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**Culture, Heritage and Tourism in Southeast Asia**

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**This position paper 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 and several colleagues in the UK began a multidisciplinary programme of research to investigate various dimensions of tourism (sociological, anthropological, economic, political, geographical/environmental and historical). 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, among others such as the increasing availability of disposal income among international tourists, an emerging middle class in the region with the need for an increasing range of leisure activities and consumption opportunities, access to affordable air travel and the development of transport, the exposure given to new and often ‘exotic’ tourism sites in the global media, and the search for new vacation experiences have all led to an expansion of academic research on tourism. Tourism studies have acquired scholarly respectability and my recent interests have since moved into the relationships between culture, identity, heritage and tourism in Southeast Asia, and particularly a comparative study of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the region.**

**Culture and Southeast Asia**

What I want to emphasize, as John Clammer has done eloquently before me (2009: 9-11), that Southeast Asia is characterized, 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 hybridization, synthesis and mixed communities, the phenomena of pluralism and 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 operate across the region is that of tourism and the cross-cultural and cross-ethnic encounters which it engenders.

These historical processes can be framed in terms of the twin concepts of differentiation (and diversity) and convergence (Mackerras, Maidment and Schak, 1998:1-14), and using this simple dualistic perspective I do not think we need to exercise ourselves endlessly about whether or not Western theories on culture, particularly post-structuralist ones, are appropriate in analysing and understanding other cultures. The processes of cultural differentiation and interaction nevertheless 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, 1995:1047-1048) and the fact that Southeast Asia is ‘arguably the best place to look for culture’ (Steedly, 1999: 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 analyzing culture in the region (Bowen, 2000; and see King, 2001a, 2005, 2006). 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: 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 globalization, 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 and the cross-cultural encounters which flow from it. 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). 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 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 immediately think about culture and the fact that cultural tourism is a major focus of interest for both international and domestic tourists; and that this interest has 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.

**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 (Jenks, 1993:1). Culture (and its expression in language) is usually presented as what it is to be human, and what distinguishes us from the rest of creation (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; 63). 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, used, deployed, manipulated, elaborated, displayed, commoditized, 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: 1).

Culture is therefore a concept; it is, as Kahn proposes, an ‘intellectual construct’ (1992: 161). For me the following considerations are important: Culture is taught, learned, shared and transmitted as a part of collective life (this is purely Parsonian [1951]; and also derives from the Tylorian ‘complex whole’ [1871]). 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 socialized into a particular culture, can, when he or she has discovered its ethical judgements, values, standards, beliefs and views of the world, the connections which it makes between cause and effect and the explanations which it provides for the place and function of humans within the natural world and for the bases of human interaction, organization and behaviour, can make sense of it even without necessarily approving of its underlying principles. Having said all of this I do accept that there may be events and behaviour which are beyond culture or constitute a ‘counterpoint’ to it which is not ‘meaningful’ or ‘comprehensible’ (Daniel, 1991).

**The Concept of Heritage**

Much of what I have said about culture can also be deployed in contemplating ‘heritage’ as a concept. Though passed on from one generation to another heritage is 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 and King, 2003a) Like culture heritage is a concept which is difficult to define (Herbert,1989:10-12). In a narrow and simple sense heritage is ‘a legacy; a set of traditions, values, or treasured material things’ (Universal Dictionary, 1987: 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’ (2003:82). In introducing the notion of interpretation, which suggests that heritage is created, given meaning and imbued with significance, we move into a much broader conceptualization of heritage which pertains to concepts of identity and nationalism (Peleggi, 1996: 432; Winter, 2007: 5-8). In this latter sense heritage, presented and re-presented as something 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 realization 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, mysterious and the spectacular, and local community cultural and economic engagement with the sites (Winter, 2007: 139-149).

Black and Wall state that ‘the sites selected to represent the country’s heritage will also have strong implications for both collective and individual identity and hence the creation of social realities’ (2001: 123). In post-colonial developing states this process of identity construction is an even more urgent task and the need, in Anderson’s terms (1991:178-185), to ‘imagine’ the nation 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 (Glover, 2003:17). 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, researchers and international tourists. It has therefore become a highly politicized project to do with identity and conflicts over its character and trajectory. UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre based 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/>). Since the late 1960s heritage has been internationalized by such bodies as UNESCO which has ‘helped to generate a new set of understandings of culture and built heritage’ (Askew, 1996: 184). Peleggi says with reference to national heritage in Thailand that the past and its expression in built forms are ‘iconicised’ and they become ‘the only reliable sources of national identity’ (1996). They are displayed both to an international audience and to the citizenry, but, of course, given processes of conservation and landscaping their authenticity is invariably staged. 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, and the ‘criteria for selection’ of sites to be included on the World Heritage List (and see UNESCO, 1983). Until 2004 these 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 the multi-disciplinary edited book entitled *Tourism in South-East Asia* (Hitchcock, King and Parnwell, 1993) we argued that the future research agenda must comprise 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 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 consequences of tourism for Southeast Asian economies, societies and cultures; the character of newly emerging “tourisms” including heritage and historical 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 South-East 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* (1997a). 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 Balinese culture also lends substantial ethnographic weight to these interests and concerns (1996). At this point we should also re-emphasize the recent increasing research interest in heritage tourism, the multivalent character of the concept of heritage, the development of “discourses of the past”, and the political uses and construction of heritage; these concerns overlap considerably with work on cultural invention, identity and authenticity(Hitchcock and King, 2003a). Two outstanding recent studies of cultural politics, identity construction, heritage and tourism are certainly 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 *Asians on Tour* which is the first substantial compendium on domestic tourism in Asia (Winter, Teo and Chang, 2008).

To bring all these concerns together a research team in which I am involved has recently launched a wide-ranging programme of research, supported among other bodies 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*. This study of Melaka, as arguably the most important historical and cultural site in Malaysia, is part of a much larger, multidisciplinary, comparative and cross-regional project conducted by a British research team which is examining the management, development and re-presentation of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS), both natural and cultural sites, in Southeast Asia. The sites are defined generally as those of ‘universal human value’ and within this ‘a select list of the most outstanding of these from an international viewpoint’ (cited in Malaysian State Party, 2008: 8).

Among other matters, the research programme focuses on the tensions and conflicts generated in the encounter 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, our 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.

In Malaysia the issues are even more complex because the Malay-dominated government has used and transformed urban landscapes in their nation-building policies, but established and primary urban areas which are the focus of these policies are usually home to visually prominent and demographically and economically significant Chinese and to a lesser extent Indian populations. Urban areas therefore express and embody particular sub-national ethnic identities, not only of various Chinese communities, but also increasing numbers of Malays and other Muslims, numerically smaller populations of Indians, and a whole host of hybrid peoples, including, in the case of Melaka, Portuguese- and Dutch-Eurasians, Baba-Nyonya or Peranakan Chinese and Indian Chitties; these mixed populations are usually the product of acculturation, cultural exchange and intermarriage between immigrants and indigenes. 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.

The research for this paper also emerges from a recently co-edited book in which I was involved on *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia* (Hitchcock, King and Parnwell, 2010) and an earlier edited special issue of the journal *Indonesia and the Malay World* (Hitchcock and King: 2003) entitled *Tourism and Heritage in South-East Asia*. The 2010 text is the first to consider the character and consequences of the growth in the interest of heritage and heritage tourism across the Southeast Asian region and the many ways in which heritage is presented, re-presented and constructed in relation to the growth of both domestic and international tourism. In that book several World Heritage Sites (WHS) were also considered: George Town (in Penang [Pulau Pinang]), Melaka (Malacca), Angkor in Cambodia, Hue and Halong Bay in Vietnam, and Vat Phou in Laos, and it seemed appropriate that the many issues which were raised in considering UNESCO along with other heritage sites and the implications of inscription on the World Heritage List, which began at the end of the 1980s, demanded a much more ambitious and wide-ranging multidisciplinary and comparative programme of research (and see Miura, 2010: 103). There has been very little attention given to the comparative study of internationally recognised heritage and the different demands which these sites make upon the management bodies responsible for administering them. Although some of the sites are not directly comparable, lessons can be learned from good and bad practice trans-nationally, and it can be expected that rather than the interest in and use of these high profile sites diminishing, the continued expansion of domestic and international tourism and the economic and political roles which tourism plays in national development strategies in Southeast Asia will serve if anything to increase the pressures on World Heritage Sites. Once UNESCO has inscribed a site then it becomes ‘a validation of quality’ and even more importantly it confirms its ‘authenticity’; these attributes can and usually do provide significant attractions for the international tourism market and governments also deploy them for political and economic purposes (Jenkins, 2008: 5).

The chapters in our *Heritage Tourism in Southeast Asia* which focus on UNESCO sites raise several issues (and see Esposito and Gaulis, 2010). These comprise in no particular order of precedence: (1) how different constituencies construct, present, re-present, reshape and contest heritage; in the case of Hue, once the imperial capital of a united Vietnam, Johnson demonstrates how local researchers, experts and tour guides in the Hue Monuments Conservation Centre have embraced the official view of the site as one which demonstrates Vietnamese cultural creativity and artistic skill, and embodies ‘a renewed sense of national identity’, though they remained critical of the failure of government to realise the historical and architectural importance of the site until the more recent incorporation of heritage into national tourism development strategies (2010: 197); (2) the ideological control and manipulation of the sites which governments frequently exert on what they consider to be important elements of national identity, nation-building, history, achievement and international image: Melaka is a case in point within the Malaysian government’s nation-building policies based on Malay-Muslim priorities as we shall see in detail below (Worden, 2010:130-146), as are Angkor in Cambodia (Miura, 2010: 126-127) and Hue in central Vietnam (Johnson, 2010: 176-178); (3) the pressures which tourism exerts on these sites and the problems raised by government involvement in the promotion of and planning for tourism and other kinds of development. Again in the case of Hue local researchers expressed anxieties about the negative effects of tourism, particularly ‘uninterested and ill-informed’ tourists (whether domestic or international), on the authenticity of a historic site (Miura, 2010: 198); whilst in the case of Halong Bay in northern Vietnam the site is endangered by pressures both from increased tourist interest and also from the rapid expansion of industrial and infrastructural projects and resource exploitation around the bay (Parnwell, 2010: 244-246); (4) the importance of encouraging the kinds of tourists (whether domestic or international) who are genuinely interested in and wish to be informed about sites as testaments to the cultural achievements of past generations, or at the very least to provide informative literature, signage, audio-visual materials and guides (without these being overly intrusive) so that the sites can be better understood, enlivened and contextualized; (5) the role of sites and what they are seen to represent as expressions of the particular everyday lives, circumstances, views and thoughts of those who engage with them and as expressions of wider political, economic and cultural issues; in other words, they serve not only as subjects of discourse but they enable the creation and elaboration of discourse (Johnson, 2010: 198-199); (6) the variations in the effects of change and local responses to these across communities and areas within the same site and between sites as in George Town for example (Jenkins, 2010: 162-171) or between Angkor in Cambodia and Vat Phou in Laos (Miura, 2010); (7) the issue of local communities who live in or around the site and their involvement in or exclusion from WHS. Communities were often removed from sites and restricted in their movement and livelihoods in the interest of conservation and to recreate cultural sites as historic parks for the purpose of tourism promotion; the WHS of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya in Thailand and Prambanan and Borobudur in Indonesia illustrate this early policy as Black and Wall demonstrate (2001). However, looking at other examples, Angkor, following its inscription in 1992, experienced a first phase of protection and conservation and the relocation and restriction of local residents under the ‘Save Angkor’ initiative sponsored primarily by French and Japanese international agencies; it then saw a shift in policy particularly from about 2004 towards more sustainable development and a recognition of the rights of local communities with an emphasis on ‘living’ cultural heritage using ‘local knowledge, skills and local people’s association with the sites’; Vat Phou in Laos demonstrates a similar set of tensions and the dislocation of local residents but then the attempts to address local needs and involvement. But it needs emphasizing here that there is often a considerable gap between official policies to promote local participation and their implementation (Miura, 2010: 126-127, 119-123); and finally (8) these sites provide ‘a new genre of community, both imagined and real’ comprising ‘a new social space, new values and borders’ (ibid: 103); although the importance of WHS carries their importance and influence beyond their 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.