

# **Atrocity Heritage Tourism at the “Death Railway”**

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By definition, heritage is something that people judge to be important, a part of the past that has contributed to the present. But for different people, the nature of that importance, the meanings attached to a piece of heritage, can differ widely. When heritage is put on display as a tourist attraction, the dissonance between different meanings can result in conflict and controversy. Many stakeholders are involved: tourists in search of gratification; entrepreneurs turning a profit; conservationists worried about the future of that heritage; and perhaps a local community with a sense of ownership.

Hence, management of heritage, and especially of heritage tourism, is never easy. Most problems in the management of heritage result from a failure to understand the different meanings which that heritage has for the different parties involved. Many involved in the marketing of heritage seem unaware of such multiple meanings and the political implications of how heritage is presented and interpreted.

“Atrocity heritage” is a term applied to heritage associated with death and disaster. The generic problems associated with heritage are multiplied in the case of this subcategory because of the sensitivity of the emotions involved. Typically an atrocity will have had both perpetrators and victims. Each will have translated the event into memory in a different way. What then happens when both perpetrators and victims in the past become the tourists of today at the site? Besides the generic issues of interpretation, commodification and conflict of interest, management of the special category of atrocity heritage demands special sensitivity surrounding issues associated with death and disaster.

This article focuses on the atrocity heritage tourism site known as the “Death Railway” in Kanchanaburi Province of Thailand. It is one of the most prominent of such sites in Southeast Asia, attracting around one million overseas visitors and three million Thai visitors every year.

The multiple dissonances surrounding this site are especially complex.

Although the site is located in Thailand, its meaning as heritage is most valued in other countries, especially Australia. The historical episode behind this heritage is something that Thailand has seemed intent on forgetting, in part because of the close economic relationship developed with Japan, the perpetrator. As an added complication, Chinese visitors, who have no direct relationship to the site’s history, have become an increasing proportion of tourists to the site, with unexpected consequences. The “Death Railway” is thus an example of how heritage tourism with a strong economic interest and a lack of understanding of the site’s significance can harm the heritage.

### The historical background

In December 1941, Japan launched its attack against the western Allies in Asia. After Japanese troops landed on the Thai coast, the Thai government agreed to allow them passage to invade the British colonies of Malaya and Singapore, and later issued a declaration of war on the Japanese side. The Japanese Imperial Army demanded Thai assistance for the construction of a railway into Burma. Capturing Burma was important to Japan for three reasons: to cut the “Burma Road”, the 720-kilometer Lashio-Kunming highway that was the only route for the western Allies to transport military supplies to China; to secure raw materials required by Japanese industry such as wolfram from the Mawchi mines and oil from the Yenangyuang oil fields; and to establish a supply line through Burma to India to replace the sea routes vulnerable to submarine attacks.



Figure 1. Map of the railway

The 415-kilometre railway from Nong Pladuk in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Burma (see Figure 1) was built between June 1942 and October 1943 through the remote and difficult terrain of mountains, forests and river valleys. The work was done by British, Dutch, Australian and American prisoners of war and conscripted Asian labourers, predominantly Indian, Indonesian, Malay, Vietnamese and Burmese (see Figures 2, 3). During the construction, more than 12,000 of the 60,000 Allied prisoners of war died mainly from disease, malnutrition and exhaustion, and were buried along the railway. Among the Asian labourers the death rate was higher, as between 80,000 and 100,000 perished out of a total of

more than 200,000. The Japanese kept no records of these deaths and their graves remained unmarked.

After construction was completed, some prisoners of war were moved to bigger camps while others remained as maintenance workers. The railway was in operation for almost two years, carrying military troops and supplies. In mid-1944, the Allies recognised the strategic importance of this railway and began aerial bombing, especially of bridges. During the bombing raids, hundreds more prisoners of war were killed. The bridge across the River Kwai was hit many times, but was repeatedly repaired until a last raid on 24 June 1945, after which the Japanese abandoned the line.

After the armistice, the Allied armies took control of the railway and demolished some parts. The section in Thailand was sold to the Thai government. The remains of those prisoners of war who died, apart from those of the Americans that were repatriated, were moved from the camp burial grounds and solitary sites along the railway (see Figure 4) into three war cemeteries – at Chongkai and Kanchanaburi in Thailand and Thanbyuzayat in Burma – placed under the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

After a technical inspection in 1947, the State Railway of Thailand decided it was feasible to re-open the line only as far as Namtok Station (called Tarsao during the war). The bridge was repaired with two central spans (distinguished by their square rather than curved shape) supplied by the Japanese as war reparations (see Figure 5). While also used for local transportation, the line became a tourist attraction known as the “Death Railway”. On weekdays there are two trains mostly used by local people while at weekends extra services are added to meet tourist demand.

### Atrocity heritage tourism

Heritage tourism is a well-known category or aspect of tourism. Atrocity heritage tourism has emerged as a distinct sub-set of this category. Several of the



Figure 2. Prisoners of war building the railway (Australian War Memorial)



Figure 3. Conscripted Asian labourers building the railway (Australian War Memorial)



Figure 4. Temporary burial ground by the railway during construction (Australian War Memorial)

most prominent sites of atrocity heritage tourism are associated with the Second World War. They include former concentration camps in Germany and the Atomic Bomb Dome and Peace Park in Hiroshima, the target of the atomic bomb dropped on 6 August 1948. The Dome was part of a major exhibition hall which was hit directly by the bomb. The Japanese government decided to leave the remaining steel frame of the building as a memorial that visually recalled a human skeleton. Around this focus, the government built a memorial garden as a peaceful area where survivors, the bereaved, the concerned and the curious could visit to reflect on the event.

In popular usage, atrocity means almost any event that is abnormally bad, but particularly any “case of deliberately inflicted extreme human suffering” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996: 95). Atrocity thus has three overlapping aspects: it involves acts of severe cruelty perpetrated by people against people; those acts are particularly shocking or horrifying to others; and the perpetrators are perceived as culpable. Because their atrocities involve both perpetrators and victims – and bystanders – interpretation of the event is bound to be dissonant and emotional.

Atrocity heritage includes all associated artefacts, buildings, sites and place associations, as well as the intangible accounts of the acts of atrocity, interpreted by the various parties involved – victims, perpetrators, bystanders and others. It



Figure 5. The bridge on the River Kwai (the author)

stands as a separate category of heritage because it is “disproportionately significant to many users” and because “dissonance created by the interpretation of atrocity is not only peculiarly intense and lasting but also particularly complex for victims, perpetrators and observers” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996: 21).

Large-scale sites of atrocity heritage are often beset with controversy because the site is incapable of reflecting the highly varied interpretations of what should be memorialized according to different groups involved. Where those groups are drawn from different countries, such controversy can easily become political. Hence, managing sites of atrocity heritage faces a special range of problems. Dissonance among the different groups involved, such as victims, perpetrator and bystanders is inevitable. Although this dissonance cannot be erased, it can be reduced and balanced.

#### *Dissonance at the “Death Railway”*

In the case of the “Death Railway” this usual dissonance among the three main parties – victims, perpetrator and bystanders – has some added aspects. To begin with, the war means different things to different people, as is evident from the way it is named. In the West, it is the Second World War, a term which clearly yokes this war to the 1914–18 war and the European theatre. In Asia, it is more usually known as the Great Asia-Pacific War, switching the focus to the US and Asia rather

than Europe. In Thailand, it is called the Great South-East Asia War, focusing more narrowly on Japan in Southeast Asia.

Thailand's relationship to the heritage of the "Death Railway" is especially complex. Although the site is located in Thailand, few of those being commemorated are Thai. Most of the dead were Western prisoners of war or Asian labourers imported from elsewhere. While one part of the Thai government co-operated with the Japanese and declared war on the Allies, another part co-operated with the Allies through the Seri Thai (Free Thai) movement. Since the war, the wartime co-operation with the Japanese has tended to fade from public memory while the co-operation with the Allies (the victors) has been better retained. Since the 1980s, Japan has become the largest single source of foreign investment in Thailand, as well as a major trading partner. The Japanese are now one of the largest expatriate communities in Thailand, and a significant factor among tourist arrivals.

In other countries of Southeast Asia, the memory of the war also has a certain ambivalence. In Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, the Japanese occupation is remembered for many acts of exploitation and violence. Yet it is also recognized that the Japanese occupation disrupted European colonialism and paved the way for national independence more quickly than it might have been realised otherwise. For both Thais and other Southeast Asians, the meanings of the "Death Railway" site will be very different compared to those of Westerners or Japanese.

Finally, there is yet another potential dissonance among the victims. As we shall see below, the film that launched the "Death Railway" as a tourist site focused very heavily on the European prisoners of war and almost elided the Asian labourers. Australia has established a kind of ownership at the site. But during the construction of the railway, Asians far outnumbered Westerners among the victims. This imbalance is a source of controversy.

### The production and marketing of heritage

The creation of both history and heritage involve a selection from the past. History is converted into heritage by a process of commodification which involves interpretation, simplification, packaging and marketing. The product that emerges from this process may be substantially changed from its original form. The commodified heritage may achieve an independent life of its own and even begin to rewrite the understanding of the past as "tabloid history" (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Hewison 1987, 1989; Walsh 1992; Lowenthal 1985).

When heritage becomes an object of tourism, another set of contradictions is introduced. In their role as heritage, sites need to be protected and preserved, but in their role as objects of tourism, sites will be commercialised and exploited. Hence, cultural heritage tourism requires two forms of management: cultural heritage management and tourism management. Many heritage attractions fail to

achieve either their tourism potential or their heritage potential because the differing objectives of these two forms of management result in mutual suspicion and conflict (McKercher and du Cros 2002: 3).

In the case of the "Death Railway" these generic problems of commodification are magnified by the particular way in which it emerged as a site of atrocity heritage tourism. The event that launched the site was the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (see Figure 6), which won seven Oscars, three BAFTAs and three Golden Globes in 1957, and topped the box office earnings list the following year. The film was based on a novel written by a Frenchman, Pierre Boulle, who had been a prisoner of war elsewhere in Thailand. The story is a fiction which uses the bridge and the railway construction as its setting. At the climax, the bridge is destroyed, an event which never happened.

The fact that the popularity of the site depends in large part on a fictional account adds yet another window of dissonance. The river across which the bridge was built in 1942–43 was called the Maeklong. Only after the film became popular and the bridge became a site of tourism did the Thai government rename this stretch of the river as the River Kwai (officially Khwai) in the 1960s.

### Dissonance and controversy at the site of the "Death Railway"

In summation, the "Death Railway" site is freighted with many layers of dissonance and potential controversy: the disjunction between "history" and heritage"; the generic tension between preservation and exploitation of heritage; the multiple interpretations by perpetrator, victim and bystanders, common to most atrocity heritage sites; and the ambivalent memory of wartime history in Thailand and Southeast Asia. This section explores how this complexity has affected the organization and management of the site.

#### *The bridge*

The fundamental of any heritage site is the physical fabric and setting. In the case of the bridge on the River Kwai, the memory is of a bridge in an area of remote tropical rainforest. The film reinforced that scene. Today that landscape has disappeared. The big trees have been cut down. The area around the bridge has been paved over with concrete. There are new buildings to accommodate tourists: shophouses for travel agencies and trinket stores; vendor stalls selling food and souvenirs; a pier for long-tailed boats newly built by the municipality almost under the bridge itself; and right beside it, a

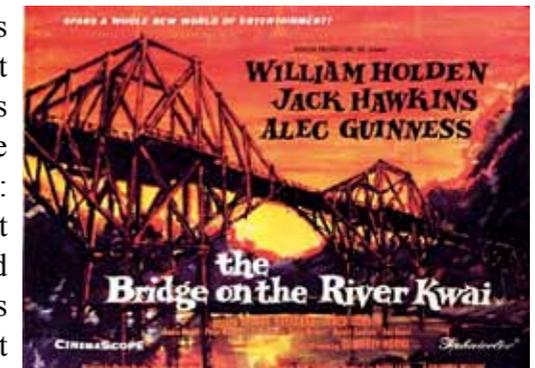


Figure 6. Film poster, 1957



Figure 7. Chinese temple by bridge on River Kwai (the author)

grand floating restaurant serving hundreds of customers. The visual perception of the scene has totally changed. The historic connection between the bridge and its landscape has been destroyed.

A new intrusion on the site is a huge Chinese temple right opposite the bridge (see Figure 7). The temple compound includes a hall of worship, a reception centre for visitors, a vegetarian canteen and a garden running down to the river. In the garden, close to the bank of the river, stands an 18-metre statue of the Chinese goddess Kuan Yin, facing towards the bridge (see Figure 8). Undoubtedly, the construction of this temple reflects the fact that the number of Chinese and other East Asian tourists visiting Kanchanaburi has been rising.

When construction of the Chinese temple began in May 2009, controversy immediately arose. Opponents argued that the temple would diminish the historical value of the bridge. They petitioned the court on the grounds that the temple was too close to the river and had not undertaken an Environmental Impact Assessment, and won an injunction for a temporary halting of the construction. However, the temple appealed against the judgment, and continued with the construction. Despite this legal challenge, the temple was officially opened on 16 June 2012 with the governor of Kanchanaburi presiding at the ceremony. This opening reflects a victory for the temple while the lawsuit is still unresolved.

Perhaps the negligent management of the site is partly a function of Thailand's ambivalent relationship to the site. Although the site is on Thai soil, Thai citizens are a small fraction of those being commemorated. The building of the railway belongs to an episode in history that Thailand seems intent on forgetting. The protesters

against the Chinese temple could not invoke the legal framework to protect heritage because the bridge is not officially registered as a national monument. They had instead to rely on municipal bylaws.

This negligence is evident elsewhere. In the square beside the bridge and railway station, the municipality has built abstract-style sculptures with text explaining the history of the site. But the area is inundated with vending stalls. Nobody reads the boards or appreciates the sculptures. Instead the stall-keepers use them as storage space for their stock.

In the same vein, the main activity of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) at the bridge has been to use it as a stage setting for festivals or spectacular events. TAT has founded an annual week-long festival at the end of November featuring "rides on a vintage train" and a light-and-sound presentation simulating an air attack on the bridge (Figure 9). In these activities, largely oriented to the domestic tourist market, the atrocity element has been totally elided. The bridge is a setting for festival and fun. In some years, the light-and-sound show has included scenes from a romance between a Japanese soldier and a Thai girl, the theme of a hugely popular Thai novel that has been repeatedly adapted in films and television series. The story is totally fictional and would of course be unknown to any non-Thai visitor to the show, but has become a prominent part of Thai perceptions of Kanchanaburi "heritage" through this highly popular work of fiction.

Erik Cohen has noted how "a cultural product... which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognised as authentic, even by experts" (Cohen 1988: 379–80).

#### *The cemetery*

For Australian and other western visitors, the prime site of commemoration is the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery comprising 6,982 graves. Here the landscape has suffered from a similar neglect as found at the bridge. The boundary of the cemetery is now lined with concrete shacks housing tourist shops. The tranquillity of the site has been badly impaired.

#### *JEATH War Museum*

JEATH is an acronym for Japan-England-Australia/America-Thailand-Holland. The museum was set up by and is maintained by monks of a nearby monastery. Photographs of prisoners of war are exhibited in a bamboo hut, built as a replica of those in the prison camps during the railway's construction. In a nearby concrete building is a collection of weapons.

A visit to this museum is an unsettling and gruesome experience. Visitors are confronted with the physical setting of a shabby bamboo hut in the heat and humidity of the tropical climate. Old pictures of prisoners of war create an atmosphere of sorrow and anger. The museum has been criticised for having unprofessional



Figure 8. Kuan Yin overlooking the bridge (the author)



Figure 9. Light and sound show of bombing the bridge (the author)

displays, showing a strong bias towards the Allies and against the Japanese, being overwhelmed by shops and stalls, and being positively misleading. The weapons in the concrete hut do not originate from the Second World War, but from the later wars in Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos, yet the visitor is not informed of this.

#### *Hellfire Pass Museum*

Australia has established a powerful stake in preserving the “authentic” meaning of the site. The Australian interest has focused on the area now known as Hellfire Pass (Konyu Cutting during the war), 75 kilometres from Kanchanaburi towards the Burmese border. In 1998, Australian Prime Minister John Howard presided over the opening ceremony of the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum, which was built by the Australian government and managed by its Department of Veteran Affairs. Each year on ANZAC Day, 25 April, many Australians resident in Thailand and other Australian visitors gather at Hellfire Pass for an official commemoration known as the Dawn Service.

In contrast to the chaos around the bridge, the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum is efficiently organised with a high standard of informative displays. Behind the museum is a trail to visit a famous mountain pass. Unfortunately, this museum has been troublesome for both the Thai and Australian governments. Thailand claims

the museum is in a security sensitive area under military control. Visitors have to register at a military check-point before entering the museum. Protests by the Australian government have failed to alter this condition. After visiting the museum building, visitors are encouraged to walk along a trail to the pass, but not allowed to walk outside the trail for security reasons. Controversy does not end there. The fact that the museum focuses heavily on the experience of Australian prisoners of war has led to complaints that others, both Western and Asian, have been omitted. This issue has been a matter of debate since the museum opened.

#### *Thailand-Burma Railway Centre*

This private museum, located beside the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, is owned and run by an Australian, Rod Beattie, who has dedicated himself to research of the “Death Railway” for around twenty years. This museum was opened in 2003 and faced some difficult years, but recently has received more attention from tourists. The displays tell the story of the Second World War in Kanchanaburi within the larger context of the war in Asia. The second storey of the building has a panoramic view over the cemetery. Operated by a professional team using good presentation techniques, the museum manages to tell its story in an accessible manner.

#### *Vintage train*

A ride along the railway in a vintage train is perhaps the most authentic experience on offer at the site. The train passes along the track of the original railway, through landscape which is largely unchanged beyond the urban limits. There is no commodification of the war story involved, just an experience of the train and the landscape. Since the train is also a regular service for local transport, tourists experiencing the “Death Railway”



Figure 10. Tourist train on re-laid track (the author)

through the forest sit side-by-side with local residents on their daily business. The clash between function and culture is an interesting phenomenon.

## **Conclusion**

Heritage is never easy to manage; heritage that is exploited for tourism even more so; and atrocity heritage that is exploited for tourism even more so because of the category’s special sensitivities. Into this mix, the “Death Railway” adds extra complications because of the host country’s ambivalent relationship to the history of the site, and the way in which the site’s value as heritage was partly created by a

highly fictionalized version of the history. The site is strewn with different meanings.

The Thai role in the history of the site is primarily that of bystander. The Thai stakeholders have tended to focus on the short-term value of the site as a source of profit with very little attention to the factors which make it valuable as heritage. Hence, TAT uses the bridge as a backdrop for entertainment; monks cobble together a shoddy museum; the municipality replaces the forest with concrete; construction contractors destroy the tranquillity of the cemetery; the military is obstructive; and the law cannot prevent a Chinese temple transforming the landscape and meaning of the site.

Western standards of heritage management might be relevant or irrelevant when confronted with different contexts. The respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong. The atrocity heritage of the “Death Railway” desperately needs some planning that appreciates the value of the site and its multiple meanings. This will only be achieved through involvement of all those associated with the site as heritage, whether perpetrator, victim (both Western and Asian), local community, host government and new tourist (Chinese). Otherwise, the value of the site, both as heritage and as an asset for tourism, will decline.

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