, 2005). On this last point, Mary Steedly suggests that it is the work of a particular assembly of American social scientists, pre-eminent among them being Clifford Geertz, which 'have thoroughly associated this part of the world, and Indonesia in particular, with a meaning-based,

interpretive concept of culture' (1999, p.432). Yet, the situation in Southeast Asia has become, if anything, infinitely more complex since Geertz turned his early forensic attention to Javanese community rituals (*slametan*) and Balinese cockfights (1973). More recently, processes of cultural change in the region have become intertwined with and indeed are generated by modern forms of globalisation, the expansion of consumer culture under late capitalism, the rapidly growing influence of the global media and trans-national communication systems, and very importantly international tourism. Zygmunt Baumann, for example, has pointed to a shift from the importance of political economy to the centrality of culture in post-modern society so that power, influence and control operate in more subtle ways through advertising, public relations and the creation of needs and longings by those who generate and control flows of information and knowledge (1987, 1998).

As regional specialists of Southeast Asia, there is an increasing and vital need for us to understand the character of cultural change and encounters in the region and the responses of the local people to this bewildering range of forces, pressures and influences. I would argue, therefore, that the comparative, region-wide study of culture is central to our enterprise as social scientists and within that the importance of understanding identity and its construction and transformation. It is with these considerations in mind that I also argue that we need to devote much more attention than hitherto to the multidimensional and cultural context of tourism and heritage and the ways in which the rapid and dramatic expansion of tourism in Southeast Asia is both changing cultural forms and being shaped by local cultures. Indeed, when we examine tourism development in the region, we have to immediately address the issue of culture and the fact that cultural tourism is a major focus of interest for both international and domestic tourists. This interest has in turn been strengthened with the more recent introduction of the concept of heritage and the importance of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the tourism and heritage industry in Southeast Asia.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

It goes without saying that 'culture' is one of the most crucial, though overworked, and indeed 'complicated', 'complex', 'controversial' and 'divergent' concepts in the social sciences and, given its status as a focal point of interest, it has quite naturally been the subject of the most intense debates and disagreements. Of course, it does not help that it is a term which is also used in a multitude of different ways in popular discourse and that it occurs with alarming and confusing regularity in discussions within and across a range of academic disciplines. In these debates culture is (or more specifically elements of it are) produced or constructed, deconstructed, invented, reinvented, reproduced, modified, discarded, lost, contemplated, inherited, disseminated, adopted, assimilated, absorbed, deployed, manipulated, elaborated, displayed, commoditised, exchanged, and transformed. Chris Jenks in his book *Culture* in the Routledge 'Key Ideas' series presents us with a health warning when he says 'the idea of culture embraces a range of topics, processes, differences and even paradoxes such that only a confident and wise person would begin to pontificate about it and perhaps only a fool would attempt to write a book about it' (1993, p.1).

Culture is therefore a concept; it is, as Kahn proposes, an 'intellectual construct' (1992, p. 161). For me, the following considerations are important. Culture is taught, learned, shared and transmitted as a part of collective life. It comprises the ideational, conceptual, conscious dimension of human life and the ideas, accumulated skills and expertise embodied in material objects (art and artefacts) and carried and given expression most vitally in language. It encompasses the symbolic, meaningful, evaluative, interpretative, motivated, cognitive and classificatory dimensions of humanity (Geertz, 1973). It refers in its more popular connotations to 'ways of life' and 'ways of behaving'; it is therefore pervasive. It has to be understood in terms of form, content and process and although there are cultural regularities and continuities which are easily detected, there are

also quite obviously alterations, modifications and transformations. In some ways, though not as neatly bounded as was once originally supposed, it is patterned and has a certain systematic quality so that someone who has not been socialised into a particular culture, can, when he or she has discovered its ethical judgements, values, standards, beliefs and views of the world, and the bases of human interaction, organisation and behaviour, make sense of it even without necessarily approving of its underlying principles.

THE CONCEPT OF HERITAGE

Much of what I have said about culture can also be considered in contemplating 'heritage' as a concept. Though passed on from one generation to another, heritage is not handed down unchanged. Like culture, of which it is a part, heritage is subject to selection, construction, negotiation and contestation in the context of more general processes of local and national identity formation (Hitchcock & King, 2003a, 2003b). Like culture, heritage is a concept which is difficult to define. In a narrow and simple sense, heritage is 'a legacy; a set of traditions, values, or treasured material things' (Universal Dictionary, 1987, p. 721). Smith, taking the meaning somewhat further and emphasising human agency and the active engagement with heritage, proposes that it is distinct from but related to 'the past' and to 'history', and comprises 'the contemporary use of the past, including both its interpretation and re-interpretation' (2003, p.82). In introducing the notion of interpretation, which suggests that heritage is created, given meaning and imbued with significance, we move into a much broader conceptualisation of heritage which pertains to concepts of identity and nationalism (Peleggi, 1996, p. 432; Winter, 2007, p.5-8). In this latter sense, heritage, presented and re-presented as something of cultural origin which relates to the past and which is in some way given special value or significance as 'treasure' or 'legacy', is constructed and appropriated by the state and its agents as an object worthy of political,

economic and 'touristic' attention, although usually only certain items are selected for this purpose and others are ignored or discarded. However, the deployment by the state of heritage resources, particularly those designated as of global significance, for the realisation of certain politico-ideological purposes does not usually go unchallenged and visions of national revival, identity, history, sovereignty, modernity and progress often compete with international conservation and scientific agendas, commercial and developmental interests, international tourist views of the exotic and the spectacular, and local community cultural and economic engagement with the designated sites (Winter, 2007, p.139-149).

In post-colonial developing states, this process of identity construction is an even more urgent task and the need, in Anderson's terms (1991, p.178-185), to 'imagine' the nation often leads to the selection and deployment of archaeological finds, cultural traditions and heritage sites to present images of national resilience, unity, and innovation, often in the context of an 'imagined' golden or glorious age of endeavour and achievement. The 'essence' or 'genius' of the nation is usually traced back to a glorious past and to benevolent and enlightened government when everything that is now cherished as demarcating and defining the nation was created and set in motion.

In summary then the concept of heritage refers to tangible and concrete elements of the past (buildings, monuments, artefacts, sites and constructed landscapes), as well as those aspects of culture expressed in behaviour, action and performance (usually referred to as 'intangible cultural heritage'), which are interpreted, valued and judged to be worthy of our attention, interest and protection. In addition to the state, other domestic agents who are involved in the creation of meanings and understandings in relation to heritage and the past comprise local tourists and those communities which live in or in close proximity to heritage sites and those who secure their livelihood from working there.

Yet heritage is also contested and transformed not only by domestic agents but

also by global actors, including representatives of international organisations such as UNESCO. It has therefore become a highly politicised project to do with identity and conflicts over its character and trajectory. UNESCO's World Heritage Centre in Paris and its associated Committee designates World Heritage Sites as of either 'cultural' or 'natural' or 'mixed' (both cultural and natural) importance, and more particularly, as sites of 'outstanding universal value' (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/>). The *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage*, which was introduced to protect global heritage, was adopted by UNESCO in 1972, as well as the 'criteria for selection' of sites to be included on the World Heritage List. Until 2004, sites were selected using six cultural and four natural criteria, but since then, they have been brought together in revised guidelines to comprise a composite list of ten criteria displayed on the Centre's web-pages under the title 'The Criteria for Selection'. As one would expect, the list is sprinkled with superlatives: for example, the first is 'to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius', another 'to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared', yet another 'to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history', and another 'to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change'.

TOURISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In the early 1990s in our edited book entitled *Tourism in South-East Asia* (Hitchcock, King and Parnwell, 1993), we argued that the future research agenda for tourism studies must include, among other things, the urgent need to understand the dynamics of tourism development

in the region from inter- and multi-disciplinary perspectives, expand the range of case-material and engage in more ambitious comparative studies (across countries, sub-regions, tourist sites, communities, ethnic groups, social classes, gender and agents). There were also several key emerging themes in the early 1990s, including the re-thinking of the concepts of culture, identity, tradition and authenticity, given the importance of cultural and ethnic tourism in Asia; the ways in which local communities and their "traditions" were constructed and represented; the character of newly emerging "tourisms" including visits to heritage sites; and the interrelationships between tourism and other processes of change.

Of course, there have been many important contributions to the study of tourism in Southeast Asia since the 1990s, but in my view, a theoretically exciting edited collection, which has become a standard reference in the field, is Michel Picard's and Robert Wood's *Tourism, Ethnicity and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies* (1997). Picard and Wood concentrate on a set of interrelated themes which have been a major preoccupation in tourism studies during the past 15 years. These comprise the politics of identity construction and transformation, modes of cultural and ethnic representation, the role of the state and development policies in cultural and ethnic processes, and the responses of local communities to tourism and national level practices. Picard's path-breaking study of the 'touristification' of the Balinese culture also lends substantial ethnographic weight to these concerns (1996), along with two recent outstanding studies of cultural politics, identity construction, heritage and tourism: Kathleen Adams' detailed and penetrating work on 'art as politics' and changing identity in Tana Toraja, Indonesia (2006), and Tim Winter's masterly and pioneering analysis of Cambodian (Khmer) identity and tourism in relation to the World Heritage Site of Angkor (2007). Another dimension to this work is Winter's recent co-edited book, *Asia on Tour*, which is the first substantial compendium on domestic tourism in Asia to examine the ways in which an expanding

Asian tourism is changing the ways in which we conceive of and analyse the cultural particulars, including heritage sites, of tourism development (Winter, Teo & Chang, 2008).

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

To bring all these concerns together and to continue to develop the research agenda a multi-disciplinary team in which I am involved has recently launched a wide-ranging programme of research, supported, among other sponsors, by The British Academy and the Research Committee of the Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom on *UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Southeast Asia: Cross-cultural and Managerial Perspectives*. It is examining 20 out of the 31 inscribed UNESCO sites, both cultural and natural, across Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Field work has already been undertaken on the three UNESCO sites in Malaysia: Melaka/George Town, Mulu and Kinabalu. The programme also emerges from two recently co-edited books in which I have been involved on *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions* (Hitchcock, King, & Parnwell, 2009) and *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia* (Hitchcock, King, & Parnwell, 2010).

Among other matters, the current research focuses on the interactions, tensions and conflicts generated at these sites between different stakeholders and users which comprise local communities, national and local governments, international bodies, domestic and overseas tourists, and civil society institutions. Obviously, the significance and involvement of these different bodies will vary from case to case. In addressing the issues which arise in the management of the sites, the main concern is to determine how conflicting pressures are making themselves felt on these sites, how those who carry responsibility for their management are

addressing them and how the different users interact with and perceive these sites. What is a common locus of potential tension is, on the one hand, the granting of a globally acknowledged heritage status to a particular site with all that this entails in its preservation, conservation, and what is perceived to be its authenticity in historical terms, and, on the other hand, the attraction that the site has, once inscribed on the World Heritage List; first, for tourists and those in the tourism business; secondly, governments and their concern with national identity and prestige and the promotion of economic growth and development; and thirdly, the local communities which live in and around the site and often depend on it or come to depend on it for their livelihoods.

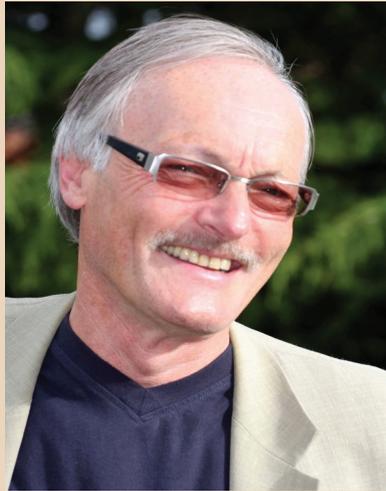
Therefore, there is often ongoing tension between the need to protect and conserve a historically and culturally important site (and in UNESCO terms, its authentic or original characteristics) which has been bequeathed to the world by earlier generations and provide it with its 'universal human value', and the pressures exerted by the vagaries of changing human political, social and economic interests, values and use, and the changing demands of tourism, leisure, recreation and consumption. Finally, these sites provide 'a new genre of community, both imagined and real' comprising 'a new social space, new values and borders' (Miura, 2010, p.103). Although the importance of World Heritage Sites carries their significance and influence beyond their physical borders in that they are part of national and international flows of people, capital, ideas and values, they can also be seen as defined, bounded and localised spaces within which there are encounters, exchanges and conflicts. In short, they provide ideal locations within which the study of culture, heritage, identity and tourism come together and can be analysed and understood.

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Victor King has been teaching and undertaking research in the sociology and anthropology of Southeast Asia since the early 1970s when he completed his Master's degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in anthropology, geography and Indonesian Studies, and then undertook field research in Kalimantan, Indonesia for his doctoral degree in social anthropology at the University of Hull. Most of his career was spent in the Centre for South-East Asian Studies and the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Hull. He

was appointed to a Senior Lectureship there in 1988 and immediately thereafter to the re-established Chair in Southeast Asian Studies (from 1988 to 2005). At various times, he served in Hull as Director of the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Dean of the School of Social and Political Sciences, Director of the University's Graduate School and Pro-Vice-Chancellor. He joined the University of Leeds in 2005 as Professor of Southeast Asian Studies and became Executive Director of the White Rose East Asia Centre (WREAC) in 2006. He was awarded the title of Emeritus Professor in 2010.

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