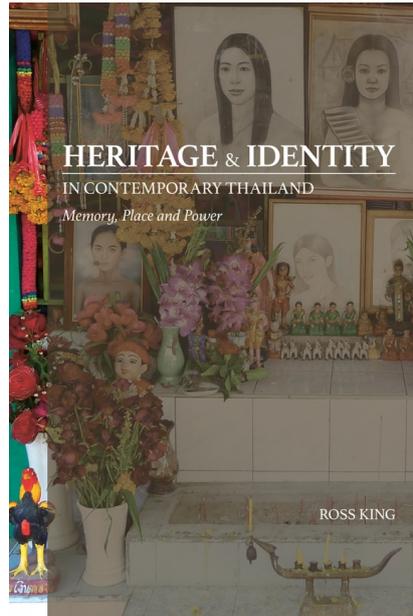


Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Thailand: Memory, Place and Power (2017)

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This book was edited and co-authored by Dr. Ross King, professorial fellow and former Dean of the Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne, Australia. *Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Thailand: Memory, Place and Power* builds on Dr. King's 2011 publication, *Reading Bangkok*. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the remaining twelve chapters rely on Dr. King's partnering with Thai Ph. D scholars, mainly from the University of Melbourne and Silpakorn University in Bangkok. There is a somewhat complex academic framework, meaning the work is more suitable for Thai studies' specialists, particularly those with an interest in architecture and heritage, as well as for specialists in place semiotics. This is not to say that it could not be read by the general reader; it also contains useful pointers for local governments and place administrators, as well as universities working with local communities.

In drawing together an eclectic mix of PhD dissertations around common themes, Dr. King employs concepts such as multiple heritages and memory (Nora, 1996); the role of distinctive urban spaces and especially group identities, including ethnic identities (e.g., Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1992), assemblage (e.g., Deleuze & Parnet, 2002; DeLanda, 2006); the ambiguities of Thai historiography (Winichakul, 2001); authenticity (Trilling, 1972; Kaufmann, 1975) and nostalgia (e.g., Brooks, 1976); and sites of memory as dialectical images (Benjamin, 1982; Buck-Morss (1991).

The introduction adequately introduces these terms and applies them to exemplars in the Thai context, and the conceptual framework serves in attempting to tie together what are essentially disparate chapters. This tightrope walking act is acknowledged by dividing the book into two major sections (excluding the introduction and conclusion), the first on *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) and heritage and memory, and the second on *milieux de mémoire* (living environments of memory) and heritage, memory, and inequality.

The first chapter, on Chiang Saen, serves to introduce the Tai peoples and their *muang* (city-state) and *muang fai* (hydro-agriculture system), as this was one of the first cities in what is now Thailand, and its spatial organisation and roles of temples are explained. However, the role of Chiang Saen in Thai historiography could have been better explained and the chapter could have juxtaposed the history and heritage management of Chiang Saen with various nationalist projects. Though a late development in terms of the book's publication, the largest flagpole in the world, with a museum and learning centre, is slated to be built in Chiang Saen to develop tourism ("Chiang Rai," 2016).

The subsequent chapter interweaves three Thai kings (Mongkut, Chulalongkorn, and Vajiravudh), the architecture of their palaces, and their foreign relations and architectural ideologies. The chapter is mainly of interest to historians of official Thai architecture and nationalism. Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the ambiguities of love in the Thai tradition, employing allegory to examine the Baroque in four Thai cases studies, of love and ambivalence, especially of love and death, focusing on the Lanna (Northern Thai) house; love of place and community, focusing on the Lanna *kuang* (plaza) in juxtaposition to Sanam Luang in Bangkok and the Buddhist *sala* or pavilion; love of nation, as expressed in the Young Soldier Monument in Chumphon, the Bang Rachan Monument in Singburi, the Sri Song Rak Pagoda in Loei, the Wat Si Roy in Ang Thong, the White Pagoda of Chiang Mai, and the Military Museum in Nan; and love of king, focusing on the King Taksin Monument in Thonburi and Ratchadamnoen Avenue. This chapter focuses on the evolving historiography of these heritage sites and interestingly notes that successive regimes have ended disastrously, meaning discontinuity in interpretation of the sites.

Chapter 5 focuses on heritage and gender in Thai history and memory, specifically focusing on Queen Chama Thevi of Haripunchai, a Mon kingdom in Lamphun in Northern Thailand. This chapter is a useful addition to gender studies in Thailand and illustrates local, as opposed to national, appropriation of history, with a Buddhist temple named after the heroine, and includes reference to the renegade northern monk Kruba Sriwichai. An academic reference to the work of Dr Katherine Bowie on Kruba Sriwichai is missing

here. The chapter signifies perhaps the maximum extent to which a local city government, via a city monument in a public space, can exhibit political resistance to the Thai nationalist discourse.

Chapter 6 is a potted history of Thai-Japanese relations which focuses on the Bridge on the River Kwai as well as the well-known Khu Kham romantic novel by Thommayanti. Nonetheless, it is perhaps most remarkable for its chapter title – *Whose Heritage? The Japanese colonisation of Thailand*, as most Thais would argue that the country has never been colonized. The chapter is also interesting for its discussion of the Young Soldier Monument in Chumpon and its accompanying ideology as well as for a brief foray into the impact of Japanese tourism on Bangkok.

Chapter 7 marks the second foray into a small local town after Chiang Saen, this time Photharam in Rathchaburi province. The chapter provides an interesting and ultimately fruitful description of what is at first sight just a town of markets, temples, and shophouses but where in the spiritual landscape each temple has meaning. The chapter is of interest to those concerned with local administration from the perspective of how to market the ‘hidden heritage’ or charms of a historical, ethnically mixed town not on the tourist trail.

The next six chapters focus on describing fuller environments of memory in Thailand or *milieux de mémoire*, namely the *khlong* (canal), Bangkok’s mid-Sukhumvit corridor, slum rehabilitation and erosion, the craft communities of Bangkok, the ethnic Phuthai of Phetchaburi and Northeast Thailand, and the craft village of Ban Pa-Ao in Ubon Ratchathani in Northeast Thailand.

Chapter 8 on the *khlong* raises the issues of uneven development and economic inequality, providing a useful historical study as well as a journey into the Bangkok *khlong* and the issue of nostalgia, i.e., the belief that the past was better than the present. It illustrates many idealised *khlong* communities are, in contrast with the wealthy mansions of Bangkok, effectively slums exhibited for the benefit of tourists that are in the process of conversion to modernity. This theme is developed in the subsequent chapter, on Sukhumvit 71, which follows the historical development and gentrification of Lower to Mid Sukhumvit, including the notorious Khlong Toei slum and the shrine of the ghost of Mae Nak Phra Khanong at Wat Mahabut, as Khlong Phra Khanong traverses Khlong Toei. This chapter usefully introduces the concept of interstitial intrusions, which characterize the architecture of the area. These two chapters provide useful lessons about the ordering and disordering of public space in the Bangkok heartlands. This sojourn into Bangkok’s *khlongs* is then continued in Chapter 10, which looks at the formal and, especially, informal heritage of space and slum development towards modernity via a public development programme in Khlong Bang Bua. The chapter usefully employs Alexander, Ishikawa, and Silverstein’s (1977) notion of patterns to analyse the effects of this development.

Chapters 11 and 13 are both on craft communities, the first looking at three brass and steel communities in Bangkok and the second looking at a Thai Lao brass community in Ban Pa-Ao, in Ubon Ratchathani province. The first is an informative account of the

dynamics of the three communities and what shapes their successes or failures over a period in which the arts and crafts have been overtaken by factory production, while the second examines the micro-economics of a crafts village from the viewpoint of pro-poor tourism, focusing on the extent to which the financial rewards feed back into the local economic system or leak to the major city. Both chapters suggest greater involvement from the fine and applied arts faculties of universities may be required to keep traditional Thai crafts alive, not to mention direct subsidies from central government, i.e., the Ministry of Culture.

Chapter 12 visits the relatively well know Tai-Kadai ethnic community of the Phutai, charting their transmigration and cultural diffusion and dispersal, examining in particular Ban Pao village in Mukdahan Province, which has attempted to capitalize on domestic Thai as well as international tourism and interest in the Phutai as an ethnic community. However, the references are thin and do not include academic articles on the subject such as Thaochalee, Laoakkha, & Panthachai (2011) or basic texts on the Phu Tai such as Kirsch (1967).

Chapter 14 effects to be a conclusion but in fact introduces a new conceptual framework, the concept of the tourist gaze, following Urry (2002), merging it with the concept of assembly to create an ‘assembling gaze’, which is then tentatively applied to interpreting selected aspects of the Thai heritage examined in previous chapters. In particular, it emphasizes juxtaposed semiotic differences, especially “between formal and informal, between wealth and poverty, between different urban morphologies and modes of production”, together with the gaps between what Bangkok is and what Bangkok should be. As a conclusion, it is somewhat lacking in terms of drawing together the eclectic mix of chapters which constitute the book.

Overall, the book represents the products of a useful alliance between a foreign expert and academic and Thai PhD students. More such volumes should be produced to validate the perspective of the ‘alien gaze’ mentioned in the concluding chapter. Several of the chapters, most especially those focusing on tourism in villages and towns outside Bangkok, would be of interest to provincial universities and towns seeking to promote ‘pro-poor’ tourism. One minor oversight is that the dissertations from which the book employed information should have had academic references in the bibliography. The other, more important, issue is that having a foreign editor and main author for every chapter swamps the voices of the Thai contributors. One almost wishes that the Thai contributors themselves were allowed one page to introduce the chapters employing their work, to explain and explore their motivations. This would add to the ‘authenticity’ of the volume.

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