Editor’s introduction: Australian cultural heritage professionals working in Asia

This issue of Historic Environment grew out a one-day conference on the theme of ‘Australian Heritage Professionals Working in Asia’. The conference was sponsored by Australia ICOMOS and AusHeritage and held on 18 September 1999 at Deakin University, Melbourne. The choice of this theme reflected both the growing interest of Australians generally in the cultural heritage of their Asian neighbours and the increasing professional activity of Australian cultural heritage conservationists in Asia as consultants, researchers and advisors.

Drawing on his book Anxious Nation, David Walker opened the conference and opens this volume with a paper that demonstrates that Australian connections with Asia are long-standing. For most European Australians, however, these connections were conditioned by fear of Asia throughout colonial and much of the post-Federation period. Nevertheless there were always some people who appreciated Asia’s immense cultural and philosophical richness and who argued for increased cultural interaction, intellectually challenging for Australians as this might be. But it is only in recent decades that official rhetoric began to emphasise creative collaboration with Asia and governments set an international-relations framework that allowed cultural heritage professionals from Australia to share their knowledge and skills with colleagues in Asian countries.

Sharon Sullivan is one of these Australian professionals. Her paper describes the work she and others in the Australian Heritage Commission have put into assisting the infant China ICOMOS. Much of this effort has focused on the development of the so-called ‘China Principles’, a Chinese equivalent of our Burra Charter, designed to meet China’s cultural heritage conservation needs. Further work to be done with the Chinese includes helping to resolve the many difficulties the Chinese State Administration of Cultural Heritage faces with site management and interpretation.

Brian Egloff’s paper outlines another set of Australian experiences, arising out of working with Asians to conserve endangered cultural heritage. In this case, the project was to restore and safeguard the two Tam Ting caves at remote Pak Ou on the Mekong River, beyond the World Heritage listed town of Luang Prabang in Upper Laos. The lower Tam Ting cave is a repository for artefacts, in particular hundreds of Buddha images, most of which are in the typical straight-armed Lao style. Cultural and natural heritage values come together at Tam Ting to make this a highly significant site for people of the locality, as well as a major tourism asset.

Sharon Sullivan and Brian Egloff deal with monuments and sites, the category of tangible heritage places that is the focus of the World Heritage Convention 1972, UNESCO’s Division of Cultural Heritage and World Heritage Centre, and ICOMOS and its national committees, including Australia ICOMOS. But cultural heritage is a far broader concept, covering movable artefacts as well as immovable sites and underwater features, as well as those on dry land. Today’s key theoretical and practice debates about significance, authenticity, access and ownership apply to all types of heritage, and practitioners are finding that the old boundaries between cultural heritage sub-fields are becoming distinctly blurred.
Egloff’s Tam Ting collection remains in the caves where it first began, initiated it is said by kings and monks. The artefacts now belong to the people and are cared for, cleaned, and added to in the style of a living museum. By contrast, Nicole Tse tells us about her work in the Cultural Centre of the Philippines in Manila. One function of the Centre is to house a conventional museum of ethnographic artefacts that have been brought together from a variety of locations and communities. Other functions, however, cover the intangible heritage of the Philippines, including indigenous dance, music, theatre and the literary arts.

This touches on another lively debate taking place in UNESCO and ICOMOS – the extent to which they should become involved in the protection of intangible heritage. UNESCO’s Executive Board in November 1998 set the cat among the pigeons when it resolved that an inventory should now be drawn-up of significant ‘immaterial’ (that is, intangible) culture and the idea that the concept of cultural heritage be widened to incorporate intangibles such as tradition and custom is picked up in UNESCO’s World Culture Report 2000.1

This is raising concern in some professional circles on several grounds, including the fact that the World Heritage Convention 1972, which underlies much of what we as heritage place professionals think and do, was designed only for the natural and built environment. Mounir Bouchenaki, formerly Acting Director of the World Heritage Centre, is on record as pointing out that the global vision and global assessment, and the processes of nomination, management and development of supportive attitudes that have been developed in relation to heritage ‘places’ cannot simply be transferred across to the intangible.1 Bouchenaki thinks it may perhaps be possible with folklore and traditional arts, as the Japanese for instance have demonstrated with their Living Human Treasures program, but what about other elements of intangible heritage such as religions and languages, or customs such as the intolerant, religion-based street marches in Northern Ireland or the practices of the Ku Klux Klan in America’s Deep South?

Usually the push for protecting ‘living cultures’ comes from people of the Developed World who are taken with the traditions (read: primitive, exotic) of the Developing World. But what does conservation mean in such a context? Is it ethical in any case to attempt to conserve ‘ways of life’, given that the resources to do so are commonly applied by people outside the community concerned?

The ICOMOS position in this debate is that intangible heritage is highly relevant where it gives significance to a place. My paper in this volume accepts this position and illustrates it with a case study of Hanoi in Vietnam. In this city, as with many other cities in Asia, there is an abundance of myths and legends associated with temples and pagodas, streets, lakes and other urban features. Without taking these and religious rites – another important element of intangible heritage – into account, even the best preserved temple will be merely an empty shell and of little significance to local people. The intangible is the critical ingredient, giving meaning and significance to places.
This viewpoint is well articulated by professionals in East Asia, and lies behind the Nara Document on Authenticity. In Japan, Korea, China and Vietnam it is the symbolism of a place and the skills used to build, restore, even rebuild it that are treasured. This is also true in Southeast and South Asia, and Bruce Koepke looks at the significance of traditional performance skills in Badakhshan, in eastern Afghanistan.

If the Lao Tam Ting caves were remote, this corner of Afghanistan is totally isolated. It is also politically dangerous given that it is the only corner not yet directly controlled by the Taliban, an ethnic militia not noted for its tolerance of artistic skills or religions other than their own; witness the recent destruction of Buddhist artefacts in the National Museum in Kabul. Far too often – for example in Cambodia, Tibet and East Timor – ruling elites and government have shown precious little respect for cultural heritage, whether this consists of monuments and sites or symbols and skills. Koepke also outlines the dangers Australians must face when working in certain international situations. But not only is the safety of the Australian researcher in question; so, too, is the safety of the Afghan informants – a situation that severely tests the ethical basis of conducting research in foreign, politically fraught lands.

As if to respond to the new emphasis in UNESCO, Koepke’s paper represents a study of intangible heritage for its own sake. Of course intangible heritage is always in a place – but is it of the place. The answer in the case of the performances described in Badakhshan is clearly ‘yes’, and perhaps this leads us back to finding new ways of bringing the cultural and natural back together, of seeing these two aspects as an integrated heritage, in the same way that indigenous Australians in Kakadu or Uluru-Kata Tjuta see themselves, their heritage and their environment. Although we may baulk at his coining of the term ‘heritology’, the respected museologist Tomislav Solar does have a point when he calls for professionals and researchers to focus on ‘the totality of heritage’ and to work towards the establishment of a new science for the future – one in which the various disciplines share a common interest in answering the key questions of why and how to remember the past.

endnotes