

Victor T. King, ed.. *UNESCO in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative Perspective*. NIAS Studies in Asian Topics Series. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015. Illustrations. xv + 463 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-87-7694-174-1.

Reviewed by Christa Adams

Published on H-FedHist (February, 2019)

Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

In 1972 UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) adopted the World Heritage Convention, an internationally recognized set of guidelines that enabled states parties to identify and protect sites emblematic of regional “cultural” and “natural” heritage. States parties were required to ratify the convention, symbolizing the agreement of local actors and stakeholders to adhere to UNESCO protocols when nominating a site for inscription on the World Heritage list. Inscription as a World Heritage Site (WHS) reflected a given site’s “universal human value,” along with one of (through 2004) “six cultural [or] four natural criteria” (pp. 2, 4). Prestige, as a primary result of inscription as a WHS, enabled states parties to promote and benefit from the cachet inherent in this international recognition.

In this comprehensive volume, editor Victor T. King highlights the complexities of management of and challenges associated with inscription as a WHS, by focusing on sites located throughout Southeast Asia. This regional focus enables comparative study of local responses to issues linked to the protection of heritage, filling a gap in existent research on the effects of inscription as a WHS in developing states. King defines heritage as “tangible and concrete elements of the

past ... as well as those aspects of culture expressed in behavior, action, and performance” (p. 2). In the context of this volume, heritage is defined as either “cultural,” whereby a site is deemed valuable because of existent physical evidence, or “natural,” where value is assigned because of a site’s “outstanding physical, biological, and geological features” (p. 5). Local efforts to protect and promote both “cultural” and “natural” heritage in Southeast Asian nations, along with the attendant challenges and benefits associated with inscription of a site as a WHS, are explored in the context of sixteen chapters, covering diverse sites located in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia. Chapters 1 through 12 serve as case studies of Southeast Asian cultural heritage sites, while chapters 13 through 16 function as case studies of four natural heritage sites.

In chapters 1 and 2, Annabel Vallard and Sigrid Lenaerts examine the effects of WHS status on the historic city of Luang Prabang, located in the Lao PDR. Vallard addresses the impact of WHS status on the site through the lens of textile production, highlighting the construction and dissemination of “officially recognized ‘traditions’” that are simultaneously “commercialized” for tourist

consumption (p. 41). Lenaerts evaluates the ways that heritage is presented and interpreted for tourists at the site, focusing on local and visitor responses to and experiences of these interpretative efforts.

Michael J. G. Parnwell and Erik Akpedonu highlight similar challenges in chapters 4 and 5, through examinations of heritage management and expanding tourism at two urban sites: Hoi An Ancient Town, in Vietnam, and Vigan, in the Philippines, each inscribed as WHSs in 1999. Parnwell addresses issues resulting from efforts to manage an urban heritage site located within a modern cityscape, arguing that Hoi An Ancient Town is largely “managed for tourism, rather than tourism being managed for heritage preservation and appreciation” (p. 106). Akpedonu examines Vigan, an indigenous urban trading center that expanded in size during the Spanish colonial period and is today considered by UNESCO to be “the best-preserved example of a planned Spanish Colonial town in Asia” (p. 113). Because tourism was the only legitimate “economic option” in Vigan, local stakeholders were highly motivated and invested in its success as a tourist center, resulting in the site receiving UNESCO’s “Best Practice in World Heritage Site Management” award in 2012 (pp. 123-24, 138).

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss two WHSs in Malaysia: Melakka and George Town, inscribed together in 2008 “as ‘historic cities’ of the Straits of Malacca” (p. 140). King, in his analysis of Melakka’s hybrid cultural role in Malaysian history, suggests that stakeholders struggled to balance nationalist ideals with the diverse cultural reality of the site. Further tensions emerged via attempts to reconcile “heritage conservation and economic development,” both of which would ostensibly enhance the tourist experience of Melakka (p. 167). Ooi Keat Gin, in chapter 7, examines the “maverick character” of George Town, established in the eighteenth century as an English East India Company port (p. 169). Ooi contends that George

Town’s value as a WHS is a direct result of its “immigrant, cosmopolitan population,” which collectively produced the site’s unique “tangible and intangible multicultural heritage” (p. 187).

The authors of chapters 8 through 12 examine issues related to managing and interpreting archaeological sites. In chapter 8, Roberto B. Gozzoli analyzes the nature of heritage and “authenticity” at Ayutthaya Historical Park, located in Thailand. Gozzoli contends that the “authenticity” of archaeological sites like Ayutthaya is relatively fluid, being defined by both shifting political needs and contemporary cultural concerns. Keiko Miura, in chapter 9, tackles the issue of sustainable development and heritage protection at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Miura suggests that only the “harmonization of diverging values” between local and official stakeholders will lead to sustainable heritage protection at the site (p. 236). Fiona Kerlogue discusses Muara Jambi, a tentative list archaeological WHS located in Sumatra, in chapter 10. Kerlogue indicates that the site’s cosmopolitan heritage is producing new challenges associated with “the construction and revision of national narratives and identity” by regional and national actors (p. 257). Michael Hitchcock and I Nyoman Darma Putra examine two more Indonesian WHSs, Borobudur and Prambanan, through the lens of management. The authors propose that existent “haphazard” management practices will need to be modified to better address issues resulting from increased tourism and development at these sites. In chapter 12, Miura and I Made Sarjana evaluate the complex issues linked to managing Bali’s *Subak* System, “an association of both irrigated cultivation and religion,” nominated and ultimately inscribed as a WHS in 2012 (p. 274). The terrace agricultural system, reliant on the Hindu-Balinese concept of *tri hita karana*, a philosophy that stresses “living in harmony with the supernatural, natural, and human worlds,” enabled the sites to qualify for recognition based on both cultural and natural value (p. 289).

The authors of the volume's final four chapters examine the myriad issues related to the management of "natural" heritage sites in Southeast Asia. In chapter 13, Vu Hong Lien discusses the Phong Nha-Ke Bang Nature Reserve of Vietnam, a World Heritage list site with incredible biodiversity, geological history, and commercial potential. Vu suggests that the site's maintenance hinges on the willingness of local authorities to "apply international standards on conservation" in the short term, to ensure successful long-term protection of the site (p. 312). Janet Cochrane examines Indonesia's four natural WHSs in chapter 14, highlighting similar challenges. Cochrane argues that, in the face of habitat destruction, "public officials and private entrepreneurs" must collectively take a long view of site management to ensure continued protection of natural resources into the future (pp. 345-46). Johanna Katharina Fross turns to the Philippines and natural site management in chapter 15, examining the effects of ecotourism on the Tubbataha Reefs Marine Park and the Puerto Princesa Underground River National Park. Fross suggests that the expansion of ecotourism in these WHSs "can be undermined if practices do not embrace a sustainable approach"; she thus advocates in favor of greater oversight to protect WHSs in similarly vulnerable positions (pp. 365-66). Cochrane likewise chronicles the challenges of balancing tourism with natural heritage management in chapter 16, where she discusses the pitfalls associated with the commercialization of heritage at Kinabalu Park, Sabah, and Gunung Mulu, Sarawak, both in Malaysia. She here argues in favor of the expansion of state oversight of these sites to ensure that they might more equitably benefit Malaysian citizens in the future.

The value of this edited volume lies in the topical diversity of the case studies presented. Individuals with research interests in Southeast Asian history, material culture, governance, or economic expansion will find the book to be both well organized and useful in the context of contempo-

rary and future inquiry into the effects of WHS status on cultural and natural sites and on the people who live and work around them in Southeast Asian states. The scope of the volume might be unwieldy for nonspecialists, particularly given the diversity of content presented and number of sites addressed. That said, as an initial effort to raise awareness of the challenges associated with site management and protection in a period of increasing tourism to previously seldom-visited WHSs in Southeast Asia, the content presented is invaluable, as it, along with addressing contemporary concerns, raises questions for future scholarly inquiry.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-fedhist>

Citation: Christa Adams. Review of King, Victor T., ed. *UNESCO in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative Perspective*. H-FedHist, H-Net Reviews. February, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53640>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.