คุณค่าของมรดกแห่งประเทศลาวและสิงคโปร์: การใช้ประโยชน์และผลกระทบ

National Heritage Values in Lao PDR and Singapore: Its Functions and Effects

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Abstract

Heritage is socially and culturally constructed and used to serve different purposes. Heritage is therefore a representation of values from different perspectives ranging from the universal to the individual. In the context of Southeast Asia, heritage is politically utilized to help build-up the nation. By doing as such, heritage becomes official and authorized which exclude the non-mainstream heritage from the public understanding. The examples from Lao PDR and Singapore are presented to disclose the heritage making process and its roles as a business of majority.

Keywords: national heritage, authorized heritage, business of majority, Lao PDR, Singapore, heritage making

บทคัดย่อ

นักวิชาการในปัจจุบันมีความคิดเห็นตรงกันว่า "มรดก" เป็นสิ่งที่ถูกสร้างขึ้นด้วยกระบวนการทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรมด้วยวัตถุประสงค์ต่างๆ ดังนั้น "มรดก" จึงเป็นตัวแทนของคุณค่าที่คนในสังคมจะมีให้กับ "มรดก" นั้นในหลายระดับ ตั้งแต่ระดับโลก จนถึงระดับส่วนบุคคล ในบริบทของเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้นั้น "มรดก" ถูกสร้างขึ้นและให้ความหมายเพื่อประโยชน์ทางการเมือง และนำไปซึ่งการนำ "มรดก" มาใช้เพื่อการสร้างชาติ การนำมาใช้ในลักษณะนี้ ทำให้ "มรดก" กลายเป็นเรื่องของกลุ่มคนที่มีอำนาจและให้การรับรอง "มรดก" อย่างเป็นทางการ ซึ่งจะนำไปสู่การไม่นับรวม "มรดก" ของคนกลุ่มอื่นๆ ในสังคม ในบทความนี้จะนำกรณีศึกษาของ ประเทศลาว และประเทศสิงคโปร์มาชี้ให้เห็นกระบวนดังกล่าว ตลอดจนบทบทของ "มรดก" ว่าเป็นภารกิจของคนส่วนใหญ่ของสังคม

คำสำคัญ: มรดกแห่งชาติ มรดกที่เป็นทางการ กิจกรรมของคนกลุ่มใหญ่ สิงคโปร์ สาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว การสร้างมรดก

Introduction

This article aims at indicating that heritage is socially and culturally constructed, therefore, heritage could be invented, re-established or vanished in accordance with current contexts (Smith 2006 and Harrison 2013). What makes heritage significant is a value which people in the society attach to

material or fabric such as a place, monument, building or site as a representation of a collective value. Hence, it can be said that heritage is a business of majority and of authorized organizations. Since "we" constitute a society, and while society is not hegemonic, it is tied together by some common features such as language, religion, cultural traditions and the like, in other words the makings of an "imagined community". Therefore heritage value can be considered a cultural system as defined by Anderson (Anderson 1991: 12). This article explores values and functions of national heritage and its impacts on the society by giving the cases of Lao PDR and Singapore as examples. The arguments presented in this paper have been formulated on theoretical discussions with personal observation and random interview in order to present what might be called "ordinary people", rather than those of authorized group of people.

Heritage in Southeast Asia: A Brief Note

Although the concept of heritage was officially initiated in the West, it might not be incorrect to state that the general fabric-centric understanding of the term "heritage" was applied in the colonial era throughout Southeast Asia, especially after World War II. According to Anderson's analysis, things that survived from the past were museumized, and used to restate and re-legitimize the rights of European powers to occupy the colonies especially during the period of the decline of colonial power in Southeast Asia, and against progressive schools of thinking and action. The material culture of the past was a way of claiming status as a guardian of a generalized national history as well as local traditions (Anderson 1991: 180-182). Additionally, Harrison reminds us about the function of museum

"Museum generates new forms of value for remnants of the past in emphasizing the distance between past and present. If the past is remote; it must also necessarily be rare and valuable. And if the heritage is that which remains from the constant march of progress, it is also threatened by the very conditions that produce it" (Harrison 2013: 23)

It is clear that objects and monuments from the past have purposefully become part of national political strategies. Interestingly, what once were tools for colonizer control became one of the tools for the post-colonized to build-up nationalism and liberate themselves from colonial sovereignty, too

Lao PDR and Singapore: Different Experiences, Different Heritage Values

Maintaining independent status is not the major concern among Laotian scholars. Throughout history, Laos had long been a vassal state of Siam for more than a century and was later occupied by France in the mid-nineteenth century. Hence the stories of liberating the nation from those two powerful nations control are the focal themes of their national history. This reflects how the state transforms these themes into a collective value for all inhabitants. After announcing her independence in 1949, the major concern among Laotian scholars, according to Mattariganond (2005), was the unity and harmonization of the nation. In her History of Laos from Different Perspectives, Mattariganond pointed out that

After independence, intellectual leaders of Laos produced a number of chronicles and history

books. In the same time, there were political conflicts occurring in Laos so the need of national harmony was raised. Therefore, this time was very significant for Laotian historians to create Laos national history as a tool to build-up the national harmony (Mattariganond 2005: 103)

To achieve that goal, most scholarly works produced at that point of time aimed at regarding the LanXang kingdom as the first and most powerful kingdom of the current Lao nation and specifying the causes of the kingdom's declination as a result of internal disharmony and conflicts (Mattariganond 2005: 112-116). Furthermore, Laotian students have been widely taught about these stories through school textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education. Referring to her analysis, Mattariganond summarized that,

It is reasonable to state that the history presented in text books has served the objectives of constructing the importance of the main institutions including nation, religion (Buddhism, and ancient traditional cultural practices and norms) and monarchy. The emphasis is harmony among all citizens (Mattariganond 2005: 130-131).

It is clearly seen that the concern of Laotian leaders after independence was to unify the disharmonized nation by arousing the feeling of love, patriotism and respect for the main institutions. These are core values which have been transplanted into Laotians' minds and perceptions, and presented through fabric or materiality. According to my field work and observations in LuangPrabang, when asked if they could name "Laos' heritage", most of my informants immediately respond, traditional cultural practices in relation to Buddhism such as Tak-Bat (giving alms), gratitude to their parents, and dressing in traditional clothes and style as well as the pride of being Laotian are examples of national heritage. These examples reflect the core values of the nation which are historically embedded into Laotian people's consciousness and transformed into fabric and materiality. Luang Prabang was inscribed as a World Heritage site in 1995, which strengthened pride in the rich and powerful ancient kingdom of Lan Xang. I argue that it is a way of bringing together the historical conflicts between Laotian people and French colonizers. The long description reads,

Luang Prabang is an outstanding example of the fusion of traditional architecture and Lao urban structures with those built by the European colonial authorities in the 19th and 20th centuries. Its unique, remarkably well-preserved townscape illustrates a key stage in the blending of these two distinct cultural traditions (excerpted from http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/479/)

Not only does Luang Prabang represent the powerful Lan Xang Kingdom, but it also is evidence of harmonization in terms of peaceful cultural interactions between colonial and local traditions. Luang Prabang is a good example presenting the main values of the public.

Throughout her almost five decades of autonomy, Singapore has been a very distinctive case in Southeast Asia due to her geographical location and rapid development. Her neighbors have indicated their origins and proved their long history with written evidence and also archaeological remains dating back several thousand years like that of Ban Chiang in Thailand or the Dong Son culture in Vietnam .

Singapore lacks evidence of her existence in the ancient history of Southeast Asia. However, this is not significant in its nation-building as Singapore's leaders have continuously benefited from the legacies of Malay history and colonial regimes after separation from Malaysia in 1965. This is presented through the National Museum of Singapore. I posit that the Singapore museum only provides a constructed set of knowledge about who "we" are and insists her existence in the Southeast Asian region. Tan also surmises that the historical background could not assist the state leaders much in obtaining the objective of nation building,

In Singapore, PAP leaders labor to transform outward-oriented citizens into inward-facing patriots. For historical and geo-political reasons, they cannot ground their nation-building campaign on ethno-linguistic unity and its basis in history. Rather, not unlike other leaders of new nations, they invoke a vision that posits Singapore as a global cosmopolis endowed with peace and prosperity (Tan 2011: 62) Portrayed as an entrepot, Singapore's image has long been as a multi-racial society. Considering how the state deals with the differences between groups, subtle policies have been made through the invention of new values which all Singaporeans whether Chinese, Malay or Indian Singaporeans have gradually adopted to help minimize three main problems after liberation which are, according to Tan, citizenship, the economy and the reinforcement of moral values, which were seen to be "declining" (Tan 2011: 49-52). The People's Action Party leaders gradually and intrinsically solved those three problems by granting citizenship to those who met all means set by the state, encouraging foreign-investment and aiding the international business environment by adopting English as a working language, and lastly by introducing compulsory Religious Knowledge (RK), particularly Confucianism, into the educational system (Tan 2011: 49-54). Choomgrant (2009) and other scholars proposed that the new values have been constructed to erase or at least dampen conflicts between the multi-racial groups. It is called the "common bond" composing of competitiveness, individual merit and individualization (Chua 1998: 32-33). In this case, as Chinese is the majority group among the multi-racial population, it is believed that Tan proposed a new theory to explain other groups absorbing a dominant group's culture. The theory is Ethnonormativity which recognizes that

no matter how natural a particular racial group's social, political and/or economic dominance may appear, that group must work to create and continuously reproduce that dominance, or risk losing that hegemonic position... It also includes the possibility of individuals from racial minority groups deliberately adopting the dominant racial group's cultural practices for perceived ideological and/or material gains. (Tan 2011: 31-32).

These dominant values, particularly those of Chinese-Singaporeans, are what the entire society practices and perceives as tools to build up the modernized and prosperous state. Phillips in his doctoral dissertation also notices that Singaporean culture is a type of predominantly Chinese continuity adapting itself to changes brought about by modernity and its projects, specifically technology (Phillips 2008: 4). These values are also transplanted into fabric and materiality in various forms in their daily life.

According to my field work and observations, Singaporeans and expats work hard to achieve their goals. Interestingly, in terms of physicality, by using the same question I asked in Laos, none of the informants in Singapore mentioned the colonial buildings or the legacy of Malay rule. In contrast, some of them even mentioned the old areas such as Katong precinct or shop houses and even Marina Bay Sands . This reflects the success of the state in implanting "national values" of hard work and the family unit, which help build up the nation to be truly global in the late twentieth century. Moreover, these state attempts have effectively eradicated conflicts between groups by articulating and reinforcing new values that over-ride race-related cultural values.

It can be concluded from experiences of two Southeast Asian nations that the first recognition of what is today called heritage evidently occurred locally in the late nineteenth century. Laos and Singapore have shown more interest towards heritage after independence in the mid twentieth century. Laos mainly secures national values of religion and the role of great kings, and regards the kings as state liberators. Laotian people value harmony. Singapore's image of a global state is relevant to the historical entrepot background. Hard work, the family unit in relation to Confucian philosophy and competitiveness are of core values of Singaporean society. I argue that the values of the people of two different states effectively function in current society.

National Heritage in Singapore and Lao PDR: Its Function and Effects

As the heritage values of Singapore are newly constructed due to her image as a global city, the attempt of the state to overcome the conflicts between racial groups is to assert the idea of nation building through many channels by re-stating Confucian values, good citizenship and economic development (Tan 2011). By promoting these values, it seems the Chinese have become more dominant. Although there is a tendency for non-Chinese individuals to adopt the dominant values, other racial group members might not follow. Including non-Chinese voices in the national history through a television program, Treasure Hunt, aired while I was conducting the first field work during March - April 2014, might be regarded as a method to re-stress the value of being a global city. In addition, personal belongings were displayed in the National Museum. This special event was publicly presented on the National Museum Website. Free entrance was available to those who held Singaporean citizenship and Permanent Residents.

[there] is a little bit of history in all our homes", and involves a call to Singaporeans to bring out the objects that they hold dear. The items showcased in the documentary, ranging from intricate memorabilia to the cherished heirlooms of individuals, families, collectors and institutions across the country, will be presented at the National Museum of Singapore as part of a special exhibition highlighting our collective heritage. Featuring the personal stories behind each of these objects and their collectors, this exhibition is a testament to how everyday items, which may otherwise be left unappreciated, could be significant to understanding one's heritage

The two cases of current contextual situations are to affirm that heritage is a business of the majority politically, socially and economically but aimed towards a broad scale. It is something that all people in the "imagined community" are supposed to share and value symbols of national commonality which will be passed on to the future.

Authorized/official heritage is under state legislative protection that primarily aims at safeguarding fabric or materiality. Additionally, this seems to be a major concern in the West, particularly for issues related to authenticity. There are charters and protocols guiding how to preserve and manage the physicality of heritage sites by taking cultural contexts for granted while considering restoration or preservation (Venice Charter 1966 and Burra Charter 1979). However, the cultural contexts of Asia were initially taken into account in the Nara Document (1994) and later in the Hoi An Protocols (2005).

Staiff and Bushell (2013) criticized the idea of fabric-oriented management towards the World Heritage status of Luang Prabang Town because it overlooks other social dimensions in Luang Prabang Town. Staiff and Bushell argue that

Heritage values, as conceptualized in the West, carrying as they do their own discursive contexts, histories and ideology, are at the core of this imagining. How does such an imagining work in Lao PDR with its command economy and where the collective (the family, the ban, the Sanga) are profoundly more significant than Western notions of individuality (and all that this implies) and where the split between tangible and non-tangible is nowhere near as clear as in Western post-Enlightenment rational thought? (Staiff and Bushell 2013: 110).

Scholars, including myself, are attempting to remind "us" that the significant value of Luang Prabang has three main pillars, and one of them- Buddhism, with its ancient traditional cultural practices and norms, is an influential factor that the architecture field of studies tends to ignore by focusing more on form than function. Staiff and Bushell also indicated that the mobility of locals and the renting out of their properties to business entrepreneurs are not major causes of the physical deterioration but could be otherwise considered as a way to transform their cultural value into materiality by financially supporting and taking care of family and the Sanga.

In addition to Staiff and Bushell's analysis, I argue that those who moved out may possibly be regarded as, on the one hand, having no sense of attachment to their home town, and on the other hand, are probably seen as a minority. In this sense, it is more complicated. They are a minority within their home town where they have been raised, educated and have lived. Though the locals may perform in accordance with national heritage values, the state and international guidelines for conservation and management policy makers may not praise and congratulate them.

In Singapore, nation-building in terms of economic and politics seems to have been prioritized from 1965 onwards, and new social values have been made to cover all racial conflicts and serve the state's purpose of driving the country to be economically prosperous and by reinforcing state prosperity. Although the

state's purpose is to re-constitute the global city state, in the past decades, Chinese values have transcended those of smaller groups as a result of the personal favor of the PAP leaders. One of my informants commented that the national leader

"Lee Kwan Yu has two reasons to build up the country- those are; first, culture and second genre. He strongly believes that a certain culture and genre could make the country successful so that's why he welcomes the Chinese and Indians (Alex interviewed on 28 March 2014)."

Despite of the fact that Lee Kwan Yu has encouraged children to learn their mother-tongue together with English as a working medium of communication, a strong emphasis on Confucian values has been stressed to citizens directly and indirectly. This influences other individuals from different races to adopt the majority values as pointed out in the previous section.

However, the notion of a global city state in the 21st century CE must unavoidably present itself as fostering equal treatment, opportunity and contributions from all races to the nation. The position of multi-culturalism has not happened easily. It has been the center of nation-building policy for almost half a century. In the new millennium, it is the third phase of Singapore's multiculturalism which

In the current phase, as globalization brings with it cultural diversity, cross-cultural understanding and dialogue are encouraged to foster hybrid Singaporean identities that would bind Singaporeans in a lattice of shared cultural links, grounded in the heartland and spreading out into the cosmopolitan world (Goh 2010: 19).

The presentation of multi-culture is shown spatially and traditionally. Wisely divided into different zones, each racial community has occupied a specific area such as Little India, China Town and Malay Village. Moreover, each group's important festivals are celebrated and national holidays such as Chinese New Year, Vesak Day (Buddhism), Hari Raya Aidi; Fitri (Islam), Deepavali (Hindu) and Christmas (Christianity).

Additionally, Goh commented on the characteristics of possible hybridity.

It is not easy to combine the melting-pot and mosaic approaches and yet foster hybrid identities. In principle, the promotion of racial and religious harmony can complement ethnic heritage preservation. One can develop a deep appreciation and actively practice one's own cultural heritage while exercising tolerance of other cultures (Goh 2010: 19-20).

Nonetheless, multiculturalism or hybridity is topped by national values to make these features more coherent. Regardless of their cultural background, all have, at least as expected by state policy, the same target. Metaphorically, a high-rise building equipped and decorated with modern technologies is a symbol of the national value of being economically prosperous while those in the building, regardless of cultural background working very hard behind computers, talking on mobile devices, having tele-meetings and contributing most of the time in the office are representatives of a multicultural environment. Therefore, I argue that including ethnic minority groups into the term multiculturalism

is fundamental in enhancing national values, which pave the way to achieving national goals based on notions of unity and harmony and the Confucian ideas of a hierarchical system where everybody has a role and a place.

Apart from carefully building up multiculturalism and including the important values of each race into the national calendar, the state has a program which empowers almost every citizen to share their stories and experiences as a part of the national oral history. Singapore established an oral history department in 1979 in the National Archives and Records Center to document, preserve and disseminate the social memories of Singapore through recorded interviews with people from all walks of life (National Achieves of Singapore 1988: 5) This program, I posit, adds a sense of belonging for those who might not really be able to physically contribute to the current nation-building due to their age. Moreover, this can be interpreted as an action indicating that the success of nation building depends not only on the state but also from all people.

The Singaporean state clearly puts much effort into harmonizing society by utilizing the strategy of appreciating ethnic minority heritage values and integrating them into the national values as part of the national objective. The success of inclusion is measured by the tolerance of each cultural practice and the level of economic growth in the past decades.

Conclusion

Since heritage is an action, the heritage making process at a national level including its use to serve national purposes is presented in relation to Lao PDR and Singapore. Different backgrounds and experiences play major parts for the state in constituting collective values and adherence to things in the past in relation to current contexts. Laos PDR and her emphasis on harmony and Singapore with the projection of being a global city state provide each state with different values to attain each nation's goals. Social value mostly is what the state wishfully expects would unite their population. However, under the national scheme of heritage values lie various differences in relation to race, beliefs, practices and perceptions. The state-protected heritage could trespass on minority heritage value and lead to conflicts in terms of the usages of the sites regarding minority beliefs and traditions as shown in the case of Luang Prabang Town. If successfully managed, in the case of Singapore, the image of a global city state becomes a reality but there are costs to minorities and to things valued at the local level but not officially recognized.

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