The Thai-Burma Railway: a cultural route?

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Abstract

The Thai-Burma railway, built under Japanese command by Allied prisoners of war and Asian labourers in 1942-43, can lay claim to being a cultural route, even though nearly three quarters of its physical infrastructure has been demolished. Not only are its archaeological remains evident in the landscape but over the years its memory has progressively transcended national boundaries. Its heritage has also been shaped not only by the Thais, on whose territory much of its remains reside, but also by cross-cultural links and interventions by other national groups with their own wartime memories. Yet, much of this heritage remains fragile and as the generation who experience World War II ages and dies, the future of the railway as a cultural route will be contingent on the emergence of new shared memories across its multinational stakeholders with an interest in its commemoration and heritage.

Introduction

At the height of World War II, in 1942-43, a railway was constructed between Nong Pladuk in Thailand and Thanbyuzayat in Burma (now Myanmar). Stretching some 415 km over often rugged and remote terrain, its purpose was to provide a supply route for the forces of the Imperial Japanese Army operating in Burma. The Japanese had captured this British colony during their dramatic conquest of South East Asia in late 1941 and early 1942; but, after the Battle of Midway in June 1942, the sea route to Burma through the narrow Straits of Malacca became vulnerable to attack by the US Navy. The Japanese therefore decided to construct an alternative overland supply route. Since they had at their disposal a vast labour force of more than 60 000 Allied prisoners of war – augmented in 1943 by perhaps 200 000 Asian indentured labourers (romusha) – they chose to rely largely on manual labour to construct the railway. The cost in human life was huge. As a result of overwork, starvation and disease more than 12 000 prisoners of war and perhaps 90 000 Asian workers died in around twelve months (Department of Veterans’ Affairs 2003:7). The precise number of romusha deaths is not known given the lack of surviving records.

The drama and trauma of this experience meant that the Thai-Burma railway acquired considerable significance in the post-war memory of the various national groups involved in its construction. However, given the range of their experiences, these memories were diverse and often dissonant. Ex-prisoners of war from Australia, the former Netherlands East Indies and the United Kingdom represented the experience of building the railway as a testament to their resilience, courage and, in the case of Australians, mateship (Beaumont 2005; Flower 2008; Raben 2008). In contrast, for the Japanese, responsible as they were for what amounted to a major war crime, the railway became an episode in a deeply problematic narrative about their conduct during the Asia-Pacific war. Similarly, for the countries that hosted the railway, Thailand
and Myanmar, its memory was inherently ambivalent: it spoke not to valorising narratives of independence struggles but rather to acquiescence, and even collaboration, in Japanese occupation of their countries (Pensrinokun 1998:138-50).

It is not surprising, then, that the physical remains of railway also acquired varying degrees of heritage significance for these diverse national groups. As Brian Graham, G.J. Ashworth and J.E Tunbridge remind us, heritage ‘is capable of being interpreted differently within any one culture at any one time, as well as between cultures and through time’ (2000:3). This article aims to consider the various ways in which the heritage of the railway has been preserved and interpreted: not only by the Thais, on whose sovereign soil two-thirds of the railway ran, but also by Australians who have claimed some ‘ownership’ of the railway’s heritage by virtue of their having worked on it. Much of this heritage preservation has been random and uncoordinated. However, this article aims to show that the Thai-Burma railway, in Thailand at least (the Myanmar sections remain closed to Western tourism and influence) a form of cross-cultural, perhaps transnational, memory has emerged in recent decades. Hence, it is possible to consider the Thai section of the railway as a cultural route, as defined by the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Some heritage sites of the railway, and especially the town of Kanchanaburi, have become the locale for ‘dynamic and evolving processes of human intercultural links’ and a ‘rich diversity of contributions’ (ICOMOS 2008). Yet, this article concludes, many of these links and processes are informal and dependent on the agency of individuals, the future of which cannot be assured. Given that official heritage policies are also weak, there will almost certainly be issues of the sustainability of this cultural route, and its physical and intangible values, into the future.

**Destruction and rediscovery of the railway**

From its inception the Thai-Burma railway was a site of cultural exchange as well as a literal physical route for transporting military personnel, equipment and supplies. Managing the construction were not only Japanese engineers and guards but also troops recruited from colonial Korea. The workforce they commanded included mostly Australians, British, ‘Dutch’ (both European and Eurasian) and a handful of US naval personnel who survived the sinking of USS *Houston* in the Battle of Sunda Strait on the night of 28 February 1942. To these workers were added, in 1943, many thousands of South East Asian labourers – Tamil Malays, Javanese, Burmese, Mons, Karens, Chinese and Thais, to name only the most numerically significant. These unfortunate people were induced or coerced by the Japanese and local collaborationist authorities to work on the railway (Ahmed 1984:216; Ba Maw 1968:290-4; Sukarno 1966:192).

The interaction between these different national groups was generally negative or minimal. Believing that their prisoners had forfeited all claim to being treated with honour and humanity when they surrendered (Utsumi 1993:71-3), the Japanese displayed an almost complete indifference to their health. They denied their workforce adequate food and medical supplies and forced them, as the pressure to complete the railway mounted in mid-1943, to work under extremely harsh conditions for excessively long hours. Western prisoners, for their part,
viewed their captors mostly as culturally alien ‘fantastic being[s]’ (Rivett 1946:143). As they saw it, the Japanese were racially inferior, brutal, illogical and irrational: most notably in the fact that they starved the very workforce on whom the railway’s construction depended (for example, Dunlop 1986:222,246-7,249; Richards 2005:161; Rivett 1946:96,142-52). Among the prisoners of war themselves, there seems not to have been much communication across national groups, often because they were interned in separate camps. Meanwhile the Asian labourers, who lived in desperate misery in camps close to the Allied prisoners, were viewed as a pitiable but an alarming source of contagion, best kept at a distance (Kratoska 2005:330-31; Richards 2005:149,167).

Yet, if the railway can hardly be called a cultural route during World War II the multinational character of its workforce gave it the potential to be such in the future. Its memory was always inherently one that could be shared across cultural and political boundaries. Moreover, its significance as heritage, and its recognition as such, resided in the fact that it was a site at which various national memories of World War II converged.

It took some decades before these heritage values were recognised fully. In the immediate aftermath of World War II the physical integrity of the railway was actually destroyed. There were a number of reasons for this. First, by 1945 much of the rail line had been damaged by Allied bombing (although the Japanese still managed to transport food and ammunition as well as two divisions of troops to Burma in 1943-45). Second, the victorious Allied powers concluded after some debate that it would be uneconomic to repair the railway. Not only would the commercial benefit to Thailand and Burma be small, given that the sea routes in South East Asia were again open, but the benefit to Burma, which gained independence in 1948, would be marginal. Finally, there were strategic implications in leaving open an historic route of invasion of Thailand from Burma. Hence, despite the huge achievement that the railway construction’s constituted, it was decided to dismantle it completely in Burma and to sell the Thai sections (about two-thirds of the total route) to the Thai government. The revenue thus gained (£1.5 million) was allocated as reparations to those Asian countries from which the Japanese had expropriated locomotives, rolling stock and other materials during the construction of the railway (Kratoska 2006:87-174).

In the years after World War II therefore the railway’s track was torn up in Burma and Thailand. Quite soon, however, the Thai authorities decided to reopen a section of the route – some 130 km between Nong Pladuk and Nam Tok – to service the transport and communication needs of the local communities. The effect of this decision was to ensure that some significant physical features of the wartime railway survived and became readily accessible to the travelling public. Most notable among these were the Wampo viaduct which dramatically hugs the limestone cliffs above the river Khwae Noi; two cuttings, excavated by British prisoners at Chungkai, near Kanchanaburi; and, most importantly, the multi-spanned steel bridge built, again by British prisoners in 1942-43, across the river upstream from Kanchanaburi town. Beyond the Nam Tok terminus, however, the railway route disappeared into the jungle or under agricultural production. Almost all the 688 bridges that once spanned the many valleys and ravines were progressively dismantled, presumably because their wood was valuable to the local population. Some kilometres of the railway’s route, near the Thai–Burma border, were also submerged in the mid-1980s under a major reservoir.

The Thai-Burma railway might have remained in this state, mostly invisible, except to villagers in Thailand and Myanmar who had local knowledge of its former route, had it not been for the 1957 film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Based on a fictional account of the POW experience by a French author, Pierre Boulle, and filmed in Sri Lanka, not Thailand or Burma, the film bore only passing resemblance to events of 1942-43. The wooden bridge it depicted was also unlike any built along the railway during the war years. However, such was the film’s success – it won seven Oscars – that it generated a stream of international tourists to the town of Kanchanaburi. The bridge they found there was not the wooden one of the film; nor did it span the River Kwai (or as the Thais call it, the Khwae). Rather it spanned the Mae Khlong whose junction with the Khwae Noi is a few kilometres downstream. However, since the steel bridge had been built by prisoners of war and its eleven steel spans set on concrete pillars made a powerful
visual impression, the local authorities renamed the section of the river flowing under the steel bridge, the Khwae Yai. Thus a physical ‘Bridge on the River Kwai’ was invented (Blackburn 2008:147-62).

A remarkable instance of the displacement of memory onto objects that acquire ‘authenticity’ in the absence of the original historic – or in this case, imagined – site, the bridge under its new moniker became central to Kanchanaburi’s tourist industry and identity in subsequent decades. Graphics of the bridge’s spans are now ubiquitous in marketing and promotional material for the town, investing it with a symbolic identity as clearly as the Eiffel Tower does Paris. The local citizens meanwhile stage an annual festival that marks the anniversary of the Allied bombing of the bridge in November 1944, an event which smashed two of the bridge’s spans and remains important in local memory because it incurred civilian casualties. The highlight of this festival is a Sound and Light show, telling the story of the Thai-Burma railway’s construction through re-enactments of captivity, a fireworks display that replicates the bombing, and a dramatic crossing of the bridge by a steam locomotive hooting shrilly into the night. Meanwhile tourists are also enticed to visit Kanchanaburi by the prospect of ‘Riding the Death Railway’ to Nam Tok. Other sites closely associated with the railway’s history, namely, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries at Don Rak and nearby Chungkai, which house the remains of 5084 British Commonwealth and 1896 Dutch prisoners of war, and 1427 Commonwealth and 314 Dutch prisoners respectively (Commonwealth War Graves Commission 2013), have acquired a central place in tourism promotion.

Thus the Thai-Burma railway has become an integral part of both the local Kanchanaburi economy and its cultural memory. There is an element of irony to this. Few local Thais had any direct involvement in the railway’s construction. The small number who were employed as workers on the railway in its early stages either absconded or were withdrawn when they clashed with the Japanese, particularly over the latter’s insensitivity to local Buddhist priests (Kratoska 2006:71). Most local Thais had only limited contact with the railway workforce, selling them food at work camps along the line. Yet, through the processes described, the tangible remains of the railway have come to acquire significant value for the local population, a value which shows no sign of lessening in importance today.

The growing Thai interest in the railway has been matched by increasing interventions by Allied ex-prisoners of war. The return of the survivors was initially inspired by the release of the The Bridge on the River Kwai film but gathered momentum with the memory boom of the 1980s and beyond. As happened all over the Western world, the ageing of eye-witnesses to trauma generated not only a compulsion on their part to be compensated and to revisit sites of significance in their personal life histories, but also an anxiety on the part of younger generations to capture memories of survivors before they died (Ashplant et al. 2000: 3-4).

Most notable in this process was a small group of Australian ex-prisoners of war who returned to Thailand in the early 1980s. Led by the surgeon Sir Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop, who would later become the iconic representation in Australia of self-sacrifice, courage and compassion in captivity, they rediscovered within the Thai jungle a dramatic cutting at Konyu, a little beyond the Nam Tok terminus. In 1943 this had been known to the prisoners who excavated it as Hellfire Pass, a name coined to capture the terrible working conditions and the use of torches to light the cutting during the long working nights. This discovery triggered a sequence of preservation and

Figure 1: The ‘Bridge on the River Kwai’ in Kanchanaburi, now with a 2011 Buddhist temple as backdrop. (Source: Photo courtesy of Kim McKenzie)
commemorative activities by ex-patriot Australians, and ultimately the Australian government. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Hellfire Pass was cleared of debris, as was a 4.5 km walking trail along the railway route beyond it. Plaques honouring Dunlop and other POW doctors were affixed to the pass’s rock face and from 1987 on, memorial services were held on Anzac Day, the key day of national remembrance of war in Australia. In 1994 a portion of Dunlop’s ashes (who died in 1993) were buried at the pass, by which time the level of Australian identification with this site was such that the Australian government, with the support of the Thai government, decided to install a memorial museum above Hellfire Pass. Opened by Prime Minister John Howard in 1998 it serves both as a commemorative site and an interpretive centre, describing the history of the Thai-Burma railway for a multinational audience (Beaumont 2012:19-40).

The effect of these Australian interventions was, firstly, to throw into relief the issue of multinational claims to ‘ownership’ of the railway’s heritage: the problem of ‘extra-territorial’ heritage which falls outside national and international heritage regimes. The reclaiming of Hellfire Pass also gave public visibility to another significant topographical feature of the railway. The cutting is some 75 m long and 25 m deep and speaks vividly to the physical exertions demanded of the prisoners of war. However, this direct commemorative intervention into the Thai landscape was sui generis. It owed much to a particularly assertive period of Australian offshore commemoration during the years of the Howard government, and, so the author has been advised by officials, will almost certainly not be repeated given the maintenance costs. Nor has any other government representing former prisoners of war shown any inclination to emulate the Australian example. Even though there were more British than Australians working on the railway, the British government did not participate in the building of the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum, considering that commemoration was more the responsibility of veteran groups than government (Beaumont 2012:28-9).

The railway as cultural route

The chain of tangible heritage sites of the railway, now stretching from Kanchanaburi to Hellfire Pass, is fragmented and constitutes only a small section of the 415 km of the wartime railway. However, it can be argued that the railway in its entirety constitutes a cultural route. For one thing, even where the railway no longer operates, the archaeological remains of its route are etched onto the landscape. Within the jungle and agricultural land of Thailand and Myanmar are many embankments which have survived all the assaults of monsoonal weather for seven decades. Without much difficulty the visitor who ventures off the road can find concrete footings for bridge pylons, wooden sleepers still embedded in the soil and even (in up-country Myanmar) the pylons of one of the few steel bridges built during the war. The landscape therefore continues to testify to the past, and where it fails to do so obviously, in the author’s experience, local villagers can identify the railway’s remains.

In addition, much, if not all, of the railway’s route has been mapped, including by Western enthusiasts using Allied aerial reconnaissance photographic records from World War II. Hence, if at any time the Thai or Myanmar authorities wished to retrieve the railway’s physical route in its entirety, or even reconstruct sections of it, as the Myanmar government has considered...
recently, this would be feasible (Fukasawa 2013). The only exception would be that section of the railway that has been submerged under the Vachiralongkorn Dam: a section which, as it happens, has considerable historic importance as it was the point at which the workforces constructing the railway concurrently from the Thailand and Burma ends finally met in October 1943. To mark the occasion the Japanese hammered a gold spike into the final sleeper!

Beyond this potential physical integrity the railway remains a continuous route within the cultural imaginations of both Thais and ex-prisoners of war. In all public places in Thailand – be it the Sound and Light festival at the bridge, the panels at the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum or in the various museums which have sprung up in Kanchanaburi, as described below – the narrative of the railway is holistic. It is remembered as an integrated whole with little, if any, specificity or detail about particular locations along the line. Prisoners’ memoirs and historical records show that in fact the experience of captivity differed dramatically according to location, with death rates being much higher the more remote the location from the railway’s ends, but today’s narrative is a homogenising one of undifferentiated trauma. Indeed, it is the very length of the ‘Death Railway’, inching its way for hundreds of kilometres through impossible terrain, which gives the narrative its form and drama.

Beyond this imaginative sense, the railway has also come to acquire other qualities of a cultural route in recent years. In particular, as international and war-related tourism has grown, there is some evidence of those ‘interactive, dynamic, and evolving processes of human intercultural links’ that are integral to a cultural route (ICOMOS 2008). Today’s Kanchanaburi is a tapestry of sites of diverse national and individual memories of the railway.

The most important of these is the bridge itself whose approaches are a mélange of heritage-related monuments: three large sculpted letters spelling out ‘W-A-R’, a long curved wall detailing the history of the railway in Thai and English, and locomotives dating from the war years. A small dinky train ferries tourists, who lack the time to make the full trip to Nam Tok, across the river and back in a matter of minutes. These markers have all been installed by Thai authorities, but scattered, and almost hidden, among them are commemorative interventions by other nationalities: a United States Memorial stone dedicated to those Americans associated with the railway; a plaque erected by the Hong Kong Welsh Male Voice Choir in 1992 to commemorate their visits and their fiftieth anniversary; and a three-dimensional bronze map of the railway installed by an Australian periodontist, Ross Bastiaan. This is one of eleven such commemorative plaques that Bastiaan placed along the railway’s route in Thailand and Myanmar, as part of his much wider project of interpreting battlefields of significance to Australians around the world (Bastiaan 2013).

Eclipsing all this, it should be said, are the market stalls purveying jewellery, local crafts and countless Thai-Burma railway memorabilia – coffee mugs, dinner placemats, key rings, tumblers, T-shirts, decorative plates and so on. The latter carry almost every imaginable image of the railway: the bridge today, its ruins in 1945, the Wampo viaduct, Hellfire Pass, and even wartime photographs of toiling and emaciated prisoners of war. Images of the bridge meanwhile adorn the bicycle rickshaws waiting for tourist business, veranda shop awnings and the plethora of billboards advertising local tours. So too do images of the Kanchanaburi war cemetery. This even features, together with the bridge, on the shopfront of a bar in the nearby back-packer precinct, Maenamkwai Road, enticing tourists to ‘get drunk for 10 baht’!

Much of this might be discounted as a crass commodification of trauma but as war museums across the world indicate, such ‘commercialization of what can be sacred objects’ is now an integral part of the memory and heritage of war (Graham et al. 2000:23). Moreover, at other sites within Kanchanaburi there are indications of a more affective engagement with the memory of the railway and a conscious intent to promote cross-cultural dialogue about its meaning.

One of the most intriguing of these, located in the immediate vicinity of the bridge, is the World War II and JEATH Museum. Built by a local Thai-Chinese businessman, Prythong Chansiri, this is not a war memorial or museum in any sense recognizable to Western museology. Rather it is an eclectic mix of Thai cultural artefacts and war memorabilia. As Andrea Witcomb has said:
'As an assemblage, this Museum points to a set of relations between things that are not always clear’ (Witcomb 2014). In the courtyard area can be found effigies of Hitler, Stalin, Tojo and other World War II leaders sitting cheek-by-jowl with bomb casings, Buddhist figurines, a car used by the Japanese in World War II, a wartime locomotive and a memorial to a Thai soldier ‘who love a country more than life’. Within the museum itself are housed displays of Thai art, historical objects and weaponry, together with graphic dioramas and murals of prisoners of war. They are shown bloodied and wounded in the bombing of the bridge, working in their camps, incarcerated in cattle trucks and suffering under Japanese guards. In another chamber is found a large display case containing the remains of some wartime Asian labourers whose mass grave was discovered nearby in the early 1990s.

Professedly, Chansiri’s motives in creating the museum were to honour his father who died as a consequence of injuries incurred during Allied bombing of Kanchanaburi in 1944 (Chansiri 2010). He also aims to promote a message of peace. The horrors of the railway and of war more generally, are invoked to build a case for reconciliation within Thailand and across cultures. ‘Peace is the Behaviour Merit’, ‘War is Sinful Behaviour’ and ‘The Phenomenon of War Brings Adverse Effects to Society’ declare the placards in the entrance courtyard. In the basement there is even a recent display recording the violence within Thailand itself between the ‘Red Shirt’ supporters of deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the ‘Yellow Shirts’ wearing the colour of their revered monarch, King Bhunibol Adulyadej.

A similar message to Chansiri’s can be found at a second JEATH Museum, a little further downstream, where the Khwae Noi joins the Mae Khlong river. Managed by a Buddhist temple, Wat Chaichumpol, this facility was established in 1977 by the then chief Abbott to provide historical interpretation of the Thai-Burma railway for the growing number of tourists. The acronym JEATH – Japan, England, Australia, Thailand and Holland – was adopted when the original title ‘Death’ was rejected by local people (Phramaha Tomsna Tongproh 2010). Taking the form of a prisoner-of-war hut, with bamboo platforms on either side of a long aisle, this museum recounts the history of the railway through a random collection of reproductions of visual material, extracts from POW accounts and images donated by artists from various countries.

In manifold ways the museum is cross-cultural. One room contains wartime artefacts, such as water bottles, spoons and watches, which testify to a shared memory of contact between the local people and prisoners of war in the war years. To quote Witcomb (2014) again: these items ‘represent an interpretation in which local Thais were depicted as helping the POWs and taking pity on them, thus establishing a history of co-operation and friendship rather than enmity’. Faded newspaper articles and photographs also document the ongoing post-war relationships between Kanchanaburi and the peoples once involved in building the railway. As at Chansiri’s museum, a universalist message of peace is also explicit. ‘Dear visitors’, the promotional pamphlet declares, ‘JEATH museum has been constructed not for the maintenance of hatred among human beings, especially among the Japanese and allied countries, but to warn and teach us the lesson of how terrible war is. May peace always conquer violence’. Flags of many nations meanwhile fly outside the museum’s gates while the depth of the links established with Australia is evident in the fact that by 2010 the presiding abbott had visited the statue of Weary Dunlop in Benalla, Victoria.
and performed Buddhist ceremonies in memory of their friendship (Phramaha Tomsna Tongproh interview, 2010).

Yet another, if less visited, example of cross-cultural memories of the railway is a small museum in the old historic sector of Kanchanaburi, located in the family home of Nai Boonpong Sirivejabhandu. A canteen contractor to the Japanese during the war years, Boonpong used his access to POW camps to clandestinely supply medicines, extra food and even radio parts funded by a resistance organisation in Bangkok. After the war he became something of a transnational hero. He was awarded medals by the United Kingdom and the Netherlands and in the 1980s was honoured by Australians through a medical exchange scheme for Thai surgeons, named jointly with Dunlop. When Prime Minister Howard opened the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum in April 1998, he spoke of the ‘sacrifice’ and ‘selfless actions’ of Boonpong and his wife and presented their grandson with a certificate of appreciation, marking Australia’s ‘enduring gratitude for the virtuous deeds of your grandparents and … the warmth of our friendship which has grown ever stronger since the war’ (Department of Veterans’ Affairs 1998).

These three museums owe their existence to the agency of Thais but other national groups have also been active in memory making in Kanchanaburi. These include the Japanese. On the edge of the JEATH museum, overlooking the river is a statue of Nagase Takashi (Fujiwara), a wartime interpreter who witnessed Japanese atrocities on the railway and assisted Allied authorities charged with exhuming POW remains in 1945-46. Profoundly affected by these events, Takashi devoted his later life to reconciliation and peace – he features centrally in the 1995 narrative of reconciliation written by ex-prisoner Eric Lomax, *The Railway Man*, released in 2013 as a commercial film (Takashi and Watase 1990). In 1976 Takashi organized a reunion of ex-POWs and ex-Japanese officers and soldiers in

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**Figure 4:** The peace temple at Three Pagodas Pass on the Thai–Myanmar border, funded by the Japanese Nagase Takashi. Indicative of its cross-cultural message is the fact that it was opened on Anzac Day 2002. (Photo: courtesy of Kim McKenzie)

**Figure 5:** The memorial built by the Japanese in early 1944 to honour those who died while constructing the Thai-Burma railway. This is now a Buddhist shrine. To the right can be seen a wreath laid by the local Thai-Japanese Chamber of Commerce. (Source: courtesy of Kim McKenzie)
Kanchanaburi, while his River Kwai Peace Foundation has provided thousands of scholarships to disadvantaged students in the local area. Peace temples that Nagase Takashi funded can also be found on the major road leading to the bridge in Kanchanaburi and at Three Pagodas Pass on the Thai-Myanmar border.

Elsewhere at Lad Ya, a short distance from Kanchanaburi but on the route that prisoners of war took when marching from the railway junction at Ban Pong to camps further up-country, Japanese peace organisations have created a large Shinto garden. At the heart of this contemplative space is a monument to the victims of the railway. Each of the major national groups is marked by its national flag while the Asian labourers are represented by an invented flag, which is explicitly internationalist in that it bears a strong resemblance to the flag of the United Nations.

Yet further Japanese engagement with the railway’s memory can be seen at the memorial which the Japanese wartime authorities built near the bridge in March 1944. An obelisk flanked by panels in each of the languages of the major national groups on the railway, it was created to honour the men of all nationalities who had died building the railway. Today it is the site of regular ceremonies attended by Japanese: for example, by members of the local Thai-Japanese Chamber of Commerce. According to the Thai custodian at the memorial’s gates (interview, 2011), ‘the Japanese cry’ on such occasions.

The rich layering of national memories in Kanchanaburi is perhaps most obvious in the vicinity of the main cemetery. Located on the highway through the town, this has become a mandatory stopping point for bus tours making their way north to the national parks for which the Kanchanaburi province is renowned. What these visitors of diverse nationalities (including Thais, Russians and Germans) make of this transplanted British imperial cultural form we do not know, but its aesthetic easily invokes an emotional response. The sheer number of the headstones, and the personal messages inscribed on them by the families of the dead, speak to an experience of loss and grief that is universal. So, too, does a church at the corner of the cemetery, the Beata Mundi Regina. Built at the initiative of a Dutch ambassador in the 1950s, it professes to provide a place where ‘all denominations and tourists [can] visit and pray for the deceased’. The altar is flanked by the Thai flag and an image of the current revered monarch.

The Kanchanaburi war cemetery also provides the venue for a formal convergence of national memories of the railway during the annual ceremonies on Anzac Day and Armistice Day. Although these are organized by the Australian and New Zealand governments, they have come to include diplomats of other POW nations, and also in recent years the successor states of the colonies from which the Asian labourers were drawn. In addition, the Thais now assume a major role in the ceremony. This is partly functional – the Thai authorities need to ensure security – but it goes beyond this. In the 2012 Anzac Day ceremony multiple wreaths were laid on the Cross of Sacrifice by elements of the Thai Department of Defence and local Thai authorities. This sharing in Western commemorative rituals is also evident, though to a lesser degree, in the Anzac Day services held at dawn at Hellfire Pass.

From all this the Thai-Burma railway might seem to be an exemplar of a cultural route as described in the ICOMOS charter: not only has it ‘resulted historically from both peaceful and hostile encounters’ but it now presents ‘a number of shared dimensions which transcend their original functions, offering an exceptional setting for a culture of peace based on the ties of shared history as well as the tolerance, respect, and appreciation for cultural diversity that characterize the communities involved’ (ICOMOS 2008). In Thailand also the railway has served, and continues to serve, as an illustration of cultural heritage values acting as a resource for social and economic development.

**Issues of sustainability**

However, there are significant questions as to the sustainability of these values, both tangible and intangible. Undoubtedly the bridge at Kanchanaburi and the CWGC war cemeteries are deeply embedded in the local cultural landscape and will continue to remain core to the town’s and province’s economy. However, the heritage environment around at least two of these
sites is being eroded by seemingly unchecked urban development that compromises their heritage values. The Kanchanaburi war cemetery, which in World War II was located some five kilometres outside of Kanchanaburi, has now been swallowed up by the sprawling town and is surrounded by noisy commercial activity. It is also overlooked by a large sign advertising the Death Railway Museum (an admittedly sophisticated facility developed by an Australian ex-patriot, Rod Beattie). The vicinity of the bridge meanwhile is not only cluttered with the already mentioned market stalls but in 2011 became the site of a massive Buddhist temple erected on the further bank of the river. Destroying a large section of the vegetation that was much more reminiscent of the wartime landscape it has significantly compromised what remained of the bridge’s heritage environment.

Further along the railway, at the Wampo viaduct, there are signs that this key element of the railway’s heritage is also in jeopardy. The overhanging limestone cliff is suffering from erosion and is now propped up with seemingly unsophisticated bolts. Should it ever collapse onto the railway, it is questionable whether the Thai railway authorities would have the will or funding restore it. The fact that there are now major tourist resorts beneath the viaduct that owe their market potential to the stunning vista of the trains passing overhead several times a day might bring pressure on them to do so. But there are less difficult routes, in engineering terms, inland which might take the viaduct’s place.

The fragility of the railway’s heritage is attributable in part to the fact is that there is no coordinated planning at either the provincial or the State level to protect the tangible or intangible values of the Thai sections of the railway. The operating railway is the responsibility of the State Railways of Thailand while heritage protection in Thailand is fragmented across central and local authorities. In addition, the railway, for all its obvious tourist value, does not accord easily with Thai conceptions of heritage. It does not affirm the ‘defining triad’ of modern Thai national identity, namely: monarchy, nationalism and Buddhism (Arrunnapaporn, 2007:36). Nor is it the kind of monumental site more traditionally seen as heritage. This can be found some kilometres outside Kanchanaburi, in the Nine Army Battle Historical Park which celebrates the defence of the kingdom by King Rama I against a Burmese invasion in 1785. Even here, the synthetic quality of much of the infrastructure (for example, a ‘battlefield’ on which re-enactments are staged for popular entertainment) reflects the fact that heritage regimes in Thailand, as elsewhere in Asia, are shaped by the belief that ‘the past lives on in memory of people, of events and of places through time rather than concentrating on the material fabric which can change or be replaced’ (Taylor 2004:423).

There is therefore little, if any, prospect of the Thai government nominating the Thai-Burma railway for World Heritage listing. Even if they were to see merit in so doing, the railway would struggle to meet the criteria for World Heritage inscription as having ‘outstanding universal value’. Furthermore, given its current physical condition, it could not demonstrate the necessary integrity, authenticity or adequate protection and management systems. Beyond these tangible heritage issues, it is clear that the local museums which in the past have generated cross-cultural exchange and transnational memories of the railway are inherently fragile. The JEATH museum at the temple is already showing signs of serious decay, thanks
to the tropical climate and there are no evident plans for its restoration. This is despite the fact that there is seemingly ample funding available for investment in the nearby temple precinct. Possibly the temple leaders feel that the museum’s original function, of providing historical interpretation, is now redundant, given the newer and more sophisticated Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum and the Death Railway Museum.

The World War II and JEATH museum near the bridge meanwhile may not survive the death of its now elderly owner. Although Chansiri has made provision for its future in a trust fund (Chansiri interview, 2010) the commercial value of the site on which it resides will make it very tempting to developers. The small museum at Boongpong’s house meanwhile is reliant on the commitment of family members for its maintenance. To judge by the crumbling state of the street, Pak Prak, in which it resides, the local authorities have little commitment to protecting it – or the other historic buildings whose heritage value is acknowledged by a series of interpretative signs installed along the street.

As for the Australian memorial museum at Hellfire Pass, this seemingly has a greater security, but its continued existence is dependent on the tolerance of the Thai State. Conscious of this, the Australian authorities have tried to embed it in the local community, investing considerable effort in village aid and local development projects. They have also tried, with some success, to attract Thai tourists to the memorial museum. All interpretative panels have been translated into Thai and the initially rather Australian-centric displays have been modified to project a more multinational message. The suffering of the Asian victims of the Japanese is also given considerable prominence in the memorial museum. Hence, the majority of 90,000 plus visitors in recent years have been Thai (Bill Slape, Manager Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum, interview 2010) and the comments that visitors of all nationalities leave in the guests books suggest that the experience of visiting the museums is both educational (‘we never knew’) and emotional.

It is also clear that any attempt on the part of Thai authorities to take control of, or close, the memorial museum would trigger a significant diplomatic incident with Australia. Since the Thai-Australian relationship is currently strong and multifaceted, the Thai government would presumably be reluctant to risk such damage. Yet, the legal basis to the Australian tenure of the land on which the memorial museum is built is very thin, while the relationship with the Royal Thai Army authorities who manage the land is prone to be uneasy. At the time of writing, half of the walking trail beyond Hellfire Pass has been closed to tourists by the Thai military authorities and the prospects of its reopening seem slim. Moreover, the precedents from Singapore are not particularly encouraging. When in 2004 the Singapore government, another close ally of Australia, decided that it served its domestic interests to demolish another site over which Australian ex-POWs thought they had some ‘ownership’, the Changi prison, the Australian government was unable to prevent this. The compromise solution, of keeping one wall as a token of the whole prison, fundamentally compromised the site’s tangible and intangible values (Beaumont 2009:298-316).

The future of the Thai-Burma railway as a cultural route will therefore be dependent on the continuation of the shared understandings of its significance that have evolved between Thais and other national groups. How these will fare in future decades, as the generation who experienced World War II dies out, is difficult to predict. However, it is certain that as these witnesses to the past die – be they Thai, Japanese or Western – the character of the collective memory of the railway will change. Within Kanchanaburi there are already signs of a shift towards entertainment and war tourism driven by local taste and aimed at local audiences. For example, when the 2010 version of the Sound and Light show at the bridge abandoned the traditional locomotive, attempting instead to promote a message in Thai and English of shared grief across nations, it was a commercial failure. Almost immediately the new format was dumped, the familiar steam train was reinstated and in 2011 the voiceover was restricted to Thai (‘Jumbo’ Chatupornpaisan interview, 2011, fieldwork 2010/2011).

The changing nature of memory, and the evolution of heritage values which memory inspires, of course should not surprise us. As Jay Winter has observed, all collective remembrance is contingent on the agency of individuals acting in groups of two or in their thousands. When such people ‘lose interest or time, or for any other reason, cease to act; when they move away
or die; then the collective dissolves, and so do collective acts of remembrance’ (Winter 2006:4). However, this again suggests that if the Thai-Burma railway is to continue to function as a cultural route, a setting within which cross-cultural memories converge in new rituals and new shared meanings, new collectives will need to emerge, not just in Thailand but also in the, as yet, undeveloped sections of the railway in Myanmar.

References

Much of the information informing this article was gained during five fieldwork visits to Thailand in 2007-13, and one to Myanmar in 2013. The research was funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Australia-Thailand Institute; the Australian Department of Veterans’ Affairs Commemorations branch; and the Australian Research Council. My collaborators in this research have been Andrea Witcomb and William Logan of Deakin University and the late Kim McKenzie of the Australian National University, to all of whom I owe much intellectually and personally.

Access to the Department of Veterans’ Affairs files was gained under a Special Access application.


