ACHS 1 – The Re/theorisation of Heritage Studies

Beyond Chinatown: Considerations on the Heritage of Displaced "Others" in Southeast Asia's cities

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While southern Chinese sojourners have formed relatively stable communities in the multi-ethnic pre-colonial cities of the Southeast Asian region since at least the 15th century, a widely-observable pattern in Southeast Asia's cities is their takeover of areas formerly occupied by diverse other communities in the late 19th century and in the 1920s during a remarkable surge in southern Chinese immigration into the region – the largest such movement in the world. This temporal dimension of displacement is concealed in heritage discourses today in cities where local Chinese communities are numerically and economically dominant, whether in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, or Singapore, and adds a layer of complexity in the entanglement of urban heritage with colonial racial socio-economic policies and postcolonial machinations of ethno-nationalist identity.

This paper discusses the heritage of minority groups in Southeast Asian cities in this context: former colonial groups such as the Portuguese and Dutch, foreign Asian communities such as South Asians, Persians, and Arabs, and various indigenous Southeast Asian groups such as Malays, Javanese, Thais, and Bugis. It begins by investigating heritage projects that ignore or exclude these former histories and reviews others that call attention to these pasts.

An interesting paradox presents itself in Southeast Asia. The valorisation of Chinatowns as local heritage by local Chinese communities has led to the exclusion of "other" groups who no longer reside in the area, even when the latter's historic community amenities are still present. Conversely, the state typically resorts to essentialising representations of the dominant indigenous majority (with the key exception of Singapore, where the state sponsors essentialised images of "Chineseness") – actual existing indigenous urban heritage is thereby not only ignored but also epistemologically displaced by the interpretive violence of state fictions.

To this end the paper proposes a move beyond a state directive / local initiative dichotomy, to consider how essentialising projects and narratives by both state and local community that select a freeze-frame on the past – heritage *tableau* – inflict interpretive violence upon the multi-layered, necessarily multivalent past of a site. It demonstrates how the cognisance of the complex interplay of architectural histories – the *lieu* – and broader socio-economic histories of cities and towns – the *milieu* – necessitate a shift from the superficial valorisation of extant historic fabric to a critical perspective on place histories that partakes of a broader frame of historical analysis and foregrounds multi-valency. Through the collaboration of urban design strategies and the social sciences, the preservation of buildings and sites can creatively interweave ways of acknowledging palimpsests, both physical and intangible, in the layered historic sites of the region. The sources of these multiple narratives come from such silent witnesses as old toponyms and street names in various vernaculars, the recuperation of the names and merchandise of former shops and houses, and a combination of the marshalling of archival records and oral history projects. These strategies allow the recuperation of multiple narratives in the face of the absence of these communities and of physical reminders of their former presence in the historic fabric.