UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Southeast Asia: a comparative and critical commentary

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Main points

• Heritage is an industry and with agencies such as the UNESCO World Heritage Centre (WHC) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in Paris increasingly globalised

• UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS) are deployed as places of national prestige and tourism development

• But also sites for encounters and conflicts: local people, tourists (domestic and international), NGOs, government agencies, national governments, international agencies

• Major issue: the need to protect and conserve (UNESCO’s concern with authenticity, preserving the past, maintaining the status quo) and government concerns to use the sites for purposes of national identity and prestige and tourism development

• What is best practice? How best can they be managed?
UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972)

• merging of two separate movements: one focusing on the preservation of cultural sites, the other dealing with the conservation of nature;
• duties of state parties in identifying potential sites and their role in protecting and preserving them;
• ‘states parties’ encouraged to integrate the protection of the cultural and natural heritage into regional planning programmes, set up staff and services at their sites, undertake scientific and technical conservation research and adopt measures which give the site a function in the day-to-day life of the community;
• properties entered on the World Heritage List;
• some placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger;
• Tentative List prior to seeking nomination (1505 properties);
• World Heritage Fund and other sources of funding.
Southeast Asian Sites

- 936 properties worldwide as of November 2011;
- 725 cultural, 183 natural, 28 mixed, found in 153 states;
- 188 states have signed the World Heritage Convention;
- 31 sites (19 cultural and 12 natural); earliest listed in 1991, the most recent last year;
- Danger list: the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordillera; inscribed 1995 placed on list in 2001; Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra, inscribed 2004, placed on list in 2011;
- Angkor inscribed in 1992, immediately placed on list until 2004 when it was taken off;
- Three countries have no sites: Brunei (none on the TL; signed August 2011), Singapore (none on the TL and hasn’t signed the Convention), and Burma/Myanmar (8 on the TL; signed in 1994).
Inventory of Sites

- Cambodia (1991) 2 sites (2 cultural, 9 on TL);
- Indonesia (1989) 7 sites (3 cultural, 4 natural, 27 on TL);
- Lao PDR (1987) 2 sites (2 cultural, 2 on TL);
- Malaysia (1988) 3 sites (1 cultural, 2 natural, 3 on TL);
- Thailand (1987) 5 sites (3 cultural, 2 natural, 3 on TL);
- Viet Nam (1987) 7 sites (5 cultural, 2 natural, 7 on TL);
- Philippines (1985) 5 sites (3 cultural, 2 natural, 29 on TL)
Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines

• Thailand: Nationalism with globalisation; domestic tourism reigns; does international tourism matter?

• Malaysia: the Malay agenda within a multicultural heritage; international tourism does matter

• The Philippines: Western heritage in Asian guise? Can there be an international tourism?
Heritage and the Nation Constructed

- Thai tourism as an elite project
- The ‘fixing’ and mapping of Thailand from the mid-nineteenth century; The Siamese ‘geo-body’
- The nation ‘imagined’ but also a geographical and spatial entity with defined boundaries
- National landmarks, shrines, sacred places, symbolic centres to express and embody the nation
- Heritage in the development and marketing of ‘Thainess’
- UNESCO inscription provides ‘international status’ and ‘authenticity’
Conceptualising Heritage in Thailand

- Contextualisation in processes of modernisation and globalisation
- Urban expansion and extended metropolitan areas
- Expanding middle classes and changing lifestyles
- Domestic tourism
Malaysia and Melaka

- the most important national historical site in Malaysia.
- the origin of the Malay-Muslim sultanate system and the concept of ‘Malay’; a golden age
- a crucial element in the Malaysian government’s nation-building policies
- emphasis on Malay and Islamic culture in the construction of a national identity
- Post-independence preoccupation with economic growth and modernization and tension between the protection and conservation of national heritage and the need to transform urban landscapes to realize modernity and development
Reclaiming Melaka

- Melaka’s importance confirmed in the words on the plaque unveiled by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed in 1989: ‘the historic city of Malaysia. Here is where it all began....the birth of a nation’
- Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first declaration of independence of the Federation of Malaya at Padang Pahlawan, Bandar Hilir in central Melaka on 20 February 1956.
- the emblematic connection between Melaka, the Malays and the wider nation of Malaysia;
- Tourism Malaysia, Melaka styled ‘Malaysia’s Historical City’.
- Melaka state government’s Tourism Promotion Division ‘Visit Historic Melaka Means Visit Malaysia’.
Reclaiming Melaka
Megadevelopment

- litter and solid waste remaining uncollected and treated in curb side drains;
- large-scale reclamation and the separation of the historic core from the sea and harbour;
- vistas of high-rise buildings which surround St Paul’s Hill;
- Separation of the Portuguese Eurasians from their traditional livelihood and environment;
- Considerable traffic congestion in the heart of the historic core;
- Increased traffic from tourism, including tour buses, and parking;
- Continued pressure from private owners and foreign property-owners in the residential-commercial area.
The Philippines: main problems

- Competition from other destinations;
- Philippines off the main tourist circuits, but better connected to East Asia;
- Lack of major high profile sites; no major indigenous cultural sites;
- Scattered locations; islands difficult of access/expensive/inadequate infrastructure;
- Political instability from the 1980s
The Philippines

- Sites relatively remote and scattered;
- National parks well protected;
- Tourism pressures much less than in other parts of ASEAN;
- Sites do not play such a large political and symbolic role in the Philippines as elsewhere (e.g. Melaka, Angkor, Ayutthaya);
- Major sites are not indigenous but Spanish and Chinese influenced;
- Even major cultural sites on Tentative List are Spanish-derived: Jesuit churches (1993); extension to Baroque churches, 5 more (2006); Basilica of San Sebastian (2006); and Spanish fortifications (2006);
Conclusions

Great variations in characteristics and pressures
National dimension versus the global
Tourism pressures; domestic and international
Management confusion
Absence of UNESCO controls; greater scrutiny of applications
Do we need global heritage?