Historic port cities: issues of heritage, politics and identity

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Abstract

The postcolonial port cities of Southeast Asia are the repositories of earlier political and social cultures in their townscape and collective memories, and bear testimony to their role as the gateways of European imperial domination. Their integration into global trading networks, achieved through wide-ranging migrations of capital and labour, fostered the development of ethnically diverse, polyglot, multicultural communities that often, after independence, found themselves at odds with the ethos of the developmental state. As a consequence, early examples of urban redevelopment, following the modernisation imperative, invariably resulted in the destruction of many historic buildings, the relocation of established residents and the loss of collective memory under the mantra of economic growth. Today, however, the multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that characterises and propels an even more insidious globalisation process, has necessitated the retention of selected cultural symbols and townscape, as intensified competition for transnational capital has heightened the need to manufacture ‘place’. While both corporate and state interests are invariably paramount in this creation, community activism can play a critical role in conserving heritage. This paper considers the various ways in which economic, political and cultural forces have interacted to (re)define elements of the past, with specific reference to selected port cities in Southeast Asia and Australia.

Introduction

The word heritage which only a short while ago was associated specifically with a family legacy, or inheritance, has today become somewhat of an abused and overused term, being constantly invoked in connection with a multitude of mundane artefacts and services, from cheese to dry cleaning, domestic plumbing and modern real estate, in an attempt to ascribe notions of quality. As with any term that enters common parlance, this increased use of the word has masked a more considered view that heritage represents preserved elements of the past, which contribute to a collective, or shared, identity (Aplin 2002). It seems that as the pace of contemporary life quickens and people are ever more caught up in all manner of economic, social and technological changes, this retention of links with the past is our attempt to salvage some degree of consistency and continuity, and perhaps humanity.

However, just as human identity is fragmented, the concept of heritage has manifold and contested meanings; essentially there can never be a single objectivity, only multiple subjectivities. In this way all heritage is potentially contestable: one person’s inheritance is another person’s disinheritance; one group’s triumph another group’s tragedy, an insider’s self-conscious subjectivity contrasted with an outsider’s supposed objectivity. Seen through this lens, scholars Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) have suggested that all heritages might be considered dissonant, implying a lack of consensus or consistency. They portray heritage as a view from the present into the past, purposefully developed in response to current needs. Inevitably, such needs are commercial and give rise to the commodification of heritage for financial profit, or political whereby governments manipulate selected images of a chosen past in order to construct their own version of ‘national identity’.

We should be naturally skeptical about both these cases. Commodified heritage, generally for tourism purposes, leads to reductionism whereby historical complexities are invariably short-circuited. Although such manipulations tend to stress the unique nature of each experience, the reality is often much less compelling as market forces tend to reproduce similar encounters despite the infinite occurrence of contrasting situations. Be particularly cautious of state-defined heritage as, in Arundhati Roy’s words, “flags are bits of coloured cloth that governments use first to shrink-wrap people’s minds and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead” (2003: 47). In its worst manifestation these ‘politics of the past’ are used to legitimise the claims of one group while denying or excluding those of another, with awful consequences that have become all too familiar.

Yet, in the everyday lives of most people, heritage is more about identity and belonging at the local scale, part and parcel of perceived quality of life as familiar landscapes, streetscapes, buildings and activities hold together the fragmented fabric of collective memory. In this regard port cities throughout history have been highly evocative in linking intangible and tangible (intangible heritage quality has been increasingly identified by UNESCO), both natural and built heritages, and maritime and terrestrial realms through essential urban-based interchange. The arcane elements of sea and land, tides and winds, salt and spray, have provided an inexorable backdrop to the passage of material progress. There has always been something special about port cities. Until the recent past such places were our only points of contact with the outside world, our link to far away places with strange sounding names. Today, even in an era of airports and container terminals, the original quays and waterfronts of port cities have retained their fascination, underlying a continuing upsurge of international interest in maritime heritage.

Historic port cities

Historically, within the emerging Southeast Asian region, port cities such as Aceh, Makassar, Palembang and Patani served as pre-colonial windows to the world, providing gateways and transit points for both intra- and inter-regional flows of people, goods and services. The waxing and waning of a succession of maritime capitals occurred as ports functioned not only as commercial entrepôts, but also as political and cultural centres, described as ‘port-poltiy’ (Kathirithamby-Wells and Villiers
These evocatively named ‘Brides of the Sea’ (Broeze 1989), thus linked together hinterlands and forelands in dynamic union over a period of more than one thousand years, providing fascinating theatres of continuity and change, sometimes portraying rapid and sustained growth, more often decline and subsequent demise. If, as Barthes (1981) declares, all cities are ‘the place of our meeting with the other’, then the function of the port city has historically been that of providing a meeting with a more polyglot global other.

Empires built around sea power were dependent upon ports for the sanctuary and repair of ships and the refreshment of crew. In the days of sailing ships such suitable havens were particularly important in the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, Java Sea and Malacca Strait, where strong monsoon winds confined vessels to harbour until the change of season. Accordingly, ships from China and the north sailed south by virtue of the north-east monsoon between January and February, returning with the southwest monsoon between July and August. Traders from the south, most famously the Bugguese prows (perahu) that emanated from places such as Makassar (Ujung Pandang) and Sumbawa, arrived in the Straits from July to October. During the waiting periods for the changing winds traders would stay for extended periods of time, building fortified camps near to pre-existing indigenous villages, stimulating the development of hybrid settlements.

Prior to colonialism, the region’s indigenous groups played host to various maritime adventurers, most importantly the Chinese whose interaction with Southeast Asia is well documented from the thirteenth century onwards (Pan 1998). During the early fifteenth century, the Ming Dynasty extended Chinese influence through the seven great expeditions of the Chinese-Muslim missionary navigator Admiral Zheng He, which stimulated the development of cosmopolitan trading ports throughout the region. Zheng He journeyed extensively throughout East and Southeast Asian waters, and sailed his massive treasure ships into the Indian Ocean to India, the Gulf region and the east coast of Africa. This example of early Chinese expansionism in the wider region was recently commemorated by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), which organised a series of events to mark the 600th anniversary of Zheng He’s maiden 1405 voyage.

From the 15th century, with the expansion of Portuguese influence, to be followed by Spanish, Dutch, French and British incursions, port cities were increasingly captured as footholds for Western powers, becoming integral nodes of successive colonial space economies. European mercantilist penetration fostered further port city developments as ‘beachheads of an exogenous system... peripheral but nevertheless revolutionary’ (Murphey quoted in Reid 1989). Batavia (Jakarta), Melaka, and somewhat later, Singapore, became ports of world renown as colonial intervention acted as a stimulus to immigration, trade and urban economic dominance.

Placed in this context, the development of Australia and its capital cities might be seen as part of a broader movement, which in McCarty’s words (1974: 11) belonged to a group of rapidly growing new countries, including the United States and Canada, Argentina and New Zealand... they had similar natural resources and played similar roles in the world economy as exporters of primary products. The capital cities were more alike than their regions.

These capital cities were commercial cities, established at a moment of time during the 19th century in order to link distant hinterlands into the expanding world capitalist economy. Trade preceded industrialisation and a merchant class rose to early prominence, to be followed later by a somewhat differentiated working class that forged its identity in the cottages, factories and warehouses that grew up around the ports.

**Fremantle as ‘historic gem’**

In the case of Western Australia, the port of Fremantle is one of three original townsites, the two others being the capital Perth and agricultural centre Guildford, which served the incipient Swan River Colony after its foundation in 1829. As the link with the outside world, the initially slow progress of Fremantle reflected that of the colony, which had a population of less than 30,000 fifty years after its establishment, despite the decision to introduce transported convicts between the years 1850-1868. The quickening pace of economic development in the 1880s, which followed the discovery of gold some 400 kms east of Perth, resulted in accelerated commercial growth and an increase in Western Australia’s population to 184124 by the 1901 census, and that of Fremantle from 3641 in 1891 to 20444 in 1901 (by then in three separate municipalities). This formative period in the port city’s history has been characterised as compressed development as the rapid influx of migrants, mainly from Australia’s eastern colonies, changed the economic and social character of the town (Shaw 1993). The growing population was contained within the pre-existing urban cadastre through multiple lot subdivisions that redressed the town’s hitherto low-density nature. This population influx coincided with the opening of the inner harbour and large-scale building and land reclamation programmes.

The combination of rapid growth and increased commercial prosperity, followed by a period of stagnation or relative decline, are two of the three postulated requirements for Ashworth and Tunbridge’s ‘historic gem’ status which is usually ascribed to small communities in which the historical resource dominates the town’s morphology and identity (1990: 135). This phenomenon overtook Fremantle as gold fever subsided as the city entered the twentieth century and economic depression set in after the First World War, We might characterise this as ‘preservation by default’, a situation that was not apparent in Perth, where capital city development pressure particularly from the 1960s-on, sounded the death knell for much of that city’s built heritage.

Fremantle had a narrow escape from ‘mall-evolent’ demolitions and redevelopment before the third ‘historic gem’ requirement, the creation of a social and political culture supportive of the preservation ethos, emerged during the 1970s. The publication of the Council’s policy statement on *Fremantle Preservation and Change* (1971), the formation of the conservation minded Fremantle Society and subsequent demographic and social changes that enveloped the town, fulfilled this third requirement.

In Fremantle the occasion of the America’s Cup Defence in 1986-87, after *Australia II* had wrested that much-coveted cup in 1983 from the New York Yacht Club off Newport, Rhode Island, was a pivotal occasion in the development of the port city which accelerated the process of heritage commodification. The hosting of this hallmark event stimulated investment in the city and raised the international profile of...
Fremantle as a tourism destination. However, the loss of the ‘Auld Mug’ at the first defence may have been a blessing in disguise, saving the port city from the worst excesses of inappropriate developments that, despite the presence of a heritage conscious council and the Fremantle Society, may have proved inevitable had the Cup continued to reside in WA (Syme et al 1989).

Nevertheless, the America’s Cup Defence successfully launched Fremantle along the road of positive place marketing. Over the succeeding years a number of the city’s attractions have been mobilised for promotional purposes. Hotels have been renamed (including the Newport), the Prison and its tunnels have been co-opted for tourism purposes, the newly constructed Maritime Museum now boasts the cup-winning yacht Australia II and events such as the Blessing of the Fleet (associated with the Italian immigrant community) have been given new significance. At the same time, however, the shift in emphasis from a landscape of production to one of consumption (or post-production) has led to a series of ongoing community contestations over issues that can be broadly represented as ‘working port’ versus ‘heritage port’ conflicts.

Reflecting on thirty years of development within Fremantle (1976-2006), it is instructive to chart the progress of buildings such as the Round House, Town Hall, former Elders building in Phillimore Street and former German Consulate in Mouat Street maintain the strong association with place that is community contestations over issues that can be broadly represented as ‘working port’ versus ‘heritage port’ conflicts. Yet the retention of key buildings such as the Round House, Town Hall, former Elders building in Phillimore Street and former German Consulate in Mouat Street maintain the strong association with place that is community contestations over issues that can be broadly represented as ‘working port’ versus ‘heritage port’ conflicts.

However, in the years immediately following decolonisation, the multi-layered characters of Southeast Asia’s port cities sat uncomfortably alongside the self-conscious building of national identity. For example, early Indonesian nationalism under Sukarno disavowed both Dutch colonial heritage and ethnic Chinese identity, evident in the official discouragement of Chinese signage on buildings, and suppression of the Chinese language (Pan 1998). In Vietnam, French cultural relativism was supplanted by Soviet-inspired microrayon planning, which in turn gave way to profit-driven development following the Western model (Logan 2000).

In Melaka, the influences of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisers and even the continued presence of local-born Chinese were downplayed as the old port took central place in the creation of a distinctly Malay national identity. This discovery of ‘Malay-ness’ during the 1970s and 1980s was in line with a state policy that favoured the indigenous bumiputera or ‘sons of the soil’ (Worden 2001). Somewhat in contrast, after separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore’s government responded to the challenges of ethnic pluralism by adopting a reductionist approach to the question of ‘race’. The CMIO model (Chinese, Malays, Indians and Others), replaced the numerous dialect, religious and caste groupings from diverse geographical origins, while promising each collapsed entity a distinct and equal place within an overarching ‘Singapore’ national identity (Ooi and Shaw 2004). Increasingly, in the context of these newly independent, multi-ethnic, urbanising societies, questions of ‘what heritage?’ and ‘whose heritage?’ became the preserve of national governments preoccupied with the modernisation imperative.

In consequence, rapid urban redevelopment inevitably resulted in the destruction of many historic buildings, the relocation of established residents and the loss of collective memory under the mantra of economic growth. In the pioneering spirit of the late-1960s the head of Singapore’s Housing and Development Board (HDB) urban renewal department stated that the city did not possess architectural monuments of international importance, and therefore few buildings worthy of preservation (Choe 1969). Not surprisingly, the removal of many historic buildings proceeded apace. In Jakarta a monumental cityscape of boulevards, statues and memorials was constructed.
extending six kilometres from the city’s Merdeka Square to the suburb of Menteng, and the new town of Keborayan Baru. (Jones and Shaw 2006). In cases where heritage was retained, such as the case of Manila’s Intramuros, the walled city dating from Spanish occupation, this was more through benign neglect as a remnant of the past, a battlefield casualty of World War II and as an illegal squatter settlement.

Overall, much has already been lost, and both local and visiting commentators have expressed their concerns regarding the ‘Disappearing Asian City’ whereby overriding characteristics of uniformity have created a sense of ‘placelessness’ (Relph 1976) in which tourists move from one destination to another without regard for authenticity or meaning. Although such forces have been met by varying degrees of local resistance and increasing, regard for authenticity or meaning. Nevertheless, no matter whether the motors of change are Asian or non-Asian, the modernization of Asian cities is said to be producing a physical sameness and blandness that denies indigenous distinctiveness. For many observers this is a matter of growing concern. Their anxiety is not simply a response to the loss of aesthetic value, craft and artistic skills, and community memories associated with traditional built forms; it is also because the new high-rise cities that are replacing the traditional forms, as a response to global economic and cultural forces, are high energy users and probably unsustainable in the long term.

**Commodified heritage**

Yet, even as historic buildings were being torn down, national tourism promotion campaigns were unashamedly employing idealised colonial images in the construction of place. European perceptions of the Oriental ‘other’ (Said 1978) were duly revered through notions of the ‘exotic east’ featuring coolies, sampans and rickshaws. The colonial mystique, as experienced by the privileged few, was invoked by reference to empire builders such as Raffles, adventurers like the Brookes, and more recent fiction writers such as Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene (Douglas and Douglas 2000). Servility, femininity and nascent sexuality, evocative of the ‘erotic east’ characterised airline promotion campaigns, most notably Singapore Airlines with its ‘Gentle Singapore Girls’ in their distinctive sarong kebayas (Oppermann and McKinley 1997). Most importantly, the Southeast Asian cities’ legacies of ethnic pluralism added authenticity to festivals, food promotions and multicultural shows, many being largely staged events that pandered to a growing tourism market.

The commodification process was also linked with waterfront revitalisation, an urban phenomenon that spread around the world as working docklands were abandoned due to freight containerisation, the increasing size of tankers and the decline of passenger traffic, all of which prompted the downstream migration of port activities (Hoyle 1988, 2000). Temporarily abandoned prime sites, close to the city core, were gradually reclaimed by service-oriented, most often tourism-related, land uses such as marinas, museums and associated retail and recreational functions, together with high cost housing. This process, which started in places such as Boston, Baltimore and San Francisco in the 1960s, reached Australia during the 1970s and the developing countries of Southeast Asia sometime later. Today, as Hoyle (2000) attests, not only has this involved seaports, but also lakes, rivers, canals and artificial water bodies. Inevitably, in coastal areas, the highly capitalised presence of waterfront commerce and up-market housing necessitates the construction of a barrage to regulate tidal flow and neuter the harbour against potentially destructive surges and seasonal flooding. The newly sanitised harbour, clean with no fishy smells (Atkinson et al 2002), is designed to confer authenticity, context and value to commercial and residential developments but the time-honoured function and purpose of waterfront is redefined. Remnants of historic ships and references to final landings before celebrated voyages are no substitute for living and working harbour heritage. Rather predictably, under the gaze of the seasoned traveller, commemorative plaques, sculptured figures, harbour tours and, somewhat inescapably, maritime museums, may take on an inevitable sameness when filtered experiences are divorced from the authentic rhythms of tangible and intangible heritage.

**The tourist-historic city-port: what price heritage authenticity?**

The evolutionary model of the tourist-historic city and its city-port variant can be adapted to fit the context of the historic Southeast Asian port city (Shaw, Jones and Ooi 1997). Drawing upon the experiences of port cities such as Taiping, Melaka, George Town in Penang, Jakarta and Singapore, the gradual transition from the ‘decayed’ port city of declining port operations, abandonment and decay; through an interim ‘restored’ period whereby the trigger factor of tourism has led to restoration and refurbishment; and finally to a ‘pastiche’ finale of façadism and the installation of appropriate symbolism. The recent listing of the historic centres of Melaka and George Town as linked World Heritage sites underlines their significance in this context (on the grounds that these are eminent examples and living testimony of historic port settlement).

In the first stage, heritage conservation opportunities present themselves in the form of disused warehouses, or godowns, which present opportunities for commercial and residential development. Some on-site remedial action may be needed at this stage by government or municipal authorities to generate capital investment from both local and outside investors. During the second stage conservation measures gather pace in faithful restorations of buildings and precincts adding to overall heritage value and tourism potential. In the final stage, the insatiable demands of the tourism industry have led to the re-creation of heritage, not necessarily in the context of historical accuracy, and the subsidising of activities such as traditional trades in ways more befitting of theme parks.

All three stages of the model have been apparent within Singapore, the island city-state that has most successfully exploited its locational advantage, colonial legacy, multi-ethnicity and modern efficiency to develop as the hub of Southeast Asian tourism. In this way, sections of the city have been appropriated for tourism-related developments that have capitalised upon the histories and traditions associated with the sea, ships and sailors. Today, the growing multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that now characterises and propels an even more insidious globalisation process has raised the stakes of development. The imperative of globalisation has necessitated not only retention, but also creation of selected cultural symbols and townscapes, as cities have willingly embarked upon the manufacture of place as competition intensifies for continued multiple territorial
insertions of increasingly mobile capital (Sassen 2005). We might well ask ‘what is the future for authentic heritage conservation?’ In their introduction to The Tourist Historic City Ashworth and Tunbridge (1990: 1-2) make the point that

History has become heritage, heritage has become an urban resource, and this resource supplies a major ‘history industry’, which shapes not merely the form but the functioning and purpose of the ‘commodified’ city.

The conservation and restoration of buildings, notwithstanding, heritage preservation is also an item of cultural production, tied up with people living and working together in areas which give rise to personal identity and cultural roots (Wright 1985). Such authenticity is difficult to regenerate once the removal of rent controls and market imperatives hasten the disappearance of residential land use in favour of retailing and commercial activity. While local authorities have sought to encourage the retention of traditional trades in order to provide a buzz of activity, more often recreational and tourism land uses in the form of offices, boutique hotels, restaurants, bars and theme pubs have replaced earlier land uses. The result, a pastiche product of a speculative conversion of shophouses that has erased the patina of age and produced many empty containers devoid of the essential life which had given rise to those myriad social interactions that bestowed a ‘spirit of place’ (Powell 1997).

Finally, in such a context the relative absence of history, or heritage, is not necessarily an impediment to its promotion. Port cities in the Gulf States are currently in the process of creating and celebrating the inauthentic after a period of rapid growth and prosperity that has transformed their cultural landscapes beyond recognition. In the same thirty years that Fremantle has demonstrated a high level of townscape continuity, Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has made the transition from a Fort, portrays the ‘old charm and bustle of commercial life demonstrated a high level of townscape continuity, Dubai in the same thirty years that Fremantle has demonstrated a high level of townscape continuity, Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has made the transition from a Fort, portrays the ‘old charm and bustle of commercial life beyond recognition. In the same thirty years that Fremantle has demonstrated a high level of townscape continuity, Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has made the transition from a small creek settlement characterised by earth, clay or barasti houses (made from leafy date palm branches) to an extravagant globally-oriented metropolis. Today’s Dubai has been totally remodelled, boasting innovative and spectacular architectural designs with pastiche reconstructions of Alpine ski-slopes, Egyptian palaces, Italian Renaissance architecture and the wholesale creation of maritime ambience as a backdrop to opulent marina living. In many cases imagery has exceeded reality as several constructions are still works in progress and prospective buyers of virtual real estate are encouraged to ‘grow with the dream’.

Yet, in the midst of such wholesale reinvention, Dubai seeks to reclaim its maritime heritage in an attempt to establish continuity and credibility. In a society that has cherished the stories, myths and legends that make up a rich oral tradition, the four thousand year old legacy of small fishing communities engaging in boat building, net making and pearl diving is invoked to tell the story of a people’s enduring relationship with ‘grow w ith the dream’. Yet, in the midst of such wholesale reinvention, Dubai seeks to reclaim its maritime heritage in an attempt to establish continuity and credibility. In a society that has cherished the stories, myths and legends that make up a rich oral tradition, the four thousand year old legacy of small fishing communities engaging in boat building, net making and pearl diving is invoked to tell the story of a people’s enduring relationship with

material, natural and built heritages must remain firmly grounded in the crucial setting of maritime context. Local identity is not served and tourists are not inspired by redundant harbours, permanently dry docks, vacant waterfronts or sanitised representations of the past. Heritage value is much better maintained by waterfront revitalization through a continuation of marine connectivity.

Without doubt, contestation and dissonance in the identification of heritage authenticity and uniqueness will remain, but the important questions of ‘what heritage’ and ‘whose heritage’ are best addressed in the context of working waterfronts through high levels of effective public participation, democratic openness and minority representation. At the same time the continued need to guard against the more intractable ‘authorised heritage discourse’ largely funded by government agencies, and the more rapacious demands of corporate commercialisation, will remain within Australia and even more so in the wider region. To paraphrase the words of an eminent statesman and, somewhat more recently, a local heritage advocate, ‘the price of heritage retention is eternal vigilance’.

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