

BOOK REVIEW

Protecting Siam's heritage, edited by C. Baker, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2013, 352 pp., THB฿950.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-6-16215-059-3

Before I accepted the proposal to review this book, I wrote to the review editor to make sure that it would be fine to write something rather critical about it. Judging from the title, cover photo, and the backside blurb, I thought it would be a one-sided simplified call for conservation of Thai Royal and Buddhist heritage à la international best practise, and was certain that my review would be quite depreciating. How wrong I was! There was certainly no need for editorial blessings. *Protecting Siam's Heritage* surprised me as one of the most interesting books I have read in a long time. With its great variation of topics and perspectives it challenges the common, yet far too simple dichotomisations between preservation and development, and between Western and Asian attitudes to conservation. If one should never judge any book by its cover, it is certainly true for this one.

The book is actually a special issue of the *Journal of the Siam Society*, to mark its centenary and 100th volume in 2012, and draw attention to the Society's *Siam Heritage Protection Programme* launched in 2011. Hence the book was produced by The Siam Society (under Royal Patronage), and edited by the Thailand-based British writer and historian Chris Baker, who is also Honorary Editor of the JSS. He was assisted in the editorial process by former banker James Stent, who identified and approached the authors, and wrote the introduction.

Nineteen articles, all but one original, are presented in three sections. The first section – History – consists of five articles. First Piriya Kraikish, former President of the Siam Society, offers an historical background to heritage protection in Thailand, from Buddhist merit making in the seventh century to recent conflicts over modernist urban heritage in Bangkok. Sumet Jumsai provides an activist view in a personal account of the heritage conservation movement in Bangkok from 1964 to 2012, while Euayporn Kerdchouay accounts for the Siam Society's engagement in heritage issues, from its early days until the launch of its Siam Heritage Protection Programme in 2011. Based on his own experiences from the Lopburi province of Central Thailand, historian and museum curator Phuthorn Bhumadhon argues for the involvement of local communities in heritage conservation by the creation of 'conservation clubs'. In the final article of the first section, Rewadee Sakulpanich describes the development of national heritage legislation in Thailand from the 14th century until present times with focus on the 1961 Act, which is the current law in force.

The second section – Issues – begins with a keynote speech on heritage and tourism by politician Surin Pitsuwan. Next is Yongtanit Pimonsathean describing and promoting heritage conservation projects done by the semi-official/semi-private Crown Property Bureau, which he himself represents. Following these are four articles with a more critical angle, which focus on the neglected parts of urban heritage in Bangkok. Chatri Praktinonthakan writes in a article originally published in Thai, about the national filtration of international heritage regulations according to a scheme that he calls the Rattanakosin Charter, after the central part of Bangkok where the Grand Palace is located. This charter, he argues, overvalues Royal and Buddhist heritage and rejects vernacular culture and modernist heritage associated with the People's Party era. In a similar critical vein, Tiamson Sirisak and Natsuko Akagawa writes about the conservation of shop houses and other vernacular architecture in Bangkok, with focus on cultural rights. Worrasit Tantinipankul writes about urban local communities and contestation over heritage sites in a neglected part of Bangkok, across the river from the official glory of Rattanakosin. Finally, Montira Horayangura Unakul focuses on waterways as a crucial part of Bangkok's history and heritage, and a potential asset in future urban developments. Next, Michael Herzfeld contributes with an article revolving around his own concept of crypto-colonialism. At the end of the second section, we leave Bangkok and move first to the

Phanom Rung Historical Park, where Alexandra Denes offers detailed insights into a research project studying local heritage values in conflict with the official mandate of the Fine Arts Department. Then, in an article by Apinya Baggelaar Arrunnapaporn, to the ‘Death Railway’ in the Kanchanaburi Province, where atrocity tourism flourishes around an immensely complicated heritage site defined partly by fiction, and partly by traumatic memories of war. The final article of the second section was originally a talk given by Woraphat Arthayukti and Edward Van Roy, about the ongoing search for Ayutthaya king Uthumphon’s tomb in Mandalay, Myanmar.

The third and final section – International perspectives – comprises four articles. First is H. Detlef Kammeier writing from an international, Unesco-inspired perspective about heritage conservation in Asia from 1972 to 2012. In the second article, local historian Khoo Salma Nasution writes a ‘shared’ history of the multicultural state of Penang in Malaysia, arguing that Penang fails to fit into national history and concepts of national heritage, because its very fabric is made of international interactions and coexistence. In the third article, Paula Z. Helfrich gives a personal view of heritage preservation in Yangon Myanmar, based on childhood memories. In the very last article of the volume, Richard Engelhardt, Montira Horayangura Unakul, and Julia Davies write about the Unesco Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation.

Reading through the collection of articles I have often missed a map, which would have helped me and many readers outside of Thailand to identify and understand the geographical relations between the different sites and regions that are mentioned in the articles. But my main criticism concerns the framing of the volume. The title, the cover photo picturing the lavish external decorations to the *phra ubosot* of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok (placed right at the centre of the traditionally conceived nation in the Grand Palace of Bangkok), and the backside blurb, altogether create an unfortunate sense of polarisation between an entirely ‘good’ protection and conservation of Royal and Buddhist heritage, and a ‘bad’ threat represented by modern development and lower-class vernacular culture. This simple polarisation is confirmed and emphasised in the introduction by James Stent, which circles around preservation and development as two opposite poles in a binary system, with the notion of threat as a main motif. This is rather too simple, and does little if anything in the way of structuration or embellishment for the volume as a whole. Hats off to the editorial pair Baker and Stent for having assembled such an excellent collection of articles with authors representing a great variety of perspectives. And they should be commended for making these texts so smoothly accessible to all of us who do not read Thai. But I wish they had trusted someone with more insight into the current international field of heritage studies to frame it all in a package more attractive to this research field – where it deserves to be widely read. The current framework unfortunately fails to do justice to the rich, critical and complex contents of the articles, particularly in the second and third section of the book.

Most of the twenty-two authors have a personal relation to and/or expertise in Thailand’s cultural heritage. If some of the articles, particularly by representatives and senior writers, stand out as unreflective or even complacent about their own achievements, they are still worth reading for the facts and historical detail they provide and as examples of the different perspectives that now exist in the heritage field in Thailand. With the more reflective texts produced by a younger generation of scholars who are not afraid to weave their arguments with strands of critical theory running through complicated multi-layered empirical observations, they make a very interesting collection representing a rich and diverse field of heritage enquiry and practice.

And there are some real gems in the collection. I have particularly enjoyed reading Montira Horayangura Unakul’s call for attention to Bangkok’s urban waterways as an important heritage with potentials for the future, Alexandra Denes’s detailed rendering of the discussions between different stakeholders in the Phanom Rung Historical Park, Apinya Baggelaar Arrunnapaporn’s description of the many complicated layers of meaning surrounding the ‘Death Railway’ as a tourism destination, and Koo Salma Nasution’s fascinating story of Penang built on a multicultural heritage and shared history. If I had to pick one favourite, it must be Chatri Prakitnonthakan’s sharp and fearlessly critical, yet empirically substantiated article on the ‘Rattakosin Charter’ – the unspoken class-driven principle that overvalues a certain style of Royal and Buddhist heritage (regardless of age or historical authenticity)

while it rejects ordinary people's vernacular culture and the modernist heritage of the People's Party Era – which, he argues, defines official heritage practise in Thailand no matter what international regulations say.

This is a volume of great variation. The quality of scholarship varies, and everything will not be to everyone's taste. Nonetheless it makes an important contribution to the international field of heritage studies, which has so far been largely dominated by scholars and examples from the English-speaking world. It deserves the attention of scholars, students, and heritage professionals across the world.

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