

Chapter 15

UNESCO World Heritage Designation: An Opportunity or a Threat to Hoi An Ancient Town (Vietnam)?

Huong T. Bui

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan

Tuan-Anh Le

Southern Cross University, Australia

Chung H. Nguyen

Vietnam National University, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

The chapter analyzes the impacts of World Heritage List designation on the local economy, residents, and environment in the Vietnamese site of Hoi An Ancient Town. Findings from the study raise concerns about managing heritage tourism in developing countries. While Hoi An successfully attracts a large number of tourists and enjoys economic success from tourism, social and environmental sustainability are in question. This case study demonstrates that management of tourism at World Heritage-listed sites is facing challenges of land speculation, inflation, commodification of local culture, and environmental degradation.

INTRODUCTION

In 1986, Vietnam embarked on a process of economic reform under the *doi moi* renovation program, and during the thirty years of implementation of a socialist market economy, tourism has been one of Vietnam's most rapidly growing economic sectors. Within the tourism economy, the ancient city of Hoi An, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the most important tourist destination in the centrally located Quang Nam Province. Hoi An has taken advantage of the increased international profile that accompanies UNESCO World Heritage Lists inscription by capturing external expertise and mobilizing local

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community support to build a well-defined image of a historic city (Brooks, 2008). While the majority of studies present a supportive and positive view of tourism development in Hoi An (Hoi An Center for Monuments Management and Conservation, 2008; Di Giovine, 2009a,b), there are warnings that the town may be moving off the track of sustainable development (Avieli, 2015).

This chapter offers a critical view of the impact of World Heritage Site designation on economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the Hoi An Ancient Town. The chapter starts with a literature review of heritage tourism and UNESCO World Heritage Lists, and then provides background of the ancient town along the timeline of its development. The review encompasses a series of studies conducted by UNESCO, NGOs, scholars, and various stakeholders at the site. A comprehensive analysis of impact of tourism on the living cultural heritage of Hoi An is followed by a discussion of the influence of World Heritage designation on tourism development and town planning of the historic city.

BACKGROUND

Heritage, Heritage Tourism, and UNESCO World Heritage Designation

Recent literature on heritage study focuses on heritage connection to both the present and the future (Graham, Ashworth, & Tunbridge, 2000). Importantly, the modern-day use of heritage involves “a contemporary commodity purposefully created to satisfy contemporary consumption” (Ashworth, 1994, p. 16). Preservation of heritage links the past to the present and the future (Orbasli, 2000) by preserving not only the structure of buildings but also culture (Nyaupane, 2009). Heritage—in both its tangible and intangible aspects—is a critical resource for international tourism (Graham, 2002), particularly for developing countries (Garrod & Fyall, 2000).

Heritage tourism emerges as the most important economic activity in Vietnam (Lask & Herold, 2004). Two cities in central Vietnam—Hue and Hoi An—are examples of cities that have enjoyed both public relations and economic benefits from inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List (Bui & Lee, 2015). However, designation as a World Heritage Site might also present dilemmas to some destinations, as UNESCO emphasizes preservation—essentially “freezing” the heritage in time—dominance of a colonial vision of history, placing universal over local values, and issues of personnel (Avieli, 2015). Capacity to manage the site after designation is also critical, as a top-down approach may centering on tangible aspects while ignoring human aspects and culture. Tourism may introduce major social change, commodify culture, and impose unwarranted modernity (Harrison, 2004).

This chapter highlights the touristic use of cultural heritage as reflected in the experiences of Hoi An Ancient Town. In transitioning from a centrally planned to a market-based economy, the government of Vietnam sees heritage tourism as a powerful economic and diplomatic tool. Consequently, heritage preservation has received a great deal of attention relative to other cultural endeavors (Saltiel, 2014). However, the politicization of heritage property, driven by enormous economic gain from tourism development, often ignores the dark side of designation as a heritage site. Using the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hoi An as a case study, this chapter evaluates the impacts of World Heritage List designation on economic, social, and environmental aspect of the historic town.

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