

## 研究ノート

## Cultural heritage commodification: A case study of the Hue Capital Citadel, Hue city, Vietnam

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## Abstract :

The term ‘heritage’ carries various meanings depending on the context considered. Although no one definition is enough to define the term, it is widely agreed that heritage is a source of social and cultural identity, and can even create a sense of wonderment for those living within the site. Unfortunately, heritage is also subject to commercial exploitation or commodification. The commodification of cultural heritage has become increasingly common due to its economic importance and the desire to share one’s culture with others. However, the commodification of heritage raises concerns of cultural authenticity and the ability of the local government to value heritage without privileging its economic turnover. This paper examines cultural heritage commodification through a case study of the Tu Phuong Vo Su (TPVS) Pavilion located within the Hue Citadel area of the Complex of Hue Monuments UNESCO World Heritage site, Vietnam. This study investigates the commodification of the TPVS Pavilion by analyzing the contents of five news accounts reporting on the topic from the three major online media channels in Vietnam. The news accounts suggest the TPVS Pavilion went through a significant commodification process during its recent tourism development and that the supposed ‘tourist demands for services’ was used by the Hue Monument Conservation Center (HMCC) as a justification for privatizing the cultural heritage space. The local government represented by the HMCC, who is accountable and responsible for maintaining the authenticity and value of the site, should prioritize the social and cultural values for the local residents. The essence of the TPVS Pavilion should be held at a higher importance than the economic benefits that the commodification process encourages.

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### I. Introduction

Merriman (1991) claims that the term ‘heritage’ originates from the “proliferation of the presentation of the past” (p.8) of which meaning alters depending on individual view; while Tunbridge (1999) refers to ‘heritage’ as the contemporary use and interpretation of the past. Two phenomena are observed, which are: (1) the caring and preserving of landscape and culture by the host community with the aim to serve the place identity and sense of belonging of future generations, and (2) the manipulation and exploitation and commodification of the same tangible and intangible property for economic benefits (Tunbridge, 1999). The above two explanation regarding heritage implies that the procedure of choosing certain tangible or intangible parts of the history to be labeled heritage and passed down to the future generations is a subjective process. By appointing some particular items, community members, or events to be heritage, the others are ignored and marginalized. Moreover, the ways of conserving

heritage and rituals attached to it are critically important in strengthening the ‘power’ of such heritage and help to transmit heritage to the next generation. Therefore, setting the rules for heritage conservation is critically important (Marta de la Torre, 2013). In line with the wide spreading of the term heritage, heritage tourism has developed to be a distinguished and popular type of tourism when considering the number of attractions and visitors (Timothy, 2011). He further mentions that hundreds of millions of people are attracted to heritage tourism each year generating considerable job opportunities and economic values.

When considering the tourism industry, Vietnam does make a mark on the achievement list. Within the South East Asia region, Vietnam’s international tourist arrival increase by 26%, ranks first in 2016 (UNWTO, 2017). World Travel and Tourism Council (2018) reports that the travel and tourism industry in 2017 made up a total of 9.4% of Vietnam’s GDS and supported 7.6% of total employment including both

direct and indirect jobs. Among the country, Thua Thien Hue (TTH) province is located on the central coast of Vietnam and is relatively famous for its tourist activities. TTH province was the capital of Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945). TTH province is rich in culture and possesses numerous historic buildings and monuments from the late dynasty. That facilitates heritage tourism development since the 1990s in TTH province and Hue city specifically (Nguyen and Cheung, 2014). Hue City lies in the center of TTH province and is considered the economic and cultural hub of TTH province. Among various heritage sites, this research focuses on the Hue Capital Citadel as a case study since it is deemed to be an essential element of the Complex of Hue Monuments. The Complex of Hue Monuments is one of the three UNESCO World Heritage in TTH province, and; is the first to be inscribed in the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage (in 1993) in Vietnam. Lying inside the Citadel is the TPVS Pavilion. It embodies the wish for peace and harmony of Vietnam during the French colonization (1884-1945) (Phan, 2014). After being heavily damaged by the Vietnam war, the TPVS Pavilion was reconstructed in 2010 and repurposed into a coffee shop in the same year (Phan, 2014). The commercial development was suggested and executed by the Hue Monument Conservation Center (HMCC). The incident took place in 2011 and media coverage reflected in three major online media channels were consistently unfavorable and skeptical over the motives of the HMCC decision.

Captivated by the ambiguity of the term heritage and the flexibility to conserve heritage sites and objects, this short paper aims to exam how the commodification of cultural heritage took place and is managed in the context of the Hue Capital Citadel in Hue city, Vietnam. Precisely, it examines the action of turning the TPVS Pavilion into a coffee shop through the conceptualization of cultural heritage and stakeholder interaction. The discussion presented in this paper is drawn on by reviewing past literature and examining five news accounts released in 2011, the same year the heritage commodification occurred.

## II. Cultural heritage: ideas, concepts, and on-going discussions

Ashworth (1994) describes heritage as “a contemporary commodity” (p.16) that is created to comply with the consumption of the contemporary population specifically. Additionally, heritage refers to the present-day use and interpretation of the past (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1999). Timothy and Boy (2003) report that the meaning of heritage

was broadened over time, moved away from an inheritance (and/or legacy) to any sort of exchange or relationship between generations, and became a broader concept of identity, power as well as economy. This confusion is caused by the complex associations between history, heritage, and culture where some people casually assimilate heritage with history or heritage with culture (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). The two authors conclude that “heritage is not simply the past, but the modern-day use of elements of the past, whether tangible or intangible, cultural or natural, it is part of heritage” (Timothy & Boyd, 2003, p.4). Edson (2014) reports that, in general, heritage is something partially material, human, and spiritual that humans turn into when facing hardship in their lives. Therefore, heritage in this sense is much more than just a custom, idea, or tradition, and the decision to choose what is to be considered heritage should be a reaffirmation or validation of the social identity of an individual, (usually) group, or society. Moreover, Merriman (1991) claims that the meaning of heritage alters depending on the individual view, not the generational perspective based on his observation on two main phenomena, namely: the caring and preserving of landscape and culture by the community in order to serve future generations “sense of identity and belonging” ; and the manipulation and exploitation of the same tangible and intangible property for commercial purposes (p.8).

Marta de la Torre (2013) reports that conservation practices have changed drastically since the 1964 Charter of Venice. She mentions that cultural heritage used to refer to narrowly the specific objects of places that embody historic, cultural, or aesthetic values. But it has now widened into a bigger environment including monuments, gardens, facilities, and the landscape as a whole. Additionally, Marta de la Torre (2013) suggests that since no heritage site would carry the exact value and significance, the conservation approach for each site must be flexible to serve its ultimate purpose of protecting the unique value of each heritage. Nevertheless, “some heritage in the world was of such importance that is was of (the) value of all humanity, and that responsibility for its management was of more than national significance, even if the primary responsibility remained with individual nations” (p.29) as referring to the idea from World Heritage Convention by UNESCO (2013). As for the approaches to conserve heritage, Timothy and Boyd (2003) list four, which are: preservation, restoration, renovation, and regeneration. According to them, any restoration (also known as reconstruction) or renovation attempt needs to be within the limit of returning the property to its previous condition.

According to Timothy and Boyd (2003), there is a wide

“array of heritage attractions” (p.21) around the world that are different in age, size, and significance. They added that the supply of heritage sites could be either widened through recent recognition and discovery; or deepened through the enhancement of conservation rules or existing controversy. Besides, there are as many types of heritage attractions as a human could name, from museums, war heritage, religious heritage, living culture, festivals, industrial heritage, literary heritage.

Aligning with the popularity of the concept of heritage, heritage tourism has developed and flourished over time. Heritage tourism is defined as a phenomenon depending heavily on the motivations and perceptions of tourists rather than on the specific site attributes (Peleggi, 1996). Poria, Butler, and Airey (2001) identify three types of heritage tourists which are: people visiting a site (1) which they considered to be part of their heritage, (2) which they deemed have no connection with their own, and (3) which was labeled as heritage without being aware of this designation. With this, heritage tourism is defined as a subgroup of tourism in which visiting motivations relies on characteristics of the place and perceptions of tourists on their heritage. The above definition faces criticism from Garrod and Fyall (2001), who point out that it is too heavy on demand site and has ignored people or organizations who supply the heritage tourism experience. Similarly, to facilitate a better understanding of the process on which heritage commodification takes place, Ashworth (2000) developed a model in which consumer demand is the primary criteria for resource selection and the interpretation of that resource for certain consumer markets is the main motivation for heritage commodification. Bui and Lee (2015) report that heritage tourism started as a niche field and gradually came to be considered as a “part of the mainstream tourism” (p.189). They also tap on the current issues of tourist consumption of cultural heritage assets claiming that the process of turning heritage into consumable products is challenging not only for policymaker (as heritage managers and presenters) but also for cultural tourists (as heritage experience consumers). Furthermore, they claim that for the particular context of Asia and specifically Vietnam, this issue remains seemingly unexplored (Bui & Lee, 2015).

### III . Case study

#### 1. Hue city, Vietnam

Hue city until today can preserve many tangible and intangible cultural heritage which embodied the mind and soul of Vietnamese people and their values until the present day

(Pham, 2013). There are numerous historic assets, for instance: the Hue Capital Citadel, royal mausoleums, old temples, and pagodas that can potentially generate economic benefits (Hue Monuments Conservation Center, 2010). Hue city is also famous for its nature such as the Perfume river, Tam Giang lagoon, Lang Co beach, Ngu Binh mountain, and Bach Ma national park. In 1993, the complex of Hue monuments was listed as UNESCO World Cultural Heritage, becoming the first UNESCO recognized property of Vietnam (Pham, 2013). Additionally, Vietnamese Court Music, which is preserved in Hue, was inscribed in the UNESCO list of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003 (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, the woodblocks of the Nguyen Dynasty were inscribed in the UNESCO World Document Heritage in 2009 (UNESCO, 2020).

#### 2. The Citadel, Hue, Vietnam

The Citadel is the central and most important element of the Complex of Hue Monument, the earliest UNESCO world heritage of Hue. It consists of the Hue Capital Citadel, the Imperial City, and the Forbidden Citadel which are clustered together and places symmetrically along the longitudinal axis. Additionally, a moat system of around ten kilometers in length surrounding the wall served as a defense system and water transportation. Thus, to enter the Citadel, one must cross a bridge over the moat system. The external wall is called Hue Capital Citadel (Kinh Thanh) with a circumference (the outer boundary) of approximately ten kilometers, six-meter-high and twenty-one-meter-thick (Hue Monuments Conservation Center, 2010; Pham, 2013). The Hue Capital Citadel has a total of ten entrance gates on top of which an observation post or watchtower is placed. The next layer is called the Royal Citadel which has a square shape with 600-meter-long on each side and one meter thick (Hue Monuments Conservation Center, 2010; Pham, 2013). It has four gates, among which Ngo Mon Gate on the South is often seen as the symbol of the Citadel. Most of the important events during the Nguyen Dynasty took place in this location. The internal layer is called the Forbidden Citadel on which normal entry is strongly restricted as it is the area that served the daily activities of the royal family.

Besides, the architecture of the Citadel harmonized both Eastern and Western architectural styles (Hue Monuments Conservation Center, 2010). The traditional Vietnamese architectural principles (geomancer principles) used to explain the location choice proved to be a major driver of the architecture. The other Eastern influences include Oriental philosophy, Chinese principles of Yin and Yang, and five

basic elements of the Earth: earth, metal, wood, water, and fire (Hue Monuments Conservation Center, 2010). Such cultural influences can be seen when entering the Citadel through the placement of objects, mixed-used of different textures such as wood and metal, and the incorporation of small gardens and ponds throughout buildings. The five colors of yellow, white, blue, black, and red were also adopted in decorating the roof, pillars as well as buildings. Besides, the Vauban military architecture brought to Vietnam by the French was also merged into the Citadel and the presence of nine cannons placed at two sides of the Ngo Mon Gate is an example.

### 3. The Tu Phuong Vo Su Pavilion

Within the Citadel lies the TPVS Pavilion. It was first built under Khai Dinh Emperor in 1923 with original purpose as a resting place for the king and royal family members as well as a study place for princes and princesses (Phan, 2014). The TPVS Pavilion is said to carry the message of harmony and a call for peace. Since it was constructed at the time Vietnam was under French colonization, the king was losing military as well as political power over to the colonizers. The TPVS Pavilion is 182 square meters big and has two stories built entirely of bricks and cement using a Western technique (Le, 2018). In 1945, when the last Nguyen Emperor resigned, the TPVS Pavilion was abandoned; and after the severe war in Hue city in 1968, was heavily damaged. No record specifically regarding the TPVS Pavilion is found until 2010 when it was entirely reconstructed to celebrate the 1000th anniversary of Thang Long-Ha Noi (Phan, 2014). However, shortly after that, the entire TPVS Pavilion was turned into a coffee shop. This commercialization of cultural heritage sites is proposed by the HMCC claiming that adding beverage service is part of heritage adaptation strategy implementation (Phuong, 2011). The director of HMCC, Phung Thu, answered in an interview saying that the primary purpose is to provide visitors a rest stop after a long walk inside the Citadel and serving drinks is merely an addition (Phuong, 2011). He also confirmed that the majority of the TPVS Pavilion remained functioning as a museum where historical objects are displayed. Despite the justification given by the head of HMCC, press coverage of the incident is almost consistently negative.

This paper reviews five news posting by the three most reliable and popular online media channels which are *Dantri.vn*, *Vnexpress.net*, and *Tuoitre.vn*. When searching for the keyword of 'TPVS Pavilion' on each channel, the following five news reports are found

The date of publishing, title, and name of the media channel are organized in the table below:

Table 1: Details of news reports posted by three online media channels

	Date of publish	Title
Dantri.vn	23 May 2011	Trillion Vietnam Dongs newly conserved heritage site becomes a coffee shop
	7 June 2011	Adjustments in some beverage bar items in TPVS Pavilion
Vnexpress.net	23 May 2011	Heritage site HCC turns into a coffee shop
Tuoitre.vn	22 May 2011	TPVS Pavilion turns into a coffee shop
	26 May 2011	TPVS Pavilion turns into a coffee shop: Impossible to not commercialize?

## IV . Examining the commodification of the Tu Phuong Vo Su Pavilion

### 1. Through media review on the commodification of the TPVS Pavilion

The HCC is a heritage site, thus, its originality and value are the subjects of conservation. The TPVS Pavilion is a part of the HCC. Since the coffee shop is opened purposefully to attract tourists visiting the Citadel and the TPVS Pavilion, tourism heritage management could be implemented here. However, the reality of its operation was troublesome for some people. Thus, the poor heritage tourism management skill has led to arguments among local Hue people on whether or not the coffee shop could be kept.

In order to view the case from multiple perspectives, the researcher finds it necessary to identify key stakeholders of the incident. Involving in the commodification of the TPVS Pavilion, main stakeholders include (1) tourists, especially those visiting the Citadel; (2) businesses representing by owner(s) of the coffee shop operating in the pavilion; and (3) local tourism management bodies and local government. Each group has an impact on and is impacted by the pavilion turning from being an embodiment of cultural heritage into a coffee shop.

Tourists are the group whose need is used by the official authority to justify the incorporation of the coffee shop in TPVS Pavilion. Phung Thu, the director of HMCC affirmed that

because many visitors complained about the lack of rest stops and drink stalls inside the heritage so that the commodification took place (Phuong, 2011). The same source also reports the opinion of Ngo Hoa, the vice-chairman of Thua Thien Hue provincial people's committee on the issue that allowing the operation of coffees shop would not only be beneficial for tourists but also create a secondary source of income and make the heritage livelier. Regardless of how the heritage managers use visitors as demand for this commodification, tourists might react vastly different about this pavilion-converting-into-coffee-shop. Some might find the coffee shop being a great place to enjoy the scenery and slow lifestyle of Hue city in comparison with the dynamic and busy atmosphere in Ho Chi Minh city or Hanoi while drinking coffee. Some others might see it as an interruption of the 'authentic heritage' experience in the Citadel. Nevertheless, tourists turn out to not be the main customers of the coffee shop in the TPVS Pavilion, but the local Hue residents are. This new set of demands from locals is reported by Loc (2011a), it reflects the incorrect claim made by management bodies before allowing the coffee shop to operate.

Besides, the impact of businesses represented by the coffee shop runner(s) in the TPVS Pavilion is more or less indirect because they are brought to the position by the HMCC and has merely done their intended task. As the Nobel prize winter economist Milton Friedman says, "the business of business is business" and that in a free society, businesses have only one "social responsibility" which is: "to use its resources and engage in activities designated to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud" (1970, p. 6). This is to confirm that any businessman would focus on benefit maximization only.

On the other hand, the local government authority is the one who commodifies the TPVS Pavilion, decides whom to run the coffee shop, and would have ultimately made the decision to end the operation if there had been one. As mentioned earlier, government officials defend their position by saying their decisions are for the best of tourists' satisfaction and if the practice is incurred any problem, it would be the business operation's neglect, and they, the HMCC, would make sure to direct the management properly.

All in all, the dispute is believed to be caused by the under-management of the HMCC over the business operation in the heritage site of the TPVS Pavilion. They can argue that coffee shop brings in economic benefits and contributes to the conservation fund. However, since the information and number remained disclosed to the public, criticisms are unavoidable.

How the coffee shop is run should also be closely managed and monitored by the HMCC to avoid any heritage experience interruption.

## 2. Through the conceptualization of cultural heritage

Applying four approaches listed by Timothy and Boyd (2003) to the case of the TPVS Pavilion, it was heavily damaged after the war and was reconstructed in 2010 claiming that a spiritual meaningful building has been brought back into life (Phan, 2014). However, shortly one year after the reconstruction, it turns into a coffee shop which is difficult to identify any links between the new function of beverage provider with the original function of a study place for princes and princesses. The only connection would be the people could be able to enjoy the scenic view of the HCC from the TPVS Pavilion like the past royal members, but only if they use the coffee shop services. Commodifying a place of such historical and spiritual values is indeed led by tourists' desire in the case of TPVS Pavilion as claimed by Ashworth that commodified resources are selected based on consumer demand (1994) which implies a danger that in the process of commodification, the interpretation of the site become the product due to tourists' inability to distinguish what is authenticity. Gradually, the site which once possessed cultural and spiritual meaning changes its form and function for tourist consumption. Such commodification could also disturb the solemnness and aesthetic of the TPVS Pavilion because of the noise and restless business activities of the coffee shop (Loc, 2011a). Loc (2011b) shows a case of a restaurant opening inside the Citadel resulting in unacceptable behaviors of customers and was closed shortly later.

Examining the case of the TPVS Pavilion from a supply and demand view in cultural heritage (Timothy & Boyd, 2003), it is heavily weighted on the demand side. Looking at the demand for heritage tourism, opportunities brought to the heritage by the existence of tourists are usually the central focus of discussion. The latent demand referring to "the difference between the potential participation in tourism within the population and the current level of participation"; and option demand referring to "the value people place on being able to travel in the distance future" are the two common considered facets of heritage tourism demand (Timothy and Boyd, 2003, p.61). From the viewpoint of demand source, "the realm of tourism" (the tourist promoting visits to heritage attractions), "various levels of government" (the larger public whose wishes are represented by government), and "heritage guardians" (preservation groups or society that help to protect

the heritage resources) are three essential demand drivers (Timothy and Boyd, 2003, p.63). After all, although tourism is a vulnerable industry and demand could be unpredictable, the demand for heritage is less elastic than other general tourism resources according to Timothy and Boyd (2003). Because once being recognized heritage, it would be very rare to find another place in the world to hold the same value of that heritage site. Therefore, the HMCC decision to commercialize the TPVS Pavilion derived largely from the tourists' demand can be judged as insufficient. Because tourists represent only the "realm of tourism" (Timothy & Boyd, 2003, p.63) but not the greater demand group.

As mentioned in the World Heritage Convention by UNESCO (2013), heritage sites especially those were inscribed in the UNESCO list of world heritage should be maintained as much and as long as possible. Despite possessing a value important for humanity, the responsibility to manage and maintain the heritage sites remains within the hosted countries. The TPVS Pavilion is an inseparable part of the HCC which is inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage list. By reconstructing the damaged pavilion, the HMCC complies with the convention's idea of maintaining the physical and architectural condition of the heritage. However, when commercializing the TPVS Pavilion and bringing in a private owner to operate the business within the heritage, the HMCC hands their task of managing and protecting the site over to a third party. While in theory, this process should be considered carefully on how not to interfere with the originality and value of the TPVS Pavilion. Management of the coffee shop should be treated not only from a business perspective but also from a heritage perspective.

## V. Conclusion

Heritage is socially constructed and is valuable only when certain groups, communities, or societies (at that moment) consider it to be so. Additionally, heritage remains meaningful in restoring one's identification, and story; as well as a resource for tourism operation. Heritage tourism does not only provide funds for heritage conservation but also enhances the value and authenticity of the heritage. Nevertheless, despite its economic turnover, the commodification of heritage, if not done properly, could be as controversial as in the demonstrated case of the TPVS Pavilion in the Citadel, Hue city. The TPVS Pavilion located inside the Citadel of Hue once carried the Vietnamese desire for peace and harmony which is a cultural and spiritual symbol of Hue city (Phan, 2014). Thus, issues arose when it was commodified as a rest stop/coffee shop

under the poor management of the HMCC. Being the front management body of the Citadel, the HMCC must realize its role and take appropriate actions. In conclusion, the value and essence of the Citadel as a whole are at a much more significant level than tourist convenience or economic benefits. All stakeholders' views must be incorporated in the management of heritage, which, as history and story, belong to the people who live with the place.

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