

Extreme Interpretation

Authenticity versus Commodification: Atrocity Heritage Tourism at the 'Death Railway' of the River Kwai and its Associations, Thailand

Background to the place

When the Second World War started in South East Asia around December 1941, all countries in the region were affected. Especially, the European- colonised countries like; Indochina, Burma, Singapore, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. Thailand (Siam, at the time) although, not colonised, located in the centre of South East Asia, was forced by the Japanese Imperial Army to coordinate in the construction of the strategic railway line to connect the Malay peninsular with Burma. The purpose was to use this cross-national railway as a military supply line through Burma to reach India without risking the allied submarine attacks on the sea-routes.

The Thailand-Burma railway line, which was later to be widely known as the 'Death Railway' is built during June 1942 until October 1943 by British, Dutch, Australian and American prisoners of war and impressed Asian labourers, predominantly Indian, Tamils, Indonesian, Malay and Burmese. During its construction more than 12,000 of the 60,000 allied prisoners of war died--mainly of disease, sickness, malnutrition and exhaustion-- and were buried along the railway. The Asian labourers also suffered high death rates, and between 80,000 and 100,000 of the more than 200,000 Asian workers perished. The Japanese kept no records of these deaths and it was not possible for anyone else to do so. The graves of Asian workers remained unmarked.

The rail route in Thailand was 303.95 kilometres in length, most of which passed through dense rain forests, deep valleys and streams, and high mountains before arriving at the Burmese border. From then on, the line went through similar topographic landscapes for 111.05 kilometres. The whole length of this cross-national railway line was 415 kilometres. With such difficult terrain, the construction of this line was extremely difficult. The Japanese planned to complete the line within one year, while in normal time the construction would require 5 - 6 years for completion.

Following the end of the war after six times bombing of the Bridge over the River Kwai, the British Army sold the section of railway in Thailand to the Thai Government. The remains of those who died (except the Americans whose remains were repatriated to U.S. soil) were transported from the camp burial grounds and solitary sites along the railway into three war cemeteries. At Chongkai and Kanchanaburi War cemeteries lie the remains of those who were recovered from the southern end of the railway. In Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery, Burma lies those from the northern end. After inspection in 1947, the State Railways of Thailand (SRT) decided it was feasible to rebuild or re-lay the line only as far as Namtok Station (Sai Yok waterfall/ wartime called “Tarsao”). This strengthened and re-laid track, became a famous tourist vintage route, highly recommended as an *in situ* experience, and it is a successful operation in achieving its goal as the time machine back to the past.

Study Boundaries

The study focus on war sites in the Kanchanaburi province where tourist's commodification are taking place. The war sites related in this study are the area around the Bridge over the River Kwai and its train station; the Kanchanaburi War cemetery; two

museums, the JEATH War Museum; the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre (TBRC), and the riding on vintage train.

Cultural Heritage Significance Assessment

Places related to the war in Kanchanaburi are highly important to both Thai and international history, it shows evidence of a significant human activity of war against each other. They are also associated with, unfortunately, groups of people. It contributes knowledge and understanding about the Second World War, and assisting us to make a link between the war that occurred in the West and in the East. The international historical value, contributes a crucial *genius loci* to local communities.

In general, people of Kanchanaburi have a ‘sense of proud’ of the war heritage. Although the Second World War is considered not important to a Thai history by the Thai government, something they do not want to mention. Thus the Thais and the locals, feel these heritages do not belong to them completely and have to share with, mostly, western people. Simply said, they share a physical part, but not intangible one. Another reason that people do not have ‘sense of belonging’ of this heritage is the impact of the big failure in conservation of cultural heritage in Thailand that tends to push out local communities while isolating the heritage for tourists or reserved only for the social elite. Thai heritage appreciation can also be seen that base on economical reason in turning heritage into tourism products.

Cultural Heritage Authenticity

‘Authenticity’ is described as the relative integrity of a place, an object or an activity in relation to its original creation. In the context of living cultural practices, the context of authenticity responds to the evolution of the traditional practice. In the context of

an 'historic place' or 'object', authenticity can encompass the accuracy or extent of its reconstruction to a known earlier state (ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter, 1999). Authenticity can be divided into the physical fabrics and intangible values of heritage. The fact about authenticity in cultural tourism is that most tourists want to consume senses of 'authenticity' but indeed not necessarily reality. Many tourists are interested in cultural heritage but most have minimal knowledge about the past. Authenticity is then a social construct that is determined in part by the individual's own knowledge and frame of reference.

Tourist's Commodification Assessment

1. Historical Commodified Interpretation

We are apt, to confuse history and heritage interchanging seamlessly one for another. On this issue, a particular theme of David Lowenthal book, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, has expressed it clear as in the Introduction:

In domesticating the past we enlist it for present causes. Legends of origin and endurance, of victory or calamity, project the present back, the past forward; they align us with forebears whose virtues we share and whose vices we shun. We are apt to call such communion history, but it is actually heritage. The distinction is vital. History explores and explains pasts ever grown more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes (p.11).

Heritage is not history. It uses historical fact but translates fact to sustain and support memory and values. Heritage is, thus, not our prime or sole link with the past. History maintains a significant role. But has the lure of heritage overtaken history as a

prime way of recovering the past as Lowenthal ventures to suggest. Heritage is then what we absorb from the past and part of the growing dependence we have on the past where we may, in fact, falsify history.

So much like the case of the Bridge over the River Kwai, not many tourists and people are aware that it never has been the Bridge over the River Kwai during the wartime. In fact, the Bridge was ordered to build across the River Maeklong. Unfortunately, as so often happens, the truth was not allowed to get in the way of a good story. The fact that Thailand has officially changed the name of the River Maeklong into the River Kwai, according to the film and recognition of most people, and of course to commodify tourists' curiosity, this largely from the Hollywood David Lean's movie (1957).

Beside that, Thai government at the wartime was forced by the Japanese to use the country to pass to Burma and give co-ordination with some assistance, later could get away and denied its co-operation. Country wants to keep the citizen to believe that Thailand has never been colonised and had nothing to do with the war. Thailand political duplicity during the Second World War, took side on both; the Japanese invader; and the Allied Army was a very interesting case study.

Tourist's commodification by using heritage to falsify war stories continues further at several sites. Most stories are sanitised or half true half fiction. Most literatures about the war subject are rubbish, wrote by a war-traumatised Ex-POWs or their relatives. Admittedly, heritage interpretation in case like this could hardly avoid controversy. It is involving issues such as the war atrocities committed by Japan (presently Thailand's prime foreign investor) as well as its iconography established by the Allies, overshadowing the fact about the war victims, both the Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and the Asian

impressed labours. Thus, whole concept of the war story became one of the Walt Disneyish objects for individual interpretation.

2. Physical Setting Commodification

One of the most successful heritage interpretation is to let a physical setting of heritage speaks for itself with a support of explanation. Beside an extreme historical interpretation of this war site, a physical fabric of the Bridge itself stays highly intact. After the bombing, the Bridge was repaired, reused and maintain regularly by the SRT. What is more important in its authenticity is the landscape setting of the Bridge which is degrading, though some parts, destroyed, and commodified by tourism at a high grade. There is an adding of new building and lots of change to the station to accommodate big amount of passengers. The most radical impact is the development of a concrete egg-carton box shop houses to used for tourist's amenities such as selling souvenirs, restaurants, car park, shopping mall, and etc., and an uncontrollable amount of stalls and vendors to sell drinks and foods. It damages the landscape setting, destroying the integrity of the Bridge and the station, changing of visual and destroying symbolic connections between the places and its setting completely.

Another mistake is the de-contextualisation of the war story and the war heritage by making modern monuments, in abstract forms and designs, with non-domestic materials, spread them around the square where the Bridge and train station stand. The interpretative intention of the war stories by building these monuments has mistakenly decided. Nobody reads the signs, or having in contact with these monuments, it is used by stall-keepers to stock their stuffs instead. Here, there is a habit when we de-contextualise our culture by building theme parks around our historic monuments and we treat them as garden

ornaments. We also do it with intangible heritage when we put on dinner dance shows and treat these expressions of art and ritual as some kind of desert for trivial consumption. This de-contextualisation of our culture is a very serious problem because it destroys the authenticity of the cultural expression.

3. Cultural Context Commodification

Following the issue of de-contextualisation, there is a marked difference in the context of the way heritage place is approached by foreigners and locals. While the foreigners wonder around as tourists, for the Thais and domestics, heritage sites represent national treasures and symbols of national identity, more than a tourist attraction. It is a tricky issue in case of the Bridge and war heritage in Kanchanaburi. As mentioned before, Thai people and the locals do not completely feel that it is their heritage. Will they treat it as national treasure?

The main governmental figure in operating Thai tourism industry is Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) in which its promotion of heritage sites for the past two decades has centred on their use as stage setting for festivals or spectacular events, taking place in many places around the country. The Bridge over the River Kwai is also a part of these festival promotions. The oldest and by far most famous, the Loy Kratong, celebrated over three days in November amidst the ruins of Sukhothai. The highlight of this festival is a light and sound show with performers garbed in historical costumes, stages at the most important temple of the complex on the night of full moon.

The Bridge over the River Kwai is a different case, being site popular mostly with Western tourists. Collective memory of the infamous “Death Railway”, and an extensive war-memoir literature, suffices to explain its appeal as a destination. But the

marketing of the River Kwai Bridge into a tourist attraction has practically elided the horrendous past associated with the site and transformed it into a place for entertainment. TAT has opted for the jocular: a week - long festival staged at the end of November at/around the Bridge. The festival features “rides on vintage train” and whose hallmark is a sound-and-light presentation simulating an air attack of the Bridge. One can assume that, among international tourists, those interested in culture are attracted by the site *per se* and not by the attached fair, which on the other hand possesses limited appeal for recreation-seeking tourists. The situation is different for domestic tourists, who are keener than international tourists in their quest for cultural authenticity, and also are more receptive to sites, celebrations and other events that exploit the royal and religious imagery. This kind of festival, both the Loy Kratong for domestic tourist and the Light-and-Sound Show at the Bridge for international, are a perfect example of the commodification of heritage sites. It can be seen to display what Erik Cohen has conceptualised as “***emergent authenticity***”, whereby “a cultural product...which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognised as authentic, even by experts” (Cohen 1988:379-80).

When we promote culture for tourism we tend to make the mistake of promoting simple repetition or replication of cultural forms. The same dance is performed over and over again, like the case of Light-and-Sound show at the Bridge. The illustrated story about the origin, construction and the bombing repeats itself for more than ten years. There is no cultural transmission or heritage interpretation, what there is the result in interruption of the process and the atrophy of cultural forms into marketable products. The interpretation of these war heritages is seemingly designed to dispel, rather than unfold.

Tourist's commodification at other sites

Beside the Bridge that being the centre and represents the whole context of war in Kanchanaburi, the memories of war, in the town does possess other three powerful mnemonic sites: the CWGC War Cemetery of Allied POWs, with 6,982 graves; JEATH War Museum (an acronym for Japan-England-Australia-Thailand-Holland) and Thailand-Burma Railway Centre (TBRC). JEATH War Museum was set up and is maintained by the monks of the nearby monastery, where POWs personal belongings and photographs are exhibited in a bamboo hut, built as a replica of those in the prison camps. Beside, commodified stories of the war by many of falsification, intentionally or not, the museum has chosen to bias clearly on the allied side, and condemn to the Japanese. Combine with an unprofessional way of presentation, a visit to this museum is an unsettling experience. Other tourist's commodification such as, shops and stalls have also overwhelmed the place and lack of management.

At the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) War Cemetery, the landscape setting and visual effect are spoiled by the growth of engineering and property construction. There are concrete buildings around the cemetery and standing in the middle of road at all sides. It is missing the tranquillity, which is needed at such a site. However, the booming of properties market around the cemetery is still at the low rate to compare with other parts of town. This comes from a strong fear and respect to the dead of the Thai, which also brings a minimum tourist commodification at the site.

The Thailand-Burma Railway Centre located at the next door to the war cemetery, is receiving more attention from tourists. A two-storey building with an unattractive architectural design, overlooking to the cemetery with a panoramic view on the upper floor,

offers an in-depth information about the Second World War in the region, especially in Kanchanaburi. Operating with a more professional team with a good technique of presentation, and especially are able to minimising the commodification, the museum is considered to be a success.

The Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum, a politically controversial museum, owns and runs by the Department of Veteran Affairs, under Australian government. From its infamous *in situ* location, Hellfire Pass (Konyu Cutting), had made the site became known in a short period of time after the opening in 1998. It is also located on the highway to the border to Burma with abundant of tourist attractions on the route. Tourist often stop over to have a glance of a beautiful clinical museum with a high standard of presentation techniques, and take a walk following the walking trail to see the famous cutting. Unfortunately, this museum has been a troublesome for both governments, Thai and Australian. It is situated in the military area where the National Security Policy is being re enforced. Careful management of the museum under the military's custody is a necessity after a random clash between both parties. Beside that, a highly bias interpretation to the Australian POWs is dedicated to the site, left out other POWs. This point has been a debate since the museum was opened.

Last, the riding on vintage train that is highly recommended by most travel agents. Indeed, it is a good experience and one of the best ways to understand about the rail line; its construction; typography; and how the Ex-POWs had lived. Once more, tourist commodification follows on to the train and every where train passes. This train route does not use only for tourism it is a public transportation for the locals. Again while the locals transport themselves as part of daily life, tourists are experiencing the so-called 'Death

Railway' through the forest. A clash between its function and culture is phenomenon. Ticket price is also different, local pays one-tenth of the tourist. No interpretation, either on the train or at stations. If there is, apparently poor, uncertain and falsified information.

In Nara Document on Authenticity states clearly that “authenticity may differ from culture to culture, and even within the same culture. It is thus not possible to base judgements of values and authenticity within fixed criteria. On the contrary, the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong”. As does the case of the Bridge over the River Kwai and its associations, to be successful, a management plan cannot depend on complex Western technology or high-tech solutions. It must be designed by the place's stakeholders; it must be acceptable to the local community; and it must be able to be implemented in the local political, social and technical environment.

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