In early January 2009, a major international conference titled *Heritage in Asia: Converging Forces and Conflicting Values* was held at the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Drawing on a number of critical and emerging themes in heritage the conference featured presentations that argued for a specific suite of understandings, policies and practices of heritage relevant to Asia.

Singapore seemed an odd choice for a heritage conference given its lack of heritage buildings. The Singapore Cricket Club is one of the few heritage structures that springs to mind and it has recently had a major refurbishment that has stripped it of much of its original built integrity. Upon further investigation the rich cultural heritage of the city becomes evident even if the built environment doesn’t always reflect this. The importance of intangible heritage as a thematic driver of the conference was equally true for gaining a better understanding the city-state’s heritage. This interest in intangible heritage at the conference mirrors an international trend that is in turn driven in large part by increased interest in the contentious 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Conference presentations reflected an increasing trend to consider heritage in Asia from the widest range of perspectives. They included: intangible heritage; cultural landscapes; heritage and tourism in Asia; heritage, history and memory; post-conflict heritage; heritage history and identity; sustainability; the role of national and international stakeholders in the management of heritage sites; and digital archaeological heritage.

While many of the conference themes may seem self evident (for instance the potentially loaded Eurocentric notion of universal value), they were discussed in ways that shed new light on heritage throughout the region. A major conference theme was the way ideas of modernity across Asia have ‘destabilized previously accepted assumptions about “authenticity” and the aesthetics of nature and culture’. A number of sessions included extended discussions about the increasingly difficult notion of ‘spirit of place’ in the World Heritage Charter and the need to anchor this concept to a more generally coherent definition of its meaning, particularly in an Asian-specific context. In his closing comments, conference co-convener Tim Winter noted that there was more work to be done, particularly in terms of a broader intellectual project of developing theoretical paradigms relevant for the region and also in new areas of heritage such as national parks and heritage throughout Asia.
Keynotes included a reflective opening address by Nobuko Inaba on intangible heritage, a discussion by Johannes Widodo of current issues and themes in heritage identified by key current researchers in the field and a thoughtful overview of heritage in Asia by Richard Engelhart (a key heritage advocate who recently retired from his role as UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific). There was also a survey and analysis of the role of states parties in the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention from an insider’s perspective by William Logan. This timely paper highlighted the challenges for the UNESCO 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Interestingly and importantly for Australian heritage practitioners, some presentations discussed the technological transfer of heritage from Asia to Australia. It was also pleasing to hear key ideas from the Burra Charter being discussed and applied into this forum. The conference included presenters from much of Asia, Europe, and Australia. Pleasingly there were an increasing number of presenters from India. It was noted by the conference organisers that there is currently a dearth of Indonesian, South Asian and Arabic world researchers and practitioners presenting their work in international forums.

Some of the recent trends in heritage studies and the heritage industry were reflected in the international launch of three important books. Tim Winter, Peggy Teo and TC Chang’s (2009) Asia on Tour: Exploring the Rise of Asian Tourism is a timely publication that casts a critical eye over recent developments in heritage tourism in Asia. Laura Jane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa’s (2009) book titled Intangible Heritage and its companion volume William Logan and Keir Reeves’ (2009) Places of Pain Shame: Dealing with Difficult Heritage are the first two publications in a new Key Directions in Heritage Series by Routledge.

Another feature of the conference was the additional events associated with the conference. Tours to key precincts revealed the rich cultural diversity of the city. TC Chang’s excellent Chinatown tour included a visit to the extraordinary city models on display at the permanent public urban planning exhibition at Urban Redevelopment Authority on Maxwell Road. The extensive city planning highlighted the challenges for preserving cultural heritage in a commercial setting and the ongoing interaction between city planners and heritage practitioners. Perhaps the most poignant reminder of the challenges confronting Asian heritage was a black and white photography exhibition of heritage sites in Asia, many of which are under threat or, as in the case of Preah Vihear on the Cambodian-Thai border, are at the centre of major international political debates (Winter 2009).

For an Australian based heritage researcher with interests in Asia it was important that this conference was an unqualified success. The quality and breadth of papers was high. The level of conference support by ARI was excellent in terms of Valerie Yeo’s organisational team and catering but equally importantly in terms of financial support. Quite simply the financial resources provided by NUS (and also the University of Sydney) enabled a major heritage conference with significant publishing outcomes and debates about the profession to emerge.

One conclusion to emerge from the conference is that much of the current work that is currently being undertaken in Asia is international best practice. However there is a need for greater development of heritage studies centres throughout the region in tandem with a need to ask questions about heritage conservation and practice that are pertinent to Asia. A similar argument can be made for heritage studies in Australia and this highlights the increasing need for further dialogue between Asia and the Pacific.

Heritage in Asia: Converging Forces and Conflicting Values emphasised the need for greater collaboration between practising heritage professionals and those based in the Academy. In the best instances heritage practitioners are involved in both areas. What this conference identified for Asia is the need to develop new theories and methodologies and apply them in the field throughout the region.
Bibliography


