Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, Hui Yew-Foong, and Philippe Peycam (eds)

What would an account of heritage-making look like if we began with the everyday actions of citizens and civil society, rather than the policies and priorities of the nation? For those keen to explore this question in reference to contemporary Asia, this edited volume is an excellent place to start. Set within the context of heritage studies—an interdisciplinary field that has grown dramatically over the past three decades in tandem with the global boom of heritage as a source of public concern and commercial opportunity—the chapters collected herein are a breath of fresh air. Thus far, much of this literature on the ‘uses of the past in the present’, whether in Asia or elsewhere, has focused on the role of the nation in the selective designation and recuperation of those historical sites and cultural traditions deemed by authorities as essential to the promotion of national identity, political stability, and economic development. This emphasis in the existing scholarship is certainly warranted, given that, to borrow the pithy phrasing of this volume’s introduction, ‘heritage has become a cultural prothesis that nations cannot do without’ (p. 5). However, to anyone familiar with the trajectory of heritage-making in Asia today, this nation-centric framing too often obscures or minimizes the diverse range of civil society groups, diasporic networks, and local enthusiasts who together play an increasingly critical role in the process of identifying, preserving, and transmitting the complex history of this region to future generations.

In this volume, however, their efforts take center-stage. The presence of the nation is never completely absent from these pages; of course, the very notions of citizenship and civil society are premised on its existence as an entity in relation to which individuals and communities must somehow be defined. But each of the authors here have, in their own fashion, taken up the bold challenge set out by the editors to ‘account for heritage-making in pre-national, post-national, trans-national and, God forbid, a-national contexts’ (p. 3) by de-centering the role of the nation to varying degrees in their accounts. Moreover, rather than casting the heritage-making efforts of citizens and civil society as either opposing or endorsing the ‘Authorized Heritage Discourse’ (p. 17) of the state, as is often the initial temptation, these authors provide ethnographically and historically rich narratives that confound easy explanation along these lines.

Taken together, the chapters cover an eclectic array of sites where heritage-making can be seen to unfold: an archaeological park in Java, street corners in Singapore, villages in rural Vietnam, a coastal community in West Malaysia,
farmlands in Taiwan, and the cityscape of Yangon, to name but a few. As this brief list suggests, the geographic scope of the volume is rather more constrained than the ‘Asia’ in the title claims; in fact, with the exception of one chapter on Macau, its focus is exclusively on Southeast Asia and Taiwan (which is only to be expected, given the involvement of Singapore’s Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Taipei’s Academia Sinica in both the publication of the volume and the organization of the conference that preceded it). By no means is this a fault, however. Frankly, it is refreshing to encounter a book where ‘Asia’ turns out not to mean only Northeast Asia, as is more typically the case. Likewise, the structure of the chapters—the first two-thirds considering various countries in Southeast Asia, the latter third dedicated to Taiwan—might at first seem lopsided, but actually resolves the issue that many edited volumes of this type face: how to cover its subject in a fashion that is both expansive and nuanced in order to satisfy a range of readers who will undoubtedly approach the text with differing needs and interests.

Occasionally, some of the authors here do succumb to the familiar tropes that tend to afflict heritage studies literature. After years of rich scholarship in this field, repeating yet again the truism that ‘heritage is contested’ or ‘heritage is political’ does not bring much to the proverbial table. Fortunately, the majority of the contributors avoid falling into that rut, and several present accounts of heritage-making that are particularly creative and surprising. These include Yoshihisa Amae’s chapter on the remarkable reverence (to the point of actual deification) that some Taiwanese today have for the figure of an early twentieth-century Japanese engineer and the massive infrastructures he designed. Provocatively, Amae argues that this curious case speaks to the emergence of a postcolonial discourse in Taiwan that manages to be ‘pro-Japanese’ without necessarily being ‘pro-colonial’ (p. 255), as well as being representative of the country’s gradual move away from the Kuomintang regime’s ‘Sino-centric’ vision of national identity towards one that is instead ‘civic and multicultural’ (p. 257). Likewise, Zhang Beiyu’s detailed account of the dramatic transformations Chinese street opera has undergone in Singapore over the past 150 years reveals a complex genealogy of religious practice, regional migration, and urban spatial politics—all of which dovetails nicely with other chapters also considering heritage-making as it unfolds along paths of the Chinese diaspora (most notably, Yi Li’s on Chinese poetry societies and libraries in post-war Myanmar). Returning to Taiwan, Han-Hsiu Chen and Gareth Hoskins shed light on a genre of heritage-making to which little attention has been paid in the Asian context: the preservation of sites related to the history of tobacco cultivation in the region and the representation of this heritage to tourists today as evidence of “human harmony with nature” (p. 306). This ‘picturesque depic-