

# The Causes and Effects of Cultural Tourism on Relics Sites and Museums in Vietnam

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As Vietnam's economy grows, with social order and security being re-established, the country is opening up to foreigners, encouraging an intense development of its tourism industry. The annual growth rate of tourism in Vietnam (both inland and abroad) is 40%, with the number of foreign tourists rising from 250,000 in 1990 to 1 million in 1994. Facilities for tourism developed at an annual rate of 25%, and at present, there are 2,300 accommodations in the country, with 42,000 rooms (among which 2,200 rooms are for foreign visitors).

The above figures indicate that tourism in Vietnam is not enormous. However, its rapid growth and prospects encounter many difficulties and problems, such as in the management of tourism, particularly in the cases of historical sites, cultural relics, landscapes, and museums. There is as yet no statistic on cultural tourism in Vietnam, due to the absence of a clear distinction between cultural tourists and non-cultural tourists. According

to SEAMEO-SPAFA Regional Center for Archaeology and Fine Arts' Guidelines for Southeast Asia volume 1, P.93 of Unified Cultural Resource Management: "Collectively, the group most interested in cultural properties are known in travel and tourism literature as the Cultural tourist" and from a publication entitled Tourism at Cultural World Heritage Sites: The Manager's Handbook (1993:12) by International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) "Cultural Tourists" are defined as those who "fall into the intellectual and educational category. They express their search for the authentic by seeking immersion in the local culture of their travel destination. Their preference is for what amounts to be the anti-thesis of mass tourism...". Cultural tourists can, therefore, be understood as those who are interested in seeking immersion in local culture.

Apart from interacting with the local culture, experiencing the sights and sounds of places and landscapes, there are visitors who

are only interested in historical and cultural sites as part of their travelling experience in Vietnam. It is, therefore, difficult to make the distinction between cultural tourism and tourism in general. There are three significant events in respect of tourism in Vietnam: 1) Vietnam signed an agreement of co-operation with the European Union (EU); 2) Normalisation of diplomatic relations with the United States; and 3) Membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These developments encourage stability in the country, and are pre-conditions for the country's tourism to prosper while the economy improves, attracting foreign investments in the tourist industry.

Vietnam is endowed with numerous beautiful landscapes, and more than 1,819 historical and cultural relics which are recognised by the State as national heritage. The Hue Monuments and sites, and HaLong Bay have been designated world heritage while many other sites and landscapes

are selected for world heritage status.

With the intensity of tourism in Vietnam come the tendency to commercialise the industry. Concerned conservators and musicologists, who were confronted with this situation, cooperated with the State to issue an inter-ministerial circular letter between the Ministry of Culture and Information, and the General Department of Tourism, to control the process of commercialisation of tourism, specifically tourism at historical/cultural sites, landscapes and museums.

Concern about preservation of historical and cultural sites, and landscapes has increased as the number of tourists in Vietnam, both domestic and foreign, have reached alarming figures. The following are some indications of the problems related to cultural tourism:

- \* The infrastructure is not coping with the traffic use at historical/cultural sites and landscapes, particularly during the festivals and holidays;
- \* Too many visitors cram sites and landscapes during festivals and holidays, subjecting themselves to a number of risks;
- \* Poor service and inadequate facilities such as electricity and water supplies, roads and accommodation, result in the careless disposal of litter and waste that cause environmental pollution.

- \* Roads leading to the sites, and the sites themselves such as commune houses, pagodas, temples, shrines etc., which were built of wood and fragile materials, are deteriorating quickly while the situation of large number of visitors, and dense smoke from burning joss sticks continues uncontrolled.

H u o n g  
Pagoda, for example, has been deluged by c r o w d s during the f e s t i v e season. Litter and waste are disposed onto surrounding hills and into near-by streams, causing serious pollution. There are not enough lodgings near the site

for visitors. Services such as parking, tour guides, shops, etc. are not well organized. This consequently results in the disorderly selling and buying, which are common occurrences at tourist sites in the rural areas.

- \* Investments in the restoration and improvement of sites are less in proportion to the money collected from visitors. Mainly State funds are used in their restoration and improvement.

- \* Driven by profits, many publications and unprofessional guides have been giving inadequate, cursory and even misleading presentations of the sites and landscapes.

- \* The problem of illegal trading and smuggling of antiques out

of the country has risen. Many objects from sites have been stolen.

Even though the development of tourism in general, and cultural tourism in particular, has brought about n e g a t i v e impact on sites and landscapes, there is a positive effect on policy operation as well as on the staff at the

sites. To meet the increasing demands of visitors, particularly those visiting cultural sites, the Vietnamese Government has approved a programme for "Anti-deterioration of Historical/Cultural Sites and Landscapes", through which investments will be put into the conservation and restoration of eighty-three relics of special importance, in the improvement of the infrastructure of the central museum, and in renovation of display systems of these museums. Professional and scientific

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activities will also be promoted.

Some great sites such as Hue, and Hoi An have their own management boards, which are responsible both for the management of the sites in every respect and the organizing of the research and presentation of the sites. The staff, who are in daily contact with visitors, have to make efforts in improving their own professional knowledge and understanding of the site so that they will be able to meet the increasingly high requirements from visitors, primarily cultural visitors, by giving them good presentations without the help of interpreters.

Many handicrafts and traditional objects, as well as traditional dishes, have been recovered. Intangible cultural values such as folk craft, popular literature and arts have been restored and promoted. In the surroundings of the sites, which receive repeated influxes of visitors, there has been a proliferation of hotels and restaurants. Jobs have been created for local residents. Profits gained from tourist services, though small, have been deducted for the restoration and improvement of the site.

The Vietnamese Government has also directed the attention of branches at all levels toward managing the overall development of tourism and other industries in such a way that pollution will be restricted, and gradually eliminated from the sites and landscapes. Projects of restoration and improvement of sites should be carried out actively, and in combination with projects of tourism. The approval

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Organizations, businesses, and individuals have been mobilized to make contribution to the restoration of sites and

landscapes which are visited by numerous tourists. For example, the American Express financed the restoration of the stele stall in the Temple of Literature, and the non-profit organization (Hoi Vo Vi loi) in Belgium financed the restoration of the 14th-Century Pho Minh Monument of Tran Dynasty, in Nam Ha province.

Obviously, sites and landscapes with fewer visitors are seldom financed for their restoration; and there is less publicity on these sites which receive less attention

than those with greater number of visitors.

The Vietnamese Government, and other Governments in the world, have unanimously agreed that the indigenous culture of a nation should be preserved and enhanced. That is why the Vietnamese Government issued Decree No. 14/LCT-HDNN on preservation and exploitation of historical and cultural sites, and landscapes. Instructions and decisions have also been made on minimizing the negative impact of tourism on relics and landscapes, such as the ban on advertisements at the sites.

Efforts have to be made toward harmonising the development of tourism with conservation of the cultural values of the nation. Reconstruction and improvement of the infrastructure at sites and museums are to be carried out. Mobilization has to be made to draw funds and investment capital from many sources, both at home and abroad. Service staff and tourist guides have to be trained on their tasks and responsibilities.

Vietnam is poor; its state budgets are limited, and its people's lives are still difficult. Even though much attention has been given to the preservation of its cultural heritage in the face of the tourism development and other economies, work has only just started. Vietnam should learn from the experiences of the others in the region to improve the management of its own tourism industry.