

## Review

### **Unesco in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative Perspective** **Victor T. King, Editor, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press 2016**

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Received April 18, 2017  
Accepted April 18, 2017  
Published July 21, 2017  
DOI:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.26721/spafajournal.v1i0.165>

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#### **Abstract**

Book review of Unesco in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative  
Perspective

#### Keywords:

Review; Unesco, Southeast Asia, case studies

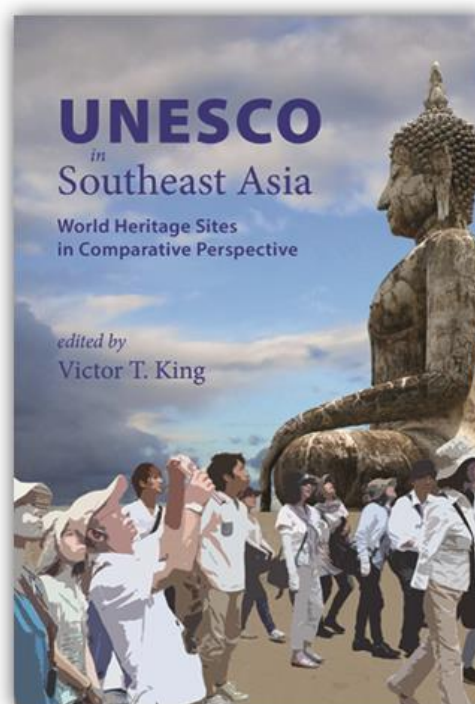
## Introduction

*Unesco in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative Perspective* is the first attempt to describe the current state of play of UN declared Heritage sites in the region and it covers a lot of diverse ground in the course of 400 pages. Editor Victor T. King has compiled a set of 15 case studies that survey nearly half of the 36 Unesco declared Heritage Sites in SEA and provide a good range of specific examples of the impact of world heritage considerations being imposed onto complex local sites.

This is very much a first look at the idea of how does one describe the global historical and/or cultural significance of a location without foregrounding it at the expense of its local (and extremely complicated) significance. All of the ‘sites’ considered in these essays are not only part of the daily social, economic, cultural and political lives of their current occupants, they also fulfil historical functions related to establishing the national identities of those current occupants. Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Melaka in Malaysia and even the old Spanish sections of the city of Vigan in the Philippines all play significant roles in ‘the national imagination’ as symbols or markers of ‘the essence or genius of the [current] nation [that] is usually traced back to a glorious past and to benevolent and enlightened government when everything that is now cherished as demarcating and defining the nation was created and set in motion’ (King 2016: 19).

In post-colonial nations still in the process of developing sustainable economies, setting aside sections of landscape because they foster a sense of national identity and pride can prove to be problematic on its own unless that sense of identity can do double duty by creating revenue and jobs through tourism or some other form of low stress development. The idea of a location having a ‘World Heritage’ significance in addition to its local economic significance and its role to play in national identity can be seen as a very foreign and unwelcome intrusion if the site managers do not integrate the needs of the local population into their development plans. The most successful Unesco sites considered in the book have partnered not only with national governments and agencies but have created relevant ways for the site to contribute to local lives.

This is easier said than done in remote rural locations where a distant national government wishes to retain control of natural resources at the expense of the local population. No matter how well intentioned (conservation of a unique landscape) or how ill intentioned (profiteering through corruption or over harvesting) National Interests may be, the alienation between local groups and central leaders consistently creates problematic situations at Unesco sites. Despite its popularity as an idea, World



Heritage in practice is very much a work in progress with varying degrees of success throughout the region.

In the case of the Luang Prabang heritage site in Laos, environmental damage caused by the war was immediately followed by rigidly executed and poorly administered centralized planning that has antagonized the local population to such a point that poaching, 'indiscriminant' limestone quarrying and poorly built tourist facilities are degrading the largest intact forested karst in the region at a rapid rate.

It is challenging for an outsider such as Unesco to have any sort of positive impact on a hostile economic situation such as what currently exists in Luang Prabang, and that sense of heritage designation being ineffectual seems to be common knowledge well beyond the international development community. The region's reputation as a unique and beautiful landscape is known worldwide and 80% of the tourists interviewed were aware that the town is a Heritage site but a significant proportion of informed visitors interviewed onsite stated its status as a UNESCO site was not an important factor in their decision to travel there and that they were more motivated by seeing the town, the forest and the caves before they were destroyed by excessive tourism and neglect.

This level of frustration is not at all consistent throughout the region. Each of the Book's detailed case studies describes a unique Heritage opportunity grounded in the particulars of the lives of its location's current residents. Muara Jambi in Central Sumatra has been a sparsely populated, almost sleepy, town off the beaten path that has somehow managed to miss most of the excitement of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Indonesia. It was faintly remembered in the local oral history as a temporary centre of the pepper trade 200-300 years earlier but it was mostly a place that failed to attract the attention of larger historical forces and, as such, remained fairly peaceful. Tucked back in the brush behind a hill is a set of temples from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries which somehow managed to avoid accurate description until the early 1980's. The richness of these unexpected finds was never part of the narrative of Sumatra or Indonesia until after the fall of Suharto. This lack of a place in national story meant that the few visitors who actually bothered to tour the unmanaged site around the turn of this century were treated to peace and quiet rather than a curated cultural experience. This all changed with a public exhibition of artefacts and aerial photographs of the site in Jakarta in 2006 and by 2010 nearly 75,000 people were visiting the site each year.

One of the real success stories of the book, Muara Jambi, benefits from both its recent discovery and the real element of surprise of finding such an early and complex Hindu-Buddhist population centre in such an unexpected place generated. Over half of the 75,000 visitors in 2010 were residents of the province itself and the sense of casual ownership of the site by the locals suggests it is considered as a place of leisure along the lines of a local park. While slightly less than half of the visitors are also students on structured tours of the area, the strong local and provincial sense of this site expanding our understanding Jambi's place both in the world and in Indonesia seems to be multi-generational and quite solid despite remaining so informal. When the usual tug-of-war between development and conservation emerged in 2011, the Jambian public's response quickly spread online. Two years after being placed on the tentative list for Unesco certification in 2011, a local consortium began to stock pile coal on a remote part of the site and even damaged some of the potential future

excavation area while levelling the ground with Bull dozers. While both the national government and the provincial government were only willing to change the designation of the site but not prohibit economic activity, the local community actually borrowed the Unesco's phrases and arguments to lobby opinion against the potentially damaging commerce. As of the book's publication there has been no concrete resolution of the issue but the situation has been defused by a loose compromise to build new roads around known, existing structures and an acceptance that coal stocks above ground are unlikely to damage the artefacts below. While this is not a permanent solution of course, it is a workable compromise. At present, Muara Jambi is in good stead to move beyond Unesco's tentative list of World Heritage Sites to permanent status thanks in part to a series of comprehensive five year development plans that have involved both the provincial and national governments but also to the strong local voices that opposed any development that would damage a place they consider part of their home.

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