Book Reviews
Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Thailand: Memory, Place and Power

Author: Ross King
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Historically, heritage conservation has long been a means of justifying political power by forging links with the past; Mussolini patronised the archaeology of the Roman Empire, adopted Roman symbols of power and conserved/restored the Forum in Rome in an effort to link his regime with the glory of Imperial Rome. In Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Thailand, Ross King and his co-authors examine the practice of using heritage-related places and concepts in modern Thailand.

King was formerly Dean of the Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne, where since his retirement in 2003 he has continued his association with the department as a professorial research fellow. He has published extensively on urban design and his most recent monographs have emphasised on the nexus between cultural philosophies and planning in southeast Asia.

Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Thailand is a collection of essays arranged as twelve chapters around the theme, as the name suggests, of the use of memory, place and power. Each chapter is a collaboration between Ross King and his co-authors who are Thai academics. The final publication is the result of at least ten years of research.

In his introductory chapter, King examines Pierre Nora’s concept of the use of memory and the national psyche, published as Les Lieux de Mémoire (3 volumes published between 1984 and 1992, and in English as Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, 1998). This becomes somewhat of a theme for the ensuing chapters which examine sites and monuments, as well as written or oral histories and traditions, in presenting the concept of modern statehood in Thailand.

One of the many rich examples provided is the recent right wing Yellow Shirt (or People’s Alliance for Democracy) movement in opposition to then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra around 2006-8 for what was described as anti-monarchy actions, and the citing in part of his usurping of traditional royal activities as cause for a charge of lèse-majesté. Shinawatra was subsequently removed in a popularist military coup. Around the same time both Thailand and Cambodia were disputing the control of the border Angkorean-period temple of Preah Vihear. Shots were fired on the militarised border and riots broke out in respective capitals over notions of nationalism.
King and his co-authors provide numerous case studies for the use in the political sphere of what we might also term ‘intangible heritage’ to form a particular notion of national identity. With the international heritage community warmly embracing the concept of intangible heritage and its protection, King’s *Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Thailand* can serve as a sobering reminder not only of the use, but also the potential abuse of traditions, their popular values, and their heritage management and promotion at a national level.

The University of Singapore Press publication is 300 pages in length with relatively few illustrations and forms a treasure trove of diverse examples of the use of tangible and intangible heritage in modern Thailand.

Wayne Johnson