Authenticity Versus Commodification: Atrocity Heritage Tourism at the ‘Death Railway’ of the River Kwai

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Abstract
For more than thirty years, the ‘Death Railway’ of the River Kwai has been increasing its popularity as a tourism product. It is an example of a rapidly growing atrocity heritage tourism— an infamous bridge and rail line that was built by the Prisoners of War during the Second World War. In this process of providing heritage for tourism consumption, there is tendency to commodify several aspects of heritage to meet the needs of visitors. From a lack of a good understanding in heritage management, it is seductively easy to destroy any connection of the social context, in which heritage is inevitably, embedded. The commodification of historical significance; physical setting; and social and cultural experience, commonly dislocates a site from its living users and inhabitants, without regard to the interests of living populations.

Tourist commodification at this site has obscured its authenticity. This paper which is a part of PhD research will present the problems of the places’ commodification and suggest the means to reinvest authenticity in the heritage.

Introducing the Problem
Thailand’s international popularity as a tourist destination has been built since the early 1970s on an unbridled hedonistic appeal. However, starting in the late 1980s, official tourist promotion has greatly emphasised cultural heritage as cultural tourism. The quest for a distinctive cultural heritage was promoted as part of the nation-building enterprise. Also, the UNESCO World Heritage Sites status bestowed on Sukhothai and Ayutthaya in 1991 has contributed to the repackaging of Thailand’s tourism industry. These designations have also highlighted their importance as physical loci of national historical narrative. In the process of standardising, modifying and commodifying cultural assets for use in cultural tourism there is a serious risk of loss of authenticity. The problem is that too often the ‘packaging and presentation’ of heritage is carried out by the tourism industry for the benefit of its members and not by those responsible for the safeguarding of cultural heritage. As a result, both the physical fabric of a heritage property and its intangible aspects are trivialised and compromised. Further, Thailand is lagging behind on educating its people to understand the value of their cultural heritage, an inheritance from the past which contains events, places, people, etc. Thailand’s cultural heritage, like in many countries, is very much under threat.

Background to the place
When the Second World War started in South East Asia around December 1941, all countries in the region were affected, especially, the European-colonised countries like; Indochina, Burma, Singapore, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. Thailand although not colonised, located in the centre of South East Asia, was forced by the Japanese Imperial Army to cooperate in the construction of the strategic railway line to connect the Malay peninsular with Burma. The purpose was to use this cross-national railway as a military supply line through Burma to reach India without risking the allied submarine attacks on the sea-routes.

The Thailand-Burma railway line, which was later to be widely known as the ‘Death Railway’ was built during June1942 until October 1943 by British, Dutch, Australian and American prisoners of war and impressed Asian labourers, predominantly Indians, Tamils, Indonesians, Malays and Burmese. During its construction more than 12,000 of the 60,000 allied prisoners of war died—mainly of disease, sickness, malnutrition and exhaustion— and were buried along the railway. The Asian labourers also suffered high death rates, and between 80,000 and 100,000 of the more than 200,000 Asian workers perished. The Japanese kept no records of these deaths and it was not possible for anyone else to do so. The graves of Asian workers remained unmarked.

The rail route in Thailand was 303.95 kilometres in length, most of which passed through dense rain forests, deep valleys and streams, and high mountains before arriving at the Burmese border. From then on, the line went through similar topographic landscapes for 111.05 kilometres. The whole length of this cross-national railway line was 415 kilometres. With such difficult terrain, the construction of this line was extremely difficult. The Japanese planned to complete the line within one year, while in normal time the construction would require 5 - 6 years for completion.

Study Boundaries
The study focuses on the war heritage in Kanchanaburi province, where the ‘Death Railway’ was ordered to be built...
and only at places where tourist’s commodification are taking place at a high rate. This war heritage experience centres on the area around the Bridge over the River Kwai and the train station; the Kanchanaburi War cemetery; two museums, the JEATH War Museum; the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre (TBRC); and a ride on a vintage train.

Cultural Heritage Significance Assessment

Places related to the Second World War in Kanchanaburi are highly important to both Thai and international history. Its cultural significance can be summarised by the following key points:

- It shows evidence of a significant human activity of war against each other.
- They are also associated with; unfortunately, groups of people. Nowadays, the Ex-POWs and families use some sites for commemoration reason on special occasions.
- It contributes knowledge and understanding about the Second World War.
- It is assisting us to make a link between the war that occurred in the West and in the East.
- These international historical values, contributes a crucial genius loci to local communities.

Cultural Heritage Authenticity

‘Authenticity’ is understood to mean, in the context of this paper, the relative integrity of a place, an object or an activity in relation to its original creation. In the context of living cultural practices, the context of authenticity responds to the evolution of the traditional practice. In the context of an ‘historic place’ or ‘object’, authenticity can encompass the accuracy or extent of its reconstruction to a known earlier state (ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter, 1999). Authenticity can be divided into the physical fabrics and intangible values of heritage. The fact about authenticity in cultural tourism is that most tourists want to consume senses of ‘authenticity’ but indeed not necessarily reality. Many tourists are interested in cultural heritage but most have minimal knowledge about the past. Authenticity is then a social construct that is determined in part by the individual’s own knowledge and frame of reference.

Commodification Assessment of Tourist Places

Historical Commodification

We are apt, I think, to confuse history and heritage; interchanging seamlessly one for another. On this issue, I want to turn to particular theme of David Lowenthal’s (1997) book, The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History, as it expressed in the Introduction:

In domesticating the past we enlist it for present causes. Legends of origin and endurance, of victory or calamity, project the present back, the past forward; they align us with forebears whose virtues we share and whose vices we shun. We are apt to call such communion history, but it is actually heritage. The distinction is vital. History explores and explains pasts ever grown more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to fuse them with present purposes. (Lowenthal 1997:11)

Heritage is not history. It uses historical fact but translates fact to sustain and support memory and values. Heritage is, thus, not our prime or sole link with the past. History maintains a significant role. But has, as Lowenthal (1997) ventures to suggest, the lure of heritage overtaken history as a prime way of recovering the past? Heritage is then what we absorb from the past and part of the growing dependence we have on the past where we may, in fact, falsify history.

Similarly in the case of the Bridge over the River Kwai (the “Bridge”), not many tourists and people are aware that there never was a Bridge over the River Kwai during the wartime. In fact, the Bridge was ordered to build across the River Maeklong. Unfortunately, as so often happens, the truth was not allowed to get in the way of a good story. So much so that Thailand has officially changed the name of the River Maeklong to the River Kwai, to accord with the film and the perception of history and expectations of most people, and of course to exploit and commodify tourists’ curiosity. When people heard about the Bridge, these words conjure up images, from the Hollywood movie by David Lean (1957). These entail images of brutal, bumbling and incompetent Japanese soldiers having to rely on the expertise of a group of compliant British prisoners of war to design and build a timber bridge to carry a railway over a river. Another factor that has facilitated a certain distortion of historical facts is that while during the war the Thai government was forced by the Japanese to use the country to pass to Burma and to co-operate with them, they would prefer to now deny this co-operation. The government would prefer that its citizens believe that Thailand has never been colonised and had nothing to do with this war. Thailand’s political duplicity during the Second World War, which involved taking the side of both; the Japanese invader; and the Allied Army makes a very interesting case study.

Tourist’s commodification to falsify war stories continues further at several sites. Most stories are sanitised or at best half truth/ half fiction. Most literature about the subject are written by war-traumatised ex-POWs or their relatives in which there is an understandably strong subjective point of view rather than objectivity. Admittedly, heritage interpretation in cases like this could hardly avoid controversy. It is involving issues such as the war atrocities committed by Japan (presently Thailand’s prime foreign investor) as well as its iconography established by the Allies, overshadowing the facts about the war victims, both the Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and the Asian impressed labours. Thus, the whole concept of the war story became one of the ‘Walt Disneyish’ objects for individual interpretation.

Physical Setting Commodification

The daily use of the Bridge to carry trains and the numbers of tourists that walk on it every day should have posed a serious threat to its physical authenticity. However, on the contrary, the physical fabric of the Bridge itself stays highly intact. After the bombing by the Allied airforce, the Bridge was repaired, reused and maintain regularly by the SRT. It is a steel bridge with a concrete support going into the river. A more serious threat is the speed and scale of engineering works around the Bridge and the train station. The physical authenticity of the landscape setting of the Bridge is degrading. Some parts are destroyed, and commodified by heavy tourism development. There have been additions of new buildings, a town square, a footpath, monuments to accommodate the large numbers of tourists and train passengers. The most radical impact is the
development of concrete egg-carton box shop-houses to sell souvenirs, and tourist amenities such as restaurants, car parks, and a shopping mall. The development damages the landscape setting, destroying the integrity of the Bridge and the station, and completely changing the visual amenity and destroying the symbolic connections between the place and its setting.

Another mistake is the de-contextualisation of the war story and the war heritage by building modern monuments, in abstract forms and designs, with non-domestic materials and spreading them around the town square where the Bridge and train station stand. The decision to interpret war stories by building these monuments has been a mistake. Nobody reads the signs, or engages with these monuments; instead they are used by stall-keepers to stock. Here, there is a habit of de-contextualising our culture by building theme parks around our historic monuments and treating them like garden ornaments. We also do this with intangible heritage when we put on dinner dance shows and treat these expressions of art and ritual as some kind of desert for trivial consumption. This de-contextualisation of our culture is a very serious problem because it destroys the authenticity of the cultural expression.

Cultural Context Commodification

In general, there is a marked difference in the context of the way a heritage place is approached by foreigners and by locals. While the foreigners wander around as tourists, for domestic people, heritage sites represent national treasures and symbols of national identity, more than a tourist attraction. It is quite a tricky issue in case of the Bridge and the war heritage in Kanchanaburi. As mentioned before, Thai people and the locals have been taught and learned to keep their distance from this heritage and this has made them feel that it is not really theirs. The main governmental figure in operating Thai tourism industry is the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). Its promotion of heritage sites for the past two decades has centred on their uses as stage settings for festivals or spectacular events, this takes place in many places around the country. The Bridge over the River Kwai is also a part of these festival promotions because it is marketable as a tourist attraction. It has practically elided the horrendous past associated with the site and transformed it into a place for entertainment. Bypassing the dilemma between the ‘cold’ and ‘hot’ interpretation of war sites (Uzzell 1989), TAT has opted for a week-long festival staged at the end of November centred around the Bridge. The festival features ‘rides on vintage train’ and its hallmark is a sound-and-light presentation simulating an air attack of the Bridge. It received little attention from international tourists and not enough to compare additional numbers with the total amount of visitors to Kanchanaburi. One can assume that, among international tourists, those interested in culture are attracted by the site per se and not by the attached fair. The situation is different for domestic tourists, who are keener than international tourists in their quest for cultural authenticity, and also are more receptive to sites, celebrations and other events that exploit royal and religious imagery. This kind of light-and-sound show at the Bridge for international tourists, is a perfect example of the commodification of heritage sites. It can be seen to display what Erik Cohen has conceptualised as ‘emergent authenticity’, whereby ‘a cultural product…which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognised as authentic, even by experts’ (Cohen 1988:379-80).

When we promote culture for tourism we tend to make the mistake of promoting simple repetition or replication of cultural forms. The same dance is performed over and over again, repeated night after night for changing audiences or tourists, like the case of the light-and-sound show at the Bridge. The illustrated story about the origin, construction and the bombing repeats itself for more than twenty years. Another big failure is the language used in the story is only in Thai while the show focuses on international audiences. There is no cultural transmission or heritage interpretation, only the atrophy of cultural forms into marketable products. The interpretation of these war heritage sites is seemingly designed to dispel, rather than unfold history and transmit the cultural significance of the place.

Tourist commodification at other sites

While the Bridge is the central monument relating to the war in Kanchanaburi, the town of Kanchanaburi does possess four other powerful mnemonic sites: the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery of Allied POWs (under the management of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission), with 6,782 graves. At this site the landscape setting and visual effect are spoiled by the growth of engineering and property construction. There are concrete buildings around the cemetery and also located in the middle of the roads at all sides. It is missing the tranquillity, which is the characteristic of such sites that should facilitate quiet contemplation and respect. However, the booming of the property market in the area around the cemetery is still at a low rate compared with other parts of the town. This comes from a strong respect (and fear perhaps) for the dead by the Thai. More threatening commodification of the cemetery is the remaining contextual authenticity of the site, it is used as a picture spots by most casual tourists, especially the Thais and other Asians. Every weekend, the SRT puts on more trains to the ‘Death Railway’ and introduced an organised train stop at Kanchanaburi Station (in front of the cemetery) for 40 minutes to visit the place. What comes out is group after group of youngsters running in and out and around the cemetery to get the best spot for their pictures. Western visitors often also dress inappropriately casually (e.g wear swimsuits or shorts) given the solemnity of the place.

The second site is the JEATH War Museum (an acronym for Japan-England-Australia-Thailand-Holland), set up and is maintained by the nearby monastery, where POWs personal belongings and photographs are exhibited in a bamboo hut, built as a replica of those in the prison camps. Apart from the issue of simple commodification, many stories of the war are false. The museum has chosen to bias popular the allied versions of the history, over the Japanese. Combined with an unprofessional way of presentation, a visit to this museum is an unsettling experience, associated with the idea of a holiday to Thailand. Other tourist commodification such as shops and stalls have also overwhelmed the place and the lack of management is evident.

Thirdly, a newly opened museum, the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre (TBRC), located next door to the war cemetery, is receiving more attention from serious tourists. A two-storey building with an unattractive architectural design, overlooking the cemetery with a panoramic view on the upper floor, offers in-depth information about the Second World War, especially in Kanchanaburi. Operating with a more professional team with good techniques of presentation, and a clear objective to
minimise the commodification, the museum is considered to be a success.

Lastly, a ride on a vintage train is highly recommended, indeed, it is a good experience and one of the best ways to understand about the rail line; its construction; typography; and how the Ex-POWs had lived. Of course the tourist commodification follows the train and every where the train passes. This train route is not used only for tourism; it is also a public transportation system for the locals. Again while the locals transport themselves as part of daily life, tourists are experiencing the so-called ‘Death Railway’ as a tourist attraction. A clash between a train’s function and the passenger’s culture is a phenomenon. Ticket pricing is also different, Thais pays one-tenth of the international tourist fare. There is no interpretation, either on the train or at the stations.

Approaches to Resolving the Problem

Return the physical integrity to the heritage

At the Bridge: The most important aspect is the landscape setting. It would be possible to revitalise the square by moving those blocks of concrete shops and houses and tourist amenities further away. This would give the square more space by changing the architectural design. Cutting off the road in the front and making it a pedestrian street would also be an improvement. Part of the shops, restaurants and cafés can go under the bridge. This area can made a small park along the river; the idea of a water-front area shall be introduced; with no allowance for a floating restaurant around the bridge; stalls and vendors should be restricted to certain areas.

At the War Cemetery: Enforcement of property law and the introduction of planning guidelines should be introduced to give a better skyline to the cemetery. The cutting of two small roads, one at the back another at right hand is negotiable. A car park and tourist amenities should be built further away. Signs and penalties to advise and remind visitors appropriate behavior and dress codes should be introduced.

At the two museums: The enlargement of the museum landscape by cutting off the road in the front is advisable. The long term planning and management of the shops and the stall at JEATH War Museum is a necessity. These could be moved further away with a car park provided to give more space to the museum. At the TBRC an architectural revitalisation to the present building should be introduced which will alter it to be more sympathetic to the surroundings. Interpretation management of the panoramic view of the cemetery should be thought of. Small details such as museum shop should not be neglected such a venture would be enhanced if local products were introduced.

The vintage train: More sophisticated interpretative techniques and programmes should be introduced in the way that encourages an understanding in the context of the railway and the Second World War in Kanchanaburi. Printed materials such as books and brochures should be available. Signs and boards at stations and on the train should be arranged in bilingual languages: Thai and English.

Community sustainable development

The best way to ensure heritage preservation is to stimulate the local community to appreciate the heritage; once appreciated, conservation will follow. To encourage the appreciation of heritage, the criterion of economic sustainability should be introduced (see ICOMOS 1999: Principle 5.2 and 5.3). For example, shops that sell souvenirs around heritage sites should be selling only local products, made in the area, to generate more income, create more employment, and at the same time preserve intangible knowledge of craftsmanship within communities. The ownership and management of tourist amenities around heritage should also be by local people to stimulate a sense of belonging to the heritage. Local guides should be representatives from the communities, to generate income and give good impressions to tourists.

The Nara Document on Authenticity states clearly that: authenticity may differ from culture to culture, and even within the same culture. It is thus not possible to base judgements of values and authenticity within fixed criteria. On the contrary, the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong. (UNESCO, ICCROM & ICOMOS 1994)

In the case of the Bridge over the River Kwai and its associated sites, a successful management plan cannot depend on complex Western technology or high-tech solutions. It must be designed by the place’s stakeholders; it must be acceptable to the local community; and it must be able to be implemented in the local political, social and technical environment.

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