Commemorating and commodifying the prisoner of war experience in south-east Asia: The creation of Changi Prison Museum

Citation metadata
Author: Kevin Blackburn
Date: Jan. 2000
From: Journal of the Australian War Memorial
Publisher: Australian War Memorial
Document Type: Article
Length: 7,843 words

Main content

Article Preview:

{1} From the 1970s to the 1990s, south-east Asian countries, principally Thailand and Singapore, received an increasing number of visitors interested in seeing historic sites associated with the experience of the prisoners of war (POWs) captured by the Japanese during the Second World War. This has resulted in the construction of several major museums in the region representing the POW experience—the Jeath Museum (opened in 1977) and Hellfire Pass Museum (1998) along the Burma-Thailand Railway, and Changi Prison Museum in Singapore (1988). Individuals visiting these historic sites have included ex-POWs on personal pilgrimages of commemoration, but most visitors have been tourists drawn to the locations by curiosity about Japanese atrocities committed against the POWs. [1] Their interest has stemmed from the prominance of the POW experience in popular consciousness in the West and in east Asia. Stereotypical images of the POWs as human skeletons toiling under poor conditions, supervised by brutal Japanese guards, became etched in the public imagination during the postwar period and produced a perennial interest in a human tragedy. [2] Critical studies of the lives of the POWs under the Japanese, however, have long suggested that conditions varied according to what camp the POWs were held in. The popular image of "horror camps" never accurately represented conditions at every one of the POW camps in south-east Asia. [3]

{2} These studies raise an intriguing question about how the POW museums of south-east Asia have narrated the experiences of the POWs. Have the museums commemorated the variety of individual experiences, or have they reproduced public stereotypes in an attempt to commodify the past? In order to investigate how these conflicting interpretations may have shaped the public representation of the POW experience in these museums, it is best to examine Changi Prison Museum as a case study, because the creation of this museum has been the best-documented in government records.

{3} David Lowenthal has suggested that historic sites of human tragedy frequently become commodified by being turned into atrocity exhibitions which are meant to pander to the preconceptions of the tourists. The central thesis of Lowenthal's work is that the past cannot be re-created. All that modern re-creations of the past do is produce a representation of history that is shaped by present-day concerns. If tourists want to see a gallery of horrors, that expectation will influence those who attempt to re-create the past for the tourists. [4] John Urry and other writers on cultural tourism have corroborated Lowenthal's thesis. [5] Theorists on cultural tourism have noted that both tour operators and owners of tourist attractions who try to re-create the past do so according to what they think tourists want to experience or what they believe their intended audience thinks might have happened there. They deliberately package the past for their visitors' brief stay. The visit becomes a non-durable consumer commodity, if an intangible one, in which the tourists pay for the time they spend surrounded by exhibits selected, packaged and presented for them. This process means that, in representing the...