

The Rise and Fall (?) of Hội An, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Vietnam

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The title of UNESCO “World Heritage Site” is a much desired marker of quality tourism. Yet social scientists rarely discuss the designation’s impact on specific locales, the programme’s effectiveness or its negative effects. Ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the World Heritage Site of Hội An in Vietnam since 1998 permits exploration of the practices, processes and outcomes of achieving World Heritage Site status, as well as of the impact of that status on the lives of local people. The World Heritage project fails in its approach to cultural heritage in less affluent destinations, hardly protects material heritage and possibly contributes to the destruction of the sites that it aims to protect.

Keywords: heritage, UNESCO, World Heritage Sites, Vietnam, Hội An, tourism, cultural destruction.

We had to destroy the town in order to save it.

U.S. military officer explaining to Associated Press correspondent Peter Arnett the destruction of the South Vietnamese town of Ben Tre by American forces following the Tet Offensive of 1968.

Life is so much better today and the town looks so pretty.

Sixty-five-year-old Mrs Nguyễn to author, while cycling in August 2006 through Hội An’s new backpackers’ hub, packed with hotels, shops, restaurants and other tourist services.

In April 1997 I landed at the newly built airport in Lijiang, Yunnan Province, Southwest China. This was my third visit to the town,¹

and I was excited about walking again through the winding, stone-cobbled alleys, crisscrossed by canals of gushing ice-water from the snow-capped Jade Dragon Mountain, and finding myself amongst the Naxi, a local ethnic group whose members live in and around Lijiang and wear colourful costumes, have a unique architecture and cuisine, and are often described in tourist literature as “matriarchal”.

At the airport, a local Han guide, wearing Naxi attire of a blue tunic and pants and a multilayered sheepskin cape in black and white, anxiously informed me that my group would not be able to stay at our pre-booked three-star “Grand Hotel Lijiang”, the best in town at that time. When I inquired about the reason, he said that the UNESCO committee assessing Lijiang’s application for inscription on the World Heritage List (WHL) was in town and that it had taken over all previously booked rooms.

After checking in at our newly designated hotel, a tacky modern building in a dust-swept area on the outskirts of town recently designated for the “development of tourism”, we drove to the old town. When I got off the bus I was dumbstruck. A wide, straight avenue ran right through the alleys and houses at the centre of the town, with straight, wide canals on both sides. Sounds of pounding hammers were heard all around, as hundreds of workers laboured frantically to repair the houses, chiselling stones and painting wooden doors, windows and shutters. Others were sweeping the cobbled streets and collecting debris, while still others were setting potted flowers in iron frames. Beyond the numerous workers, the streets were packed with people, mainly women, wearing Naxi outfits that were visibly brand new. The guide told me that the local authorities had purchased and distributed new attire to many of the Naxi and instructed them to hang out in town during the committee’s visit.

Bewildered by the idea that, in order to convince the UNESCO committee that Lijiang should be preserved, the authorities had opted practically to destroy its centre, which had been intact and alive up to that moment. I asked the guide whether the committee members knew about the big show orchestrated for them. He answered, “I don’t think so. They spend most of the time holding meetings in the

hotel, and are about to go out for a tour this afternoon. That is why the labourers need to work so fast.” When I asked whether he or any of those involved with tourism had approached the committee members and tried to stop this spree of destruction, he responded, “We can’t enter the hotel; we will be stopped. But maybe you, a foreigner, can pretend that you stay in the hotel, and then talk to them.”²²

This experience made me apprehensive about UNESCO, and specifically about the World Heritage project. Thus, when I arrived at the central Vietnamese town of Hôi An in October 1999 to conduct year-long ethnographic research on the local culinary culture for my doctorate in anthropology and found out that the town was about to be nominated as a World Heritage Site, I decided to follow the impact of this title, if it was awarded, on Hôi An and the Hoianese.

In this article, I describe the processes that a locale undergoes when listed as a World Heritage Site and discuss the implications. I start with a short discussion of the literature on the WHL project, stressing the critiques focused on UNESCO’s policies and on the actual implementation of those policies. I proceed with a description of the development of tourism in Hôi An in the context of its listing as a World Heritage Site. I then demonstrate that UNESCO’s conservation guidelines and requirements generate a situation whereby the very same material and sociocultural elements that were to be protected were quickly and powerfully destroyed. This discussion is followed by an account of my own meeting with UNESCO’s officials. I argue that UNESCO representatives are painfully aware of the situation but that a combination of institutional and personal constraints leave them unable or unwilling to interfere in the processes that they have initiated. They therefore do very little to protect the sites over which they have taken responsibility on behalf of humanity. Inclusion on the WHL, I conclude, may prove a “death sentence” for a site, both culturally and materially. The risk is especially great in less-affluent countries like Vietnam, where local stakeholders are too weak to withstand the global flow of attention and capital drawn by the World Heritage Site title.

World Heritage Dilemmas

In the following pages I discuss some of the issues and dilemmas raised by scholars of tourism, heritage and development with regard to the WHL project. I would like to begin, however, with a few words regarding the academic neglect of this issue,³ despite the more than four decades that have passed since the launch of the WHL project⁴ and the increasing number of controversies and debates that its policies and effects have generated.⁵

During the first two decades of its existence, WHL included mainly Western European and North American sites, as well as famous and well-established sites in “developing countries” such as the Pyramids in Egypt, inscribed in 1979; the Taj Mahal in India, inscribed in 1983; and Petra in Jordan, inscribed in 1985 (UNESCO n.d.a). Richer nations are much better at protecting heritage sites and other tourist attractions than poorer countries.⁶ Further, sites such as the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal or Petra have been under tourist pressure for such a long time that inscription as World Heritage Sites may well have a positive impact. As a result, the complications and shortcomings of inscription on the WHL have been either minimal or very difficult to distinguish until recently.

A significant change was made at the eighteenth session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, held in Thailand in 1994, where “it was noted that Europe, historic sites and religious buildings, especially from the Christian tradition, and elitist architecture, were all over-represented in the list ... [while] ‘traditional’ cultures ... were largely absent” (Harrison 2004b, p. 355; cf. Askew 1996). In order to “make the World Heritage List more representative, balanced and credible”, the committee decided that additions would target regions “hitherto poorly represented on the World Heritage List” (Harrison 2004b, p. 355).

The outcome, as Harrison (2004b) shows, was the inscription of sites that were hardly known worldwide at the time of inscription, sites that had not attracted much tourism previously. It is impossible to understand the addition to the WHL of sites such as Levuka in Fiji (Harrison 2004b, p. 348), various Maya sites in Mexico (Evans

2004, p. 317) and Hội An in Vietnam without taking into account local and national authorities' intention to gain for these sites the sort of international recognition that would attract tourism. Sites like these therefore illustrate the impact of WHL status with particular clarity. The academic neglect of the WHL is due at least in part to the fact that the nomination of sites to the list has become more controversial, and the negative impacts of inscription more clearly evident, only in the last ten years or so.

The first serious academic engagement with this issue, Harrison and Hitcock's special issue of *Current Issues in Tourism* on "The Politics of World Heritage" (Harrison and Hitcock 2005), features nineteen articles and commentaries. While they treat a range of locations in countries whose political and sociocultural contexts differ considerably, and address diverse questions and problems, each of these articles deals with one or more of several common dilemmas. Which sites are included on — or excluded from — the WHL? What aspects of these sites are deemed worthy of preservation? And what are the potential and actual consequences of listing on the WHL?

These broad dilemmas point, in turn, to eight problems that seem to plague many World Heritage Sites.

1. World Heritage Sites often focus on the past and tend to ignore the present. Evans's article on Mayan World Heritage Sites in Mexico (Evans 2004) and Winter's essay on Angkor Wat in Cambodia (Winter 2004) show that archaeological sites and their *longue durée* historical narratives are protected and promoted while more recent histories, as well as the descendants of those who built these monuments and their "continuous present", are ideologically and physically ignored and even addressed as nuisances.
2. Similarly, UNESCO's emphasis on "preservation" and "tradition" results in attempts to create static and timeless sites, "frozen in time", as the promotional literature often describes them. But "UNESCO's heritage sites are hardly the unchanging embodiments of tradition they are imagined to be" (Adams 2004, p. 433).

3. The sites tend to impose colonial or ethnocentric “white” visions of history and culture. Good examples would be the listing of the colonial town of Levuka in Fiji, rather than other sites that Fijians deem of historic importance (Harrison 2004*b*, p. 348) and promoting a romantic and orientalist view of Kyrgyzstan as a land of nomads and shepherds, while disregarding cultural elements of potentially greater importance to local people (Thompson 2004, pp. 373–74).
4. World Heritage Sites often prioritize the “universal” over the “local” and the “national” (Lask and Herold 2004, p. 399). This is hardly surprising, as the idea of the WHL is to preserve and protect what is deemed shared human heritage. However, this approach also means that distinctive local and national features that are integral parts of the local sociocultural fabric are ignored and, at times, excised from sites’ official narratives (Thompson 2004, p. 378; Maddern 2004, pp. 306–8; Adams 2004, pp. 433–34). Indeed, heritage sites that promote mainly national identity, as in the case of Singapore (Saunders 2004), are hardly represented in the WHL.⁷
5. The sites tend to centre on tangible features, such as archaeological remains (Evans 2004; Winter 2004; Wall and Black 2004) or architectural structures and buildings (Harrison 2004*b*, p. 351), or on nature spots (van der Aa et al. 2004; Thompson 2004; Shackley 2004; Walters 2004; Williams 2004; Nyiri and Breidenbach 2008). These features and places are easier to define, to delineate, to quantify and thus to preserve and protect. However, more fluid and dynamic aspects of human existence and culture, mainly people and their ways of living, are often ignored. Evans (2004, p. 316) notes that, while “dealing with inert physical and natural resources is uncontroversial ... reconciling community and human concerns is ... more complex, challenging and, ultimately, political: people answer back, ‘heritage’ is often contested ... and consensus may not easily be achieved”. Though UNESCO supports cultural diversity and declares a commitment to

the protection of local cultural fabrics and to promoting culturally sensitive sustainable development (UNESCO 2003), maintaining living culture is extremely complicated and most observers agree that the WHL project is not very successful in this respect.

6. Many WHL projects impose top-down policies (Hitchcock 2004, p. 463; Evans 2004, pp. 325–27; Harrison 2004*b*, p. 359; Wall and Black 2004, p. 439) that often ignore not only local people and their wishes but also, in many cases, the interests and input of such other stakeholders as regional and national authorities, NGOs and other parties (van der Aa et al. 2004, pp. 294–95). Indeed, it is the nation-state, and not UNESCO, that has the mandate to nominate a site to the WHL, but it seems that UNESCO agents often interfere in such processes (Harrison 2004*b*, pp. 356–68; Lask and Herold 2004, pp. 402–3). Thus Harrison (2004*a*, pp. 288–89) points out, “In UNESCO-organized activities, ‘supervision’ by experts can sometimes come to mean domination by experts [I]n many respects, UNESCO sets the agenda.”
7. Tourism is a factor in almost all the submissions for listing, but those who prepare these submissions often seem somewhat ambivalent about the impact of the increasing number of tourists that will result from listing and about the protection of sites after listing. While many submissions show that only some aspects of a site are preserved and protected, there seems to be an agreement that sites, or rather their material and tangible features have a better chance of surviving if they are listed. Moreover, many of the authors of the submissions seem to share Harrison’s stand that, though tourism may “introduce or exacerbate major social change”, commodify culture and impose unwarranted modernity, a romanticized view of the rural life as rustic, idyllic and, hence, worthy of preservation, is often misleading (Harrison 2004*a*, p. 285). Hence, tourism-induced development, progress and modernization often mean a much welcomed rise in the standard and quality of life. Most

researchers thus present tourism as a positive phenomenon with the potential to improve local standards of living. Moreover, Harrison reminds us that, though “indigenous arts and crafts have sometimes been undermined by tourism ... the literature is replete with examples of where tourism has promoted a creative reaction in local people and has been instrumental in reviving arts and crafts that would have otherwise disappeared” (ibid.).

8. Finally, there is the issue of the personal status of UNESCO officials. Harrison (2004*a*, pp. 288–89) points out that “UNESCO employees are part of an international elite, which others are anxious to join”, and suggests that academics and other professionals “have their own interests in working for UNESCO” and that, when working towards UNESCO’s goals, they “might be doing so at considerable benefit to their careers”. Along similar lines, Lask and Herold (2004, p. 399), while arguing for increased local participation in the WHL process, wonder whether an international system “based on the expertise of (an) equally international elite” is capable of understanding and implementing UNESCO’s policies on the ground. They also call for the establishment of “observation stations” (ibid.), that is, local research units to oversee the implementation of the WHL policy,⁸ assess the impact of the policy and advise on future measures. Thus, though UNESCO has regional and country representatives, these authors doubt their ability to monitor the sites that they are supposed to protect.

While I agree with these points, and although many of these issues are relevant to Hôi An, what is missing from this roster of criticisms is an accurate and detailed assessment of the dynamics resulting from inscription on the WHL, of their impact on sites and their inhabitants, and of the role of UNESCO once a nomination to the list has been approved. The remainder of this article focuses on the dynamics of development in Hôi An resulting from its nomination and

on UNESCO representatives' approach to the problems that ensued in the years following Hôi An's listing as a World Heritage Site.

First Impressions

I first visited Hôi An in February 1994 while backpacking in Vietnam. The visit was, as far as I was concerned, a case of love at first sight. As I got off the vintage 1954 Renault truck that made the Da Nang–Hôi An haul, I was struck by the charm and beauty of the “laid back” and relaxed town, which was nothing like the noisy, hectic, crowded Vietnamese cities that I had seen thus far. It was small, it was easy to navigate on foot, and it had little traffic. It also had a rural feeling, with tree-lined streets, sandy alleys and small houses with well-tended gardens.

The old quarter made me feel as if I were Marco Polo, wandering along the narrow stone-cobbled alleys, peering into the beautiful shophouses with their decaying wooden carvings and moth-stained walls, and watching the residents perform their daily chores, such as cooking, cleaning, and selling and producing all kinds of things. The market was brimming with fresh produce and vibrant with shoppers, and the river was dotted with boats loaded with fruit, vegetables and fish.

I vaguely remember a few old temples and a couple of old houses — according to the UNESCO nomination, the town's most important attractions — that allowed visitors in for a small fee, but these were definitely not the highlights of my visit. What I liked most about Hôi An was that it was so full of life. For instance, I remember vividly a middle-aged woman producing and selling white paper flowers for funerals in one of the shops, with her younger next-door neighbour repairing and dealing in second-hand black-and-white televisions. I was amazed to see that life in these old houses was in tune with the world and at the same time very local and unique.

Cycling in the countryside around town I further realized how beautiful, interesting and unique Hôi An was. The small lush river delta was green with rice fields, and the small sandy paths were

shaded by coconut and jackfruit trees. The little houses, painted in pale yellow, blue and green had colourful front yards, planted with vegetables and flowers and surrounded by slender areca and coconut palms. The fields and hamlets were crisscrossed by canals and dotted with ponds where ducks, buffalo and kids swam and where lotuses and water lilies bloomed. When I cycled the five-kilometre asphalt road to the beach for the first time, I thought that this was the most beautiful stretch of road I had ever seen. One afternoon a man with a notebook in which several people warmly recommended his boat tours approached me. He took me to the pottery- and brick-producing village of Cầm Hà upriver and to the shipyards at Cầm Kim, where huge logs were hand-sawn into planks and then manually assembled into fishing boats.

The food, too, was spectacular. On my first evening in town, I walked down the dark quiet streets towards the market and ended up in Cafeteria Lý 22, one of the first hole-in-the-wall eating places catering to the few foreign tourists who ventured there. I ordered “fish in tomato sauce” (*cá sốt cà chua*) and was served a huge slice of the freshest fish that I had ever eaten, seasoned lightly with a sauce made of fresh tomatoes and, as I learned later, fish sauce and accompanied by a steaming bowl of rice and a plate of unfamiliar fragrant herbs. This was, in fact, the moment when I “discovered” Vietnamese food, which later became the main topic of my research.

Tourism had very little presence at the time. There was only one hotel in town. The People’s Committee ran the Hội An Hotel, which according to local people had originally been the mansion of the French official who governed the town and, later, a United States Marines command post. It had several air-conditioned rooms in the main building, a few simple rooms in one of the side buildings and a dormitory, the existence of which was acknowledged by the receptionists only when all the other rooms were taken. The capacity of the hotel was no more than a hundred guests or so, and that capacity very much determined the number of foreign tourists visiting town during this period⁹ — roughly 30,000 visitors per year (cf. Nguyễn Thị Thu Hà 2008, p. 55).

The town's embryonic tourist hub consisted of three or four restaurants strategically located in and around the street leading from the Hội An Hotel to the market, and a single antique shop, set in a well-maintained Chinese shop house. Across the street from the hotel a couple of local tour operators sold air, bus and train tickets and rented bicycles and motorbikes. There were also a few boat owners eager to offer their services for tours, and a few motorbike owners offering *xe ôm* ("hugging wheels", or motorbike taxi) services at the market square.

Obviously, these first impressions were superficial, essentializing and orientalist; they hardly reflected the complex social changes that the country and the town were experiencing at that time. As a backpacker, I knew very little about Vietnam, could not speak its language, had no local friends and stayed in Hội An for only a few days. I recount these memories, however, in order to juxtapose them with the experiences of local people and visitors that I have been documenting ethnographically since 1998.

Tourism Development in Hội An

Since 1994 I have visited Hội An almost on a yearly basis and have helped many friends plan their visits to Vietnam,¹⁰ asking in return for a report of their trips when they returned. In these ways I have been able to monitor the development of tourism in the town — the constant rise in tourist numbers and the establishment of ever more restaurants, shops and businesses offering other services. For example, when I asked my — then future — wife about Hội An upon her return from Vietnam in 1997, she replied, "You mean the town where everyone makes clothes?" This was the first time that I had heard about a phenomenon that had become one of the town's most important features and main tourist attractions or drawbacks. She also told me that she did not sleep in the Hội An Hotel but in another place, indicating that the hotel's monopoly was eroded.

When my wife and I moved to Hội An in October of 1999, I conducted a survey of the then-existing tourist-oriented operations.

There were sixteen hotels and mini-hotels with an estimated total of 200 rooms. A year later, there were twenty-five hotels — three of them huge beach resorts — with a total of some 500–600 rooms.¹¹ According to Nguyễn Thị Thu Hà (2008, p. 48), 195,000 people visited the town in 2000, but the director of the provincial department of tourism told me in the summer of 2001 that the real figure was more than double. According to the Hội An People's Committee chairman, some 400,000 tourists visited Hội An in 2004, and the target number for 2005 was 800,000 visitors.¹² Indeed, in the first four months of 2005, “according to the town's tourism authority, Hội An received 559,500 visitors” (Ngọc Tuấn 2005).¹³

The number of visitors to the town has been rising steadily since the early 1990s. It is also clear that its inscription on the UNESCO WHL in December 1999 has resulted in a dramatic increase in tourist numbers. Indeed, UNESCO's report points out that “[t]here has been a significant increase [in] tourist arrivals since the inscription of Hội An as a World Heritage Site in December 1999. Tourist arrivals jumped by 24 percent in 2000 and by 82 percent in 2001” (Hội An Centre for Monuments Management and Preservation 2008, p. 47).

Obtaining accurate data on the numbers of visitors to Hội An is complicated, as most data rely either on hotel reports¹⁴ or on the number of entrance tickets to the vestiges of the old town sold, which allow visits to five of the twenty-two listed sightseeing spots, which include shop houses, museums, temples, Chinese assembly halls and craft shops.¹⁵ In both cases, the numbers are problematic. Many tourists are only day visitors, and hotel under-reporting for the purpose of tax evasion is common, while many visitors do not purchase tickets or visit other sites. I therefore assume that the actual number of visitors is higher than that reported. In any case, even the reported numbers indicate two important processes. First, the number of visitors has surged dramatically since Hội An's inscription, from 158,000 in 1999 to 1,500,000 in 2011, a rise of some 1,000 per cent in twelve years. Second, in a small district, composed of a town and seven villages, such as Hội An, with an estimated population of some 100,000 people,¹⁶ the figure of 4,000 tourists on average per day is nothing but overwhelming.

A friend who worked at the local tourism bureau told me in 1999 that “some ten per cent of the Hoianese are directly involved in tourism, but one hundred per cent of the economy is affected”.¹⁷ In 2007 I reminded him of this comment, and he responded that “now ninety per cent of the Hoianese are directly involved in tourism, and we have tens of thousands of migrant workers who come to work in town”.¹⁸ He did not take the trouble to mention the fact that the local economy was all about tourism.

The Dynamics of the World Heritage Site and the “Empty Shell” Syndrome

According to UNESCO, the World Heritage Committee inscribed Hội An on the World Heritage List because it met two of the programme’s criteria:

Criterion (ii): Hội An is an outstanding material manifestation of the fusion of cultures over time in an international commercial port.

Criterion (v): Hội An is an exceptionally well-preserved example of a traditional Asian trading port. (UNESCO n.d.a)

A more detailed explanation states,

Hội An is a special example of a traditional trading port in South-East Asia which has been completely and assiduously preserved: it is the only town in Viet Nam that has survived intact in this way. Most of the buildings are in the traditional architectural style of the 19th and 20th centuries. They are aligned along narrow lanes of traditional type. They include many religious buildings, such as pagodas, temples, meeting houses, etc., which relate to the development of a port community. The traditional lifestyle, religion, customs and cooking have been preserved and many festivals still take place annually. (UNESCO n.d.c)

These criteria and this explanation clearly define Hội An as a “place” or a material site. The inscription itself contains a listing of some 1,350 structures — shophouses, temples, congregation halls, dwellings, wells, streets and alleys in the old quarter (*phố cổ*, or “old town”) — which were to be protected and preserved (Hội An Centre for Monuments Management and Preservation 2008,

p. 13). As in the case of other World Heritage Sites, the listing is very specific in describing these structures. It includes detailed architectural sketches and lists of building materials and techniques, as well as clear instructions regarding the practical preservation of the material structures (ibid., pp. 13–18). While the quotation above does mention “traditional lifestyle, religion, customs ... cooking ... and many festivals”, these remain vaguely defined in the listing, and there are no instructions giving them the same emphasis as part of Hôi An’s heritage (ibid., pp. 19–25).

In the early 2000s, right after the inscription, members and inspectors of the People’s Committee of Hôi An were very serious about the implementation of UNESCO’s guidelines for protection and preservation. As these guidelines applied mainly to the structures, it is of little wonder that most official attention and inspections focused on the houses, temples and other structures.

The immediate problem faced by many house owners in the old quarter concerned maintenance. The monsoon-dominated weather and the floods that inundate the quarter annually take their toll on its buildings, which demand constant maintenance, especially of their wooden frameworks and roof beams. This timber, mainly *lim* (hard, termite-resistant, ironwood), is mostly imported from Laos and is thus extremely expensive.¹⁹ In 1999 many of the houses in the quarter were in poor condition because their ethnic Chinese owners had been targeted by anti-Chinese and anti-capitalist policies during the twenty-five years preceding the inscription, and they could hardly afford proper maintenance. The government had also confiscated many buildings in the quarter and deliberately neglected them as remnants of the pre-socialist “feudal” era that the socialist regime was eager to eradicate.²⁰ Last but not least, Hôi An was just emerging from some twenty-five years of economic decay that had followed many decades of war. Only a few owners had the means to maintain their houses according to UNESCO’s guidelines.

When house owners realized that regulations were strict and that complaining, asking for concessions or simply disregarding the new regulations would bring harsh responses and heavy fines, they turned

to making the most urgent repairs clandestinely, mainly during the night, when the inspectors were not around.²¹ This allowed for minor repairs and the improvement of basic amenities such as bathrooms, toilets and kitchens, but not for major maintenance.

Realizing the emerging crisis, as evident in the collapse of the roofs of several structures in the old quarter in 2001 and 2002, the local authorities launched a support scheme, funded by revenues from the sale of tickets mentioned above that allow tourists to visit a number of principal sites for one combined price and by government and international sources. The implementation of the scheme was only partly successful, mainly because funding proved limited and far from sufficient.²² Ideological and personal biases as well as nepotism and corruption also hampered its operation to some extent.

While some of the houses were deteriorating, government policies targeted at promoting tourism, which included more liberal licensing as well as rental of government-owned property confiscated and nationalized after reunification in 1975,²³ led to further pressure on house owners, whose lives the influx of tourists and tourist-oriented businesses affected seriously. The quick establishment of restaurants, souvenir shops, art galleries and clothes shops, and the increasing number of tourists sharply increased the volume of traffic in the old quarter, which became increasingly noisy and polluted.

In 1999 most Hoianese still woke up by daybreak and went to bed shortly after sunset. By eight in the evening, the town was dark and quiet. But the tourists, still mostly backpackers, had a very different schedule. A number of residents of the old town told me that they could not sleep at night because of the noise and the light. There were also complaints about the tourists' behaviour and attire.²⁴

Residents of the old quarter also felt strong pressure to establish their own tourist-oriented businesses or to rent some or all of their property to other businessmen. Those who opted to set up businesses in their own homes had to convert their front rooms, in which the ancestral altars were located and which they used for formal receptions and/or their original trades, into restaurants and shops.

With the exception of the few houses designated as “traditional merchant houses”, included in the combined city ticket as tourist sites and practically turned into small museums, most of the houses facing the street saw their spatial arrangements radically altered as their owners gave precedence to tourist-oriented businesses.

At the same time, those Hoianese who already operated tourist-oriented businesses and had capital to invest were looking for opportunities to expand and upgrade their ventures. With both money and inside information about the condition of the houses and about the financial straits of their owners, they began to make what were in many cases irresistible offers to rent other residents’ houses. They rented the front parts of the buildings, also displacing the owners into the inner parts of their houses, or sometimes took over entire houses. In any case, the very “traditional lifestyle, religion, customs and cooking” to be protected had thus to make room for tourist-oriented businesses in protected buildings.

By late 2000 I learned that house owners in the old quarter were already selling their property, first to better-off Hoianese and later to entrepreneurs from Hanoi. In a conversation with me, one of these outsiders pointed out that the prices of the old houses in Hôi An were practically “a joke” and a great opportunity, as he estimated that Hôi An was only on its first steps towards becoming a major tourist site.²⁵ Though this man was already very well-to-do at that time, his investment in Hôi An helped him create in due course a huge business empire throughout the country, with tailor shops, restaurants and real-estate agencies. In 2002 I was informed that foreign investors, overseas Vietnamese and others were buying property in and around Hôi An.²⁶ These investors faced many complications due to the complex regulations for foreign investment in Vietnam. Yet their interest in the town boosted the confidence of local house owners, officials and businessmen and contributed to further rises in the price of property.

In August 2004 a house owner told me that he was selling his almost 200-year-old family house for a considerable sum. “With the money I will get, I will buy three lots of land in one of the new

neighbourhoods and will build a house for myself and one for each of my children. I will also be able to send both to study abroad.” “Moreover,” he added, “it is impossible to live in the old quarter anymore; it is too noisy and too crowded, and there are too many restrictions.”²⁷ I have heard similar explanations from other house owners and in conversations with friends. This process intensified to the point at which almost all the street-facing houses in the old quarter have been turned into tourist-oriented businesses. I estimate that fewer than twenty per cent of the houses in the old quarter were still used in 2012 for dwelling or non-tourist businesses by those who had owned them in 1999.

The outcome is what I call “the empty shell syndrome”, a situation in which the structures were “kept and maintained”²⁸ but their “content” — that is, the residents of these houses and the “traditional lifestyle, religion, customs and cooking” described in UNESCO’s inscription of Hôi An — were quickly and efficiently displaced.

The Touristification of Hôi An

In late 2004 a professor of tourism studies at an American university who had previously held a high position in the tourism ministry of his European country of origin contacted me.²⁹ He was planning to launch a new research project in Vietnam and wanted to discuss his ideas with me. A postdoctoral fellow in Singapore at the time, I was excited to host for the first time a scholar in what we anthropologists call “my town”.

The professor arrived in Hôi An a couple of days before me, and a day after his arrival he sent me an email message which read roughly as follows:

Hôi An must have changed radically since you have last been here. It is really touristy ... packed with souvenir shops and tourist traps, pestered by commission agents touting clothes shops, kids selling postcards and newspapers, and galleries selling tacky paintings. The food is nothing like what you describe in your dissertation — most restaurants here are tourist traps.

I was shocked and, to be honest, quite offended. I told my wife, “Can you believe this guy? He is saying that *our Hôi An* [that is, the most interesting and most beautiful place in the world] is touristy.”

But the professor’s email made me realize that Hôi An was turning ever more touristy, as tourism acquired a life of its own, radically changing the economy and residents’ lifestyles, modes of consumption and aspirations. By 2004 the old quarter had become overwhelmingly tourist-oriented, full of art galleries and woodcarving workshops, shops selling “traditional” ceramics, antiques and souvenirs. It had merchandise and artisans from all over the country, all often presented as local.³⁰ Tailoring was booming; almost 200 shops — 180 according to UNESCO’s IMPACT report (Hôi An Centre for Monuments Management and Preservation, p. 50) — offered to sew up anything and everything quickly and cheaply.³¹ The quality of the cloth and of the clothes being made was questionable, while the low prices of the late 1990’s were long gone. The owners of these tailor shops had become very rich by international standards.

Shops producing handmade shoes and bags made from leather and artificial silk soon joined the clothes shops. Another invented product was the ubiquitous “Chinese lantern”, handcrafted from synthetic cloth glued over ingenious bamboo mechanisms that collapse into handbag-size packs and are thus easy to carry home. Exemplifying what Nelson Graburn (1967, p. 34) called “airport art”, they were made by dozens of families, who often presented themselves to tourists as descendants of Chinese families who had been making lanterns for the last 200 years. These lanterns, produced in huge numbers, shapes, and colours, were also on sale in other Vietnamese tourist hubs and in craft shops around the world (Carruthers 2004).

In 2004 some seventy restaurants and bars in and around the old quarter competed for the palates and wallets of tourists, offering mostly the standard fare found in tourist-oriented restaurants in Vietnam: noodles, spring-rolls, fried rice, stir-fried vegetables with tofu, seafood, eggs or meat, as well as Western breakfast items such as omelettes and toast “served all day”. Most menus had a section offering “Hôi An Local Specialties”, mainly *cao lầu* noodles, fried

hoành thánh (wontons), white rose dumplings, and fish grilled in banana leaves. I have detailed elsewhere (Avieli 2013, pp. 126–28) the adaptation of these items to the tourist palate, their simplification and even vulgarization, mainly because foreign tourists lacked both the cultural taste necessary to distinguish high-quality Vietnamese food from inferior dishes and the willingness to pay for high-quality meals. In 2012 a local intellectual and close friend told me, “it is impossible to eat good food for a reasonable price in Hội An anymore”.³²

Tourism has transformed the transport system of Hội An in many ways: fishing boats turned into tourist boats, *xích lô* tricycles converted for carrying tourists, the introduction of expensive cars and buses and, since 2006, the establishment of three taxi companies catering mainly to tourists. One could also write much about the pottery produced at Cẩm Hà village, the woodcarvings produced at Cẩm Kim, and the virtual erasure of much of what was formerly on the islet of An Hội, just across a pedestrian bridge from the old quarter, and its reconstruction as a new tourism district. However, I think that the point that I want to make is clear. Within five or six years of its inscription on the WHL, the old quarter of Hội An had been touristified:

1. The “traditional lifestyle, religion, customs and cooking” that were to be protected and that had previously been at least as attractive to tourists as the protected structures, were exposed to unprecedented pressures *as a consequence of the town’s designation as a World Heritage Site* and virtually collapsed.
2. Young, independent and adventurous tourists were quick to notice that the town was becoming exceedingly touristy, became critical of this process, increasingly expressed disappointment and left. However, the more conventional mass tourists gradually replaced these travellers. Thousands of visitors organized in dozens of large groups descending on the town twice a week from cruise liners, to be led to its sites, shops and restaurants.³³

Beyond the Old Town

While only the old quarter is inscribed as a World Heritage Site, the inscription also significantly affected the rest of Hôi An. The area immediately bordering the World Heritage Site, which exhibited many of the features of the inscribed site — including old merchant houses, wells, temples and alleys — attracted similar attention from entrepreneurs and faced similar pressures from touristification. But, since it was not protected, the transformation was much quicker in this area. Increasing traffic and parking limits in the protected area diverted the ever increasing volume of traffic into the streets adjacent to the site and thus also affected this part of the town.³⁴

In order to accommodate the increasing number of tourists, farmland on the margins of town, in the closest such area to the World Heritage Site, was converted in 2000 into a new tourism area. Affluence, rising standards of living, a long-term shortage of housing and pressure to leave the old quarter led to the establishment in 2004 of several large suburbs on farmland further away. By 2010 the urban areas of the town more than doubled. The rice fields, streams and ponds that were part of the setting of a bustling rural town gave way to the sights of contemporary Vietnamese urban-scape. High land prices and urban planning measures led to the emergence of two- and three-storey houses, as well as narrow and elongated concrete buildings with neocolonial façades. Despite construction regulations, house owners went out of their way to build on their entire lots, leaving no space for gardens. They often transform the front gardens required by regulations first into covered areas and later into front rooms, often used for businesses. The outcome is a barren urban-scape, in sharp contrast to the image conveyed in the World Heritage Site listing.

One area on which the problems mentioned here took an especially heavy toll was the road to the beach, which I described earlier as the most beautiful stretch of road I had ever seen at the time that I first visited Hôi An. This road became extremely important in the context of tourism. Before the arrival of tourism, beach land, which

was unsuitable for (rice) farming, was cheap and fishing was — and still is — considered hard, dangerous and unrewarding economically. This meant that the narrow, five-kilometre-long road to the beach was never very important, as opposed to the road to Đà Nẵng, for example. In 1999 it passed through a completely rural area, with tiny farm houses in sandy manicured vegetable gardens surrounded by areca and coconut palms and decorated by flower beds and with occasional rice fields, streams and sandy paths leading deep into the countryside.

In 2000 the local authorities decided to support only what they viewed as quality tourism. I was not allowed to participate in the meeting at which this decision was taken. But one of my informants, as well as a foreign researcher affiliated with UNESCO, recounted the discussions and decisions. In a nutshell, quality tourism meant a shift from backpacker or individual tourism to package tourism. A number that was quoted was “USD200 a day”, though it was not clear what this number included. The main decision regarding development was that new hotels would be allowed only if the investment involved exceeded a million U.S. dollars.³⁵ In that same year, the number of hotels in the town almost doubled, but three of the new hotels were large resorts. Two of these resorts were built on the beach, while two hotels were built by international investment consortiums. The 2000 decision regarding quality tourism practically meant that only outside investors would thereafter build most new hotels, as very few people in Hôi An had the required capital.

As building in the World Heritage Site was not allowed, and as land close to the site was scarce and expensive, investors’ attention shifted to the beach and to the road leading to the beach. Most of the town’s mid-range hotels were built along this road, while the larger, more luxurious hotels emerged on the beach and on the islets across the river from the World Heritage Site. The same process that affected land prices in and around the old quarter affected the area along the beach road, but here there were no protective regulations at all. Urbanizing and commercializing processes “crept” along the road, with rural houses replaced by urban dwellings. Hotels and

shops completely transformed the once rural landscape of fields and streams. In fact, the only stretch of rural scene left is around the lagoon and swamp lands parallel to the beach, where construction is more complicated and will probably take place only when land prices and expected profits justify it.

The authorities were not only silent accomplices in the transformation of this country road into a busy urban road; they took an active part in the process. One decision was made in 2006 to widen the road, which led to the conversion of front gardens into asphalt and sidewalks. As early as 2000 I was told that the authorities discouraged the use of coconut-leaf thatching on street-facing shops and front verandas.³⁶ House owners were therefore obliged to use corrugated iron, which is unsuitable for the local weather, tends to rust quickly and further eroded the rural character of this area.

The beach itself was deeply transformed, too. The sandy beaches and deserted dunes dotted with small fishing hamlets that one encountered in 2000 were virtually gone by 2010. The entire thirty kilometres of coastline all the way to Đà Nẵng to the north was either occupied by resorts or fenced off in anticipation of construction projects. Several half-built and then deserted projects were visible here and there. A huge Hyatt hotel-cum-housing project — reputedly a major real-estate scheme — has appeared near Đà Nẵng, while Le Belhamy Resort, mid-way between Hội An and Đà Nẵng is said to be the most expensive beach resort in Southeast Asia and offers complimentary butler service to guests staying in its suites.³⁷

According to my informants, regulations only allow building at a distance of fifty metres from the shoreline and the retention of the beach itself as a public space. However, quite a few hotels seem to be closer to the shoreline, while most resorts maintain the beach in front of their properties, offer umbrellas and beach loungers, operate cafes and bars, and man them with security personnel that discourage the use of the public space by non-guests. They have thus expropriated much of the beach from local peoples for use in the aforementioned “quality tourism”.

Interviews that I conducted in the summers of 2008 and 2009 with Hoianese employed in these resorts made it clear that, even though

these hotels did employ local people and paid them increasingly higher wages, the senior management was foreign — mainly European, Australian or Japanese — while the junior managers were from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The graduates of the much better schools and universities in those cities had better qualifications than local people, above all, English-language qualifications. Hoianese therefore found work mainly as cleaners, maids, gardeners, guards, kitchen hands and the like, receiving the lowest pay for work in the lowliest positions. “Quality tourism” therefore means that most profit is siphoned out of the town, and out of the country: the profits of international consortia end up in the bank accounts of their non-Vietnamese investors and shareholders, while foreign senior employees deposit their salaries in their private bank accounts in their countries of origin or elsewhere. Although local people do enjoy increased incomes and do not work under conditions as hard as those of farmers and fishermen in other parts of Quảng Nam Province, they receive the lowest wages in the system and hold lower-ranking positions.

In sum, the parts of Hội An that fall outside the World Heritage Site and that specific UNESCO guidelines do not regulate and protect were nevertheless transformed deeply by the influx of tourists that followed the town’s WHL inscription. Along with the increasing affluence and rising cost of living brought about by the huge development of the tourism industry, these areas face difficulties and transformations that profoundly affect the quality of life in Hội An.

Approaching UNESCO

During my stay in Hội An in 2005, it became apparent to me that something very wrong was going on in the town as a consequence of the designation of the old quarter as a World Heritage Site, and that I must do something about it. Let me first explain what was worrying me. At the beginning of the article, I quote Mrs Nguyễn,³⁸ the mother of a friend, saying in August 2006, “Life is so much better today and the town looks so pretty.” We were at a wedding, and I was asked to take her home on one of the family motorbikes. The wedding took place in one of the new suburbs, and on the way

back we rode through Hôi An's new tourism zone, which looked to me like a grey, uninspiring, dull and worn out "backpackers' ghetto" packed with tourist traps of all sorts and very far removed not only from my original memories from 1994 but also from the town in which I had lived during 1999 and 2000. I asked what she thought about this area, expecting her to be as critical and as disapproving as I and to lament a bygone and glorious past that had given way to an unappealing present and uncertain future.

Her response made me reflect on my own assumptions about development and tourism, and discuss the matter with some of my informants who were either engaged with tourism or affected by it. They were often critical about the direction that the town was taking, even though some had played important or central roles in tourism development and the commoditization of local culture.³⁹

These conversations helped me understand the complexity of the situation that local people faced. While they too were worried about the wild pace of development and the gradual destruction of some features of Hôi An that they perceived as central to attracting tourists into town, they also felt, and said, that in many ways life was much better than before. This feeling was not only due to money; it was also rooted in a sense of returning to the glorious days of cosmopolitanism, when Hôi An was the busiest and most important port in Southeast Asia. They also knew much better than I to what extent the local standard of living had risen since the arrival of tourism and, even more so, since the town's designation as a World Heritage Site.

Obviously, these informants were aware of the decrease in the quality of life: the noise and pollution, the stress of modern commerce, the weakening of social relations, the emerging generation gap that upset kinship ties for many families and the fast transformation of the Hoianese way of life. But they pointed out that their real worry was that, if these processes were to continue to evolve along the same sharp gradient, Hôi An would simply cease to be attractive, and tourism would dwindle or change in nature. Hôi An would thus turn into another worn-out Southeast Asian beach resort similar to Pattaya in Thailand.

My first response to what I learned in these conversations was to write, in June of 2005, a text in English which I labelled “Hội An — The First Green City in Vietnam”. In this text I detailed the problems enumerated above and suggested a remedy — turning Hội An into the first green city in Vietnam. I made a long list of suggestions based mainly on existing resources and the fine-tuning of regulations. I also suggested potential collaborators, sponsors and donors, and pointed out the potential benefits of my proposal — mainly the long-term preservation of the town as a multidimensional tourist resort, as opposed to the emergence of a modern and unattractive town with big hotels and a crumbling old core. The document was submitted by a mutual friend to the chairman of the town’s People’s Committee. The chairman asked the mutual friend to thank me but told him that he would not meet me.

A few months later an article appeared in *Vietnam News*, the government English-language daily, which reported that local authorities had declared Hội An the first green city in Vietnam. The article described some measures to be taken in the future that my proposal had suggested. As far as I know, there was no implementation of any of the suggestions beyond the declaration itself. It is important to clarify here that I am not sure whether my text had any impact; perhaps local authorities were thinking along similar lines and perhaps international agencies as well as UNESCO were involved in these initiatives. It is also important to note that over the years some of the measures suggested were implemented, such as the gradual transformation of the old quarter into a pedestrian zone. Moreover, 2010 saw the launch of a joint project between Hội An and Portland State University in the United States to develop Hội An into “the first eco-city in Vietnam” (UN Habitat n.d.).

All of this came later. In 2005, however, my worry that things were going in the wrong direction in Hội An, and that the town was quickly losing its appeal, in addition to the ensuing discussions with friends and entrepreneurs, made me realize that the local regulators as well as individual town dwellers were painfully aware of the situation but felt unable to deal with it. There was too much money involved in further tourism development for anyone to resist the temptation.

Moreover, Vietnamese society had been in a state of chronic anomie since the early 1990s, and in Hôi An, despite the authorities' claims of conservative and careful policies, both socialist ideology and the neo-traditional ideology later promoted by the state were met with cynicism. It was impossible to conceal the greed and profiteering of both entrepreneurs and politicians. I therefore felt that it was up to me to try and do something, as some kind of "reimbursement" for all that the Hoianese had given to me so generously — my professional career and many friends. I also thought that maybe this would be a good time to be braver than I had been in Lijiang ten years earlier, and to consider the well-being of my friends and of Hôi An and not only my own career and personal interests. In June 2005 I therefore emailed the document that I had prepared to advocate making Hôi An a green city to friends from the GIZ (the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, or German Agency for International Cooperation) in Hanoi and asked them to use their contacts to pass it to the UNESCO representative in Hanoi. I was surprised soon thereafter to receive an invitation to the UNESCO office in Hanoi in early August.

My meeting was scheduled at eight in the morning — early by European standards but considered mid-morning in Vietnam. As I arrived at the UNESCO office, located in a beautiful colonial villa in the French quarter of Hanoi, a young Westerner roared into the compound on a Minsk motorbike. Behind him sat a beautiful Vietnamese woman, her shining long hair blowing in the wind. A "Minsk", with its large engine, solid structure and hand-operated gears is a status symbol among male Western expatriates in Vietnam. It suggests rough outdoor adventures, mechanical and driving skills, masculinity and prowess, unlike the automatic, Japanese motorbikes popular among Vietnamese youth. A beautiful Vietnamese girl on the back of one's motorbike is yet another expatriate status-symbol-cum-decoration. Let me clarify here that I am not being chauvinistic or dismissive of a relationship about which I knew nothing. Nor am I critical of Minsk bikes and their riders. My point is that this man possessed two of the principal stereotypical status symbols of

the young Western expatriate in Vietnam, and my feeling was that these were not really appropriate for a UNESCO representative.

I was taken to the UNESCO representative's office, and, when he realized who I was, he said that he wanted all of his colleagues to take part in the meeting. Two Western women and the man who owned the Minsk joined us. The latter was presented to me as being "in charge of the World Heritage Site of Hôi An" and having "been there three or four times" during his two years working for UNESCO Vietnam.

Asked to explain my request to meet the UNESCO representatives, for the next forty-five minutes I explained, in detail and using specific examples as well as quotations from interviews and other findings, the problems that threatened the sustainable development of tourism in Hôi An. I pointed out that I could foresee several possible directions in which things would evolve, some better than others. But I stressed that the people of Hôi An would be the ones paying the highest price for what happened, economically, socially and culturally, while most of the profits — economic and social — would go to outsiders.

I specifically emphasized the fact that UNESCO had failed to define and set regulations for the protection of intangible heritage and that no regulations and requirements had been introduced regarding tangible and intangible heritage beyond the old quarter. At this point, the man on the Minsk said that they realized that they had a problem with the "buffer zone". When I asked him to explain what he meant, he said that this was how UNESCO defined the areas surrounding a World Heritage Site. He added, "But after all, there are only 4,000 people living in the buffer zone." When I argued that what he called "the buffer zone" was most of Hôi An, with an official population of 25,000, but one that in reality probably exceeded 50,000, he said that he had to check those details.

When I concluded, the UNESCO representative thanked me for preparing my document and for informing them about the situation. He then added, "Of course, we already know about these problems." I was surprised and asked why they did not do anything, and he

explained how things worked. UNESCO has many carrots but hardly any sticks. It is strongest during the process of evaluation, when it can decide whether or not to grant World Heritage status to a site and on what conditions. It is at that point that local and national authorities do their utmost to please the committee conducting the assessment, adhere to UNESCO guidelines and adopt UNESCO's language of preservation and sustainable development. But, as soon as the inscription is made, things become much more complicated.

You see, as we do not give any money for preservation or development, we have very little power in decision-making when it comes to running the sites. Our only way of dealing with World Heritage Sites that are not handled properly [that is, according to UNESCO guidelines and regulations], is to move them to the list of Endangered World Heritage Sites, or to remove them from the list completely. But this would create a huge diplomatic crisis between the government of Vietnam and UNESCO, and it is practically impossible to do.⁴⁰

We were all silent when he concluded. I asked again, "So what can be done?" He answered, "Well, there is a way. We, as UNESCO, can't do anything with your report. But if you're willing to submit your report officially, we could pass it to the Vietnamese authorities and ask for a response. I believe that this might have an impact." I asked what would happen to me, and he replied, "I don't think you'll be able to come to Vietnam again". I said, "I just want to make it clear; you are asking me to do your job and pay the price of being banned from a place which I love and which stands at the centre of my academic career?" He did not respond.

Conclusion

During my last stay in Hội An, in April 2013, it was clear that the town was a very popular destination. Friends who pointed out that the number of tourists visiting the town in 2013 was expected to reach two million, perceived my doomsday prophecies of tourists going elsewhere as farfetched. What I saw, however, was the intensification of the processes described in this article. One evening I made an

appointment to meet a friend in the old quarter. We walked down the packed pedestrian streets, softly illuminated by hundreds of colourful Chinese lamps. There were thousands of tourists walking around and soft Western classical music coming from hidden speakers. My friend looked around her and said, “There is not a single Hoianese in the streets.” We scanned the crowds more intently, and she added, “Except for the vendors and waiters....”⁴¹

Let me return to Mrs Nguyễn, who was clearly supportive of the changes resulting from the listing of Hội An as a World Heritage Site. She was not the only Hoianese enthusiastic about tourism and the affluence and social change that had come with the inscription of the town on the WHL. In another conversation, a friend responded angrily to my worries over the way in which things were evolving by pointing out that most Hoianese would rather sit on clean toilets inside their houses rather than squat over the “hole in the ground” toilets of the old quarter.⁴²

This article is not the romantic lament of a white tourist saddened by the disappearance of the old and authentic, destroyed by modernity and the greed of “locals”, too stupid and selfish to realize that they themselves have destroyed their blissful paradise. Nor is it a critique of development or of tourism. In fact, I have witnessed an incredible rise in the standard of living in Hội An and I think that life in the town has never been better for the common people, at least economically. The *anomie* and social difficulties faced by town dwellers are hardly unique to Hội An or to Vietnam, and I am not accusing UNESCO of causing the collapse of traditional social systems, let alone of being responsible for the generation gap, technological maladies or the introduction of neo-liberal ideology. These processes are apparent in different measures throughout Vietnam, Southeast Asia and elsewhere, and I believe that the relatively affluent Hoianese are probably better equipped to deal with the maladies of modernity than their compatriots in neighbouring districts. Hội An and its (constructed) history and culture, as well as its economic success, are acknowledged and respected throughout Vietnam, making the Hoianese confident and optimistic.

Most importantly, this is not a critique of the local people of Hôi An. Property owners, business entrepreneurs, government officials or Vietnamese from other towns, even when they develop all kinds of ways to circumvent UNESCO's well-meaning plans, guidelines and instructions, are economically, politically and socially too weak to handle the mounting pressures associated with the listing. One can hardly hold them responsible for the shortcomings in its implementation. Even when they resort to illegal actions, nepotism and corruption, this conduct is mainly a consequence of the situation in which they are entangled.

I do, however, aim to question the long-term effects and effectiveness of UNESCO's WHL project and to argue that the debates over historical narratives that define preservation guidelines, important as they may be, address only part of the cultural features that should be protected and preserved. My data suggest that UNESCO should make the decision to list sites that are not on the map of global tourism and that are located in "developing" countries — and as a consequence, extremely vulnerable to mass tourism — more carefully. It should acknowledge the economic weakness of local stakeholders, citizens and authorities and address this structural weakness, not as a local malady that explains failure, but as a given situation that should be understood and managed carefully. Local stakeholders are simply too weak to handle mass tourism effectively, and the democratic and empowering discourse of development agencies and UNESCO seems too often to be a way of blaming them for the problems that result from poor planning and advice.

The concept of "the buffer zone" is symptomatic of the problem at hand. This technical term disguises the fact that, in most of the dozens of heritage sites I have visited, "the buffer zone" proved anything but a buffer. Just as in Hôi An, designated World Heritage Sites, natural or cultural, do not have clear-cut edges that separate them from the rest of their spatial contexts. Rather, the nature reserves, monuments, artefacts or practices at hand are parts of complex and dynamic social, spatial and temporal entities. In many

cases the “buffer zone” is actually where local people live, work and play, and this definition of that space serves to negate their very social and cultural world. The mistake would be to perpetuate this piecemeal approach to heritage, and ignore the organic embeddedness of heritage sites and their “buffers”.

Finally, this article addresses issues of personal integrity for both ethnographers and UNESCO officials. I cannot say that I am very proud of the way I handled my relations with UNESCO. I can excuse myself in the case of Lijiang — I was merely a tourist. I can also argue that I did my best in Hôi An, practically risking my own relations with the authorities. I can even argue that if I had sent the report officially and agreed to let UNESCO use it to confront the authorities, it would have made no difference and that I would have gotten into trouble for nothing. This might have been the case. However, I do not feel that I deserve a medal for what I have done to help my friends in Hôi An and contribute to a more stable future.

When it comes to UNESCO personnel, I invite readers to draw their own conclusions. The UNESCO report published in 2008 (Hôi An Center for Monument Management and Preservation 2008) acknowledged many of the points discussed in this article, pointed to some actions taken and described plans for future solutions. But the text was generally positive. It conveys no sense of urgency. Hôi An today is a very ripe pineapple, on the verge of becoming overripe. For outsiders it looks juicy, sweet and fragrant, but those who know pineapples see the cracks in the skin and smell the first odours of rot. One solution is immediate consumption while avoiding the rotten parts. Another is slicing the fruit up and drying it in the sun as a preserve. But the future well-being of the Hoianese calls for immediate refrigeration, if we want to keep their town juicy and sweet.

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NOTES

1. I first visited Lijiang in 1994 while backpacking in China, and returned in 1996 as a tour leader working for an Israeli tour operator. My third visit in 1997 was, again, as a tour leader.
2. Field notes, Lijiang, April 1997. The right thing to do was probably just what the guide advised — approach the committee members and tell them what was going on. But I did not do this. I doubted my ability to reach them and, more so, to convince them that they were being misled. Moreover, I did not dare challenge the Chinese authorities. Thus, I resolved my cognitive dissonance by stressing my commitment to my clients and not taking action. This article is an attempt to rectify my decision and point to the destructive process that is taking place in Hôi An, where my commitment is clear. It should be noted, however, that my experience with UNESCO representatives in Vietnam, recounted later in this article, suggests that approaching the committee members in Lijiang would probably have failed to affect their decision.
3. In his analysis of the debate over the conservation and meaning of the cultural heritage of Rethemnos, Crete, Michael Herzfeld (1991) identified many of the issues and processes discussed in this article. Yet, as Rethemnos is not a World Heritage Site, Herzfeld did not address UNESCO's role in these processes. Herzfeld elaborates his own critique of UNESCO in an interview conducted by Denis Byrne (2011).
4. In the "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" (UNESCO n.d.b).
5. A basic Google search of "UNESCO World Heritage" results in some five million entries, while adding the terms "critique", "debate" or "controversy" results in hundreds of thousands of entries. I have sampled just a few dozen, but these are mostly websites or news articles addressing problems and shortcomings related to the WHL. However, it was only in 2004 that the first special volume dedicated to "The Politics of World Heritage" (Harrison and Hitchcock 2005) was compiled, making for the first broad and systematic attempt to address the complications, dilemmas and shortcomings of this project.
6. See, for example, van der Aa et al. (2004, p. 299), on the preservation of Cambridge, England.
7. While the case of Singapore is complicated by the heavy hand of its government in harnessing and shaping heritage, the question remains whether the national aspects of a site should give way, as it were, to universal ones. Obviously, it would be hard to impose such interpretations on powerful, rich countries, which are less dependent on UNESCO. See

- Williams (2004) for a discussion of American unwillingness fully to accept UNESCO's guidelines even when sites such as Yellowstone Park were placed on the "List of World Heritage in Danger".
8. It is not clear who would man these monitoring units — local people, foreigners or both — and who would sponsor them — UNESCO or local authorities. But it seems that such institutions may face difficulties unforeseen by the authors, such as political pressure, personal agendas and corruption. Nevertheless, I can see the clear potential benefits of such monitoring units and strongly support the idea.
 9. According to my Hoianese friends, there were a couple of guesthouses catering to Vietnamese clients, but these were mostly officials and business people. Domestic tourism was just taking its first steps, and Hội An was certainly not a destination for local people at that time.
 10. I began working as a tour leader for a leading Israeli tour operator in 1992 and was involved in developing Israeli tourism to Vietnam.
 11. Field notes, Hội An, June 2000.
 12. This was recounted to me by a friend in August 2004.
 13. Nguyễn Thị Thu Hà (2008, p. 58) quotes the following numbers: 1999 — 158,000 visitors; 2000 — 195,000; 2001 — 360,000; 2002 — 440,000; 2003 — 465,000; 2004 — 600,000; 2005 — 650,000; 2006 — 880,000; 2007 — 1,030,000. *Vietnam News* reported that, in 2011, "over 1.5 million tourists visit[ed the town] ... an estimated rise of 18.3% compared to the same period last year... Figures further indicate that among these 1.5 million travelers, only about 650,000 visitors stayed overnight ... [H]alf of these travelers, approximately 750,000 tourists, are international travelers coming from different countries in Asia, Europe and America" (Vietnam Travel and Living Guide n.d.)
 14. Hotels must register their guests with the police every day.
 15. See Hoian-tourism.com (2014).
 16. Interview with Hội An city official, July 2007. The total population of Hội An District in 2000 was 80,000 people, 20,000 of whom were registered as town dwellers. In 2007, following administrative reorganization aimed at elevating Hội An's administrative status from a town (*thị xã*) to a city (*thành phố*), the number of urban dwellers rose to 60,000, while 25,000 were defined as countryside dwellers, though practically no one had moved. The number of unregistered labour migrants from other provinces was unofficially estimated to be 10,000 to 20,000.
 17. Field notes, Hội An, December 1999.
 18. Field notes, Hội An, August 2007.
 19. Field notes, Hội An, August 2004.

20. Field notes, Hôi An, July 2000.
21. Field notes, Hôi An, July 2000, December 2001, August 2004.
22. Field notes, Hôi An, August 2004.
23. Field notes, Hôi An, November 1999.
24. Field notes, Hôi An, July 2000.
25. Field notes, Hôi An, July 2000.
26. Field notes, Hôi An, August 2004.
27. Field notes, Hôi An, August 2004.
28. In many cases this means completely dismantling the old structure and building a new one, presumably according to the original plan. It should be noted that it is very common in Southeast Asia constantly to reconstruct and renovate private, public and religious structures, so that a “200-year-old temple” might not have a single nail, doorframe or roof tile that is older than fifty years, while the original architectural style is gradually replaced by emerging new styles. This is an important topic, which I shall not discuss in this article but which is studied in the case of Luang Phrabang, Laos, by Lior Bear, my doctoral student. What is important, however, is that in such cases I could easily observe the changes that had been made to the building in order to accommodate tourist-oriented businesses.
29. I refrain from using his name as his research is ongoing and conducted without official permission.
30. Field notes, Hôi An, August 2004.
31. The first tourist-oriented clothes shop in Hôi An was opened in the early 1990s. In 1995 the town was already known among backpackers as “the place where you make clothes”. In 1999 there were close to a hundred shops. In 2007 I was given any number between 400 and 800 shops. This industry has an overwhelming presence and impact.
32. Interview, Hôi An, August 2012.
33. Field notes, Hôi An, August 2012.
34. Field notes, Hôi An, July 2008.
35. Field notes, Hôi An, April 2000.
36. Through the years I repeatedly asked why the coconut-palm thatch was forbidden, and the answers were never very clear. But it was suggested that such roofing does not look modern enough.
37. Field notes, Hôi An, August 2012.
38. Pseudonym, conversation, Hôi An, August 2006.
39. Also see Erik Harms’s discussion of ambivalent responses to urban “beautification” in Ho Chi Minh City (Harms 2012, pp. 742–44).
40. Field notes, Hanoi, August 2005.

41. Field notes, Hội An, April 2013.
42. Field notes, Hội An, January 2010.

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