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# “Real Culture” Preservation, Authenticity, and Change in Hoi An’s Heritage Tourism Industry

Ursula James  
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# **“Real Culture”**

## **Preservation, Authenticity, and Change in Hoi An’s Heritage Tourism Industry**



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**Viet Nam: National Development and Globalization, Spring 2010**

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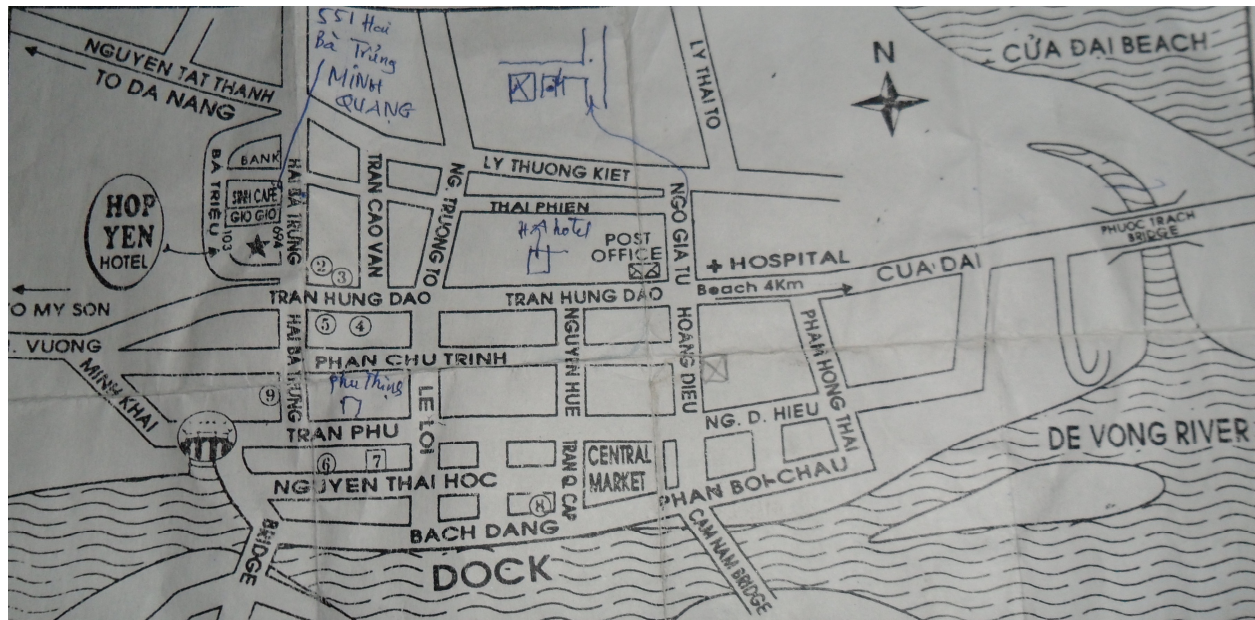
## **Abstract**

Following the achievement of World Heritage site status in 1999, Hoi An shifted from a primarily agricultural economy to a primarily tourism-oriented economy. This economy is based on the idea of heritage tourism, focused mostly on preserved tangible heritage but increasingly accompanied by attempts to preserve and capitalize on intangible heritage. As the heritage tourism industry grows, the city of Hoi An must make constant decisions as to the nature and goals of the ideas of preservation and authenticity and their interplay with economics and the forces of globalization. The city has consequently had to balance the many conflicting demands of these ideals, which leads to conundrums for officials, as well as challenges and even crises for local people. The sustainability of the heritage tourism industry depends on the city's ability to carefully perform this balancing act.

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## Figures



Map of Hoi An Ancient Town heritage site

## Introduction

Following the period of *doi moi*, which brought vast reforms to the Vietnamese economy, the tourism industry began to see growth. It began as a trickle in the early 1990s and has blossomed into an industry that earned \$3.5 billion dollars in the first nine months of 2009 alone (Vietnam's Sustainable Tourism: Plan and Reality 2009 Presentation). With this growing stream of tourists, Vietnamese officials have worked to overhaul and improve infrastructure such as accommodations, electricity, water supply, telecommunications, transportation, and security, and provide training in the service industry (Interview with Nguyen Duc Tri, April 8, 2010).

At the same time, officials have had to juggle the concerns of providing for sustainability in development, and the tourism industry is no exception. Beyond the environmental awareness that is often associated with the word sustainability, in the case of tourism, the human component of this economic activity is as delicate and important a subject as the land. The idea of sustainable development, as stated in a definition by Drakakis and Kilgore (2001), includes:

*equity in the distribution of the benefits of economic growth, access to adequate basic human needs, social justice and human rights, environmental awareness and integrity, and an awareness of linkages and representations of change over space and time.*

Sustainable tourism is thus a comprehensive concept of balancing economic needs and desires with equity, awareness, and integrity in regard to human concerns.

As a developing nation, Viet Nam has a particularly large capacity for the subcategory of heritage tourism, the fastest growing international sector of tourism (UNESCO website). The idea of heritage tourism is tourism based on viewing and experiencing the history and culture of

a location. There are a number of government projects throughout Viet Nam that are aimed at promoting such heritage tourism. Regions such as Sa Pa in the north have large ethnic groups whom the government seeks to, as Dr. Tri, a professor of tourism at the Ho Chi Minh School of Economics put it, “protect” so that the groups will no longer have the “burden of economics” and can “have an easy life” (Interview with Nguyen Duc Tri, April 8, 2010). The premise of these projects is for people, particularly those from ethnic groups in often remote places, to maintain, and in some cases revitalize, their traditional lifestyles while increasing their income by allowing tourists to “experience” their daily life and cultural traditions.

In the case of Hoi An, a city in Central Viet Nam with an economy almost entirely based on tourism, the local heritage tourism industry began along a similar premise but with more local management. As a UNESCO World Heritage site, this formerly poverty-stricken town has become a sort of heritage tourism Mecca. It is now a town with plentiful jobs and heavy investment in infrastructure.

Importantly, the local government, and to a certain extent the local people, are also devoted to both the idea of historical and cultural preservation and to creating an atmosphere of impeccable hospitality, catering to a high-end tourist market. These ideas are at times in direct conflict with each other, a fact with which Hoi Anians continually grapple. Hoi An is thus an example of the way in which heritage tourism development means constantly balancing many conflicting demands, namely the ideas of preservation and authenticity with the influences of globalization and other economic forces. The following analysis will seek first to explore the ideas of preservation and authenticity in the setting of Hoi An and how they interplay with the economics of heritage tourism. It will also examine challenges involved in this tourism model

and possible solutions to maintain a tourism industry that is sustainable both economically and from a human perspective.

## **Methodology**

I spent four weeks, between April and May, in the city of Hoi An studying the impacts of the tourism industry on the carefully cultivated idea of preservation, and, broadly, the cultural sustainability of heritage-based tourism in Hoi An. This study was ethnographic in nature. The primary methods used were participant observation and interviews. Participant observation included a period with a homestay family, time spent with a group of tailors and seamstresses, several guided group tours, time on the beach and in hotels, among other participation in the daily activities of both local people and tourists. Interview styles included casual conversation, email questionnaires, and semi-structured un-tape recorded interviews. Interviews were carried out almost exclusively without a translator, as most informants spoke intermediate to fluent English. In this analysis, names will be changed for anonymity and to protect the identity of informants.

## **History of Hoi An**

Throughout its history, the city of Hoi An has been a place where many forces converge. Situated on the coast of Central Viet Nam, it is a place between the North and the South, as well as between land and the ocean as a former key trading port, which is reflected in its accents, food, customs, and politics. It is a place that has seen the presence of the Cham people, Dai Viet

people, Chinese and Japanese settlers, and occupation by the French, Americans, and Vietnamese resistance forces, as well as many traders and visitors from the West. Today, with an economy based heavily on tourism, it is a place where people from dozens of nations can be seen every day.

Of particular importance to the development of the tourism industry was the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the fifteenth century, the Dai Viet or Vietnamese ethnic group, settled in Hoi An and began farming. Over time, they began to specialize in certain handicrafts, such as woodcarving and ceramics, which led to inter-village trading and eventually the development of international trade. Due to its proximity to a deep water harbor, Chinese and Japanese traders began to frequent the city, which became known as Faifo. The town was divided into Chinese and Japanese sections, divided by the symbolic Japanese bridge, which can still be visited today. Europeans began to follow these Asian traders, opening the door as well to Catholic missionaries. Though political and geographic changes lessened the importance of the port in the eighteenth century, Chinese and Japanese traders continued to come, and sailors would often wait out the typhoon season in town, which eventually led to much inter-marrying with Vietnamese women. The next two centuries were dominated by Viet Nam's wars for independence and civil war, in all of which Hoi An played key roles (Impact 2008).

Following the Viet Nam-American war and prior to 1990, in the midst of *doi moi*, Hoi An was severely impoverished. The town's primary economic activities were agriculture and fishing, as well as handicraft production and retail (Hoi An Tourism presentation 2010). The first spark for the heritage industry in Hoi An came in 1982, when Kazimierz Kwiatkowski, a Polish

historian, urged the Ha Noi government to make efforts toward preservation. In 1985, Hoi An became a national heritage site (Interview with Minh<sup>ii</sup>, April 28, 2010).

In 1990, as Viet Nam made market reforms and opened up to the world, a trickle of tourists began making its way to Hoi An. As its historical structures were still largely intact despite decades of war, and with a pristine beach just four kilometers from the center of town, the tourism industry in Hoi An was born. At the time, the town had only one hotel with eight rooms (Interview with Minh, April 28, 2010). The number of tourists slowly increased, with accommodations following suit. By 1995, there were eight hotels with 100 rooms total. Tourists began to be turned away for lack of room, or they had to sleep outside (Interview with Minh, April 28, 2010).

Around this time, in the mid-1990s, a Vietnamese government task force began scouting sites throughout Viet Nam to nominate for UNESCO World Heritage status. There had been several international conferences concerning preservation in Hoi An, and with its ancient buildings and historical importance, it was selected for nomination. Throughout the 1990s, Hoi An local officials, with the help of an international task force, submitted a number of applications and worked to expand their infrastructure. For example, in 1997, the provincial and local governments began to use state funds as well as foreign investors' money and technical aid to restore historical buildings (Interview with Minh, April 28, 2010 and Impact 2008).

Hoi An was listed as a world cultural heritage site on December 4, 1999 on the grounds of being “an outstanding material manifestation of the fusion of cultures over time in an international commercial port” and “an exceptionally well preserved example of a traditional

Asian trading port” (Impact 2008). The year 1999 has since become known as a turning point in Hoi An history. Many locals and officials will refer to this year as the time when their livelihoods and economy altered drastically. Development has thus taken place primarily in the last ten years, and this analysis will mainly deal with that time frame.

Since 1999, the number of tourists coming to Hoi An has continued to grow every year, nearly exponentially beginning in 2003, eventually topping one million visitors in 2007. The last five years have seen an average yearly increase of tourists of 19% (Hoi An Tourism Development presentation 2010). Simultaneously, thousands of jobs have been created for local people and the economy has shifted dramatically toward the hospitality industry. Hoi An is now marked by a rather robust economy and is a leading example of the Vietnamese tourism industry.

### **The Shift to a Heritage Tourism Economy**

As a result of attaining World Heritage status and the subsequent massive influx of tourists, Hoi An’s economy underwent an extensive restructuring beginning in 1999. A formerly agriculture-heavy economy, it is now 90% comprised of tourism related industries, both direct and indirect (Interview with Minh, April 28, 2010). Many people left their fields and began to take jobs in town at the many hotels and restaurants or set up souvenir and tailoring shops. As a World Heritage site, Hoi An’s tourism revolves around the idea of heritage tourism—capitalizing on what is referred to as the tangible and intangible heritage of the community.

Tangible heritage includes the many ancient buildings and structures of the Ancient Town or “Old Town” and over 1000 ancient artifacts on display. The buildings in particular are the primary focus of Hoi An’s preservation efforts. Old Town is the core tourism zone, comprised of a grid of several long streets. Each street features five types of carefully restored seventeenth century houses featuring a mix of Chinese, Japanese, traditional Vietnamese, and French culture.

Intangible heritage is the “livelihood and lifestyle” of a culture (Impact 2008). This category includes performance and artwork, food, handicrafts, occupations, beliefs, spirituality, and general demeanor of the people. At the time of its instatement as a heritage site, many aspects of Hoi An culture that had featured prominently in the everyday life of Hoi Anians several centuries previous were no longer widespread (Impact 2008 and Conversations with Minh). Inspired by their push toward restoration of built heritage, Hoi An officials decided to also revive these defunct traditions to both comply with the UNESCO spirit of “protecting” customs against change, and possibly more importantly, to complement and enhance the appeal of the built heritage as a tourist attraction. Many businesses and museums were created to capitalize on this portion of the heritage industry. Much of the following analysis will focus on this intangible heritage.

With this economic shift to heritage tourism, the job market was greatly expanded. In order to facilitate the drastic economic shift from a small-scale agrarian focus to master planned tourism economy, many new hotels, restaurants, and shops were opened in restored old houses in Old Town or built just outside of the city center. To staff these new businesses, the government has also provided many work training programs, including training colleges for English language

and tailoring skills (Interview with Minh, April 28, 2010). Many of Hoi An's young adults attend English classes, which are often held in the evening to accommodate work schedules. Some also train to work in various hospitality positions, such as in hotels or as servers in restaurants.

Handicrafts, such as tailoring, ceramics, and wood carving, were either small industries or dying arts in the 1990s, but in order to enhance the heritage tourism experience, they were rejuvenated for tours and to fill their traditional purpose of providing goods for sale in town. Several traditional handicraft villages—including Kim Bong carpentry village and Thanh Ha pottery village—are popular local tourist attractions. The basic idea is to have local residents make their living through traditional arts by selling directly to tourists and creating a touring location, while providing products for the large souvenir market in town, just as these villages did in the seventeenth century (Conversation with Minh, May 15, 2010). Apprentice programs and training colleges were organized accordingly to create a new generation of handicraft experts, though this option is not as popular among youth as other sectors of the tourism industry (Interviews with Thanh Ha residents, May 15, 2010).

As a result of these economic changes, Hoi An has gone from an impoverished small town to a bustling international tourism hotspot with a relatively high standard of living. The job market has increased drastically, which prevents the small town youth work force drain that plagues other Vietnamese towns. Young adults attend the tourism university in town, Phan Chau Trinh University, and gain the skills and English language capacity necessary for service jobs and retail. The average salary for one of these service jobs is \$150/month, which is considered to be a decent salary by local people (Conversation with Tien, May 4, 2010 and Interview with Minh, May 10, 2010). Jobs are so plentiful that restaurants and hotels are often overstaffed,

particularly in the low tourist season of May and June. Further revenue is gathered through the sales of entrance tickets, which tourists are required to buy in order to visit the Old Town. The profits from ticket sales go primarily to building restoration and general tourism program development and maintenance (Impact 2008).

## **The Preservation and Performance of Culture**

### ***What Does Preservation Mean?***

As mentioned earlier, this analysis will focus on the intangible heritage aspect of Hoi An's preservation efforts, so it is important to explore the meaning of preservation as a concept. The idea of cultural preservation plays a key role in Hoi An, as both the spark for the economic shift and the focal point of the heritage tourism industry. According to the UNESCO World Heritage website, the goal of heritage preservation is "to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity," embodied in an international treaty called the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. According to the Convention, the term "heritage site" encompasses a variety of places, including monuments, groups of buildings, human-made and natural sites, and geological features—essentially any place or entity considered to be of historical and cultural significance as nominated by the State in which the site is located and approved by UNESCO. The State is then charged with the broad mandate to conserve and maintain the site, protecting it against the "damage and destruction"

wrought by “changing social and economic conditions,” while ensuring that the site is an integral part of the community in which it is located (UNESCO website).

With tangible heritage, on one hand, it is relatively easy to envision a plan for preservation that meets these criteria. A building can be restored to its previous condition and maintained as such. Artifacts can be excavated, restored, and displayed. Through many conversations with Hoi An authorities and workers in the heritage industry, it became clear that Hoi An’s preservation plan does indeed revolve primarily around this tangible heritage preservation. Hoi An’s initial push toward heritage status was based on their built heritage, the many ancient and intact buildings, as well as outlying historical ruins, all displaying international historical influence. Only when tourists began to arrive in force did officials craft a structured tourism industry and begin to reach out to other traditional activities to create a broader, more lucrative market.

As mentioned earlier, dwindling handicraft industries, disappearing arts, and long-defunct festivals were revived largely for the sake of the tourism market. The goal of “preservation” in Hoi An has since been expanded to include such intangible heritage. Preservation of intangible culture, however, is not as clear-cut as tangible culture and its physical structures. Culture, an ambiguous concept in itself, is not a static entity. Culture, in its very nature, changes over time. New people come into contact, as occurred during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century heyday of Hoi An’s seaport. New circumstances arise, such as the shallowing of the port, which diverted international traffic to Da Nang. War makes many changes as well. The question then shifts to what exactly should be preserved. What captures the essence of Hoi An culture? Is there a time period, a particular way of looking and acting that *is* Hoi An culture, that can be put in a static

time capsule of “preservation”? Or is intangible heritage preservation in this case mostly meant to enhance the ancient feeling of the restored seventeenth century buildings? This idea of what exactly “preserving culture” means is one of the main questions that I initially set out to explore through interactions with locals and officials.

### ***“Real Culture”—Authenticity***

“Authenticity” is a term that features in many documents related to preservation efforts in Hoi An as a sort of marker of what should be preserved and what sorts of forces should be protected against. I came to find out through many challenging interviews, however, that the actual application of the label of “authentic” is not an easy task. The word itself does not translate easily, so the definition that I settled on with several people was simply “real culture.” “What is ‘real’ Hoi An culture?” I began to ask.

Modern Hoi An is certainly quite different from pre-colonial culture and even pre-tourism culture. How, then, can culture—something so big, amorphous, and particularly in the case of Hoi An, something that has faced so many different forces of change—be captured, encapsulated, and commodified for a state of preservation and even for sale? To explore the concepts of preservation and authenticity, I have attempted to explore several guiding questions. First, what do local people of a variety of ages and positions consider to be “authentic” culture? Second, is it possible to truly preserve culture, which implies attempting to keep it as a static, fixed entity? Third, does culture become something else, something “unauthentic” when it is

commodified and used as a tool for economic development? Fourth, what level of attachment to and investment in the attempted preservation of their culture do local people have?

### *Cultivating an Image*

In order to turn the heritage tourism industry into the economic engine that it is today, Hoi An officials have worked to create a cohesive, controlled image of Hoi Anian culture and tradition. In doing so, officials must make decisions on what is considered authentic, what is acceptable to change, and how businesses should present this cultivated heritage image to outsiders. Crafting this image is one of the primary balancing acts of preservation and economics. In making these decisions, officials are faced with the possible conflict between what is “authentic,” what is a marketable cultural image, and what, if anything, should be “preserved” simply for posterity.

Various city departments are charged with overseeing different aspects of Hoi An’s heritage preservation and industry, and the interplay between them is an integral part of the balancing act of heritage tourism. The two departments that I spoke with the most were the Hoi An Department of Commerce and Tourism and the Center for Monument Management and Preservation. From several interviews with staff of both departments, as well as with staff of the Hoi An Museum of Folklore, it became clear that heritage management requires coordination by many different people who must carefully balance interests between departments and within themselves.

One of my primary informants, Minh, is a Department of Commerce and Tourism Information official who is in charge of overseeing local tourism development. He is middle aged with a wife and two young adult children. Minh's office is perched on the corner of two of the largest and most traveled tourist streets in Hoi An, overlooking a bustling crossroads where the cries of motorbike drivers and vendors of fried banana donuts can be heard over the sounds of traffic and multilingual conversation. He is a pleasant man, educated in Czechoslovakia, who speaks fluent English and even more fluent Czech. We had many conversations over the course of my month in Hoi An.

After several such conversations, he told me that the atmosphere that is intended for Hoi An is to resemble the seventeenth century, when international trading was at its peak and when many of the restored houses still in existence were built. When I asked him about the feeling that he wanted to leave visitors with he replied:

*Like the 17<sup>th</sup> century...quiet...hospitality...those are the things...we make it quiet, move noise activity out. And hospitality, make people more friendly, tourists come many time later....And who do we want to attract to Hoi An? The top 10 countries [lists on fingers] France, Australia, Germany, America, Britain, Japan, Canada, Dutch, Denmark, Switzerland...is that 10? For the French, the #1, they want the past—the older generation come here...in the seventeenth century for business and for missions (Interview with Minh, May 10, 2010).*

The seventeenth century idea, bolstered by a quiet atmosphere of antiquity and a well-trained English and sometimes French-speaking work force, is thus a desired image that complies with what Hoi An's largest markets desire. In his professional role, his goal is to create an environment that appeals to the strongest tourist market, in this case Westerners and in particular, nostalgic French visitors.

His personal opinions on authenticity, however, imply a level of cognitive dissonance between the image of “authentic Hoi An” that he wants to create and what the current state of affairs seems to be. When I asked him his opinion of authentic Hoi An culture, he at first describes a place of unchanging tradition.

*First, I think it is a beautiful, interesting city in center of Vietnam. Not just big place for locals but attract tourist too...It is a long traditional culture and custom and about 17<sup>th</sup> century until now change but not a lot, because of tourists. Very rich culture, not rich by money but culture, you know? ...Living together, not new culture, long traditional culture—make comparison with grandparents and grandson change but just little (Interview with Minh, May 10, 2010).*

He essentially asserts that Hoi An has remained much the same for the past four hundred or so years. However, as he alludes to in the above quote and elaborates on later in the conversation, he also speaks of his concerns about rapid changes happening in the town, from disrespectful youth behavior to non-traditional weddings, compliments of globalization and often inspired to some extent by the presence of foreign tourists.

These conflicting sentiments are echoed in other statements by local officials and employees of preservation and tourism offices. It is important to note that most of these people are middle aged, as that is the age group that is generally in charge of the city. Yen, the sister of my temporary homestay hostess, is between 30 and 40 years old. She works in the Center for Monument Preservation and Management and has worked largely with tangible heritage in alignment with UNESCO goals. Her words were quite similar to Minh’s. After seeing a question written in my notebook that said, “What is Hoi An culture? Traditional culture?” she said:

*The culture of Hoi An is very rich. In the ports Hoi An is one of the international commercial trading port town. Many international merchants come here—Europeans,*

*Asians, Southeast Asians, especially Chinese and Japanese...The diversity of cultures spread to the architectural style, traditional style, some rituals until now. Traditional culture have been kepted until now* (Interview with Yen, April 29, 2010).

This statement, like Minh's, presents a Hoi An that has stayed essentially the same as it was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She later brought up the concept of authenticity herself, defining it as the "original situation of built heritage and intangible heritage," adding that "if possible we will rebuild, renew..." (Interview with Yen, April 29, 2010). This idea of the "original situation" of heritage, in light of her explanation of the time period that her restoration work aims to capture, fits with Minh's idea of a pre-colonial environment as authentic. At the same time, however, she presents the challenges and conflicts of reconciling an authenticity ideal with that of the realities of modernity. She says that culture has been "kept" the same up to the present but also expresses concern about preserving authenticity, implying that there are issues with maintaining certain customs and ways of life. When I asked her opinion on the impact of tourism on Hoi An culture, she said:

*For example...growing...need to modernize houses, rebuild to appropriate modern life. It is difficult to preserve authenticity. The second part when many tourists come is traditional lifestyles change* (Interview with Yen, April 29, 2010).

Through these conversations and several others with officials and staff within the same agencies and others with a similar aim, this same pattern of describing a culture that has remained much the same for centuries and then, paradoxically, describing many ways in which the culture is changing, appeared again and again. It could logically follow, then, that the goal of preservation in the case of Hoi An seems to involve reaching back to customs, rather than simply holding a static culture in a state of ancient, unchanging tradition. (Interestingly, the state of being that officials are striving to capture, the seventeenth century, was a time when many

cultural influences—Chinese, Japanese, European, etc— converged to add many new customs to the foundation of ancient Hoi An culture.) Authentic, then, takes on a new meaning as a relative term that requires a balance between old and new. The goal in Hoi An is to recreate a place that is authentic by the standards of the seventeenth century within the unstable context of the twenty-first.

In order to reach back toward this image of Hoi An, local officials have put a number of regulations in place. The types of businesses allowed in the city center are restricted, excluding electronics shops on the main tourist roads other than cell phone stores, and relegating to the outskirts of town any industries other than souvenir and tailoring shops, hotels, and restaurants. One of the initially most controversial policies was a ban on motorized vehicles in order to create a more peaceful and safe environment in Old Town. Only walkers and bicycles are allowed on the streets during certain hours on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday (Interview with Minh, April 28, 2010). The restricted hours are announced by loudspeaker and apply to locals as well as tourists. Locals are also instructed in “appropriate” ways to interact with foreigners and trained in basic English language skills. Many people are also trained in the local tourism college in hospitality skills. Hoi An is advertised as a place of friendly, outgoing, and smiling people. While this is a widespread view of Vietnamese people in general, Hoi Anians in particular are encouraged to fit this image.<sup>iii</sup>

Through the decisions that officials must make about what kind of image of Hoi An to craft and nurture, they must maintain a balance between UNESCO desires, their own ideas of posterity and of economics, the desires of local people to a certain degree, and tourist desires.

Hoi An thus becomes a place sandwiched between quaint and trendy; between traditionally, tastefully old and modern comfort; and between time capsule and dynamic economic center.

### *The Museum Effect*

One of the potential fallouts of an attempt to preserve an inherently changing thing like culture is the chance of causing what could be called the museum effect, an idea cultivated from a UNESCO report stating tourists' commentary on the town appearing to be a "museum display" (Impact 2008). In this phenomenon, the built heritage is maintained as it was in the past, and the festivals, clothes, food, and handicrafts are performed and created in accordance with traditional custom, yet with a perceived lack of real attachment or sincerity on the part of the people enacting this heritage.

In interviews with people of a variety of ages and occupations, there were mixed levels of engagement in the preservation process, but there was evidence of a pervasive disconnect from many preservation activities. When asked about their personal feeling of connection to revived traditions, most people answered that they enjoyed the celebrations and found them interesting but that they did not feel particularly connected to them. Every citizen seemed to feel a strong pride about their town, its history and its preservation, but when asked about specifics, the feeling did not seem to run as deep.

### Games

As for traditional games, at regular intervals throughout the week, a few can be found in the streets several evenings per week, including a traditional lively, musical bingo-style game called *bai chôi*, as well as a game where a blindfolded player attempts to break a hanging clay pot with a bat. These games are intended to replicate traditional games that Minh describes as “very typical games [that] I used to play when I was young...It is very funny, exciting, good for everyone, for young and for old” (Interview with Minh, April 28, 2010). Most of the time, the game venues seem relatively unpopulated, however, and an MC can be heard calling to passersby on his microphone to pay “just 5000 dong” to play. Local teens can sometimes be seen participating and often thoroughly enjoying the games, however, especially on weekends.

### Music and Dance

Music and dance is another category of preservation that has an ambivalent level of attachment from the local people. Folk music and dance performances can be heard three times a day, at 10:15, 3:15, and 7:15 at a handicraft workshop and performance hall and at 9:00 pm everyday at a nearby restaurant, as well as on street corners on many evenings. The performers are highly skilled in voice, instruments, and dancing, and participate in national competitions—and in the case of the folk band based out of the performance hall, regularly place as high as second place. One of these performers, Hoa, said that she and other musicians, singers in particular, are selected to participate in these performances through community competitions.

*The Center for Culture and Sport and government in general in HA organize contests about music. Next to Tet holiday, we sing spring song and the dance we find the young*

*people can sing. When we have festival we call them to take part and day by day discover who can sing* (Interview with Hoa, May 8, 2010).

She herself learned folk songs from her father, grandfather, and uncle and participated in one such contest in high school. After graduation from Quang Nam teacher's college, she took a job as a performer in the performance house and a job in the Center for Culture and Sport. At the Center, she was trained to hone her voice and to sing with instruments and now performs almost daily as well as serving as a master of ceremonies for the performances thanks to her English skills.

As far as local people and performance arts are concerned, many middle aged women and men can be heard singing folk songs to pass the time in their shops, homes, and restaurants. The young, however, do not seem to have this knowledge, or at least not the tendency to sing folk songs, preferring Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean pop and rock music instead. In a conversation with Paolo, one of the proprietors of a local scuba and island tour business, I asked if people still listen to traditional music, and his Vietnamese assistant answered "old people" (Conversation with Paolo, April 29, 2010). Hoa said, however, that now, as part of the government's cultural preservation efforts, she also teaches a secondary school folk music class designed to ensure that the next generation keeps the songs in their memory. It is likely that this class is also meant to ensure a labor force for the folk music performances (Interview with Hoa, May 8, 2010).

### Festivals

When I asked several informants about festivals in Hoi An and their feelings of attachment to them, nearly all immediately mentioned the monthly "Legendary Night" full moon

festival. This monthly festival, I came to find out, is a modern festival created for tourists, and locals' mentioning of it felt more like a sales pitch than a personal connection. On this night the streets are lit only by lantern-light and tourists can buy a floating paper votive to put in the river. Old Town's dirt roads are full of wandering tourists and local people selling traditional food, votives, and trinkets. Continuous games of *bai chôi* are set up by the river, and many Vietnamese people play—both locals and domestic tourists—while foreign tourists tend to just watch. Traditional folk music can be heard on the street corners as well.

This night seems to be a mild source of entertainment for local people, though not particularly culturally important to them. For example, Phuoc, a director of a travel company in his thirties, said that he merely finds this and other modern festivals entertaining but does not feel particularly personally attached to them (Interview with Phuoc, May 5, 2010). Anh, another employee of the Center for Monument Management, described the legendary night as “just a show” to “think of the old days” (Interview with Anh, May 14, 2010). Interestingly, she also said that the festival served as an alternative source of entertainment to keep “bad activities,” like karaoke, out of the old quarter.

There are, however, also a number of important traditional and meaningful festivals still celebrated throughout the year. There are several Chinese festivals, for instance, that only Hoi Anians of Chinese origin celebrate at the numerous Chinese community halls around the town. Similarly, the handicraft villages have festivals to celebrate their founders (Festivals in Hoi An pamphlet 2009). The general population celebrates Tet, three important Buddhist mid-lunar month festivals, and the Mid-autumn children's festival. Unlike the modern festivals, these festivals are traditionally meaningful to local people. Phuoc said that his children look forward to

the Mid-autumn Festival with great anticipation and cited several other family-based festivals that he enjoys (Interview with Phuoc, May 5, 2010). Increasingly, these traditional and often sacred festivals are also becoming tourist attractions, as tourists want to catch a glimpse of “real” culture, beyond the regularly scheduled shows. Neither Phuoc nor Anh had qualms about tourists viewing more sacred ceremonies. In fact, Anh exclaimed, “I think local people like. Local people very friendly! Welcome everybody!” (Interview with Anh, May 14, 2010).

Conversely, Chinh, an artist and historian at the Hoi An Museum of Folklore, protested that the festivals have become too loud and not like “they used to be” (Interview with Chinh, May 8, 2010). These festivals have maintained their cultural importance to the general populace without necessarily requiring a concerted preservation effort, but they are becoming increasingly commodified as yet another tourist attraction, though, and it does seem that this pressure could have an impact on the future objectification of traditional customs. In the realm of festivals, particularly for those with strong spiritual implications, it is once again necessary to balance cultural protection and economics.

Furthermore, for many aspects of intangible heritage, including festivals, games, and music, there seems to be a sense of disconnect for many local people. As traditional pieces of the past are revived for tourist consumption, it does not necessarily seem to simultaneously revive cultural passion within the locals. Perhaps a means of fostering a greater sense of excitement and connection with the revival of traditions would be to involve the people more in the tourism planning process, which is one of the goals of a World Heritage site, as described by UNESCO (UNESCO website). The impression that I got from conversations with various officials was that the local people have some degree of input in the implantation of certain regulations, like the

motorbike prohibition, but they have not had much agency in deciding what customs to put on display. Having more input in the design and planning phases of tourism projects could perhaps lead to more personal connection for the locals, rather than simply going through motions as part of a job or duty.

### **Perceived Negative Impacts of Tourism**

As has been discussed, possibly the most precarious balancing act that Hoi An must perform is on the line between the posterity of preservation and the drive for economic development. One of the main concerns of most interviewees of about age thirty and up was the same concern held by many people in all developing nations the world over—the powerful forces of change brought by globalization. In the heritage industry, the changes wrought by globalization on tradition are a particular threat to the carefully crafted image of a place. Yet, purposefully inviting in foreigners from highly developed nations only increases the speed with which changes may happen. Similarly, as more money comes in and standard of living improves, so does the capacity to buy new and more technological goods and to become more mobile. Traditional priorities may shift as a result. In describing this situation, Minh says, “When we open the door, the good wind and the bad wind come together” (Interview with Minh, 29 April, 2010).

One particularly strong mourner of lost tradition is Chinh, the artist and historian. Chinh is somewhere between 50 and 60 and has two young adult children. On the subject of cultural changes in Hoi An, he has many concerns. When I asked his opinion on preservation in Hoi An,

he said, “It is good to keep the houses. Everything else so changed, but they keep the houses the same.” With the constant stream of tourists in Hoi An, everything except the structure of the houses, he implies, has felt the hand of globalization. He is particularly bothered about new clothing styles and hip-hop music, which he says are the influence of tourists. He mirrors the sentiments of many officials and local people regarding the particular contention in town over the short shorts, skirts, and tank tops that tourists wear, especially when visiting heritage sites (Interview with Chinh, May 8, 2010).

On the other end of the spectrum, Tien, a woman in her mid-20s and an employee of a local café, is an example of a young person impacted strongly by globalization. She was born and raised on Cham Island, a small fishing village an hour’s boat ride from the mainland. She now lives away from her family, learned English at her job, wears short skirts, and has an affinity for beer. Though she loves Hoi An and supports preservation efforts, she is irritated by many traditional customs and revels in her connections with foreigners. This divide between the youth and older generations is another tough line to walk in the tourism industry, with the youth embracing new foreign customs—such as clothing, media, and, another hot topic in town, marrying foreigners—far more readily than the older generations.

Despite their concerted efforts to encourage ever-greater tourist numbers, local officials are greatly concerned by these changing cultural mores. In order to combat change to some degree, they have implemented several programs targeted on children and families. Though the changing standard of living promotes access to global media and many forms of custom-altering technology, responsibility for the effects of globalization and expedited change is primarily put on tourists. Tourists are blamed for encouraging “social evils” (a category that often includes

karaoke bars, nightclubs, and other situations that inspire drinking, smoking, sexual contact, etc.) inappropriate styles of dress and communication, and a lack of Confucian-style respect. One of the government's main lines of defense against this problem is to send officials into schools to remind children to respect their parents, tell children how to appropriately communicate with tourists, and lay out what are "good" and "bad" traits to learn from tourists. Minh listed such "bad" behaviors as smoking and referring to elders without the proper level of respect. The "good" behaviors they encourage are fostering a sense of independent problem solving and confidence. The local government also encourages traditional living situations and respect for Confucian tradition by awarding "Cultural Family Awards" to households with three or more generations under one roof (Interview with Minh, April 29, 2010).

Once again, the key is in the balance. As Anh, the Monuments office employee, concedes, "We can't require people to not have modern things," but the government can and does attempt to regulate them to a degree that is deemed reasonable by both officials and locals (Interview with Anh, May 14, 2010). Anh says that rules on building preservation needs to be the strictest, but if modernity can be integrated in a way that does not harm the integrity of the ancient image, then it is acceptable. In the end, it is impossible to stop the march of globalization and the desires that accompany a rise in standard of living, she says, but officials will attempt to hold on to everything that they can. "The form is there, but things change."

On one hand, this is a literally accurate statement. The structures of buildings are maintained and the traditional outfits are worn, but on the inside, there are refrigerators, and as soon as work is over, an *ao dai* is traded for jeans. People go through the motions of antiquity, but the same enthusiasm and conviction are often not there. At the same time, the structure, or

even more specifically the foundation, of the society is still there. An unchanging essence of culture is maintained at the heart of everything, a certain *je ne sais quoi* that binds the local people together as “Hoi Anians,” with a common history and shared space, regardless of the regulations that officials may try to implement. Perhaps the trick to ensuring the cultural sustainability of heritage tourism is to emphasize and use this quintessentially intangible essence to find a way to harmoniously integrate the past and modern changes.

### **Effects of the Tourism Industry on Local Lifestyles**

Though the threat of modern customs brought by globalization is a great source of concern in Hoi An, an even stronger threat may be posed to the roots of society—the family unit. The same economic forces that have brought increased prosperity to the town are also creating problems of access and forcing hard lifestyle decisions. While the standard of living has improved, the cost of living has increased. While the old town has always been more expensive than outlying areas, the cost of old houses has been driven up by the demand for retail space. Those who were lucky enough to already own a house in town have been able to rent them out for a premium price. Many spaces have been rented out by foreign investors to turn into medium and high priced restaurants and hotels (by Vietnamese standards), thus putting upward pressure on property value and on services in general. As a result, many people live outside of town and commute to work, and the old town has become a space almost exclusively for tourism activities. One or two generations are left in the ancient houses, Minh says, but they must live in a marginal percentage of the total house space (Interview with Minh, May 10, 2010).

The pay for a low-level service job, such as a waiter or waitress, begins at \$80 per month and averages out at \$150 per month (Interview with Minh, May 10, 2010). This wage puts the average Hoi Anian above the poverty line (6 percent of the town is in poverty, well below the national average), but still leaves many people struggling to make ends meet with anything to spare (Impact 2008). There are opportunities for higher pay, such as in one of the nearly two hundred fast tailoring shops in town. However, such jobs require a twelve hour work day, 9:00 am to 9:00 pm, with often only one day off per month.

These jobs are largely taken by women who have or eventually will have children. Hung, who is almost eight months pregnant at the time of this writing and has worked in such a tailor job for the last ten years, is unsure what she will do when she has the baby. She plans to take only a few weeks off for maternity leave before returning to her nearly 84 hour workweek. Her coworker, Xuan, the mother of a three year old boy, has brief contact with her son everyday, early in the morning and immediately after school when his father brings him by the shop. Her husband has been unemployed since her son's birth and is struggling to find a job that will allow him to pick their son up from school at 4:30 every day. Both women feel that they cannot give up their job's decent salary, which supports their families, but wish they had more time to take care of their children and be at home with their families (Conversations with Hung and Xuan, April and May 2010).

Thus, modern Hoi Anians on the whole are working more—and getting paid more—but spending less time with their families. This phenomenon puts strain on the family unit, a crucial component of the heritage preservation model for its ability to foster traditional values and customs. Paying careful attention to the lifestyle changes invoked by the economic structure

should perhaps be a priority for local officials. The “cultural family” award program merely rewards families that live under the same roof, but if they are not home to interact with each other, then the intended preservation of customs may not happen.

## **Tourist Perspectives**

Tourists come to Hoi An for a variety of reasons. In order to further explore the concept of inequality as one effect of tourism, it is important to briefly examine these motivations and their impacts.

### ***Foreign Tourists***

Half of all tourists every year are domestic Vietnamese travelers, while the other half is comprised of foreign tourists, coming primarily from ten Western countries (Interview with Minh, May 10, 2010). As Minh stated, tourism in Hoi An is primarily marketed directly toward people from these ten countries and particularly focused on those who will stay for an extended amount of time and spend “lots of money” (Interview with Minh, May 10, 2010). This category almost entirely encompasses an older demographic. However, a large number of foreign tourists are age 30 and under and fall into the category of “backpackers.” Hoi An is thus split between these two demographics and must cater to both, which is yet another balancing act of the tourism industry.

For the wealthier, and thus often older, set, there are resorts and higher end hotels. There are also many tour packages to see nearby relics and the traditional villages. Daily tours of Old Town can also be taken, as well as boat and bike tours of the area surrounding Hoi An. For the

young, budget backpacker crowd, there are cheap (by Western standards) hotels and a handful of trendy bars that are open past 9:00 pm, the time that the rest of the town essentially shuts down. These younger tourists are rarely seen on town tours. The beach and the small nightlife are instead the primary attraction. Both demographics, however, take advantage of the abundant tailor-made industries and other shopping.

Curious to see the impacts of the town's aggressive marketing of its heritage, I casually asked ten different tourists that I met at various times what their thoughts are on the town. This informal running survey included an Irish couple in their late 20s or early 30s, an Australian couple in their 50s, a 25 year old Danish man, a pair of Australian friends of 30 and 50, two American women in their late 20s, and a South African ex-pat from Vung Tao in her late 20s. Their reasons for coming to Hoi An generally fell into several categories—namely, “it was part of a tour package” (which was the most common answer from those over 30), “the beach,” or “friends said the shopping was great.” Only the Australian couple, whom I met on a city tour, answered that they were interested in the history of the city. A number of people felt that the town had a “quiet charm” and said that they enjoyed the architecture. Not one of them attended a performance, though I did see other foreign tourists at several performances at the performance house.<sup>iv</sup>

This informal survey would seem to indicate that the actual heritage aspect of Hoi An's heritage tourism industry is not the driving force that attracts tourists, at least not anymore. Tourists often commented on how “quiet,” “pretty,” and “charming” Hoi An is, but never on its history, performances, museums, or games. This lack of interest could be a driving factor behind the conundrums of preservation laid out earlier. In order to attract high-paying Western tourists,

it is necessary to cater to their needs—maintaining the quaint, charming, and safe feel of the town while also creating many avenues for modern entertainment. As a World Heritage site, however, it is also necessary to fulfill UNESCO’s preservation desires, and local officials’ own preservation desires. Working to meet the criteria of all parties thus leads to conflicts of image, authenticity, and locals’ motivations and connection to preservation activities.

### *Domestic Tourists*

Due to language barriers and lack of consistent access to a translator, I was not able to interview domestic tourists on their opinions of Hoi An. In order to attempt as balanced a perspective as possible, however, I asked some local people and tour guides about domestic tourists’ motivations for coming to Hoi An. The broad answer that I received was simply that it is “famous.” The reasons for its fame seem to be myriad, but some reasons included its natural beauty, the beach, auspicious spiritual sites, and, according to one tour guide, its historical feel.<sup>v</sup> Many Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian tourists seem to travel with corporate tours, which are increasingly used as work bonuses. They can be seen in large groups full of families, wearing matching tour hats and name badges from work.

Though domestic tourists can be seen regularly coming through the town in these big groups, another side effect of the increased cost of living is that these tourists are forced out of much of the tourism market in Hoi An, especially if they do not come with a corporate group. The percentage of domestic tourists has risen from one-fifth to one-half in recent years, but many of these tourists are unable to make more than a day trip to Hoi An (Interview with Minh, May

10, 2010). The service industry is catered to foreign tourists, based primarily on the US dollar. Domestic tourists must stay in Da Nang, which is 35 kilometers away. They do not choose to have clothing tailored, for example, because they “can get the same thing cheaper somewhere else” (Conversation with Le<sup>vi</sup>, May 8, 2010). Minh said that officials are striving to make more hotels for domestic tourists outside of the city center that are “quiet and clean” and a reasonable price (Interview with Minh, May 10, 2010). This plan does serve the needs of domestic tourists but also creates a space within the Old Town that is almost exclusively for foreign access.

It does seem difficult to integrate domestic and foreign use of space due to the possibly inevitable effects of price inflation. However, the exclusion of domestic tourists, however unintentional, contradicts World Heritage goals of shared access to “universal” heritage sites. Perhaps an attempt at creating some more centrally located (i.e. near Old Town) accommodations, restaurants, and shops that cater specifically to the needs of domestic tourists would help to create a more all-access feeling to the designated heritage area. Such an attempt could also help to combat the aforementioned “museum effect” by inviting another level of participation in heritage activities, between Hoi An native and foreign tourist.

## **Conclusion**

Hoi An is a city at the crossroads in many senses. Due to its geographic location, in the center of the nation and on the coast, it is historically a meeting place of many cultures, both domestic and foreign. As such, the town has seen many transformations over time. Through it all and particularly in the last 400 years, it has managed to adapt to changes and integrate new

cultural mores while maintaining a unique and even traditional character. In order to do so, however, at least in the modern era, there has been strong central planning to ensure that officials' desires for the city's traditions and heritage image are maintained while allowing for optimal economic growth. Hoi Anians in general have had to carry out a careful balancing act between, to put it simply, old and new.

While there is not one cohesive image for all Hoi Anians of what Hoi An should be, there does seem to be a general consensus on several points. Most people agree that keeping the built heritage intact is an important reminder of the past but that the people must be allowed to equip these buildings with modern comforts in a tasteful and structurally harmonious way. As for the outer vestiges of traditional culture such as music, dancing, clothing, and handicrafts, there seems to be a general feeling that every citizen should have a basic knowledge of these traditional arts but that the actual industries be kept alive partly for posterity but primarily for the sake of bringing in tourist revenue. As for festivals, the most sacred and traditional are still maintained in as "authentic" a manner as possible while allowing in the many curious tourists who wish to have a window into the spiritual and traditional ceremonies of Hoi An. Locals seem to accept the presence of so many foreigners into their community with grace and friendliness. New festivals have been created as well, essentially solely for the benefit of tourists. Though these are not necessarily considered to be "authentic," they are an attempt to bridge the gap between preservation and profit.

In the end, the ideas of preservation and authenticity are still difficult to pin down in a neat definition. These concepts are as amorphous as the idea of "culture" which they are meant to describe. Furthermore, it is impossible to hold any culture in a static state, particularly while

cultivating a tourism industry. What Hoi An manages to do, however, is find a way to strike an adaptive balance between tradition and change. Chances are that the city will only be faced with more globalized pressures in the future, but if the past is any indication, it will find a way to embrace and gracefully integrate these changes in a way that serves the needs of the historical integrity of the town, its visitors, and most importantly, the local people.

In order to meet the demands of the present in a sustainable manner, however, officials will also need to work to ensure more equal access in all facets of the tourism industry. Increased input from local people could be highly beneficial to creating a more organic and engaged heritage feel to the town. Creating more access to the domestic tourist market could also aid in this process. In taking this two-fold approach, it is possible that traditional customs could be bolstered and the feared changes of globalization mitigated and smoothly integrated into the current tourism model. Finally, finding a way to address labor issues could prevent a situation of unsustainable strain on workers, as well as the breakdown of the vital family unit. In the end, the sustainability of not only a cohesive Hoi An identity and the lives of the people who comprise it but the economy itself could depend on the city's ability to creatively manage the multi-faceted issues of a heritage tourism economy.

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## Interviews

- Interview with Anh, Office for Monuments Management and Preservation, 14 May, 2010, 8:30 am.
- Interview with Chinh, Hoi An Museum of Folklore, 8 May, 2010, 3:30 pm.
- Interview with Hoa, Local café, 8 May, 2010, 4:00 pm.
- Conversations with Hung and Xuan, tailor shop, throughout April and May 2010.
- Conversation with Le, Japanese covered bridge, 8 May, 2010, 10:00 am.
- Interview with Minh, Hoi An Dept. of Commerce and Tourism Information office, 28 April, 2010, 2:30 pm.

Interview with Minh, Hoi An Dept. of Commerce and Tourism Information office, 29 April, 2010, 2:30 pm.

Interview with Minh, Hoi An Dept. of Commerce and Tourism Information office, 10 May, 2010, 9:30 am.

Conversation with Minh, Thanh Ha pottery village, 15 May, 2010, 9:00 am.

Interview with Nguyen Duc Tri, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, 8 April, 2010, 5:00 pm.

Conversation with Paolo, Cham Island Diving Center, 29 April, 2010, 1:00 pm.

Interview with Phuoc, Hoi An Travel Agency, 5 May, 2010, 9:00 am.

Interviews with Thanh Ha pottery village residents, 15 May, 2010, 9:00 am.

Conversation with Tien, Cham Island Diving Center, 4 May, 2010, 10:00 am.

Interview with Yen, Van Phi Homestay and Restaurant, 29 April, 2010, 2:00 pm.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Cover art from *Vietnam's Sustainable Tourism: Plan and Reality 2009* presentation. (2009). Hoi An Department of Commerce and Tourism.

<sup>ii</sup> Name changed

<sup>iii</sup> One interesting challenge to this image control is that many of the local businesses are owned by foreign investors, and many tours and trips to places such as Cham Island and other tourist sites are operated by foreigners. On such tours, information about the area and the way of life is disseminated by non-locals, and thus tourists are exposed to the perspective and interpretations of outsiders. In fact, many of these “outsiders” have lived in the area for years or have married into a local family. For example, the operator of a small bicycle tour business is a Frenchman married to a Hoi An native. He takes tourists to his in-laws’ communities. In this way, he is someone inbetween foreign and local, but he still gives his perspective as a European ex-pat.

<sup>iv</sup> These conversations occurred throughout the month, during meals and through casual encounters.

<sup>v</sup> These comments were also through casual conversations. The discussion with the tour guide occurred on May 6, 2010 when I took a tour of Old Town.

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<sup>vi</sup> Le is a ticket checker at the Japanese Bridge.