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World Heritage Listing and Implications for Tourism – The Case of Hue, Vietnam

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1. Introduction

In 1993, the complex of monuments built around Vietnam's former capital city, Huế, was inscribed on World Heritage List. The complex included the Citadel, a walled city that used to house the Royal Court and its administration but is now a residential district of Huế, the Imperial City within it, and the royal burial complexes nestled in the surrounding foothills. Built during the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945), the complex of monuments is regarded as 'an outstanding demonstration of the power of the vanished Vietnamese feudal empire at its apogee in the early 19th century', and 'an outstanding example of an eastern feudal capital', justifying their inclusion on the World Heritage List. (UNESCO, 1993)

The inscription of Huế's complex of monuments on World Heritage List came at a time when Vietnam's economic reforms combined with the lifting of the United States of America trade embargo in 1994 to create a favorable environment for economic development and tourism in Vietnam. As a new destination, previously out or reach due to the Vietnam war, Vietnam attracted an increasing number of tourists drawn to the country for a number of reasons, including to visit the country's legacy of the well-known war. (Johnson, 2010; Laderman, 2009) Like other modern international tourists, cultural aspects of their total experience are important; they are keen to 'interact with the people of that culture and not simply to have a visual experience of an iconic structure.' (Vu & Fernando, 2007) The international recognition of the city's cultural heritage was expected to raise its profile and attract mass tourism to the city, but by and large these expectations have not been realised.

This chapter examines the attractions that Huế offers to tourists, including the complex of monuments inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List. It provides an outline of the historical significance of the monuments and the friction that arises at the intersection of heritage and history. It notes the impact of the listing on the prominence of Hue as a tourist destination, which in turn helped to restore and revitalise its cultural assets. The general strategy adopted by Hue's tourism authorities is to showcase the monuments to tourists for their aesthetics appeal, and to revive past cultural practices as a representation of Hue identity. The chapter then looks beyond the aesthetics and examines the historical and spiritual significance of the monuments in an attempt to explore ways in which the city's cultural heritage could be more deeply integrated into heritage tourism.

2. Hue as a tourist destination

As a tourist destination, the city of Hue is often praised in literature for the beauty of its natural settings and for being Vietnam's former capital city. It is situated in the Thừa Thiên – Huế province of the central region of Vietnam, in a narrow strip of land hemmed in by the rugged Trường Sơn mountain range to the West and the South. To the north lies the province Quảng Trị, to the south lies the Hải Vân pass 'winding like a dragon coiling itself around the slopes of the interconnecting mountains to provide a link to Quảng Nam province.' (Nguyen, 1992) The author Nguyễn Hữu Thông describes the natural settings of the areas around Huế in the following terms, quoted at length for the evocative style, its beautiful and vivid descriptions as well as its informative content.

The Trường Sơn Mountain range, Huế's point of reference, spreads gently westward and plateaus to form the relatively flat highland of Tahoi in Laos, but the Eastern side drops precipitously with sheer cliffs and steep slopes, forming a wall of richly varied sceneries reminiscent of ink brush paintings, creating a climate that is at once 'difficult' and 'character building'. The Eastern slopes contrive with the gathering rains to form the many streams and rivers cutting through the landscape. [...] Nature has given Huế the gentle, clear water, Hương river. It provides living space for its water-born residents, a meeting point for writers, poets and creative artists, a place for young men to display their strength and skills during festive times, and a sparkling foundation for those wonderful lantern floating nights.

On the northern side of the Huong river lies the Citadel which used to house the most important organs of the Imperial government, but nowadays a mostly residential district. The walled citadel, constructed between 1805 and 1832, formed the frame for everything else. It was located and laid out in accordance with eastern principles, but its construction followed modern concepts of military science according to the design of the famous French military engineer Vauban. The most important part of the Citadel is the Imperial City, and the Forbidden City within it. Originally intended for those directly connected to the royal court and its administration, over the years, large areas inside Citadel have now become residential quarters for a large portion of the population, forming a District of the city of Huế. The Imperial City, however, has remained a non-residential area.

Since its construction, the passage of time has brought wars and much destruction to the Citadel and only a small number of the original buildings are still standing. It suffered tremendous damage on three occasions: in 1885 when the French forces sacked the city by force and razed the city to the ground; in 1946 when the Viet Minh withdrew from the city after taking its control from the abdicating king Bảo Đại and applied scorched earth tactics in their retreat; and most recently in 1968 during the Tet Offensive, when modern heavy weapons were used heavily in an intensive battle to retake the city. With some of its royal palaces and temples restored recently, it is the most commonly visited tourist attraction in Huế. (Laderman, 2009; Johnson, 2010).

Outside the Citadel there are associated monuments of importance. These include the burial complexes of the Nguyễn kings and other buildings related to the spiritual life of the dynasty. All the royal burial complexes are situated in a secluded area west of Huế, because the sun symbolises the king in his life and the setting sun symbolises the passing of the king. Most of these burial complexes were built when the king was still alive, taking many years

to complete, consuming much manpower and resources. The aesthetics of the burial complexes incorporate the topology of the much wider surrounding space. For example, the setting of king Gia Long's (1802-1820) burial complex, although itself sparsely built and austere, 'takes up an area of 2,875 hectares, dotted with forty two mountains standing guard, the focal point of which is the burial site itself.' (Phan, 1995:70) Underpinning the design of the royal burial complexes of Huế is a philosophy that regarded death not as the final end. The layout of the overall landscape consists of two separate areas, one where the king is buried and a larger area where palaces, pavilions, halls, theatres and libraries were built so that the king, when alive, would sometimes spend time there, away from the Royal Court. As a result, the burial complexes of the Nguyễn Kings feel like 'beautiful parks set in a vast expanse of mountains and forests, where the birds sing, the flowers bloom, the creeks burble and the wind whistle through the pines'. (Phan, 1995: 70)

Apart from the public monuments recognised by UNESCO, the material heritage of Hue also includes the pagodas, numerous substantial garden homes, some of which are family worship places, communal houses and smaller places of worship. Altogether they form a widespread network of small and varied architectures that represent a substantial heritage in their totality. In a way they provide the texture and the background upon which the larger structures stand and without which the larger monuments would seem out of place.

3. The listing of the monuments

Apart from providing the visitors with a pleasing visual experience, the complex of monuments, as vestiges of a time past, provide a connection to the history of the place. The inscription of the complex of monuments on the World Heritage List helped highlight that connection and renewed interest in a heritage that had up to then been largely neglected by the state, a politically inconvenient legacy.

It is a legacy of international and national importance, but it is also a legacy that's associated with the Nguyễn dynasty, regarded by the present communist regime as feudalistic and reactionary. In the context of Vietnam's post-war politico-cultural agenda, Huế's association with the Nguyễn dynasty remains the most problematic. Paradoxically, it is the historical circumstances that bequeathed the city its universally recognised cultural heritage that pose difficult issues for its management: the responsibility for the management of its heritage sites, including tourism development, lies within the powers of state instrumentalities of a modern socialist government antagonistic of the nation's feudal past (Long, 2003). In terms of its management, the impact of having such negative historical baggage was real, especially in the period immediately after the end of the Vietnam war. With the nation's attention and energy being focused on post-war immediate needs, the maintenance and preservation of the monuments around Hue, badly damaged during the war, was of secondary importance, as noted by the historian Trần Đức Anh Sơn.

After the nation was reunified (30-April-1975), the nation's history turned a new page but the fate of the heritage of Hue did not immediately improve. With a perspective full of prejudice of a number of people at the time, the complex of monuments of Hue was lumped together with the "feudal reactionary" Nguyen Dynasty, and therefore continued to be neglected, if not to say mistreated. [...] There will be contrary views, but the reality was that political prejudice weighed heavily on the heritage of Hue,

causing people to take inappropriate courses of action with these monuments. (Tran, 2004: 24-25)

Since the decision in 1993 by UNESCO to inscribe them on the World Heritage list, with international assistance, the maintenance and restoration of the monuments around Hué have made some progress. The renewed interest in the cultural heritage value of the monuments of Hue brought about an increase in heritage tourism, with the number of visits to the historical sites of Hue rising from 243 thousand in 1993 to 1.3 million in 2002, to 1.55 million in 2007. In recent years, the number of visitor arrivals has stagnated and the rate of repeat visits remains low. The number of visitor arrivals has recently ceased to be of central importance as a target for tourism development strategies for Hue. Hue's tourism authorities now consider their role to be 'one of supporting the conservation of cultural and nature heritage sites, rather than as a means of attracting tourist arrivals and increasing revenue for the government.' Instead, the goal is to 'restore the sites and the traditional culture associated with them, not only by conserving the tangible remains, but also through the revitalisation of Hue's cultural heritage.' (Bui, 2006)

Since the inscription on World Heritage List, there has been quite a transformation of how the heritage of Hue is presented, a transformation that fit a wider pattern of marketing tourism practices in Vietnam, in which both the history of conflict and colonisation is airbrushed to suit the perceived interest and taste of tourists (Kennedy & Williams, 2001). Funded with international assistance and underpinned by serious research and expertise, the restoration of the monuments has returned some of their former glory and provided a focus for efforts in tourism planning. In turn, the prominence accorded to Hue's heritage has helped revitalise interest not just in the monuments themselves but also in cultural aspects associated with them. A biennial cultural festival, the *Hue Festival*, with exhibitions, performances and re-enactments of old rites, has been held every two years since 2000 to showcase cultural aspects of the heritage of Hué. The development plan for Hué tourism, 2005-2010, aims to achieve conservation and maintenance of its cultural heritage through cultural tourism (Bui, 2006).

This transformation sidesteps historical connections that are awkward and inconvenient. It negotiates around the historical - heritage intersection by focussing on the aesthetics and creativity of the monuments in a process described as de-politicisation of its heritage celebrations (Long, 2003; Johnson, 2009). It doesn't quite amount to an erasure of an inconvenient heritage (Dearborn, 2010), but the net effect is the construction of a narrative that tells a part of the whole story. While there 'cannot be said to be one single correct narrative associated with a heritage attraction' (Suntikul, 2010:203) the current 'official scripting of the Hue Monuments in terms of aesthetics is not simply about reconstructing a past that does not challenge dominant versions of revolutionary history' but Hue's renovation is also 'an important part of recent attempts to define an enduring set of symbolic materials [...] that define the best of Vietnamese national culture,' promoting it as one of the pre-eminent sites for the renewing of arts and culture. (Johnson, 2009:177).

The focus on the arts and culture helps to present Hue's heritage in a readily digestible way to the visitors, offering them an experience wrapped in the physical beauty of the restored monuments, in the colours of festivals, the revived performances and highly visual re-enactments of rituals. However, the emphasis on aesthetics may lead to glossing over some

deeper significance: historical and spiritual aspects of Hue's heritage do not feature in a meaningful way in the official scripting of Hue tourism.

4. Beyond aesthetics: Historical and spiritual aspects

If tourism to Hue is to be developed from the strengths of its cultural heritage, the experience offered to the visitors should be built around what Hue's heritage has to tell, in terms of its historical significance and the cultural beliefs and practices of the time. The monuments of Hué are not simply a reminder of a long gone political system, but one laden with historical significance and spiritual values. They have a story to tell. The stories behind their construction can reveal the historical circumstances, their design reflects the prevailing taste and aesthetic sensibilities, and their usage reflected the customary practices and the belief system of the people at the time.

This chapter now examines in detail one of the most popular tourist destinations of Hue, the burial complex of King Tu Duc (1847 - 1883), whose reign was the longest of all Nguyen kings, in order to tease out its historical and spiritual significance.

The construction of king Tự Đức's burial complex took place at a turbulent time for the nation and an extremely difficult time for the king himself. When he assumed the throne at the age of twenty, Vietnam was at peace with its sovereignty intact. By the time the construction of his burial complex began in 1864 the nation was at war with France and three provinces in the South had already been conceded to the French. Initially planned to take 6 years to complete, with 3000 soldiers and workers on three month rotation, the construction was accelerated to be completed within 3 years. The disaffected workers and soldiers staged a mutiny in 1866 that almost toppled king Tu Duc, being stopped at the last minute inside the Forbidden City by the Imperial Guards. For weapons, many of the mutineers took up the pestles used at the construction site to crush lime, and the mutiny is referred to as the Lime Pestle Rebellion. Thus, despite its tranquil setting and poetic harmony, the monuments were conceived and constructed at a time when Vietnam was under military threats from outside and considerable unrest from within. Despite having to deal with the weighty matters of the state and the grave situation facing the nation, Tự Đức nurtured his love for poetry with great passion. One of his compositions, the *Khiem Cung Ky* - Notes for Khiêm Cung, engraved on a stone stele at his burial complex, is a five thousand word literary essay on his times, with reflections both philosophical and personal, an historical text in its own right.

Aesthetically appealing and certainly the most popular with tourists as well as local visitors, king Tu Duc's burial complex is defined from its surrounds by a walled enclosure occupying some twelve hectares of land. Water from a small creek that flowed through the area was diverted to create a man-made lake with a small islet in the middle. Curved paths meander around the ground, halls and palaces are grouped together without an axis of symmetry. The burial complex contained dozens of buildings, palaces, hall, library, theatre, and living quarters, to provide and support the daily activities and pastimes of the king, his family and his entourage.

For almost ten years, between the completion of the construction and his death, this complex served as a second place of residence for the king, a retreat from the hustle and

bustle of the capital city, and also an alternate place for the Royal court. It would have been here that king Tu Duc held court with his inner circles of mandarins discussing matters of state, met his fellow scholar poets to discuss and compose poetry. In short, here the world of the present life made its presence felt in the space intended for the after life.

After king Tu Duc passed away in 1883, all these structures were maintained and preserved for his worship. His wives and concubines moved their residence here to continue to care for his soul, and this was where they spent the rest of their lives, showing their total loyalty and devotion to the late king. The customs at the time prohibited the king's wives and concubines from remarrying. After his death, if they were childless, as was the case for all of king Tu Duc's wives and concubines, they could not move out of the burial complex to live with their children. The other option would have been to take a Buddhist vow and lead the life of a practicing Buddhist nun inside a temple or a pagoda. In 1994 a nephew of one of king Tu Duc's concubines, recalled with clarity the times of his childhood spent there with his aunt, including an occasion in 1922 when a visiting French woman artist composed a water colour portrait of his aunt. Thus some 39 years after Tu Duc's death, at least one of his former concubines was still living there in the complex. (Ho, 1998)

This intermingling of the activities of the present life in the space intended for the next life is compatible with the belief '*sinh ký tử quy* - in life we entrust, in death we return' - which regards life in this world as ephemeral and impermanent. It underpins the traditional Vietnamese rituals associated with ancestor worship, which on days of special significance, acknowledges the spiritual presence of ancestors in the present world.

In short, the burial complex of King Tu Duc represents much more than just a burial site. Its construction reveals the historical circumstances of the time, its design reflects the personal taste and aesthetic sensibilities of the king, and its usage prior to and after the death of the king reflects the customary practices and the belief system of the people at the time. Therein lies much of the deeper historical and spiritual significance of the site, which at the moment doesn't enjoy a prominent place in the official narratives associated with the sites.

5. Conclusion

It is clear that World Heritage listing has brought material benefits to the city, largely via the conduit of tourism. The impact of listing was two-fold. On the one hand, it stimulated interest in the city's cultural heritage and brought an increase in tourist arrivals. On the other hand, international resources and expertise, made available for the protection and renewal of their cultural asset, have facilitated a transformation in the way the city's cultural heritage is presented for tourists, which in turn, re-positioned Hue's heritage in light of its aesthetics and cultural achievements.

The initial expected increase in mass tourism to the area in the wake of the World Heritage listing has not materialised, which is understandable, given the moderate intrinsic values of the monuments as a modern day tourist destination. The complex of monuments of Hue is of national and international significance, but it is of a moderate scale, its construction relatively recent. It does not have the pulling power, the imposing grandeur, nor the antiquity of mass tourist drawcards such as the Angkor Wat, or the Great Wall. It is situated in a region without a strong industrial or commerce base; its infrastructure ill-equipped to

provide for the needs of the modern day international tourists. In this context, the steps taken by Hue's tourism authorities to lean towards heritage tourism are understandable.

The monuments of Huế are not simply a reminder of a long gone political system, but one laden with historical significance and spiritual values. As such they should be accommodated with a national strategy to manage the memories of the past and to celebrate the nation's heritage within the framework of its history. As shown in the study of the burial complex of king Tu Duc, the historical and spiritual significance of these sites represent a wealth of heritage resources that could be utilised to inform and enrich tourism experience predicated on the cultural heritage of Hue.

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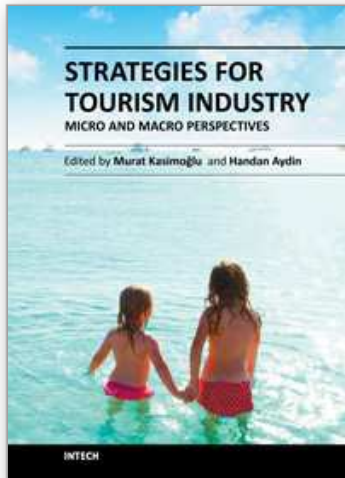
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