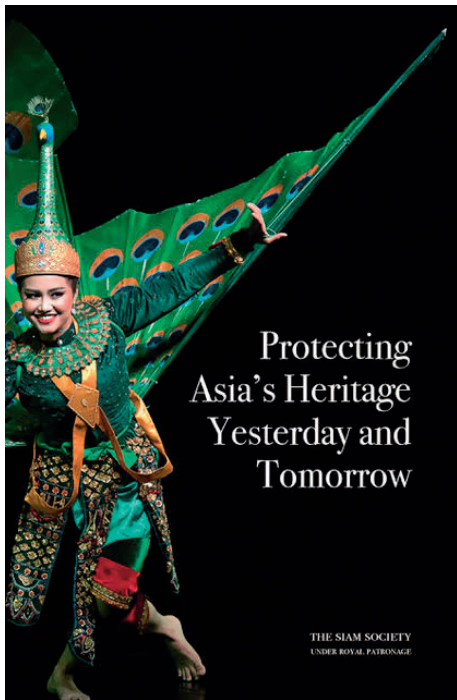


*Protecting Asia's Heritage: Yesterday and Tomorrow*. Bangkok: The Siam Society and Silksworm Books, 2020. ISBN 9786162151569. 825 Baht.



This book contains twelve articles originally presented at a conference titled “Heritage Protection: the Asian Experience” hosted by the Siam Society in January 2019. The contributors, hand-picked for their practical involvement in heritage issues, come from eleven Asian nations.

At the most basic level, the book offers lessons for tackling major dilemmas in the field of heritage protection. These dilemmas, framed as constructive questions, include:

1. how can we effectively deal with the value contradiction in cultural management between the ‘preserved past’ and the ‘living present’, given that both aspects of the culture do not always get on well together?

2. how can we preserve tangible cultures without isolating them from their intrinsic intangible value and functions?

3. in cultural conservation and management, how can inconsistencies be resolved between the ‘universal’ (mostly Eurocentric) standard and local perspectives?

4. in the modern capitalist world, can there be a ‘win-win’ compromise between cultural preservation and cultural business, in which the business lives off the results of preservation and also helps sponsor it? and last but not least,

5. can there be desirable cooperation on a more equal basis between ‘licensed’ (well trained) conservationists and amateur volunteers, particularly those with cultural expertise normally overlooked in standard conservation?

I think the book effectively challenges the power hierarchy in the field of cultural conservation, which is normally dominated by government policy, institutional management, law, a Western concept of ‘authenticity’, and standard conservation measures made legitimate in the areas of archaeology, art history and urban planning. To my understanding, the book makes a pragmatic argument for widening the space for others to contribute productively to cultural conservation and management. By setting out to offer distinctively Asian perspectives, the book provides glimpses into explorations and experiments in cultural heritage management, accomplished in the Asian context. Its examples cover a vast geographic area: east to west from India to the Philippines, and north to south from China to Indonesia. Although gathered under the same Asian umbrella, these examples are truly diverse in terms of the authors’ interests, the subjects chosen, their approaches, and their ideologies. In a metaphoric sense, they may represent the tip of an iceberg challenging scholars in the field to push forward

exploration of the enormous unseen submerged part of this iceberg.

In addition, this book is not ‘difficult to read’, or in other words not a ‘stressful’ kind of book, full of theories, techniques and abstractions that can only be fully appreciated by experts in the field. On the contrary, several of its chapters are simple and straightforward, offering a lively account of the experiences of people volunteering or working as amateurs in the field of cultural management and conservation. They may be ordinary people, NGO workers, highly-skilled architects or even people from the business world. Because culture is always multifaceted and can be ‘owned’ by anyone with the intention, all these adventurers can find their own niche in the conservation and management work that suits their interests and expertise.

Culture is in a healthy state when it coexists easily with people living their daily lives. Ideally speaking, a healthy culture needs no doctors in the form of alien experts for its management or conservation. The unnecessary involvement of such doctors may potentially create another layer of problems, like making the culture too unnaturally rigid, or too stagnant, or too restless, or (most worryingly) too isolated from the everyday life of its people. On the contrary, a healthy culture only needs doctors who understand the culture and are thus well equipped with the necessary knowledge to offer live-saving aid at times when the culture is in crisis, and who know how to step back once the culture resumes its normal health. This book also provides several examples of the adverse aspects of some doctors’ involvement, mostly by doctors who perceive that culture is always in poor health and should be kept permanently under treatment in a hospital. There are even cases of patients being abused by their doctors in the name of ‘protection’ or ‘conservation’.

This book is a serious scholarly work in the sense that it engages in a conversation with the disciplinary and institutional approaches currently dominating the fields of cultural management and conservation. These disciplinary approaches are normally constrained under the Western or ‘Eurocentric’ philosophical concept. The book voices a variety of alternative experiences, loosely organized in the geographic sense as ‘Asian perspectives’. It offers a defense for systems of cultural management that are not strictly formulaic, in other words, not in rigid accordance with the disciplines of law, policy, and so on. On the contrary, the book calls for more flexible, tailor-made methods aiming at integration of local perspectives, normally under-represented in the standard protocols, along with the usual stakeholders in cultural management. For general readers, the book provides lively examples of successful cultural management and conservation that were deliberately designed and conducted, not by well-trained experts but rather by self-learned amateurs who were more or less insiders of the culture in question. These examples should make the reader question how their own culture could be best promoted or revitalized, perhaps by their own hand.

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