

## **URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY**

## **The Global Political Economy of Cultural Heritage (2011–2016)**

*Final Report by Christoph Brumann*

*Head of Research Group: Christoph Brumann*

*Doctoral students: Ah Li Cheung, Pierpaolo De Giosa, Vivienne Marquart*

Between 2011 and 2016, this group investigated the political and economic conditions and consequences of a prominent global institution, the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972. From humble beginnings, this international treaty has evolved into the globally most important catalyst and clearinghouse for heritage discourses and policies (Brumann and Meskell 2015). The intergovernmental committee overseeing the convention, with the support of a secretariat (the World Heritage Centre) and three advisory bodies, has come to focus on the World Heritage List, both on monitoring the state of conservation of the 1121 cultural and natural properties in 167 countries (as of 2019) and on adding further sites deemed to have “outstanding universal value” (OUV). The World Heritage title is a major global brand now and an important asset for promoting tourism, boosting national and local pride, attracting investments and development funds, and sometimes also improving conservation. Correspondingly, the hopes and aspirations pegged on World Heritage bids are often considerable, not least in Halle where the Francke Foundation was a much-touted but ultimately unsuccessful candidate in 2016. World Heritage fame can even transform sites into targets of violence, as demonstrated by Islamist radicals’ destructive acts in Timbuktu, Mali, in 2012 that ultimately occupied the International Criminal Court. As around eighty per-cent of the World Heritage List consists of cultural properties, this is also one of the most prominent arenas for the public discussion of culture; how exactly the “universal value” of cultural achievements is constructed is an interesting question for post-Boasian social anthropology.

In approaching this global institutional assemblage and its tacit premises, we followed a two-pronged strategy: I continued my earlier multi-sited field research of the central institutions and their statutory meetings while Cheung, De Giosa and Marquart conducted more conventional year-long field studies of World Heritage sites, all of them cities in Eurasian “transition countries”. The expectation was that the observations at one end of the World Heritage apparatus would shed light on the other end.

For the global end, I was admitted as an academic observer to five of the annual eleven-day World Heritage Committee sessions (2009–2012 and 2015), two of the biannual three-day World Heritage General Assemblies (2011 and 2013), and a number of other official meetings, conducted formal interviews in five languages with a large number of participants from all contributing organisations, often on

separate occasions, and scrutinised the vast documentary record (for methodological details, see Brumann 2012a). The observed period proved to be fortunate, as it spanned the tumultuous transition from largely expert-driven proceedings to a new regime where the self-interests of the 21 Committee member states and other national delegations determine the outcomes. The treaty states insist on their right not to be disappointed, career diplomats are firmly in command now (Brumann 2011, 2014b), celebrating their own community (Brumann 2015a), the avoidance of binational conflict is of utmost priority (cf. Brumann 2016b), and the system has lost whatever teeth it once had.

This state of affairs, in large part, is the result of “culture chaos”, unresolved North-South tensions, and the inbuilt growth dynamic of the World Heritage system. “Culture chaos” results from the co-existence of an elite notion of culture with a broader, explicitly anthropological idea, without awareness of the inherent contradictions. Reacting to charges of bias when the European countries were filling the World Heritage List with their palaces, cathedrals, and historical town centres during the 1990s, the World Heritage institutions expanded conceptions of cultural heritage to include testimonies of everyday life, the vernacular, and the subaltern, thus paving the way for cultural landscapes, industrial sites, routes and canals, sites of voluntary and forced migration, and the like. The experts of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), however, remained in place and what is familiar to their art historical and architectural backgrounds, such as Baroque parks, still has an easier path onto the World Heritage List than, for example, traditional settlements in Africa (Brumann 2017a, 2018a, 2019b).

The persistence of such bias is encouraged by the way North-South tensions play out in the World Heritage Committee.<sup>1</sup> Even with the new policies, Northern countries were not barred from nominating conventional sites and using the new categories for their own candidates. Thus the most common case of World Heritage cultural landscapes was the European wine region. Southern countries, by contrast, often failed to meet the rising standards and since the unfunded World Heritage title is the only substantial reward, frustration mounted. In the 2010 session, large Southern countries in the Committee banded together for amending many of the proposed decisions according to their own interests, overriding the advice of the advisory bodies with their largely Northern personnel and the few Northern countries

---

<sup>1</sup> In times of increasing political and economic multipolarity, a division of the world into a rich and powerful “North” – or “West”, or “advanced countries”, often but not always implying North America and (Western) Europe – dominating the “South” is of course an oversimplification that does little justice to the actual global role of quite a few countries (such as postsocialist Eastern Europe, NATO member Turkey, China, India, South Korea, G7 member Japan, or Australia). Nonetheless, it remains an important structuring principle for, and convenient shorthand within, discourses and alliances in the international arena. Of course, the division belies the actual historical continuities and connections within the Eurasian land mass.

that supported the experts. This set the tone also for the subsequent sessions. Yet while post-colonial rhetoric and laments about global imbalances are often heard in the plenaries, little Southern solidarity has arisen. Instead, Japan and the more World Heritage-hungry states of the South such as China, India, Iran, Mexico and Turkey team up with the Northern list leaders to fight anything that might inhibit their nomination thirsts, thus preventing a more even spread of attention and resources (Brumann 2019a, 2021). There are close parallels to what political economist Robert Wade has observed for reforms in the G20, the World Bank and the IMF around 2010 where it was also the weightier Southern countries' pursuit of national interests that worked against collective gains for the Global South, resulting in "multipolarity without multilateralism".<sup>2</sup>

Yet without the underlying expectation of growth, national interests in further World Heritage titles could not dominate the dynamics to the degree they do. Nobody proposes to close the World Heritage List and new designations make for happy news, even as the resources of the system fall behind. Were List access regulated by numerical limits or were there to be an overall cap, coordination and overall consistency in such matters as the treatment of "cultural routes" (Brumann 2015c) or authenticity requirements (Brumann 2017b) might be easier. But as OUV is construed as absolute, the temptation for nation states to push their own candidates and help one another in talking OUV into existence is irresistible. Even so, almost all participants believe in the inherent qualities of at least some World Heritage properties – the really deserving ones – and this keeps the machinery afloat and the internal critics committed (Brumann 2013, 2017a, 2018b, 2021).

In a one-day MPI workshop in January 2014, historian Aurélie Elisa Gfeller (The Graduate Institute, Geneva) and I convened the historians, geographers and

**Inside the UNESCO Heritage Conventions: ethnographic and historical approaches**



**Workshop 23–24 January 2014**

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology | Main Seminar Room  
Advokatenweg 36 | 06114 Halle | www.eth.mpg.de  
Organisers: Aurélie Elisa Gfeller (The Graduate Institute, Geneva)  
and Christoph Brumann (MPI for Social Anthropology)

 Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

<sup>2</sup> Wade, Robert H. 2011. Emerging world order? From multipolarity to multilateralism in the G20, the World Bank, and the IMF. *Politics & Society* 39: 347–378.

folklorists who have conducted comparable ethnographic or archival studies in the World Heritage arena and on the sister UNESCO convention for intangible cultural heritage (adopted in 2003). Debates centred on methodological questions, particularly the challenges of maintaining a researcher position when participating as state representative or consultant ("collaborative dilemmas", as participant Chiara Bortolotto phrased it).

For the local studies of World Heritage cities, we chose the historical capitals of three rapidly developing countries, Istanbul in Turkey (Marquart 2014, 2015), Melaka in Malaysia (De Giosa 2021), and Xi'an in China (Cheung 2019). All these cities are former centres of imperial and colonial rule, the most celebrated strongholds of history and heritage of their nations (a distinction that Xi'an shares with Beijing), erstwhile meeting places of peoples and religions, and present-day magnets for cultural tourism, including foreign visitors. All three have experienced massive transformations in recent years, with major infrastructural and commercial construction projects changing the urban landscape and affecting the perception of the built heritage. With my own earlier field study of Kyoto (Brumann 2012b) – another heritage strong-hold and tourist attraction – as a model, Cheung (Xi'an in 2013/14), De Giosa (Melaka in 2012/13) and Marquart (Istanbul in 2012/13) set out to approach the role of cultural heritage broadly, giving attention not just to the heritage experts and institutions but also to other bureaucrats, builders, planners, land-owners, residents, businesspeople, citizen activists, heritage aficionados, and ordinary residents, taking into account the full range of positions and views from a position of "heritage agnosticism" (Brumann 2014a) neither apologetic of heritage nor dismissive of its proponents. The place of World Heritage and other historical legacies in these people's social lives and imaginations was to be charted and put into the context of larger forces.

What we observed was very much a transition-country model of dealing with cultural heritage. There is little readiness to give state-backed conservation apparatuses the autonomy they tend to enjoy in the more resourceful Euroamerican countries where, for example, the demolition or alteration of listed buildings is often severely constrained, backed by a largely unquestioned belief in the intrinsic value of heritage conservation and related concepts such as authenticity. But neither is there a widespread disinterest in and neglect of heritage and the past (as one sometimes finds in societies where the struggle for basic public safety and livelihood needs is more acute). Rather, in these three countries, cultural heritage is harnessed to larger political and commercial projects. It is expected to pay its way, in a sense, but is still sought after because of its symbolic weight that is not entirely reducible to vested interests. This tendency is more pronounced in the two multimillion metropolises Istanbul and Xi'an. Yet in Melaka as well, heritage anchors a whole range of projects and aspirations, and global recognition through the World Heritage framework amplifies the effect.

Instrumentalisation is most obvious in those projects that tie heritage to nationalist agendas. Xi'an stands as a symbol for past – and indirectly, also present and future – Chinese greatness. Reference to ancient times is heavily influenced by the government's attempt to glorify specific dynasties, the Qin (creators of the Terracotta Army found next to the city), Han (first unifiers of the Chinese empire), and Tang (rulers over China's greatest expansion with the capital Xi'an/Chang'an as the world's largest city). Monuments and sites connected with these periods are boosted while others receive less attention. This imperial optic also played out in a multi-national World Heritage nomination of Silk Roads sites in 2014 where the final, much contested selection of Chinese component parts included imperial palaces and Buddhist sites but left out all Islamic ones, such as the Great Mosque of Xi'an. Although the latter derive from the Silk Road, they would have complicated the Sinocentric narrative. In Istanbul, the elite Ottoman heritage has enjoyed increased attention in recent years, again as testimony to Turkish imperial greatness and at the cost of contenders such as Byzantine monuments or ordinary wooden houses from the Ottoman period that remain neglected, even within the World Heritage zones. And in Melaka too, empire is celebrated, with the Malay sultan's palace reconstructed right next to the colonial structures of the subsequent Portuguese, Dutch, and British overlords. The present-day official politics of multiculturalism also leaves its mark on heritage, such as when particular historical streets are branded as exclusively Chinese, Indian, or Malay (the three nationally dominant groups, each with its own political party). In actual fact, there was much more ethnic differentiation in Melaka's past and little segregation.

The nationalist deployment of heritage was less surprising for us than the scope of commercial appropriation. Xi'an stood out most in this regard: heritage including the World Heritage sites is often the nucleus for real-estate development, with a shopping and entertainment area around the historical site and rings of high-rise luxury condominiums further back, making for a trademark pattern that has been imitated across China. Tourism dictates the development of traditional neighbourhoods where both the building substance and the residents have been largely replaced, except in the Muslim Quarter, whose residents have used the politically delicate status of their religion in China to some advantage. The entire Silk Roads World Heritage bid with Xi'an as a cornerstone was part of Xi Jinping's geopolitical initiative of the "Silk Road Economic Belt", aiming to reconnect China with Europe via the Central Asian countries. In Istanbul, vintage facades grace the brand new upper-middle class condominiums in historical neighbourhoods, and tellingly, president Erdogan's controversial reconstruction plan for the former army barracks on Taksim Square would have housed a shopping centre. In Melaka, the entire historical core, with many of its former shop houses converted into boutique hotels, cafes and restaurants, is now ringed by high-rise developments, often on reclaimed land that ironically removes the famous harbour ever further from the waterfront. The poshest condominium, catering to rich Singaporeans and overseas investors, recreates the landmarks of



historical Melaka in an indoor mall. Connections with and references to a glorified past, even in the skimpiest form, are good for marketing in all three cities. It does not have to be heritage in the strict sense. Reconstructions can stand in readily for the real thing: in the aforementioned examples, the modern-day shop house built for Melaka's "Hard Rock Café", or the "neo-Tang" facades lining downtown boulevards in Xi'an. Demands of authenticity are often restricted to specialist circles such as architects and planners or conservation NGOs. Ordinary citizens tend to remain passive, even when they doubt the veracity of the historical relics (as quite a few domestic visitors of the Terracotta Army do).

What ordinary residents and citizen activists want has, in any event, a weaker influence than in Kyoto where local action kicked off a dynamic that ultimately led to a new heritage-oriented planning regime. Across the three cities, decision-making circles remain opaque to both ordinary citizens and activists. The heritage and planning bureaucracy is often inaccessible and powerless against political impositions. Citizen mobilisation for heritage causes is weak compared to Kyoto and often restricted to educational elites.



*View of high-rises from a Portuguese church ruin, Melaka. (Photo: P. De Giosa, 2013)*

Successful cases of resistance do occur but tend to be based on local ties, rather than mass media mobilisation and public debate. In most cases, the authorities have their way. The Gezi Park protests that Marquart followed over a couple of dramatic summer months in 2013 were a big exception: resistance against the destruction of the park for the aforementioned army bar-racks developed into a huge popular movement occupying the park and challenging the AKP government. Marquart observed disenchantment but also a reinvigoration of citizen engagement in the months following the repression of this protest (all largely obliterated in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt and its aftermath).

The ordinary person's involvement with heritage and history tends to take other, sometimes unexpected forms. All three studies found in-depth engagements with localities, relics, houses, and streetscapes that often do not speak the language of heritage "monumental time", but rather that of lived experience, or "social time".<sup>3</sup> Many Xi'an old-timers remember digging for ancient relics in their childhood, and history and its heroes are surprisingly common conversation topics among large parts of the population. The neighbours of the Byzantine churches in Istanbul value these as the mosques they frequent and do not object to functional instead of historically grounded restorations. In Melaka, the Chetti – the descendants of the earliest Indian traders who inter-married with the local Malay – see maintaining their rich ritual life as a heritage in its own right, despairing of the fact that this does not suffice to protect their neighbourhood – just outside the World Heritage zone – from high-rise incursions.

UNESCO World Heritage, in all three cities, is in any case a distant presence. It is most momentous in Melaka, which since its designation together with George Town/Penang in 2008 has experienced a tourist boom and where respect for the World Heritage institutions is still strongest. There are few gross violations of buildings rules within the World Heritage property, even when, outside the designated zone, development continues apace. By contrast and partly because of longer experience (Istanbul was listed in 1985), the Turkish authorities have not been too concerned with recurrent Committee admonitions to put a stop to the destruction of timber houses in the traditional neighbourhoods. The construction of the new Metro Bridge over the Golden Horn – a perceived threat to famous vistas – developed into a major standoff where the World Heritage Committee threatened to declare Istanbul a "World Heritage Site in Danger." The Turkish government averted this by making some minor concessions and lobbying Committee member states for support. Ultimately, the bridge was built, to local opponents' deep disappointment about perceived UNESCO inaction. While the Mausoleum of the First Qing Emperor (with the Terracotta Army) just outside Xi'an has been on the List since 1987, the first

---

<sup>3</sup> Herzfeld, Michael. 1991. *A place in history: Social and monumental time in a Cretan town*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



World Heritage sites within the city were only designated as part of the Silk Roads series in 2014, during Cheung's fieldwork. The World Heritage title was a strong motivation, such as when one of the archaeological candidate sites was cleared by relocating tens of thousands of people. But the contradiction between packaging the sites as remnants of cross-continental connection and their completely nation-centred selection escaped the attention of the World Heritage bodies.

The different approaches of the three countries mirror their styles of participation in the World Heritage Committee, where all served as members during my fieldwork (China in 2007–2011, Malaysia in 2011–2015 and Turkey in 2013–2017). China and Turkey have been among the most eager nominators of World Heritage candidates in recent years, clearly aware of the advantages for domestic and international tourism (China is about to wrest the numerical pole position from Italy). Corresponding to their world-political weight, the two delegations played an active role in the sessions. China was matched only by Russia in the blunt way in which it pursued self-interest and rejected criticism. By contrast, Malaysia struck a much more cautious pose; delegation experts told De Giosa that they were attending in order to learn. Chinese and Turkish participants were more aware that there is much to be gained from this diplomatic arena but only little to fear, given their countries' geopolitical clout.

The growing role of national self-assertion was confirmed by the outcomes of a two-day Max Planck workshop that I co-convened with David Berliner (Université libre de Bruxelles) in October 2012. It resulted in *World Heritage on the Ground* (Brumann and Berliner 2016b), the first book to bring together a dozen in-depth ethnographic investigations of World Heritage sites. In my conclusion I explain why the actual sites are often such as distant presence in the Committee sessions (Brumann 2016a). The case studies of the volume focus on World Heritage cities, cultural landscapes, and archaeological sites, mainly in Africa and Asia, comprising world-famous highlights such as Angkor, Chichén Itzá, and Borobudur, together with lesser-known locations. Just as in the studied cities, the national level is shown to have a greater influence on transformations at the sites than the distant World Heritage bodies. In many cases it is not so much the established national bureaucracy but new organisations specifically set up for the purpose that take control. Local communities, by contrast, typically see their rights curtailed. New benefits such as those brought by tourism often bypass them (Brumann and Berliner 2016a). Once again, heritage conservation is a prescription for accelerating social change (Brumann 2015b).

**Publications**

- Brumann, Christoph. 2011. Unser aller Kulturgut: Eine ethnologische Annäherung an das UNESCO-Welterbe. *Sociologus* 61: 19–43.
- 2012a. Multilateral ethnography: Entering the World Heritage arena. *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers* 136, [http://www.eth.mpg.de/cms/en/publications/working\\_papers/pdf/mp-i-eth-working-paper-0136.pdf](http://www.eth.mpg.de/cms/en/publications/working_papers/pdf/mp-i-eth-working-paper-0136.pdf).
- 2012b. *Tradition, democracy and the townscape of Kyoto: Claiming a right to the past*. London: Routledge.
- 2013. Comment le patrimoine mondial de l’Unesco devient immatériel. *Gradhiva* 18: 5–29.
- 2014a. Heritage agnosticism: A third path for the study of cultural heritage. *Social Anthropology* 22: 73–88.
- 2014b. Shifting tides of world-making in the UNESCO World Heritage Convention: Cosmopolitanisms colliding. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37: 2176–2192.
- 2015a. Community as myth and reality in the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. In: Nicolas Adell, Regina F. Bendix, Chiara Bortolotto, and Markus Tauschek (eds.) *Between imagined communities and communities of practice: Participation, territory and the making of heritage*, pp. 273–286. Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen.
- 2015b. Cultural heritage. In: James D. Wright (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed.), vol. 5, pp. 414–419. Oxford: Elsevier.
- 2015c. Vom Nutzen der Verbindungen: Die “cultural routes” im UNESCO-Welterbe geschehen. In: Andreas Ranft and Wolfgang Schenkluhn (eds.) *Kulturstraßen als Konzept: 20 Jahre Straße der Romanik*, pp. 211–221. Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner.
- 2016a. Conclusion. Imagining the ground from afar: Why the sites are so remote in World Heritage Committee sessions. In: Christoph Brumann and David Berliner (eds.) *World Heritage on the ground: Ethnographic perspectives*, pp. 294–317. Oxford: Berghahn.

- 
- 2016b. UNESCO-Welterbe, ostasiatische Nachbarn und japanische Altlasten. In: David Chiavacci and Iris Wieczorek (eds.) *Japan 2016: Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, pp. 93–115. München: Iudicium.
- 2017a. The best of the best: Positing, measuring and sensing value in the UNESCO World Heritage arena. In: Ron Niezen and Maria Sapi gnoli (eds.) *Palaces of hope: The anthropology of global organizations*, pp. 245–265. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2017b. How to be authentic in the UNESCO World Heritage system: Copies, replicas, reconstructions, and renovations in a global conservation arena. In: Corinna Forberg and Philipp Stockhammer (eds.) *The transformative power of the copy: A transcultural and interdisciplinary approach*, pp. 269–287. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Publishing.
- 2018a. Anthropological utopia, closet Eurocentrism and culture chaos in the UNESCO World Heritage arena. *Anthropological Quarterly* 91 (4): 1203–1234.
- 2018b. Creating universal value: The UNESCO World Heritage Convention in its fifth decade. In: Angela M. Labrador and Neil Asher Silberman (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of public heritage theory and practice*, pp. 21–34. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2019a. Slag heaps and time lags: Undermining Southern solidarity in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. *Ethnos* 84 (4): 719–738.
- 2019b. Global linkages, connectivity and the Indian Ocean in the UNESCO World Heritage arena. In: Burkhard Schnepel and Tansen Sen (eds.) *Travelling pasts: The politics of cultural heritage in the Indian Ocean world*, pp. 21–38. Leiden: Brill.
- 2021. *The best we share: Nation, culture and world-making in the UNESCO World Heritage arena*. New York: Berghahn.
- Brumann, Christoph, and David Berliner. 2016a. Introduction. UNESCO World Heritage – grounded? In: Christoph Brumann and David Berliner (eds.) *World Heritage on the ground: Ethnographic perspectives*, pp. 1–34. Oxford: Berghahn.
- (eds.) 2016 b. *World Heritage on the ground: Ethnographic perspectives*. Oxford: Berghahn.

- Brumann, Christoph, and Lynn Meskell. 2015. UNESCO and new world orders. In: Lynn Meskell (ed.) *Global heritage: A reader*, pp. 22–42. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Cheung Ah Li, Leah. 2019. *Where the past meets the future: The politics of heritage in Xi'an*. Berlin: LIT.
- De Giosa, Pierpaolo. 2021 (forthcoming). *World Heritage and urban politics in Malaysia: A cityscape below the winds*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Marquart, Vivienne. 2014. Insurmountable tension? On the relation of World Heritage and rapid urban transformation in Istanbul. *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 19, <http://ejts.revues.org/5044>.
- . 2015. *Monuments and malls: Heritage politics and urban struggles in Istanbul*. Doctoral dissertation, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg.