

Spotlight on Dr Denis Byrne

Dr Denis Byrne is an archaeologist who, for over 15 years, had one foot in the field of heritage practice and the other in academia. In early 2014, Denis joined the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS) in the capacity of Senior Research Fellow. We chat to him about his new book *Counterheritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage Conservation in Asia*.

ICS: Whose role is it to conserve heritage—heritage practitioners, governments or locals? This question is complicated by very different understandings of conservation held by government, heritage professions, and locals.

In my book I examine the way locals in Southeast Asia, China and Taiwan use, look after, and renovate old temples and religious monuments. The sites I focus on continue to be places of worship and the old buildings and building materials are often believed to be sacred in their own right and to have miraculous powers. And yet despite being sacred, these structures are typically subject to regular cycles of extensive renovation by local people at intervals of anything from 30 to 100 years. In the course of renovation, much of the old ‘heritage fabric’ of the structures is replaced or covered over with new fabric.

Heritage professionals are often dismayed to find that an old wall painting in a local Chinese temple has been covered over by a painting of similar religious motifs in bright new colours. Or they are dismayed to find, for example, an old Buddhist stupa in Thailand has been completely covered over in a layer of cement or brand new gold-coloured ceramic tiles. But from a local perspective these renovations do honour to the god revered at a particular

temple and the new tiles honour the relic of the Buddha which is encased in the stupa. The renovations earn spiritual rewards for those who labour on them or contribute money to pay for them. The temple congregations see the projects as restoring the religious-spiritual vitality of a temple or stupa. In China, gods may appear to their devotees in their dreams and appeal for their old and deteriorated temple to be ‘restored’. In Thailand it is considered disrespectful to allow a Buddhist stupa or temple to remain in a state of ruin.

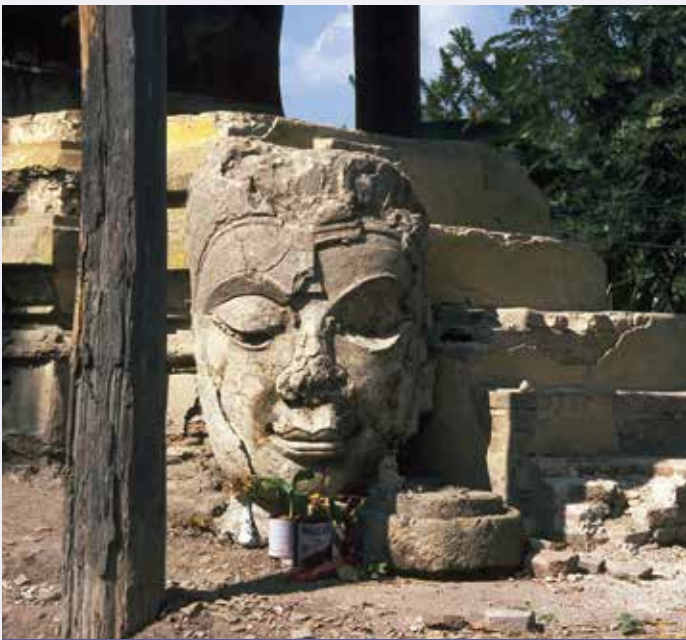
ICS: You argue that heritage practice in Asia is Eurocentric and that many conservation programs have failed to gain traction with locals. How can we bridge the local/practitioner nexus so that it includes greater collegiality? If we expect local people to listen to our arguments for retaining old buildings and building fabric in something like their original state then we should be prepared to meet them halfway. In the examples I just gave you, we should at a minimum give weight to local beliefs that these old places have supernatural significance and agency. ‘Giving weight’ doesn’t have to mean that we ourselves believe they have supernatural power; it means we are prepared to imagine what it would be like to experience them that way. Clearly there is an ethical issue



Phra Pathom stupa in Thailand under renovation in 2010



Devotees at a temple to a popular Chinese god



Head of a statue of the Buddha with offerings by local people, Lopburi, Thailand



Temple at Xiamen, China, where the wooden roof structure has been replaced but the old stone pillar remains intact

here: it is a matter of respecting other people's beliefs and using that as a basis for building bridges between local and expert concepts of conservation.

Because heritage experts tend to have government support, they are often in a position to impose their idea of conservation on local religious sites. In the worst cases of this, we've seen restoration projects carried out by experts on old temples in Taiwan and China without any reference to the fact that a particular god is present at the temple or that locals believe the temple belongs to that god.

What I mean by Eurocentric is that during the 19th and 20th centuries, at a time when the West dominated Asia political and economically, it was able to 'sell' its own idea of heritage and heritage conservation to countries like China, Thailand and Indonesia. Because this approach to conservation gave absolute precedence to the architectural and artistic value of old buildings and monuments over their contemporary religious and social value to the local communities, situations where governments as well as local and Western heritage experts perceive communities as enemies of heritage have become frequent in Asia. This leads to cases where whole communities are forcibly or coercively resettled away from heritage monuments. These people become 'conservation refugees'.

ICS: Are 'conservation refugees' a thing of the past or does this still occur? Unfortunately it does still occur, sometimes in situations where governments are proposing sites for World Heritage listing. Locals are displaced from around heritage sites

or restrictions are imposed on the way they live there – for example, they may not be allowed to farm in the vicinity of the monuments or to place devotional candles or incense sticks next to the stone sculptures of deities they continue to worship.

It is comparable to situations where tribal and minority groups are expelled from forests newly identified as nature conservation zones. This is a huge issue in India, but also in Indonesia and Vietnam.

ICS: A large part of *Counterheritage* focuses on the antiquities trade in Asia and the damage this does to heritage places that are looted of their treasures. You write that we can no longer see this as just an issue of wealthy collectors in the West draining Asian countries of their heritage. Can you explain that? Since the 1960s we have seen a rapid growth in the number of middle class collectors within Asia itself and it is mainly this that has led to thousands of archaeological sites being illegally dug up for the ancient pottery and metal artefacts they contain. In my book I describe how these events unfolded in Thailand and the Philippines in the 1960s and 70s, but the rise of the local antiquities market has been especially dramatic over the last couple of decades in China. So Asia is no longer simply the victim of Western collectors.

What is different about this new class of local collectors in Asia is that they are collecting partly out of national pride. It was a shock for me to discover that they often see themselves as champions and protectors of national heritage – 'saving it', they say, from foreign collectors. All the work that has



Archaeological site near Lopburi, Thailand, showing holes dug by looters

been done to promote the heritage of Asia in order to encourage its protection has also given it much greater visibility than it had previously. What we should have foreseen was that it would also turn it into a form of 'cultural capital'. For example, a member of the Thai middle who displays a piece of ancient Ban Chiang pottery on a glass coffee table in their house – illegally dug out of an archaeological site in the north of the country – is not merely able to identify as a person of taste and refinement, they are able to identify with the nation and the glory of its heritage. This is ironic and, as I said, it is a development quite unanticipated by heritage experts. In terms of heritage protection it is a tragic development.