

**SALVADOR MUÑOZ-VIÑAS**

**A THEORY OF  
CULTURAL HERITAGE**

**Beyond The Intangible**

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# A THEORY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Beyond the Intangible

*Salvador Muñoz-Viñas*

# A THEORY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

*A Theory of Cultural Heritage* provides a structured and comprehensive picture of the concept of cultural heritage (CH) and its theoretical and practical derivatives.

Arguing that the expanded notion of CH brings with it a number of unresolved conceptual tensions, Muñoz-Viñas summarizes the strong and weak points of the current discourse. Gathering together a range of existing views on cultural heritage and its practices, the book provides a dynamic overview of the theoretical underpinnings behind the notion and also considers how these could evolve in the future. By analyzing the conflicting meanings of the term *cultural heritage* and establishing a more nuanced ontological taxonomy, this book challenges some well-established views and outlines a framework that will allow the reader to better grasp the theoretical and practical complexities of this fascinating notion.

*A Theory of Cultural Heritage* is a thought-provoking and valuable contribution to the existing literature, written in an engaging, clear style that will make it accessible to academics, students and heritage professionals alike.

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Cover image: Image generated with the assistance of AI after a prompt by Salvador Muñoz-Viñas.

First published 2023

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-26395-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-26394-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-28812-1 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003288121

Typeset in Bembo

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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# FOREWORD

“ . . . in a world where ancient places are disappearing almost as fast as they can be recorded there is little time to dwell on theory.

(Denys Byrne)”

Already in 1903, interest in cultural heritage was described as a ‘cult’ by prominent art historian Alois Riegl. Almost a century later, in 1998, and according to British historian David Lowenthal, the cult had become so radicalized as to become a ‘crusade.’ Indeed, the notion of cultural heritage is nowadays very popular and widespread, both among heritage professionals and the general public. It has also become very broad: it may include paintings as well as literary masterpieces, a voodoo ritual, or nuclear waste. The fast expansion of the notion of cultural heritage to include such a wide spectrum of things has been dubbed “the Heritage Big Bang” and constitutes a very interesting and involved phenomenon.

Arguably, it is the wish to free the notion from some of its perceived problems (elitism, colonialism, Eurocentrism, etc.) what has broadened the concept so much that it has become difficult to manage. Nowadays, it may be impossible to tell CH from non-CH: a category that encompasses military weapons, a computer program, the Parthenon, basket-making practices, and even natural ecosystems is undoubtedly difficult to grasp. Perhaps as a response to this essential ambiguity, some authors have suggested that there is no need for an accurate definition of the notion of cultural heritage or that such a definition is not even possible. However, if we attempt to reflect on CH in some depth, we need conceptual boundaries beyond the idea that CH is what we call CH.

The essay deals with this and other important aspects of the CH discourse. However, it does not aspire to discuss every possible issue in cultural heritage theory. The primary aim of this essay is to make the notion of cultural heritage and

some of its peripheral concepts more manageable. This is done by mapping this knowledge field in a moderately innovative way – a way that may help the reader better understand its evolution, its current stance, and perhaps its future development. Also, this book introduces some arguments and categories that might help the reader to fine-tune some widespread ideas. Since these categories allow us to handle a complex reality, they work as tools, even if conceptual in nature. Thus, one goal of this book is to provide readers with new tools for their toolboxes. Please note, however, that these new conceptual tools need not replace the old ones in every case. Furthermore, the book might perhaps be useful even to readers who choose to neither replace old tools nor add newer ones: these reflections could still help them keep the old tools clean and sharp. In other words, I would be glad if the arguments developed in this book were thought-provoking or interesting enough to make readers reconsider some well-established ideas, or even to elaborate or refine the arguments in defense of those ideas.

*València, October 2022*

# A NOTE ON THE THOUGHT STYLE OF THIS BOOK

To achieve the goals described in the Foreword, a deliberate effort has been made to compose a text that is as uncomplicated as possible – one that contains few Greek-based words, uncommon notions, or utterly ambiguous metaphors. Admittedly, there are some, but they have been used as sparingly as possible: the essay concentrates on presenting clear, understandable arguments and ideas.

Experienced readers (those acquainted with the literature in the cultural heritage field) will find that the essay deviates from the prevailing thought style in some ways. For example, there are few detailed case studies that are worth this name – whenever possible, examples in a list have been used instead. The use of a *Gedankenexperiment* (a ‘thought experiment’) as an argumentative device is another case in point. Quoting authors from outside the field (e.g., philosophers or fiction writers) is yet another one.

The book has also undergone a distillation process in order to produce an essay that is dense but hopefully easy to read: dense in ideas per page, not dense in that it is obscure or hard to interpret. For this reason, when I have found a phrase from an author that would express what I tried to mean in a clear, straightforward way, I have used her or his very words in my discourse with all due recognition. This is a form of acknowledging their authority, but the reader needs to be aware that this essay draws on the ideas and insight of other authors than those quoted here.

# A NOTE ON THE MEANING OF THE TERMS

As Ahmad has noted, “the finer terminology of ‘heritage’ has not been streamlined or standardized, and thus no uniformity exists between countries.”<sup>1</sup> *Cultural heritage* is not a notion that is easy to translate out of (or into) English, at least not when an exact synonym is sought. As in many other cases, the nuances and innuendos the term has in a language are easily lost in translation, while other ones are gained in turn. To assume that the notion of ‘heritage’ has an exact equivalence in all languages (and their corresponding worldviews) might be a mistake. Even if the basic idea of the same concept may be similar, some details are likely to be more or less different. The fact that these differences exist is in itself a gentle and somewhat humbling reminder that cultural concepts are created and constructed by each society.

The nuances that the notion of cultural heritage possesses in a particular language can perhaps be fully grasped by its native speakers only, but a glimpse of the more significant differences is indeed within reach of the average scholar. I am a native Spanish speaker, and, as such, can grasp the subtleties implicit in the term *patrimonio cultural*, which is the most accurate Spanish translation of cultural heritage. In Spanish, however, *patrimonio* involves not just that which is inherited from the *pater* (the Latin word for ‘father’ from which *patrimonio* is formed) but also everything that someone possesses. Thus, my *patrimonio* involves not just that which I inherited from my parents (including customs, education, a set of values, etc.) but also the newly built house my wife and I purchased at the turn of the century and in which we now live. That house is also part of my *patrimonio*, though it would rarely be considered ‘heritage’ in English – rather, it would perhaps be called part of my ‘estate.’ Thus, there is a subtle difference in how a Spanish speaker and an English speaker perceive the seemingly equivalent notion. This nuance is more or less common to other Latin-derivative languages, such as French or Italian, and can influence how ‘heritage’ is understood, discussed, and approached by persons with

different cultural backgrounds. And while the difference may be too subtle to be bothered with in many cases, it can produce some conceptual tension when trying to fine-tune the terms.

Other languages bring their own set of nuances. Unfortunately, I can only attest to them in a mediated way; that is, through the testimonies and interpretations of other persons who, in turn, speak to me in any of the few languages I can understand myself. The German notion of *Denkmal* is a case in point. It is often translated as ‘cultural heritage’ and as “monument” (though in some cases this notion of ‘monument’ can be stretched to cover even a modest piece of paper, as posited by Alois Riegl in his 1903 masterpiece *Denkmalkultus*<sup>2</sup>). When speaking to my German or Austrian acquaintances, however, they have not been able to find a precisely identical notion to English ‘cultural heritage.’ For them, *Kulturerbe* is more akin to ‘cultural heritage,’ but I cannot intuitively grasp the conceptual difference as, unfortunately, I do not speak German. I think, however, that in spite of these small subtle differences between languages, the reflections presented in this book can be understood by most readers with a Western cultural background.

These differences (and my difficulties to grasp them) grow as the cultural environment gets more distant. For instance, when asked for the Chinese translation of ‘heritage,’ a learned Chinese colleague kindly sent an email showing intriguing uncertainties:

Heritage is translated to 遗产, and 遗产 can be divided into 遗 and 产, 遗 means ① to leave ② to forsake ③ to hand down; 产 means ① to bear ② to produce ③ product ④ property.

So from my point of view, when 遗 is combined with 产, it surely represents some physical property that somebody leaves down, and some other people inherit it.<sup>3</sup>

Another accomplished Chinese colleague, however, argued differently, showing that no standard translation of the term exists:

遗产 need not be inherited by someone else . . . we [Chinese speakers] generally use other words to describe the verb “inherit”, that is “继承”. And the meaning of 遗产 for us is mainly related to physical property that somebody leaves down, although some times we also use it to describe immaterial spiritual fortune that somebody leaves down historically.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulty in translating the notion of ‘heritage’ to Chinese and to Asian cultures in general is confirmed by Min-Chin Chiang (2019:88), for whom there is a “divergence in meaning” between the Chinese notion of ‘heritage’ and not just the English notion but also the ‘Euro-American’ notions in general:

While the English term ‘heritage’ suggests a strong personal linkage and a sense of rootedness, the Chinese translation “wenhua zichan” is more

connected to material quality and economic value. At the same time, the feature of ‘materiality’ contained in the use of “zichan” (assets) adds to the difficulty the public has in understanding what non-physical ‘cultural assets’ refer to.<sup>5</sup>

What I suggest in this brief note is that the notions of cultural heritage may vary across different languages or cultures. ‘Heritage’ may not be exactly the same as *patrimonio*, *Erbe*, or 遗产. In all cases, the reader needs to be aware that small conceptual gaps can arise when trying to adapt the English terminology beyond its original settings, and that the notion of ‘cultural heritage’ is neither universal nor superior to other related notions from different cultural backgrounds. This relativistic standpoint may help to understand not just the scope of the ‘cultural heritage’ discourse but also some of the ideas outlined in this book.

## Notes

- 1 Ahmad, Y. (2006) ‘The scope and definitions of heritage: From tangible to intangible’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 12(3), pp. 292–300, p. 299. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250600604639>.
- 2 Riegl, A. (1903) *Der Moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen Und Seine Entstehung*. Vienna: Braumüller.
- 3 Zou Feichi, personal communication, 16 January 2020.
- 4 Ya Chun Tang, personal communication, 21 October 2022.
- 5 Chiang, M.C. (2019) ‘Intangibility Re-Translated’, in N. Akagawa and L. Smith (eds.) *Safeguarding Intangible Heritage*. London: Routledge, pp. 84–101, p. 88.