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Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Thailand: Memory, Place, and Power.

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Presented as a single-author book, the volume under review here actually includes a collection of twelve essays, each co-written by King Ross and a Thai scholar. In the following, I will address this ambiguity by always referring to “the author(s)”. I will conclude by expanding my thoughts on the problems posed by such ambiguity.

Taken as a whole, the book questions the construction and transformation of Thai identity and contemporary heritage in times of disruptive modernization and uneven economic development. It argues that Thailand’s state ideology based on ‘Nation, Religion, and King’ defines narrow principles of heritage selection that overlooks the multifaceted and ever unfolding Thai cultural identity. The common thread to all chapters is ‘assemblage theory’ by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987). However, the application of this theory to the field of heritage yields several distinct explanations throughout the book and, for this reason, remains elusive. As I understand it, the author(s) aim to argue that ideas of cultural heritage in Thailand are shaped by ‘relations of exteriority’ between cultural legacies and a wide range of other ‘entities’. I use the generic (and vague) term ‘entities’ here because the case studies developed throughout the book refer to a great diversity of cultural assets, spanning from ideas of femininity to urban forms. In order to understand Thai heritage, it is not enough to study heritage forms ‘in themselves’ (through ‘relations of interiority’). One has to look instead at the multiple connections across time and space that heritage objects and forms establish with other (‘exterior’) entities, i.e. cultural forms, concepts, understandings of history, constructions of identity, affects, social perceptions etc. For instance, in order to assess the heritage value of eclectic royal Thai palaces (chapter 3), the researcher has to consider the references to various architectural styles that compose them. But also, in order to elaborate on ideas of urban heritage in Bangkok’s informal urban settlements (chapter 10), one has to analyze how urban dwellers have assembled collective vernacular knowledge about space with academic urban planning imposed by resettlement programs. These urban dwellers produce a ‘hybridized order’ (p. 194) which mirrors their lifestyle, social relations, and sense of the sacred. A holistic understanding of these multiple connections constitute “heritage assemblages”. Such assemblages are multiple and changing because they depend on the perspectives of specific actors that occur at precise historical moments. Such assemblages are not mutually exclusive.

They may fall apart as time passes. Sometimes, they coexist in time and space and may trigger conflicts.

Regrettably, only few references are made to the rich literature in the field of critical heritage studies, which could have been used as a sound theoretical backbone for such research objects. The chapters are organized in two main parts that draw on Pierre Nora's encyclopedic work on the construction of collective memory in France (1996–8). The author(s) draw a distinction between *lieux de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire*: the first term is intended to cover “the range of places, both physical and intellectual, wherein the memories of a nation might be constructed, contained and contested” (p. 6); whilst the second term designates “the settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience” (ibid., based on Nora 1996, p. 1).

Taking some distance from the broad definition provided by Pierre Nora, King Ross precises in the Introduction (which he clearly wrote alone) that the *lieux de mémoire* developed in the first part of the book brings together “cases where memory is officially defined and sanctioned in defining the heritage and identity of monarchy and the nation” (p. 29). However, the cases also cover a number of aspects of Thai heritage and identity which have been neglected or marginalized in the formation of national identity and bring back to the broad scope of Pierre Nora's concept. Chapter 2 recounts the myths, beliefs, and ancient chronicles embedded in the eldest traces and ruins of Chiang Saen's urban landscape, a city founded by King Saen Phu in the fourteenth century. Chapter 3 describes the Western-inspired construction history of three royal palaces built in Phetchaburi province by Kings Rama IV, V, and VI. Chapter 4 explores how love for human beings, family members, the community, the King, and the nation may influence historical interpretations. Chapter 5 highlights how femininity has been marginalized as a dimension of Thai history and heritage. Chapter 6 describes the heritage of the Japanese diaspora in Thailand. Chapter 7 reflects upon the ownership of the ‘local heritage’ of the small town of Photharam (Ratchaburi Province).

Pierre Nora organized a comprehensive inventory of *lieux de mémoire* specifically because he believed that collective national memory was endangered in France. By entitling the second part of the book *milieux de mémoire*, the author(s) seem to support the hypothesis that such memory is still embedded in villages and urban neighborhoods in Thailand. The second part indeed questions whether everyday-life environments in Thailand are still repositories of collective memories in spite of the evolution of lifestyles and the destruction of informal neighborhoods. Again, such nostalgic questions overlook the insights provided by literature in the field of heritage studies that shows the malleability and creative transformations of cultural heritage in contexts of economic

modernization. Chapter 8 looks at Bangkok's urban canals (*khlong*) as structuring tools of urban development and agriculture, centers for social life, and objects of tourists' ambiguous perceptions of poverty and Orientalist fascination. Chapter 9 explores gentrification and informal neighborhoods around Sukhumvit Road, a major axis of Bangkok's urban expansion. Chapter 10 analyzes the problems related to the *in situ* resettlement of canal-side communities. Chapter 11 assesses the survival and losses of three Bangkok craft communities following industrialization. Chapter 12 questions Thai identity from the perspective of minority ethnic groups, and more particularly the Phutai ("Black Thai"). Finally, chapter 13 analyzes tourism-related economic revenues and their distribution in Ban Pa-Ao village (close to Ubon Ratchathani).

The twelve chapters offer rich and insightful empirical materials. They also sketch a number of promising theoretical avenues of inquiry that I can only briefly list here: the role of sacred urban topographies in shaping an enlarged notion of urban heritage; the scales and scopes of heritage ownership by different communities; the cultural value of ordinary urban knowledge shared by informal dwellers; the masculine vs. feminine divide in heritage conceptions; the role of affect in shaping heritage approaches. However—ironically enough—the book appears as an assemblage of research avenues (which would be worth further development) all while providing glimpses on various relevant matters related to heritage and identity problems.

Although the book argues that ideas of heritage extend well beyond the triad of 'Nation, King, Religion', the chapters systematically omit whether or not different forms of legacies have received official heritage recognition at the local or national level. By the same token, the perspectives of different actors on those cultural legacies are largely overlooked. For instance, the readers do not get to know what Bangkok's Japanese diaspora or Chiang Sean's inhabitants think of their heritage, nor do they learn about how former "slummers" think of their old and their new neighborhoods. The book provides instead a homogeneous perspective on cultural values. In doing so, it defends one main idea, according to which heritage should be all-inclusive in order to acknowledge the complexity of Thai history and society. This idea is shared by the authors of the essays, who represent an intellectual elite of Thai scholars, former PhD candidates supervised by King Ross. Thus, the book will be a relevant source for scholars and students in Thai studies who are interested in the evolution of cultural values and the construction of historical knowledge in the country. Even if its topic might be of interest for a broad public of scholars and students in heritage and tourism studies, the book addresses a public that is already familiar with Thailand, because it excludes basic information about the country which would invite a broader readership.

The originality of this book resides in the dissemination of Thai scholarship, only rarely made available at the international level. However, the position of Thai scholars is ambiguous. The main author affirms that ‘at one level this is a single-author book’ (p. 29) because he has contributed to its various chapters. He adds that ‘12 internal, “data” chapters are all based at least in part on doctoral theses’ (p. 29) supervised at the University of Melbourne and Silpakorn University. Such statements pose delicate questions concerning the ownership of data and research conducted by (former) PhD candidates, which would have found an appropriate answer in the presentation of the book as an edited volume. Furthermore, it sadly contrasts with the theoretical position on cultural heritage defended throughout the volume, which pledges in favor of a socially inclusive understanding of memory and identity, capable of integrating the perspectives of a wide range of actors. How can heritage be inclusive without a fair acknowledgment of Thai scholars’ contributions that bear knowledge about such heritage?

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