INTRODUCTION

Imagining Ruins

Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) never visited Angkor Wat; nor did he see the temple-mountain of Borobudur or the vast expanse of ruins in the Plain of Pagan. But he clearly did so in his imagination. Led by the Monkey People to the proverbial “lost city in the jungle,” Kipling’s wild boy Mowgli, the hero of The Jungle Book, senses how “wonderful and splendid” was this “heap of ruins.”

Some king had built it long ago on a little hill. You could still trace the stone causeways that led up to the ruined gates where the last splinters of wood hung to the worn, rusted hinges. Trees had grown into and out of the walls; the battlements were tumbled down and decayed, and wild creepers hung out of the windows of the towers on the walls in bushy hanging clumps.¹

Kipling’s vision was of a forgotten city, probably set in central India. However, he did make a single trip to George Town, Penang, on the Malay coast and took a hike into the interior. He saw waterfalls and tangled forests and, we can speculate, stumbled upon an ancient ruin. Whether this experience was the source of his inspiration or whether his image derived from the many ruins in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, which seem best to fit the outline of his story, remains a subject of debate.² Nonetheless, Kipling’s encounter with ruins, described through the reactions of Mowgli, provides access to the mind of a nineteenth-century colonist in Asia. His treatment also points to an age-old fascination with the idea of ruins—a fascination that underlined so much of what the British, French, and Dutch saw and did when they first ventured into this region east of India and south of China.

The ancient ruins of Southeast Asia have long sparked curiosity and romance in the world’s imagination. They appear in the accounts of nineteenth-century French explorers, in G. A. Henty’s Victorian tales of boyhood heroism, as props for Indiana Jones’ adventures—themselves a nod to far earlier stories—and more recently as the scene of Lady Lara Croft’s fantastical battle with the forces of evil. Southeast Asia’s ruined temples and cities are
the subjects of countless photographs, sketches, paintings, travel posters, and postcards. A regular feature in the *National Geographic* magazine, they show up too on the History and Discovery channels and serve as backdrops for popular television travel and reality shows; the fifth leg of the 2008 season of CBS’ *The Amazing Race* ended at the approach to the ancient Bayon Temple at Angkor.\(^3\)

Many of Southeast Asia’s ruins are now recognized as World Heritage sites by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and these ruins also represent unique “cultural assets,” to use the language of modern heritage specialists. In Thailand, they form part of the nation’s official pedigree, the supposed succession of sovereigns and kingdoms that laid the foundations for modern Thailand. For Cambodians, the ruined city of Angkor stands for the memory of the past glory of the Khmer people and serves as an icon of the nation’s independence. The present leaders of Burma see the abandoned temples of Pagan as underscoring their country’s rich precolonial past. Indonesia, through its role as a modern regional power, understands its monuments as a matter of national prestige—the necessity as a member of the family of nations to care for part of the world’s patrimony as well as an indication of early cultural achievement.

Nearly all Southeast Asian countries embrace their ancient sites as an integral part of their tourism-driven economies. Advertising campaigns for Thailand strongly emphasize the traditional culture of Thailand, and the ruins of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya often form a part of this image. For Cambodia, Angkor Wat and nearby monuments are among the principal engines of economic growth for the poor northern province of Siem Reap and certainly a help to the entire nation’s economy. The development of local businesses, access to foreign currency, and even improvements to the education system all link to the number of international arrivals to areas rich in ancient monuments such as these.

Figure I.1. Angkor Wat. The modern visitor experience. 2009.
International travelers are now familiar with Southeast Asia’s ancient ruins. Angkor Wat currently has over a million foreign visitors annually, and the tourism authority is hoping that the figure will double in the next few years. Borobudur’s attendance figures hover around a 1.2 million a year (of which 10 percent are international visitors), down from a height two decades ago of nearly 2 million. Many ancient sites have few outside visitors, and many more are undiscovered by the tourism market. However, if present trends continue, more and more sites will open to tourists in coming years, although most international visitors will no doubt want to spend time with the famous “stars,” not the lesser examples.

Imprint of the West

The central question is, why so many ruins? And, as a corollary, how have they come to be so valued? Southeast Asia’s history lies at the heart of these questions. A critical site of human development during the early centuries of the Common Era—a time historians refer to as the early modern period—the fledgling states of island and mainland Southeast Asia experienced an unsteady course of expansion, realignment, and probably, as many experts now hypothesize, environmental change that resulted in the abandonment of many settlements and the establishment of new ones. Ruined city walls, palaces, and, especially, temples and memorials are the evidence of these many years of expansion and contraction and of the movements of peoples into and within the region.

By the time of Western interests in Southeast Asia, there were architectural remains spread throughout many sections of both coastal and inland areas. Some were remote and abandoned; others were close to population centers and still functioned in a diminished way as sites of religious pilgrimage. Despite European explorers’ proclamations of discovery, nearby residents were cognizant of the existence of ancient sites. Among elites, ruins occupied a place not unlike that in the West; they were evocative places, suggestive of romance and symbolic of decay, loss, and death.

Whatever their continuing importance to the lives of Southeast Asian peoples, Western visitors and colonists assigned new kinds of meaning to these places, effectively wresting them from their former contexts. By the early twentieth century, the ancient sites of Southeast Asia had become enshrined in a complex apparatus of scholarship and institutional support set upon the broader foundation of colonialism. The Kern Institute in the Netherlands, the famous École française d’Extrême-Orient in Hanoi and later Paris, museums and colleges in Java, Singapore, and Rangoon all promoted the study of Southeast Asia’s past and the unique remnants of ancient kingdoms. The Archaeological Survey of India, an institution rooted in Great Britain’s Indian empire, also extended its aims and methods to British-held Burma. Ruins were a fundamental part of this program and served as a key focus of research and understanding of the region’s complex history.

In 1944, historian George Cœdès (1888–1969) summarized a century of Western scholarship with the publication of Les états hindouisés d’Indochine et d’Indonésie, issued in English in 1968. Employing an encyclopedic knowledge of ancient languages and a keen eye for points of interconnection, Cœdès identified the origins and boundaries of the so-called
Srivijaya Empire. He also worked out the chronology of Khmer inscriptions and developed a grand theory of Indian influence, in both mainland and island Southeast Asia. Challenged by some scholars as early as the 1930s—or even before Cœdès had published his full synthesis—his concept of “Indianized states” had a profound impact on the way the West viewed Southeast Asian societies and their history—and, ultimately, on the ways these peoples understood their own pasts.

In the context of French, Dutch, and British colonial interests, an earlier “Indian” conquest seemed to both presage and lend a strange kind of legitimacy to the European presence in Southeast Asia. As Berkeley scholar Penny Edwards has shown, the French had a complex love affair with the ancient Khmer. This extended to their involvements in Laos.

Figure I.2. Phnom Bakong, Angkor. One of eight peripheral towers. Photographed taken around 1909.
and especially Cambodia and led to the appropriation of much that was historically under Thai control as well. Characterized by scholarly administrators with deep and often sympathetic interests in the history of their territories and by the patent manipulation of ancient symbols, French colonialism exhibited a strange marriage of the ancient and modern, the indigenous world and outside interests.

Columbia University professor Edward Said long ago exposed the inherent conspiracy between colonialism and supposedly disinterested scholarship in his seminal book *Orientalism.* Said based his thesis on European colonization in the Middle East and North Africa; the only figure in his book who is part of the story presented here is Lord Curzon (1859–1925), briefly viceroy of India and a champion of Burmese antiquities. However, Said’s arguments have striking relevance in the Southeast Asian context, so much so it is surprising that he did not place French-controlled Indochina at the center of his story.

The Dutch in Java and Sumatra and the British in Burma, however, fit the template of Said’s thesis less completely, reinforcing a suggestion by intellectual historian Lisa Lowe that the pattern of “Orientalism” was not always the same. The British seemed curiously uninterested in appropriating the pageantry of Southeast Asian regimes, largely ignoring historic remains in the Straits Settlements and sending Burma’s last king to exile in India. Unlike in India, where British imperialists clearly celebrated traditional rulers and their symbols—arguably as part of a strategy to protect their own interests—the predominantly mercantile colonists of present-day Malaysia and Singapore showed little interest in history or antiquities. In Burma, British administrators barely supported historical research and provided few funds for the conservation of ancient monuments. Although the Dutch showed more interest in the ancient remains of Java and Sumatra especially, they did so without the enthusiasm or financial investment of their French counterparts.

While colonial rulers uncovered the foundations of ancient societies, modern states utilized this evidence in constructing their own regimes, a point stressed long ago by historian Benedict Anderson. In Thailand, revealingly the only country in the region not under direct colonial control, officials built upon museum collections and the physical evidence of the past to bolster the image of the state. They also instigated the beginnings of a national archaeology program that would lead to the creation of a heritage program in the twentieth century. After World War II, other emergent countries followed this model, with newly created Indonesia extolling its ancient empires and Islamic sultanates, Burma celebrating the symbols of its ancient kingdoms, and even monument-poor Malaysia finding ways of commemorating culture and tradition as part of the country’s new national perspective. In Malaysia, museums and university-based scholarship would also play central roles in the creation of a new national story.

Although long independent of colonial rule, the modern states of Southeast Asia remain indebted to the Western idea of their pasts. Much historical scholarship in the region still centers on the remnants of Indianized states and on disentangling the evidence of early kingdoms and later empires. The patterns of historical change identified by Western scholars continue also to provide the foundation for the official narratives of national development. The average, increasingly urbanized, resident of any given Southeast Asian country
may have little direct attachment to ancient ruins, but these places nonetheless form an important part of how they conceive of themselves.

Ruined sites also continue to play a significant role in the lives of peoples living near them. In much of Indonesia, where Buddhist and Hindu temples lie outside Islamic practice, ancient temples still connect to long-standing folk traditions. In Thailand, ancient sites convey a sense of original value despite their ruinous condition; generally “deconsecrated,” these mostly Buddhist sites resonate powerfully with Thai visitors. In Cambodia, ruins are for the most part “ruins.” Nonetheless, both the local populations and visiting Cambodians continue to honor sacred images, often for their magical properties as well as for their patriotic value. The same is true in Laos and Vietnam, where ancient sites invoke feelings of both veneration and cultural memory.

In Burma, these associations have a special value. Long considered ruins by Western visitors, the temples of Inwa, Pegu, and Prome attracted—and still attract—devotees despite their apparent neglect. The great site of Pagan had both active and abandoned temples at the time of British conquest. Some of these were *paya* (also sometimes spelled *hpaya*), or Buddhist temples; others were *zedi* (stupas) containing relics of the Buddha or otherwise honoring other sacred figures or the memories of individual donors. When villagers or donors’ families no longer contributed to their maintenance, these sites quickly fell into ruin. Other sites, especially the active *paya*, were subject to varying levels of renewal. To Burma’s inhabitants all this was normal, neither a cause for alarm nor a national concern but simply life as it existed.

This tradition continues most visibly today at the national shrine of the Shwedagon in Rangoon, where authorities and supplicants still maintain the shrine, recently adding a new layer of gilt to the enormous stupa. Several of the more famous temples in the archaeological park at Pagan have been the objects of similar treatment, as have been—and still are—many other sacred sites throughout the country, a process recently chronicled in telling detail by scholar Donald Stadtner. New coatings of plaster, fresh paintings, and regilding are all part of the process of material and spiritual regeneration. At odds with many ideas of the international community, such practices are arguably in keeping with time-honored Burmese traditions. For many people both inside and outside Burma, however, these attempts to bring “completeness” back to ancient shrines flies in the face of more universal values, values bound up in the broader notion of “heritage.”

**Heritage and Its Critics**

The concept of “heritage”—obviously from the title a central theme of this book—is not a simple one. A century ago, matters seemed self-evident. There were important buildings...
and sites, and they needed to be saved for future generations. Scholars and other specialists selected which places were worthy of preservation and which were not. After World War II, the nascent heritage establishment, relying largely on European precedence and expertise, brought this way of thinking into new international organizations. UNESCO, founded as part of the United Nations in 1945, served as the center for ideas in the field, holding conferences and symposia and setting out the basic principles of conservation practice. Member countries looked to UNESCO for guidance and adhered to the international community’s collective strictures.¹³

Training programs by UNESCO and other specialized organizations tended to focus on techniques of conservation—generally, physical interventions to ward off decay or repair past injuries—and expanding the list of known monuments and sites. The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, passed in 1954, and the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (known as the Venice Charter) of 1964 were hallmarks of international cooperation. The World Heritage Convention of 1972 was another important step. UNESCO also encouraged the further documentation of less-known historic sites through a partnership with the

Figure I.4. Borobudur, Java. View from grade level. 1999.
International Council on Monuments and Sites and the standardization of training through its offshoot, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, founded in Rome in 1959.

UNESCO’s efforts reaped notable results throughout the late 1950s and 1960s. Working on a modest budget and dependent on the largesse of donor countries, the agency saved the famous Abu Simbel temples in Egypt, spearheaded efforts to protect the ancient site of Mohenjo Daro in Pakistan, and contributed substantially to efforts to protect the historic cities of Katmandu in Nepal and Fez in Morocco and the famous ruins on the Acropolis in Athens. From its headquarters in Paris, UNESCO sent out consulting experts on countless “missions” to other countries, following a pattern of top-down guidance that few questioned.

By the 1970s, however, UNESCO’s hopeful model of social and cultural progress faced critics from both outside and within the organization. Committed to a wide range of programs touching on many aspects of education, science, and culture, UNESCO pushed ahead with projects that seemed to identify it with the communist block—at least in the eyes of the United States, which withdrew its support in 1984. (It re instituted funding in 2003 following a number of reforms within the agency.) Answering increasingly to the appeals of less-powerful, emergent countries, UNESCO became a bastion of “political correctness” long before the phrase became current. In the cultural arena, directives and conventions addressed issues of the theft of antiquities from poorer countries, ways to curtail the abuse of cultural artifacts by private owners, and emphasized the need to ensure the participation of local residents in conservation-related projects.

Notwithstanding its own criticisms, UNESCO came to embody the very system of Western bias that it claimed to oppose. Largely European in leadership and reliant on European approaches to conservation practice, UNESCO embraced the seemingly contrary values of populism and elitism. However, by the 1990s the organization could no longer claim supremacy over all aspects of cultural preservation. National programs, numerous nongovernmental conservation organizations, and the newborn academic field of heritage studies began to challenge UNESCO’s authority in matters of conservation. Promotion of the idea of “cultural preservation,” acceptance of regional differences, and even a questioning of the very concepts of “conservation” and “heritage” became hallmarks of this transitional period.

Currently, there is no concurrence on what constitutes a “correct” approach to heritage conservation. Some experts favor the restoration of older sites. Others promote more conservative “preservation” and “stabilization.” Sometimes the building or monument figuratively determines its own treatment. Some twenty years ago, conservation specialists restored the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, opting to privilege Michelangelo’s original work over later repairs and half a millennium of carbon deposits. At the nearby Roman Forum, the process has been mostly one of stabilizing, maintaining, and cleaning the ancient structures—although, as art historian David Watkin has recently pointed out, many of these steps have also entailed considerable manipulation of the so-called original artifacts. Experts have nonetheless never considered “restoration” of the forum in its entirety to be an option.

A related issue has been that of “use.” Some sites, such as the Roman Forum—and, as
most experts have historically assumed, Southeast Asia’s many ruins—are clearly places of archaeological and touristic interest. However, St. Peter’s Basilica remains the spiritual focus of a worldwide religion of some 1.3 billion people; for many, it is less a place of historic than of religious importance. Other heritage sites fall in between, some still fulfilling their original functions, others adapted to new uses, and others left in their existing states of repair. Many of these kinds of places have fallen under the aegis of official heritage efforts, becoming part of what heritage scholars Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton have called the authorized heritage discourse, whereas other historic sites are simply unnoticed.

Some experts now eschew the heritage designation, arguing that the very fact of recognition strips places of their more immediate cultural value. Others, such as historian Robert Hewison, decry the inherent bias in selection, arguing that class preferences and
commercial factors play an overly large part in the entire process of specifying heritage sites for recognition. During the past few years, there has been a flood of critical articles, books, conferences, and even journals dedicated to uncovering the prejudices and flaws embedded in heritage efforts. “Heritage,” Laurajane Smith has suggested, is less “a thing [than] a set of values and meanings.” Setting themselves against the twin bugbears of “globalization” and the “commodification” of cultural sites, this new generation of critics is attempting to expose the inequities built into current practices and to some extent propose alternatives.

**Heritage in Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia’s heritage efforts certainly reflect this wider debate. In terms of specific “treatments,” Cambodia adheres to long-established European ideas of careful stabilization, marked by thorough research and almost surgical efforts to stabilize ancient ruins. Thailand favors a somewhat more “sanitized” program of interventions, again based on scholarship but with the needs of tourists and local visitors more in mind. In Vietnam—with the exception of the important project at Mỹ Sơn, conducted in large part with international support—the work is often hurried and piecemeal. Burma decided that a kind of semirestoration of ancient monuments is a national cause, distancing itself from Western prescriptions.

Each country faces different conservation challenges as well. Indonesia must endure persistent earthquakes and tremors, which continually threaten historic sites. The same is true for Burma and, to a lesser degree, Thailand. In both Indonesia and Cambodia, technicians have to deal with the sometimes ill-conceived designs and engineering standards of ancient builders. Cambodian ruins in particular are often inherently unstable, performing badly from a structural point of view throughout their centuries of existence. Materials also affect performance. Stone has proved the most reliable and long-lived material. Bricks, the building material of most Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese structures, are susceptible to erosion and rapid decay when unprotected by roofs or stucco coverings. All these challenges cause national programs to differ in their emphasis and also affect the outcomes of conservation efforts.

Several questions emerge when considering ancient sites in Southeast Asia. Do international conservation standards take precedence over local practices? Are the ancient sites of Southeast Asia of “transcendent value,” or should national and local preferences take the upper hand? Many experts working in the region feel that current practices adequately address these issues. Others have begun to question the primacy of officially sanctioned heritage approaches and call for greater attention to local uses and values. A few, notably sociologist Tim Winter, argue that heritage efforts in fact rob local inhabitants of their own legacy and that officials often distort the past to advance special interests.

To the uninformed observer none of these issues is immediately apparent. Most international visitors to Angkor little question what is going on there. They encounter a seemingly natural forest environment strewn with ancient stone monuments. Tourists visiting Pagan observe a landscape of temples and stupas. They see ruins, semiruins, and recon-
structed sites but have little idea of the disagreements that lie behind these choices. The adventurous traveler to Mỹ Sơn faces an incomplete site, with piles of bricks, few remaining carvings—most of the original art is in museums or was long ago grabbed up by private collectors—and obtrusive craters created by US bombs during the Vietnam War. In Indonesia, the impression is of manicured gardens focused on the sites of Borobudur and Prambanan. A similar scene exists in Ayutthaya, where formal hedges line the well-demarcated attractions.

Experts and site managers struggle daily with how to treat their sites. They must also deal with larger issues. Commercialization is a particular concern. Many visitors decry the proliferation of vendors and the evident creep of avarice into what were once sacred grounds. Theatrical performances at Borobudur, sound-and-light shows in the park at Ayutthaya, and costumed *apsaras* (celestial dancers) awaiting camera-toting tourists at Angkor all constitute, for some critics, assaults on heritage places. Entrepreneurs, working alone and with government endorsement, underwrite the costs of museums, such as the museum opened several years ago in the town of Siem Reap near Angkor, or collude with hotels to provide exclusive access to sites otherwise closed to visitors. Nearly all heritage experts lament the transformation of historic sites into tourism venues, seeing tourism as
perhaps necessary to support the work at hand but ultimately threatening to the values of heritage efforts.

Experts also disagree on the degree to which local interests should prevail. The great park at Angkor depends directly upon the services of Cambodians living there. At the same time, the governing authorities are fearful that with greater affluence and larger numbers, the park's residents may begin to detract from the very qualities that made the Angkor ruins so special. In Thailand and Burma, government officials long ago moved residents away from the sites at Ayutthaya, Sukhothai, and Pagan, placing priority on the physical character of these places and ignoring local concerns. Although there have been steps taken to ameliorate these circumstances, all three sites function still as rural parks, showing little of the lives of people who once existed there. Similar stories are true at the Indonesian sites of Prambanan and Borobudur, where only now are officials attempting to bring local populations back into the picture.

At some sites, such as Vat Phu in Laos, it is easier to accommodate local practices and still maintain the overall "heritage" quality of the site. At other sites, notably Burma's Pagan, the supposed reintroduction of traditional practices has had the effect of obscuring the original qualities of both individual monuments and the site as a whole. Temples now have new finials, fresh coats of paint—sometimes obscuring ancient murals—and newly gilded stupas. Burmese officials argue that this is part of an age-old process of renewal and "merit making" for devout Buddhists. Outside experts have decried the loss of original features. They also have questioned the motives behind the process, wondering if Burma's aims are less to honor the past than to attract more tourists.

Southeast Asia possesses a wide range of heritage sites and other places with claims to heritage status. Some of these, such as the Sangiran Early Man Site in Indonesia—where in 1936 archaeologists discovered fossilized remains of early hominids—fall under the World Heritage Convention; others have national or local recognition. Many other sites, as well as traditional practices, from cooking to dance and song, are worthy of notice and promotion. The striking thing about the region's city and temple ruins, however, is how long they have held a special place in the world's imagination. Ruins have not only been an important type of historic site in Southeast Asia but also the preeminent cultural symbol for the region for well over a century.

Tourists visit Cambodia to see Angkor. They go to Burma for Pagan. And they often go to Java in search of Borobudur. Although other sites might capture the attention of visitors and compete with or complement excursions to archaeological parks and monuments—certainly the Sultan's Palace in Yogyakarta, the historic capital of Luang Prabang in Laos, and the living culture of Bali have their enthusiasts—the region's ruins hold an unchallenged place as repositories of "official culture." This book is about this strange transformation of abandoned shrines into cultural heritage and of remote sites into successful tourism venues. It is also about how ruins have framed the outside world's impression of this complex and multifarious region we now call Southeast Asia.