

## “The Bridge on the River Kwai” - Memory Culture on World War II as a Product of Mass Tourism and a Hollywood Movie

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### Abstract

During World War II the Japanese army built a railway that connected the countries of Burma and Thailand in order to create a safe supply route for their further war campaigns. Many of the Allied prisoners of war (PoWs) and the Asian laborers that were forced to build the railway died due to dreadful living and working conditions. After the war, the events of the railway's construction and its victims were mostly forgotten until the year 1957 when the Oscar-winning Hollywood movie “The Bridge on the River Kwai” visualized this tragedy and brought it back into the public memory. In the following years western tourists arrived in Kanchanaburi in large numbers, who wanted to visit the locations of the movie. In order to satisfy the tourists' demands a diversified memory culture developed often ignoring historical facts and geographical circumstances. This memory culture includes commercial and entertaining aspects as well as museums and war cemeteries. Nevertheless, the current narrative presents the Allied prisoners of war at the center of attention while a large group of victims is set to the outskirts of memory.

**Keywords:** World War II, Memory Culture, Kanchanaburi, River Kwai, Japanese Atrocities

### Introduction

Kanchanaburi in western Thailand has become an internationally well-known symbol of World War II in Southeast Asia and the Japanese atrocities. Every year more than 4 million tourists are attracted by the historical sites. At the center of attention lies a bridge that was once part of the Thailand-Burma Railway, built by the Japanese army during the war. The railway was an important transport and supply route for the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia and its further war campaign. Allied prisoners of war (PoWs) as well as Asian forced laborers were brought to Thailand and Burma to construct the railway under dreadful conditions. Almost 100,000 of the 240,000 workers died during the construction.

Today a huge memory culture has been developed in Kanchanaburi concerning the tragic events of the railway's construction. It includes several museums, memorials and two war cemeteries as well as sometimes inappropriate commercial utilization of history.

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The list of literature concerning the Thailand-Burma Railway is long. There have been published several diaries of survivors that offer a personal view on the events (Dunlop, 1986) as well as many researches on the historical circumstances of the Thailand-Burma Railway (Beattie, 2009). However, there has been written little so far about the memory culture in Kanchanaburi (Apinya Arrunnaporn, 2008, pp. 67-70).

This article aims to analyze the memory culture of Kanchanaburi concerning the events of World War II. It will determine how this memory culture has been developed and how the events of the Thailand-Burma Railway are presented. The main research topics are: What has initiated and stimulated this memory culture? Who are the main actors? What is the dominating narrative that is presented?

Before the different aspects of the memory culture can be analyzed it is necessary to describe the historical events, starting with the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia and the circumstances that made the Japanese build the railway through the mountainous border region between Thailand and Burma.

## **The Thailand-Burma Railway**

### **1. The Japanese Invasion of Southeast Asia**

Thailand, the only country in Southeast Asia never to have been colonized by a western country, had always played an important role in the Japanese war strategies. Since Thailand was neutral and surrounded by the British colonies of Malaya and Burma to the north, south and west as well as by French Indochina to the east, it was a perfect starting point for a potential invasion of Southeast Asia (Reynolds, 1996, p. 244). Therefore, Thailand was one of the first countries to be invaded in December 1941 when Japan started its war campaign. After short but fierce battles, especially on the southern coast of the Gulf of Thailand, Thailand capitulated and allowed Japan a free passage to the British colonies of Malaya and Burma. Seeing Japan as the coming hegemonic power in Southeast Asia, and assuming that the Axis powers might win the war, the Phibun<sup>2</sup> government decided to ally itself with Japan and declared war on the USA and Great Britain in January 1942. This alliance was associated with the hope that siding with Japan could give Thailand the opportunity to fulfill its vision of forming the great Thai empire (Becker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, 2005, pp. 131.137).

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<sup>2</sup> Phibun Songram was the Prime Minister of Thailand between 1938 to 1944 as well as 1948 to 1957.

## **2. The construction of the Thailand-Burma Railway**

When Japan had invaded almost all of Southeast Asia in March 1942, it concentrated its following war campaigns on India and China. According to the Japanese war strategy the supply of troops, weapons and food should be organized via Burma and Thailand, where Japan had established its Southeast Asian headquarters. However, the few existing transport routes between Burma and Thailand were too small, too old and not suitable for the transportation of large numbers of troops and heavy materials. In order to solve this substantial logistical problem, the Japanese Army decided to build the Thailand-Burma railway to establish a safe supply route (Reynolds, 2005).

The railway was built between June 1942 and October 1943 and was called “the Death Railway” after the war, referring to the large amount of workers that lost their lives during the construction. The route of the railway started at Nong Pladuk on the western side of Bangkok, went via Kanchanaburi and ended in Thanbyuzayat in Burma (Beattie, 2007 p. 24). Crossing the thick, rough and mountainous border region between Thailand and Burma, this route was highly challenging. In addition, due to the enormous time pressure to finish the railway as fast as possible, the Japanese army decided to conduct the railway’s construction without using heavy construction machinery. In return, the work would be done by huge amounts of human labor. Initially, the Japanese army had calculated that the required work would need 60,000 laborers: 50,000 Asian laborers and 10,000 allied prisoners of war. While this was already a huge amount, it was only a quarter of the real work force (Beattie, 2007, p. 25).

## **3. The human workforce**

During the Japanese Invasion of Southeast Asia Japan had captured Allied prisoners of war in large amounts. The biggest groups came from Australia, Great Britain and the Netherlands. Although the Japanese had not expected to capture such large amounts of hostile prisoners, they decided soon to use them as a human work force for infrastructural war projects like the Thailand-Burma Railway (*Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 1929*).

Besides the allied prisoners of war, Japan recruited additional work forces from the population of the occupied Southeast Asian countries. These workers came mostly from Burma, Malaya (Boggett, 2003, pp. 18-19) or Java and were called Romusha (Murai, 1993, p. 59). In the beginning, Japan could without difficulty hirer volunteer laborers that believed their false promises about high salaries and moderate working conditions. Many believed the Japanese lies and brought their whole family in order to find a better life in Thailand. This explains why

the Romusha workforce included women and children. Once they had arrived in Thailand or Burma they were forced into hard labor, with little or no compensation, under dreadful living and working conditions. When rumors about the real working conditions along the railway spread, Japan couldn't find sufficient volunteers anymore and began to displace the Romusha against their will (Murai, 1993, p. 63).

Among the workforce of the Thailand-Burma Railway were also 5,700 Thai laborers. Unlike the PoWs and the Asian forced laborers, they were working under binding contracts and comparatively moderate conditions. Furthermore, they were deployed exclusively on the much less challenging track section between Nong Pladuk and Kanchanaburi. Being aware of the Japanese plans as well as of the real working conditions along the railway, the Thai government protected its citizens from working on the Thai-Burmese border region (Reynolds, 2005, p. 331). In addition, growing tensions between Thai laborers and Japanese soldiers occurred during the railway's construction. Therefore the Japanese army resigned from using Thai workers (Reynolds, 1994, pp. 138-140).

#### **4. The human tragedy**

Overall 97,652 of the 239,711 workers that were deployed died during the construction and the maintenance of the Thailand-Burma Railway. This equals a death rate of 41% (Beattie, 2009, p. 68).

The most important reason for the significant high death toll was the extremely miserable circumstances under which the railway was built. Since the course of the railway crossed through thick jungle, high mountains and torrential rivers, the work was often very challenging and dangerous. At the same time, much of the work had to be done using bare hands, in the absence of heavy construction machinery. While the construction of the railway included extremely hard physical work, there was also a lack of food, clean water and medicine. In consequence the laborers became very weak, and diseases spread easily in the worker camps (Beattie, 2009, p. 68). In addition, the way in which the Japanese and Korean guards treated the laborers was often brutal and ruthless, especially when it seemed that the time schedule could not be met.

While all groups suffered enormously under the dreadful living and working conditions the highest death rate was noticed among the Asian forced laborers (Beattie, 2009, p. 101). Altogether 85% of all deaths came from this group. On the one hand, the Asian laborers often didn't have the physical condition required for the hard work at the construction sites. They also didn't have the same discipline, moral and sense of belonging as the PoWs who were often

captured as complete military units. On the other hand the Japanese made a racial distinction between the groups of laborers and treated the Asian workers even worse (Reynolds 2005, 329). An obvious example for the unequal treatment was the distribution of food among the workers. While the amount of food was inadequate anyway, the Asian laborers received only 600 grams rice per day while the PoWs got 660 grams per day (Beattie, 2009, p. 59).

### **5. Finishing the railway and remembering the victims**

Once the railway was finally completed, the Japanese army used it for the supply of troops and materials between Burma and Thailand. Due to its enormous strategic significance, the railway became a favored target of allied bombings and was repeatedly damaged and afterwards repaired by the workers. In 1947 the Thai state bought the southern part of the railway from Great Britain and put it in operation.

After the war, Great Britain made efforts to preserve the memory of the deceased PoWs and created places of remembrance in Kanchanaburi. Therefore it demanded that Thailand provide land and resources for the construction of two war cemeteries (Wyatt, 2003, p. 251). In the following years the remains of the dead, which had often been rashly buried along the railway by the Japanese, were excavated and interred again officially (Apinya Arrunnaporn, 2008, pp. 67-70). Besides a couple of commemorative plates and information boards, an administration office was established, which is in charge of the caretaking of the compound and the visitors.

The Japanese army had already built a memorial for all of the victims of the railway in February 1944. After the war Japan bought the area of the memorial from Thailand and ordered the Japanese Society of Thailand to take care of it (Apinya Arrunnaporn, 2008, pp. 71-74).

## **The memory culture in Kanchanaburi on the Thailand-Burma Railway**

### **1. A Hollywood movie as the engine of memory**

The two war cemeteries and the Japanese memorials remained for years the only places of remembrance in Kanchanaburi related to the Thailand-Burma Railway. From the Thai perspective the commemoration of those events didn't have great significance. On the one hand, many Thais were not or only indirectly involved in this tragedy. They were neither the perpetrators nor the victims of the war crimes that were committed during the railway's construction. Nevertheless, in some cases Thais were witnesses of the awful conditions along the railway and often showed sympathy with the workers or even tried to help them (Beattie,

2009, p. 90). On the other hand, the postwar regime in Thailand wasn't interested in remembering the events of the war and the Thai alliance with Japan (Wyatt, 2003, pp. 253-255). So the memory on the tragedy of the railway's construction started to fade out and the story became more and more forgotten.

More than a decade after the war, in 1957, the movie "The Bridge on the River Kwai" brought the story back into public awareness. It was based on a novel of the same name written by the French author Pierre Boulle, and presents a fictional story in which the allied PoWs have to build a bridge over the River Kwai. The main characters are the brave British Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson and United States Navy Commander Shear. They stand out by their strength, courage and inescapable principles.

Directed by the famous David Lean, the movie became a worldwide success and was awarded with seven academy awards. In many western countries people became curious about this tragedy and started to deal with the events of the railway's construction once more. Thus, a Hollywood movie seemingly became the engine of memory.

## **2. There never was a Bridge on the River Kwai**

Soon afterwards international tourists arrived in Kanchanaburi with the intention of visiting the sites of the movie. In the beginning, many of them were disappointed, because the area didn't correspond with their expectations. Surrounded by deep jungle, the Kanchanaburi presented in the movie was situated in the middle of nowhere. The real Kanchanaburi turned out to be a bustling city at the foot of high mountains (Boggett, 2000, p. 123). Nevertheless the biggest problem was that the bridge, centered in the novel as well as in the movie, did not exist; there wasn't even a river with the name Kwai.

Pierre Boulle wasn't involved in the construction of the railway. He wrote his novel, hence the pattern for the movie, based on the narrations of survivors (Boggett, 2000, p. 120). During this transfer of the story there must have been inaccuracies and misunderstandings about the location of the bridge and the name of the river.

The Thailand-Burma Railway crossed, soon after it left the city of Kanchanaburi, the river Maeklong. Close to this river, there is the Khwae Noi (small tributary). The course of the railway followed this small river, but never crossed it. Further downstream there were some cuttings where local farmers let their Kwais (buffalos) drink from the water of the river. Near this location, the railway crossed the river Song Khalia and the workers had to tackle sharp cliffs, deep jungle and a torrential stream. This is the place where many tragedies took place, which were demonstrated in the novel and the movie and led to the creation of the myth "The Bridge

on the River Kwai”. About this location and the events Pierre Boulle wrote his story. The term “River Kwai” is thus the result of a mistake in the name “Kwae” and “Kwai” as well as a mix-up between the rivers Khwae Noi and Song Khalia (Apinya Arrunnapaporn, 2008, p. 61).

### **3. Mass-tourism changed geography and history**

The local administration in Kanchanaburi eventually sought for ways to meet the expectations of the tourists. Since in the nearby neighborhood only one bridge existed that was part of the original railway, this Bridge was officially declared to be “The Bridge on the River Kwai”. The bridge in question was a massive steel bridge over the River Maeklaung only a few kilometers east of the city center of Kanchanaburi. At the same time the administration remembered that the Maeklaung used to have the byname Khwae Yai (large tributary) in the Kanchanaburi region and renamed the two rivers. The Khwae Noi merged into Kwai Noi and the Maeklaung became the Kwai Yai). Because of the success of the movie which subsequently attracted tourists, the course of history was changed. More than twenty years after the end of the war, a bridge on the river kwai was eventually built.

### **4. “The Bridge on the River Kwai” as a center of memory culture**

In the following years the newly named “Bridge on the River Kwai” became the center of a bustling memory culture in Kanchanaburi. Every year around four million tourists visit Kanchanaburi and for the large majority a trip to the Bridge is obligatory (Apinya Arrunnapaporn, 2008, p. 123). In order to respond to the demands of the visitors, many different kinds of activities and facilities have been developed.

On the one hand, this includes different, obvious and in some cases inappropriate kinds of commercialization of history. The plentiful souvenir shops that surround the forecourt of the bridge offer, for example; World War II T-shirts, key holders in the shape of miniature bombs as well as bootlegs of the movie “The Bridge on the River Kwai”. In addition, there are numerous “River Kwai” hotels and restaurants near the bridge that are specialized for the bridge visitors and offer specific packages. One of the most popular attractions is a vintage train that crosses the bridge several times a day and follows the course of the Thailand-Burma Railway for 70 kilometers. Every year in late November, the so called “River Kwai Festival” is celebrated. The highlight of the festival is a sound and light show which demonstrates the story of World War II in Thailand and the tragedies of the railway’s construction. According to a tourist website, this show allows the visitors to be “an eye witness of the history – the rise and fall of the railway” (Kanchanaburi, n.d.).

On the other hand, besides the variety of commercial activities, several memorials and commemorative plaques can also be found at the forecourt of the Bridge. The governments of Australia and the USA<sup>3</sup> have established small memorial stones that depict the tragedies of the railway's construction and commemorate the dead soldiers. Moreover the Thai state, the municipality of Kanchanaburi and the Thai railway authority have also established memorials, plaques and information boards. On the other side of the Bridge, the Chinese state has created a memorial for the Chinese soldiers.

While several former allied countries showed great efforts to commemorate their nationals, there are no comparable measures among the countries of the former Romusha, with the exception of China. In many cases, none of the countries feel responsible for the laborers, since they were part of ethnic minorities, like the Tamil population in Malaya that originated from South India. These minorities were dispersed and resettled repeatedly during the European expansion of Asia and World War II and often lost their bonds with their homelands. In many cases the identities of the Asian laborers remained unknown since the Japanese didn't keep records on them and buried them in mass graves (Reynolds, 2005, p. 339).

### **5. The Thailand-Burma Railway in museums**

The story of the railway is also presented in four museums that are located throughout the city and the region of Kanchanaburi. While dealing with the same topic, they differ in their style of presentation.

The tourist authority of Thailand (TAT) ordered the construction of the first museum, the JEATH-Museum in 1977 on the compound of a Buddhist temple (Apinya Arrunnapaporn, 2008, p. 74). It mainly consists of a bamboo hut replica, similar to the laborer's accommodations. The exhibition focusses on demonstrating the living and working conditions of the PoWs and the everyday life in the worker camps. The Asian forced laborers are not mentioned at all.

Close to the "Bridge on the Kwai" there is another JEATH-Museum, however in contrast to the first one, it is in private hands. The museum is stretched over two stores and a courtyard, and possesses a larger exhibition space. Even though the history of the railway is integrated to the larger context of World War II, the museum is mainly concentrated on the fate of the PoWs.

Built by the Australian government in 1998 the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum is situated 75 kilometers northwest of Kanchanaburi. At the location of the museum, the course of the railway led through extremely challenging terrain. Therefore, this area was called the hellfire

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<sup>3</sup> It is the only place of commemoration of the American victims in Kanchanaburi. The deceased were not buried in Kanchanaburi. They were brought back to the USA and buried there.

pass (Beattie, 2007, p. 22). The museum includes a modern and elaborated exhibition as well as an open air area which contains remains of the original railway. After the museum was opened, it has been criticized for being too Australian, so the museum has adapted its exhibition. All the text has been translated into Thai and the story of the Asian workers was added (*Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum*, n.d.). However, the core focus remains on the demonstration of the suffering of Australian PoWs.

The latest museum, the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre, was founded by Australian, Rod Beattie in 2004. It is a private museum, not supported by the Australian Government. The museum consists mainly of the collections and researches of Rod Beattie, who has been the caretaker of the two war cemeteries in Kanchanaburi for many years and conducted several explorations along the railway sites. Besides the exhibitions, the museum also includes a research center with an archive, open to survivors, relatives of former laborers and the general public who are interested in the history of the railway. Neither ignoring nor neglecting the participation of Asian forced laborers during the railway construction, the Thailand-Burma Railway sets the PoWs in the middle of its story, similar to the other museums.

### **Conclusion-The imbalanced narrative**

Initiated by the worldwide success of the movie “The Bridge on the River Kwai” and the inrush of tourists that followed, an extensive memory culture has been developed in Kanchanaburi. Hereby, commercial and entertaining demands and aspects are dominating, especially around the forecourt of the bridge. Nevertheless, the four museums, especially the Thai-Burma Railway center and the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum offer a sober and more historiographical demonstration of the story. In addition, the two war cemeteries enable survivors and relatives to commemorate the victims of the railway’s construction.

While different kinds of representations of history were established, which can satisfy the demands of various groups of visitors, there is a considerable imbalance regarding the content. The current narrative represented in the memory culture of Kanchanaburi sets the allied prisoners of war, their fate and their suffering, at the center of attention. The Asian forced laborers, who constituted the large majority of the victims, are marginalized. They are set to the outskirts of memory.

The movie “The Bridge on the Kwai” was the cause for this imbalance. In this fictional story, the allied prisoners of war, mainly British Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson and United States Navy Commander Shear, are the leading characters. Because of their strength, courage and

inescapable principles, they became the obvious heroes of the story. The Asian forced laborers, in contrast, remain in the roles of supporting actors. They are presented as a huge, weak and passive mass, often literally portrayed in the shadows.

When the first tourists arrived in Kanchanaburi, the movie was their main frame of reference. The fascinating story of Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson and Commander Shear shaped their imagination and expectations. In order to satisfy the visitor's demands, the local authorities followed the representation of the movie. The museums of Kanchanaburi carried the movie's narrative on as well and focused their exhibitions on the experiences and sufferings of the PoWs, making the participation of Asian forced laborers during the construction of the railway neither neglected nor concealed. Nevertheless, similar to the movie's plot, the Asian forced laborers are marginalized and remain in the roles of supporting actors. Furthermore, the memory politics consolidated these phenomena. The former allied countries, especially Great Britain and Australia, showed great effort to commemorate their veterans and to present the history of the railway. In contrast, with the exception of China and Japan, no Asian country contributed to the memory culture of Kanchanaburi. Since the Romusha often belonged to marginalized and dispersed minorities, like the Tamil population of Malaya, no country feels responsible for them. Therefore, unlike the Allied Prisoners of war the Romusha are lacking of a lobby that commemorates their fate and suffering.

In conclusion, it was a Hollywood movie that functioned as an engine of memory and stimulated the creation of a bustling memory culture concerning the history of the Thailand-Burma Railway in Kanchanaburi. The actors of this memory culture, namely the tourists, the local authorities, the museums and the former allied countries, shape the narrative that is presented, by their individual needs, demands, purposes and policies. Hereby, the fate of the allied PoWs is set into the middle of this narrative, while the Asian forced laborers are set to the outskirts of memory and become "second class victims".

The current memory culture in Kanchanaburi is clearly dominated by western countries and the images and narratives that they present of the past. While this form of domination and discrimination that can be found in the memory culture could be seen as an expression of post colonialism, it is foremost the result of nationalistic memory politics. In order to highlight their efforts and contributions to the war, the countries focus mostly on the suffering and fate of their own victims. For example Australia, the USA and Great Britain have erected memorials, or museums that focus exclusively on their own nationals. In the absence of any countries that feel responsible for the former Romusha they are lacking of a comparable lobby and become marginalized. While Thailand has been neither the perpetrators nor the victims of the tragedy of

the Thailand-Burma Railway, it could play an important role in presenting a more balanced narrative. Unfortunately, the current museums that are operated by Thai individuals or authorities follow the narrative of the movie and concentrate on the suffering of the PoWs as well.

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