Introduction: Towards a Mobile History of Heritage Formation in Asia

What you are regarding as a gift is a problem for you to solve.\(^1\) In 1838, a solitary Chinese man visited the giant Buddhist temple Borobudur, in Central Java – more than a thousand years old – and stopped to contemplate one of the reliefs. He returned often, took books, and studied and compared the Buddhist reliefs of the temple. He made drawings and notes. But the one relief that caught his attention did not directly concern the Buddha: it showed a Chinese junk.\(^2\) Likewise enthralled by the temple, the romantic Dutch painter H. N. Sieburgh saw the Chinese visitor, whom he viewed as a true lover of antiquity. One starry night at Borobudur, Sieburgh had been entranced by the sublime temple, and longed to understand it. He called it a ‘world monument’,\(^3\) as though anticipating future appropriations of the temple (Figure 0.1). But the Chinese visitor may have come to other interpretations. Was the man contemplating an alternative past world, perhaps, situating the temple in wider and older Javanese–Chinese–Buddhist connections?

Borobudur, the largest Buddhist shrine in the world, was named a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1991, and is today one of Asia’s major sites of (local and foreign) mass tourism – like Angkor Wat in Cambodia or Bodh Gaya in India. All were ruins rediscovered in the nineteenth century and, under colonial and post-colonial regimes, transformed into majestic heritage-cum-pilgrimage sites. This study of the politics of heritage in Indonesia contains a mobile history of heritage that unfolds from sites such as Borobudur. Our Chinese visitor – about whom we know little more than that he was a butcher by profession and that he took books to Borobudur – and Sieburgh play tiny but meaningful roles in this history. Here, they illustrate how sites that contain material remains of an ancient past can powerfully excite the imagination and curiosity of visitors, neighbours, and guardians. Through histories, exchange,

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3 Ibid., boek 1, p. 61. All translations from the original Dutch, Malay, Indonesian or French are by the authors, unless noted otherwise.
and selective identification, sites are also political. The ambiguities, variety, and selectivity of personal identifications with sites become palpable on location, where various interested people and parties interact.

In 1838, when the Chinese man and Sieburgh came to admire Borobudur, the temple had only recently been made accessible for a public beyond the local population. This was made possible by the interventions of two successive (British and Dutch) colonial administrations in the previous two decades. Built around 800 CE under the Sailendra dynasty that ruled over much of Java, Borobudur had gone out of use when, in the tenth century, the centre of power moved to the east of Java; over time it was overtaken by vegetation. Borobudur’s second public life, attracting growing attention, began in the early nineteenth century.\(^4\) This was, notably, when the majority of the

\(^4\) A series of catastrophic eruptions and damaging earthquakes may have played a role in this move of the centre of power from Central to East Java. See Jan Wisseman Christie, ‘Under the volcano: stabilizing the early Javanese state in an unstable environment’, in David Henley and Henk Schulte Nordholt (eds.), Environment, trade and society in Southeast Asia: a longue durée perspective (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 46–61.

Figure 0.1 The north–east corner of the basement of Borobudur, painting by H.N. Sieburgh, 1837.
population in Java, in a process that started in the late fifteenth century, had converted to Islam. In 1814, during the British interregnum, and on the order of the Lieutenant-General T. S. Raffles, Javanese workers cleared the temple of vegetation. This took 200 workers one and a half months. In the subsequent decades, further details of the temple’s ornaments and reliefs would be made visible through further cleaning works. After the devastating Java War (1825–1830) the temple’s galleries and reliefs could be contemplated by curious visitors like the Chinese visitor, Sieburgh, and soon many more, including Javanese Muslims. We know a lot about Raffles’ commemorated rediscovery of the site, but almost nothing of Borobudur’s solitary Chinese visitor of 1838. What we do know is that the Chinese visitor carried, along with books, his own frames of knowledge, thinking, and beliefs, to identify with the temple. What he saw as important and meaningful was perhaps facilitated by state-supported archaeological interventions, but not imposed on him.

This book offers a new, mobile approach to the cultural-political history of archaeology and heritage formation in Asia, through the case of colonial and post-colonial Indonesia. We focus on the mobility of heritage and try to understand heritage formation in Asia as a multi-sited phenomenon that involves, but also goes beyond, the interests of states and heritage institutions, as well as people across state borders. We follow the concerns of local subjects and elites, of artists and tourists, of scholars and pilgrims, of state-centred archaeology and transnational cultural associations, and of global politics. To be able to combine these perspectives and understand their relations and frictions in colonial and post-colonial situations, we follow a dual approach that is both site-centred and mobile. Beginning from sites such as Borobudur and other historical remains in Indonesia, we explore, from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, encounters and exchanges between various key actors, and between various forms of historical knowledge developing on site. We aim to understand how various actors from within and beyond the state have contributed to heritage awareness, and to heritage formation as a process that is not exclusively related to state formation. Next, we follow the journeys of site-related objects, along with the site’s visitors, to places elsewhere in the world, in order to understand their role in alternative, parallel processes of

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This double approach, both site-centred and mobile, enables us to explore the political impact of exchange at multiple sites based in or originating from Indonesia. In this way we gauge the various and changing hierarchies in which heritage takes shape, is contemplated, and excludes groups of people over time.

Emphasising that culture is also political, we aim to provide insight into the relationship between heritage and violence, and into the political and religious dimensions of heritage formation. Why, when, where, and for whom do certain forms of knowledge production concerning historical sites come to dominate, at the cost of others? Why can apparently conflicting stories and engagements with sites develop in parallel? What are the effects of violent destruction, war, and regime change? Why do even unseen, hidden, or difficult histories matter at sites often framed as the frozen past of a homogeneous nation? And how can these histories still be detected and probed for their significance?

In the past two decades, it has become a common trope that heritage ‘is’ nothing in itself, but concerns a politically informed process of becoming.  

Heritage formation takes place only when people consciously start relating to the ‘remains of the past’ as something meaningful to keep for the future. These processes of individual or communal heritage engagements are never neutral, and can unfold without much friction. But when heritage becomes the object of formal religious, moral, or political uses, and is being legitimised by historical investigation, exhibition practices, and conservation politics, it can become sensitive, as people start to actively intervene, wishing to claim, (re)define, and transform the site. 

In this context, the importance of the more recent ‘performative turn’ in critical heritage studies, which explores what people actually do and experience at heritage sites, cannot be underestimated, as it helps in dismantling the perception of heritage as a primarily material phenomenon.

However, our mobile-cum-site-centred research goes further, and has led us to question the predicament of critical heritage studies as well as the practice of archaeological resource management, both of which today proliferate as sound

solutions for the political challenge of heritage formation. We argue that there is no solution for this problem, especially if we continue thinking and acting within the framework and techniques of heritage politics, which are top-down and exclusive. And even if inclusiveness is the goal, who has the authority to define the ‘stakeholders’ and ‘communities’ as the rightful heirs of a site?

This book arrives at a moment when both inside and outside academia there is an acute concern about, and journalistic interest in, the fragility of ancient civilisational sites in the context of war, religious intolerance, violent regime change, natural disasters, and national and international heritage politics. This concern has been triggered by, on the one hand, a booming competition between local communities and state governments for the recognition and status of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. On the other hand, the cases of looting and iconoclasm that have shocked the world – the Taliban blowing up the giant Buddhas of Bamyan (2001) or IS selling artefacts and destroying sites such as Palmyra in Syria (2015) – have enforced mechanisms of othering Islam worldwide, but have not raised much critical self-reflection about comparable examples of destruction and looting taking place in the context of European (and American) religious and colonial histories. However, despite many examples of iconoclasm in world history, the material remains of the past nonetheless can outlive regimes, performing new functions for the new parties or states taking over. Moreover, when historical sites are destroyed, they can continue to exist in the minds of people – either in the various ways they engage(d) with such sites or for the reasons these sites became destroyed.

Borobudur is not our only case. We also investigate other ‘ideal types’ of sites in Indonesia and their transformation into heritage, and their becoming part of various forms of knowledge, understanding, exclusion, and destruction across regime changes. Next to a number of ancient Buddhist and Hindu sites which are still meaningful as heritage sites in Indonesia today, we also explore the role of Islamic, Balinese, prehistoric, Chinese, and colonial sites and royal palaces in the dynamics of heritage and knowledge production. We aim to


12 However, from an academic perspective, see Astrid Swenson and Peter Mandler (eds.), From plunder to preservation: Britain and the heritage of empire c. 1800–1940 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
avoid ‘colonial determinism’. Although we do not deny the importance of identifying and discussing the colonial legacies in post-colonial heritage formation in contemporary Indonesia, we have come to realise that this alone does not capture the dynamics of heritage formation and knowledge production concerning sites in Asia. The Chinese visitor to Borobudur in 1838 is a case in point. He delivers only one of many alternative perspectives that we try to tie into our analysis, for the archaeological sites under study here, like other sites in former colonial empires, are not exclusively defined by colonialism, even if colonial relations have played a crucial role in their current shape. All along, however, more visitors have become attracted to and involved in Indonesian heritage sites, opening multi-layered relationships of exchange and interdependence.

Exchange, Lieux de mémoire, and the Political Dynamics of Heritage Formation

Marcel Mauss’ notion of ‘the gift’ – i.e., ‘the obligation to give is explainable because this act causes the obligation to return the gift’ – is crucial for understanding the political dynamics of cultural heritage formation at the local, national, and global levels. Also, because the act of giving involves one party identifying as the owner or possessor, conferring a gift bears directly on the question of ‘heritage for whom?’ Heritage formation, moreover, is to a large extent about morality, paternalism, and (presumed) responsibilities, about giving, taking, and restitution, and thus, as Mauss showed, about reciprocity and moral obligations. The site-centred exchanges that we explore in this book show how this mechanism works.

From the start, ‘exchange’ was a part of our research in the ‘Sites, Bodies, and Stories’ project, an inter-institutional collaboration between Indonesian and Dutch historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists, who investigated cultural heritage formation in Indonesia and the Netherlands in colonial and post-colonial times. Between the members, and with informants at different locations, exchange of various forms of knowledge, reciprocal misunderstanding, and learning took place. We also searched for site-related knowledge

outside the framework of academia and heritage institutions in the Netherlands and Indonesia, as well as in Thailand, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Austria. Against that background we decided not to use the concept ‘shared heritage’. That concept has been developed to overcome the problem of (former) colonial hierarchies and surpass (post-)colonial sensitivities when academics or heritage organisations in the former colonised and colonising countries collaborate.\textsuperscript{16} The concept looks noble, but it is problematic as it implies that the selected forms of ‘shared heritage’ can be valued, conserved, etc., only within the framework of two post-colonial states, thereby denying uncomfortable power relations and conflicting interests. Moreover, ‘shared heritage’ glosses over the very local, supra-local and transnational dimensions of heritage, precisely those processes of identification that go beyond the boundaries of states and empire,\textsuperscript{17} but that are crucial in this book.

Consciously and emphatically, sites are for us starting points and analytical tools to explore the political dynamics of heritage formation at multiple locations, and across borders of communities and states. Whereas histories that focus on biographies (leading archaeologists, discoverers), institutions (museums, learned societies), monument regulations/acts (colonial, Indonesian, UNESCO), or research fields (archaeology, ethnography) tend to merge self-evidently with national perspectives, sites open views to alternative contexts as well, since they relate to spaces that transgress the formal state boundaries.\textsuperscript{18} With our site-centred approach we thus build on, but also complicate, the highly influential analytical tool of \textit{lieux de mémoire}, introduced by the French historian Pierre Nora.\textsuperscript{19} In his \textit{lieux de mémoire} project, which inspired comparable programmes worldwide, Nora initiated a method to study the emergence and workings of memory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by tracing specific


\textsuperscript{18} For a comparable study of trans-Asian and intercolonial interests in archaeological sites located in Siam and French Indochina, see Maurizio Peleggi, ‘Royal antiquarianism: European Orientalism and the production of archaeological knowledge in Siam’, in Srilata Ravi, Mario Rutten, and Beng-Lan Goh (eds.), \textit{Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia} (Leiden and Singapore: International Institute for Asian Studies, 2004), 133–161.

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20 Nora and his colleagues came to focus on how these lieux have played a role in people’s identifications with national states in Europe. In doing so, the lieux de mémoire programme(s) tended to ignore the possibility that there are lieux with liaisons to people – living within the borders of the country – who do not necessarily identify with the nation. But it may as well be argued that people may identify with sites outside their homeland, in what they consider a foreign state.  

21 Our concept of sites is therefore broader than the national idea of lieux de mémoire, because we recognise these sites as centres of multiple spaces by themselves. Sites help us to think beyond the obvious boundaries of empire and nation-state without ignoring these boundaries.

22 Thus we follow subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, who argues that the categories of European thought (including the concept of historicising) are simultaneously both indispensable and inadequate when writing about the non-European world. He stresses, therefore, the importance of questioning the structure of narratives and of making them heterogeneous by including multiple perspectives, ambivalences, and contradictions. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: post-colonial thought and difference, revised edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 17, 43, and 45–46.

Sites in Transnational Perspective

When material traces of the past are identified as archaeological sites and become heritage, they form new spots on new maps that give historical depth to contemporary geographical and political imaginations. While these sites convey multiple historical, religious, and moral messages as they are found, the transformation to an archaeological site and the subsequent interventions – which we discuss in this book – link them to scientific, (art-)historical, and governmental concerns. This happened to the many ruins that European civil servants, military men, and travellers during the nineteenth century encountered – or in their own perception, and through colonial authority, ‘discovered’ – in South and Southeast Asia, whether within or outside the framework of colonial empires. Borobudur became a colonial archaeological site in 1814,
Sites in Transnational Perspective

when Raffles ordered its uncovering and cleaning, thereby generating new supra-local, academic, and governmental interests.

But precisely because archaeological sites are ‘localised’, and because of their previous and subsequent histories, their religious connotations, their moral messages, and their social-economic or touristic functions, they are the centre of multiple geographies.\(^\text{23}\) These do not necessarily overlap with the imperial and national boundaries in which these sites, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were selected and transformed through several stages of (re)appropriation: ‘discovering’, excavating, cleaning, restoring, conserving, circumscribing with a gate, musealising, and nominating as official national or world heritage. Against the background of this constant (re)appreciation and (re)appropriation we study heritage formation as a phenomenon that takes place within the context of various forms of knowledge production, at multiple levels and locations. Sites and objects – through texts, as images, as copies and in ‘real’ pieces, as souvenirs, as parts of exchanges, gifts, and thefts, or in the context of national or international exhibitions – cross orders and borders. In different forms they play a role in alternative heritage politics, which are not necessarily based in national and colonial state formations, and have coexisted in parallel worlds that have had centres other than Europe-based empires.\(^\text{24}\) This realisation also helps us to better understand how, as Frederick Cooper has stressed, the colonial state had to deal with structures that ‘complicate the relationship of ruler and ruled, of insider and outsider’.\(^\text{25}\)

With our consciousness of the relation between culture and power, we owe a debt to, and engage critically with, Benedict Anderson’s ground-breaking and highly influential *Imagined communities* (1991). Anderson identified the connection between an ‘archaeological push’ around 1900 in Southeast Asia and (post-)colonial nationalism. Preoccupied by nationalism and state formation, he argued that the newly founded archaeological services of that time, like the one in Batavia (set up in 1913), created regalia and tools of legitimation for the colonial state by transforming ruins into monuments. Through endless display


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and reproduction, these monuments were transformed into recognisable signs, connecting subjects of the (post-)colonial state to visions of great national pasts. With this important insight in mind, we argue, first, that if we want to understand the dynamics of archaeology, heritage formation, and knowledge production in Asia, we need to go further back, to the first half of the nineteenth century when a series of violent colonial regime changes, war, and infrastructural developments deeply intervened in local society. Second, with our site-centred approach, we aim, moreover, to go beyond the role and engagements of the state. Broadening Anderson’s state-centred framework, we follow local, transnational, and global interactions with sites at the ground level, in multiple, intercolonial and inter-Asian contexts, towards a new mobile history of archaeology and heritage formation in Asia.

Our approach is part of a transnational trend in Asian studies (and the social sciences and humanities in general), where scholars of different periods seek to investigate religious engagements of groups of people in Asia, for example, or the imaginations of Asian identities that developed beyond the borders of modern (post-)colonial states. Historians such as Susan Bayly and Engseng Ho have shown how, for that aim, ancient religious sites and burial places can greatly aid insight: they can connect to people and histories outside the national boundaries in which they are located and ‘bend diasporic journeys’. Comparably, Susan Bayly, in her work on the Greater India Society, addresses the heuristic value of religious sites, such as the tomb shrine and pilgrimage site of the Islamic saint Shahul Amir in southern India, because they ‘bear witness to the capacity of South Asians to forge fluid but enduringly supra-local solidarities which could both exploit and transcend the circumstances of colonialism’.

Unlike Bayly or Ho, it is not so much the people and their


28 Susan Bayly, ‘Imagining “Greater India”: French and Indian visions of colonialism in the Indic mode’, *MAS* 38:3 (2004), 704. For other studies on transnational imaginations of the region, see for example Timothy P. Barnard (ed.), *Contesting Malayness: Malay identity across borders* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004); A. Gupta, *The song of the non-aligned world: transnational identities and the reinscription of space in late capitalism*, in Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (eds.), *Migration, diasporas and transnationalism* (Northampton: Edward Elgar,