

The Role Of Heritage In Myanmar Today

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Myanmar is in the throes of significant change. Political reforms have led to an easing of sanctions resulting in the transformation of the country's economic base. The process has been fraught, and further change will be required to convince the international community of the sincerity of the government's intentions, but there's little doubt that the deadlock has been broken following almost half a century of authoritarian rule.

This paper considers the evolving role of heritage during this transition, and takes the site of the former student union building at the University of Yangon's Kamayut campus as a case study.

Concepts of heritage in Myanmar today

Since the political changes of 2011, external concepts of 'cultural heritage' have begun to permeate Myanmar society. The two most conspicuous outcomes of this process are the nomination of places for inclusion in the World Heritage List (WHL), and the emergence of the conservation of Yangon's colonial-era core as a focus of the international heritage industry.

In 2013 three cultural places were nominated to the WHL by the Myanmar Ministry for Culture, the government department responsible for identification and management of cultural heritage in Myanmar. There is no national heritage register in Myanmar, and no mechanism for local (sub-national) groups to identify places of value to them. The only local register of heritage assets is maintained by the Yangon City Development Corporation, the agency responsible for planning and civic administration of the former Myanmar capital. This list was compiled during the 1990s, and has not been added to or reviewed since that time.

The three sites nominated to the WHL were: the Bagan Archaeological Area and Monuments, an extensive cultural landscape associated with the introduction of Theravada Buddhism to Burma in the eleventh century; three city states in the Ayeyawady Valley developed by the Pyu – perceived as precursors to present day Burmans – between the first and ninth centuries; and the Innwa, one of five fortified cities associated with the royal family in the upper Myanmar region. The values of these sites have broad acceptance in Myanmar, inspiring associations with the origins of the Burman state, the royal family and Buddhism. In 2014, the ‘Pyu Ancient Cities’ became the first place in Myanmar to be inscribed in the WHL.

In emerging states, it is common for the first places nominated for inclusion in the WHL to be sites associated with the genesis of the state, for instance Hue in Vietnam and the Great National Monument in Zimbabwe. These places communicate universal values of foundation and nationhood, concepts with which the ‘reforming’ government may wish to be associated. The motives behind the Myanmar government’s acknowledgement of Yangon’s colonial-era city core are quite different.

The preservation of Yangon’s British-built ‘downtown’ area has become a major international point of interest associated with Myanmar’s political ‘opening up’. The city’s colonial city centre has received extensive media coverage in the US, Europe, Australia and elsewhere. The survival of the colonial urban core is generally presented as a positive by-product of 50 years of political stasis.

The Yangon Heritage Trust, a voluntary body, has emerged as the driving force behind the conservation of Yangon’s colonial legacy. It was founded by the New York-raised grandson of U Thant, former Secretary-General of the United Nations. The Trust has the ear of government, having made a presentation to President U Thein Sein in February 2013. The President expressed support for its work, and encouraged the development of

legislation to ensure the conservation of significant buildings and areas (*Myanmar Times*:2013). The government's support for the preservation of an urban area intimately associated with a colonial power that occupied the country for nearly 60 years (1885 to 1941) can be seen as having economic and political motives. Yangon city centre is lucrative real estate and a tourist draw card, and the extensive press coverage means that the management of Yangon has been intensely scrutinised.

In the Myanmar context, Yangon is an anomaly. It is an imposed city, with a character entirely at odds with indigenous built traditions. Ask a Myanmar national what's important to them about Yangon and they'd be likely to identify shrines and temples, including Sule Pagoda (the only pre-colonial remnant in the downtown area, Figure 1) and the Shwedagon Pagoda.



Figure 1 Looking south along Sule Pagoda Road: the pagoda is in the centre of the image (February 2015)
Source: Author

The nature of the places recognised for cultural heritage values in Myanmar, and the forces that have led to their recognition, are instructive. In the case of both the WHL nominations and the recognition of Yangon's colonial core, the impetus has been external. There is no evidence of an internal push for recognition of heritage sites. Places that are contested or valued by groups outside the political mainstream are ignored and in some cases actively suppressed. The tumultuous and tragic history of the former Student Union building at the University of Yangon is a place that falls into the latter category.

Rangoon University Student Union building

Students have been a powerful political force in Myanmar since the interwar period. During the 1920s the student community was vocal in its opposition to British colonial rule. The physical focus of student opposition was the University of Rangoon campus, located approximately five kilometres north-west of the city centre. The opening of the University itself, in 1920, was marred by civil unrest; protesters vented their anger against the *University Act* of 1919, which was perceived as a mechanism to establish an elite educated class to administer Burma (known as Myanmar since 1989) on behalf of the British.

Within the university campus, the site of the former Rangoon University Student Union (RUSU) has a particularly strong association with civil unrest. The RUSU was formed in 1926 (Selth 1989:3). Shortly afterwards, premises were constructed for the Union, north-east of the intersection between Victoria Street and Chancellor Drive in the centre of the large campus (Figure 2). The Student Union was a large two-level building in the Stripped Classical style addressing Chancellor Drive (Figure 3).

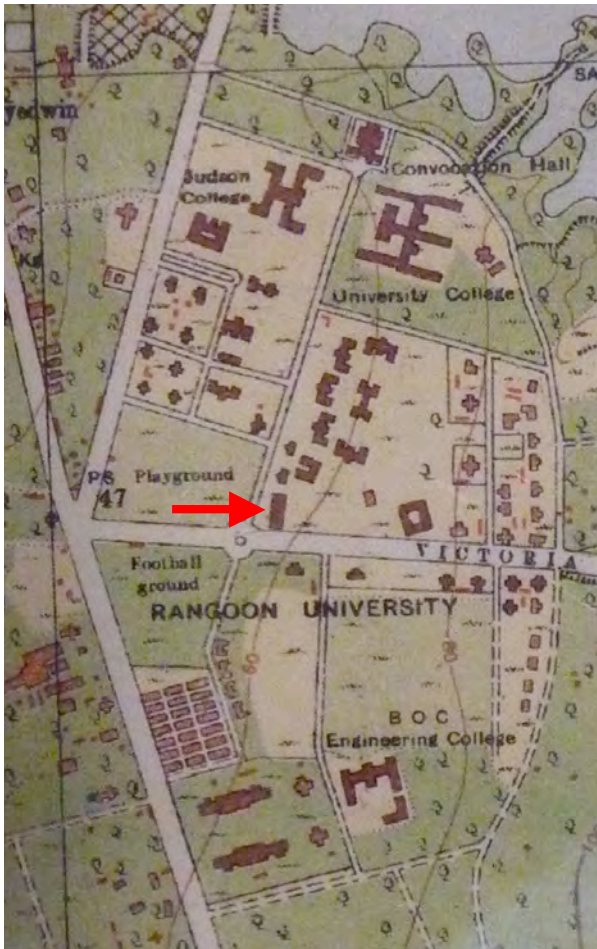


Figure 2 Plan of the University of Rangoon, 1930: the student union building is indicated
Source: Yangon Heritage Trust



Figure 3 View of the student union building from Chancellor Road Drive: only the gate posts survive
Source: Accessed online via Google Images, 7 September 2015

By the mid-1930s, the dominant force within the RUSU was a group of radical nationalists, including future presidents Aung San and U Nu (Myint-U 2008:268). In 1936, the expulsion of Aung San and U Nu from the university on the grounds of engaging in nationalist activities was the catalyst for a national strike (Selth 1989:3). As noted by historian Thant Myint-U, ‘the student union was never the same again’ (Myint-U 2008:268). From the late-1930s until 1948, when Burma gained independence, the RUSU and alumni of the university, agitated consistently for home rule.

Burma’s brief period of independent rule was terminated on 7 March 1962, when the Government led by U Nu was overthrown by a military coup orchestrated by General Ne Win. Initially, the student community was supportive of the coup. A change in mood came when students returned to university in May, and found that the government had imposed a curfew and restrictions on their movements. The mood turned to violence on 7 July 1962, when the 4th Burma Rifles, under the command of Sein Lwin, was ordered to break up a demonstration of around 2,000 students at the university. An order to disperse was ignored, and the 4th Burma Rifles opened fire. The official number of fatalities was 15, but unofficial accounts suggest that over 100 students were killed (Steinberg 2010:131).

On 8 July 1962 the RUSU building was razed and its site cleared, and the RUSU itself was banned (Figure 4). The events of 7 July 1962 established the site of the Student Union as a symbolic focus of protest against the military regime and, from 1988 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

In 1963, students erected a monument on the RUSU site, to commemorate the victims of the crackdown (Figure 5). The monument, which was 7ft 7” high and had a 62-square-inch base (7-7-62), was also razed by the military (Selth 1989:3).



Figure 4 The Student Union building following demolition, 7 or 8 July 1962
Source: Mizzima, Photo Essay, 'Historical Photographs July 7, 1962',
<http://archive-2.mizzima.com/gallery>, accessed 7 September 2015

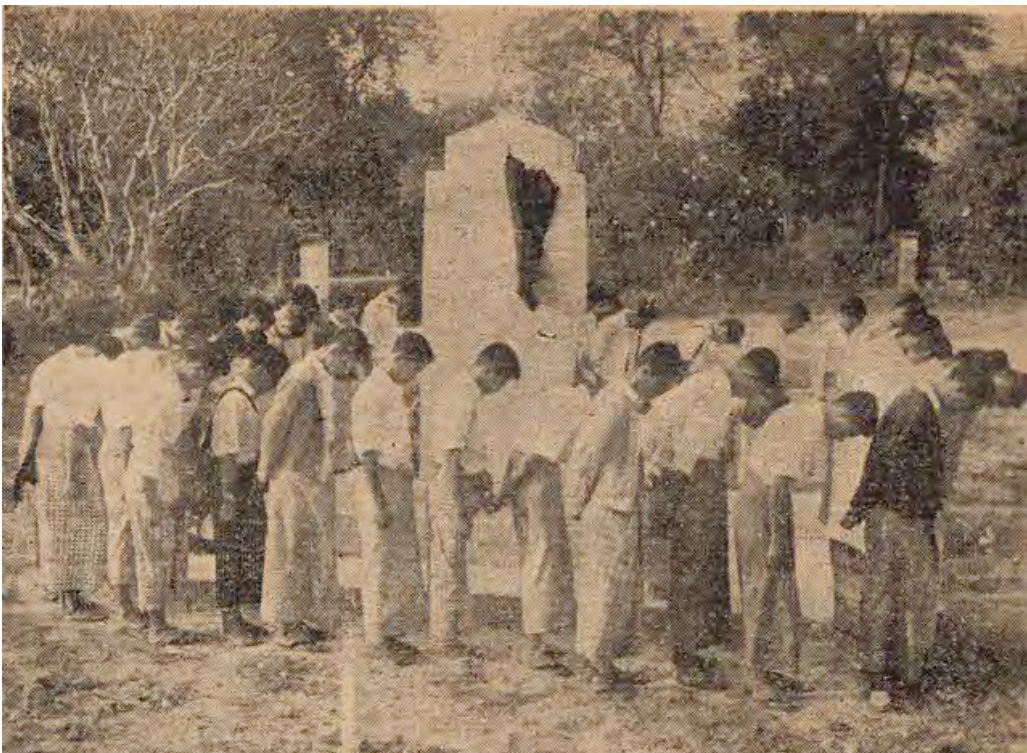


Figure 5 Memorial service at the 'Student Movement' monument at the RUSU site,
March 1963
Source: Mizzima, Photo Essay, 'Historical Photographs July 7, 1962',
<http://archive-2.mizzima.com/gallery>, accessed 7 September 2015

The site of the former student union building returned to the political frontline in December 1974, when students commandeered the body of U Thant, a key member of U Nu's government from the late-1940s, and a former Secretary-General of the United Nations. Thant's remains had been returned to Burma for burial. To the students, Thant was a hero of the nationalist movement; he was also the most prominent Burmese figure on the international stage. Their hastily-concocted plan was to entomb Thant in a mausoleum on the site of the Student Union building (Selth 1989:14). A small brick structure was constructed of materials found on site by architecture students. Before interment could take place, the military took Thant's body to a burial site in the grounds of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

Fourteen years later, on 23 July 1988, General Ne Win stood down. The weeks that followed saw a number of factions posture for power. The political vacuum was also the catalyst for the emergence of the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San's daughter Aung San Suu Kyi. For a brief period in August and September 1988, Dr Maung Maung – the only civilian in Ne Win's inner circle – became President of Myanmar. During his tenure, Dr Maung Maung offered to reconstruct the Student Union building as a gesture of appeasement to the students, and an acknowledgement of past wrong-doings (Steinberg 2010:130-131). The gesture did not come to fruition – Dr Maung Maung was ousted in a coup on 18 September 1988. Following the upheavals, the military-led SLORC seized control of the country.

On 17 August 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Thein Sein met in the new Myanmar capital Naypitaw. The meeting was orchestrated by U Myint, who had been appointed as economic advisor to the President in March 2011. U Myint occupies a rarefied position in contemporary Myanmar, being both a trusted advisor to the military-dominated government and a friend and affiliate of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi

(Kurlantzick, 2011). The meeting set in train a rapid and unexpected chain of events which led to Myanmar opening up and committing to a path of liberal democracy.

In 19 May 2012, shortly before the fiftieth anniversary of the demolition of the student union building, U Myint wrote an open letter to the people of Myanmar calling for its reconstruction. An excerpt from the letter is as follows:

More than anything else, the new Student Union building will be a landmark in the national reconciliation process, and it will fill a void that has been in our hearts for some time. As in the past, it will provide a place where our young people can gather, engage in free debate and discussion, and in keeping with our tradition, they will be encouraged to play an effective role in the nation building task that lies ahead.

On 6 July 2012, approximately 20 student leaders were imprisoned on the grounds that they were preparing to hold ceremonies to mark the event. Also in 2012, Barack Obama became the first United States President to visit Myanmar. The venue chosen for his address (on 19 November 2012) was Convocation Hall at the University of Rangoon. The location was selected to honour the role of Myanmar's students in opposing the governments of Ne Win and SLORC from 1962 to 2011.

In 2013 the revival of the University of Rangoon was taken up as a cause by Aung San Suu Kyi, who launched an appeal to raise funds for the physical renewal of the university's Kamayut campus.

Today, nearly a century after it was established, the University of Rangoon campus, and the site of the former student union building in particular, remain intensely politicised.

The site of the student union building today

Since 1996 the University of Rangoon has been closed to undergraduates. The campus is a secure area, and under constant surveillance. Some postgraduate teaching takes place there, and senior administrators have offices on campus, but it is effectively a ghost town.

The removal of undergraduates from the campus has been described as, ‘a conscious attempt to change the symbolic meaning of [the university] – in other words, to sever or neutralise [its] historical connection with revolutionary nationalism’ (Seekins 2005:258).

The site of the former student union building is visible from the public domain through a tall, spiked steel picket fence. It is occupied by a plantation of immature trees, and a small rendered brick plinth – possibly part of a reconstruction of the Student Movement monument (Figure 6). It is a powerful absence at the heart of the university.



Figure 6 The site of the former student union building, April 2014: view from the west
Source: Author

The significance of the site of the former Student Union building

There is no potential for the site of the former student union building to be identified as a heritage place. Even if there was political will, concepts of historical, social and intangible values are not yet established in Myanmar.

If the site was to be assessed for heritage significance by western practitioners, it would almost certainly satisfy the criteria of historical and social significance. The site's historical significance relates to its strong and enduring connection with resistance and the nationalist cause since the 1936 national strike, and for its association with significant and traumatic episodes in opposing the authoritarian rule of the military and subsequent junta. It is also likely to be of social value to the present community, although it is possible that the closure of the campus for almost 20 years has resulted in the younger generation having a level of ignorance of it. Unusually, in the large and diverse state of Myanmar, it is probable that the social associations with the student union site permeate nationally, well beyond the confines of Yangon. They are also likely to transcend ethnic and religious affiliations. However, social sentiment for the place has never been tested, and while the university and students remain politicised it is unlikely that there will be any formal initiative to challenge this *status quo*. For the time being at least, the student union building will remain a heritage place whose significance is actively overlooked.

Comparative discussion

The adaptation of a country's past to meet the political objectives of the present is an on-going process in almost every state. In prosperous countries with stable governments it may be imperceptible. It is often countries where a significant transition has occurred – or is occurring – that demonstrate the pattern most dramatically.

Following the end of the apartheid regime (1994), South Africa embraced a policy of national reconciliation that sought to recognise places of significance to the 'new' South Africa alongside existing memorials and monuments relating to the colonial and apartheid eras (Marschall 2006: 177). This pluralist approach was consistent with the ethos of inclusion promoted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Marschall sees the objective as one of neutralising division, and identifies the Zimbabwean model of national commemoration under the rule of Robert Mugabe as its antithesis (Marschall 2006:176-190). The Myanmar government has made no comment on a vision for a 'new' Myanmar since 2011.

Vietnam is another country that has been through a process of transition in recent decades. Following the Vietnam War (War of Independence) the country was unified under a Communist government. The *doi moi* (renovation) policies introduced in 1986 saw an opening-up to the West (Logan 2000:ch.1). In this context of shifting loyalties and increasing liberalism there was, perhaps, an opportunity to explore approaches to national reconciliation. Instead, there was an emphasis on rejecting the Soviet legacy, with a parallel upsurge of interest in buildings and urban development left by the previously reviled French (Logan 2000:225-232). The large urban centres were the focus of cultural heritage in the post-Soviet era, with each addressing their particular values and experiences (Logan 2000:253-254).

Logan has also identified a missed opportunity for heritage as a mechanism for reconciliation in Vietnam, in this case between Vietnam and its former colonial ruler France. Dien Bien Phu was the site in 1954 of the decisive battle between the Vietnamese and the French. The Vietnamese were the victors, a victory that essentially signalled the end of European colonialism in south-east Asia. Logan argues that a Vietnamese initiative to recognise the heritage values of Dien Bien Phu has the potential

to be a significant force for reconciliation. This would, however, be contingent on an explicit recognition of the human rights dimension of colonialism (Logan, 2012:237).

The use and adaptation of buildings associated with a former regime can also be instructive in indicating where national priorities lie. In the 1970s, the Indonesian government converted a precinct built by the former Dutch colonialists for use as centres of Indonesian cultural heritage: historic warehouses were converted for use as a national maritime museum, and a church became home to a shadow puppet theatre (Jones/Shaw 2006:131). The appropriation of these imposed buildings for national uses was seen by some as a symbolic act of independence.

In 2005, the Myanmar government officially relocated to Naypyidaw, a new purpose-built city on a green field site in the geographic heart of the country. An inference of this shift was that Yangon – the former capital – was a legacy of a different era, and a different regime. Yangon was also in a state of considerable neglect. There has been little or no investment in the city for decades; basic services and sanitation are localised and *ad hoc*. In part, it was this state of disrepair and neglect that gave impetus to the work of the Yangon Heritage Trust.

Since August 2011 there has been no evidence that the Myanmar government has an interest in using heritage as a mechanism for achieving national reconciliation.

Heritage healing

In nations recovering from a trauma – in Myanmar's case, 50 years of military rule – heritage is often invoked as having the potential to provide emotional and cultural healing. Recent research by John Giblin of the University of Western Sydney suggests that the practical application of heritage as a source of healing is commonly a failure. He argues that empowered groups and individuals will always seek to identify and

promote emotive symbols and places to renegotiate identities and memories, and that the issue of greatest relevance in understanding their actions is the means by which empowered actors chose to present their case (Giblin, 2014:515).

In the case of the student union building, the powerful actors include the leader of the opposition, who has initiated a campaign to re-establish and reinvigorate the university; the President of the United States, who gave a public address at the university campus as a pointed acknowledgement of the role played by students in opposing military rule; and a leading economist who has publically invoked the potential for reconstruction of the student union building as a force for national reconciliation. All of them, for their particular reasons, have identified the potential for the university, with its strong associations with resistance, to promote what Giblin describes as a renegotiation of memory and identity. To date, the government has made no formal comment on the matter.

These actors have promoted the message of recognising the university, and the student union, through formal and transparent channels. They have used their public profiles to convey their message. Their approach has been measured, deliberate and diplomatic.

Heritage as diplomatic currency

The practice of cultural heritage takes place in a broad social, political and economic context. In states emerging from a trauma, where cultural heritage practice is in its infancy, decisions are often made at the highest level of government – as has occurred in Myanmar. In these post-trauma or post-conflict situations, where a government may be seeking to both bolster its status locally and play an active role on the world stage, cultural heritage has the potential to become a ‘soft’ element in the diplomatic landscape. In the context of Myanmar, the nomination of the three ancient

archaeological sites to the World Heritage List, and the acceptance of international interest in Yangon's colonial legacy, can be seen as expressions of political horse-trading. Likewise, the 'powerful actors' who have drawn attention to Yangon University – in different ways, with different emphases and for different reasons – have effectively ensured that the place has a presence on the political agenda. Its heritage status is as a political bargaining chip.

Myanmar has embarked on a process of political reform. It remains to be seen whether the process will result in true pluralism. If this is to be achieved, a factor in the transition from a singular political voice will be the integration of minority groups within the mainstream of society. Likewise, it will be important for the country's social and religious diversity to be reflected in the heritage sites that are celebrated and conserved. Another factor in achieving national unity will be recognition of sites associated with resistance movements, including resistance to the military government, and to British colonial rule.

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