Heritage significance and the intangible in Hanoi, Vietnam

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Vietnamese national survival is one of the most amazing features in Southeast Asian history. After 1000 years of incorporation into China as merely another Chinese province, followed by a further 800 years of tributary relationship with Beijing, how is it that a sense of Vietnamese-ness managed to survive? How was Vietnamese culture maintained and rebuilt across the centuries?

The general answer is neatly explained in the Confucian saying ‘When the wind blows, the grasses bend’. Vietnamese cultural and hence national survival in the face of numerous foreign invasions, was only achieved by ‘bending with the wind’ – that is, by adopting many of the features of the invader’s culture while managing to preserve (in fact, in order to preserve) key elements of their own.

Of course, climatic differences, particularly monsoonal wet seasons, set some limits to the ability to simply replicate the Chinese cultural landscape. Up to the 15th century, it also appears that the Vietnamese elite were influenced as much by the Cham kingdom to the south as by the Chinese in particular cultural spheres, especially dance and music forms and the types of musical instruments. It is said that the Cham influence can be seen, too, in the way Vietnamese theory and practice of warfare differed from the Chinese. This extended to the contrast between the Vietnamese use of elephants and the Chinese use of horses.

The fact that the Chinese impacts were mainly felt by the urban elite, but left the popular rural culture largely unaffected is also critical. The northern rulers had made spoken and written Chinese the language of the court, bureaucracy, urban elite and much commerce. But the key factor in the survival of Vietnamese-ness seems to have been, despite adoption of tonal pronunciation and many loan words, China’s inability to wipe out the Vietnamese language among the ordinary masses of rural people.

In the countryside, the culture therefore remained based on a different language – as well as a set of legends that were handed down orally. Then, from time to time, these Vietnamese elements were re-injected back into the cities. This is one reason why the intangible heritage is still given so much status today: it more that anything is seen as conveying the true spirit of Vietnam.

Indeed, as well as the survival of language, the persistence of legends has been particularly crucial, making the intangible heritage as significant to the Vietnamese as the tangible. Often Western heritage experts going into Vietnam have missed this point: they looked for significance in the built environment of Vietnamese cities only in architectural terms. They judged the significance of buildings and sites according to Western criteria of fabric authenticity and failed to see that significance often lies in intangible elements – such as the monument’s or site’s connection with myths and legends, the continuity of symbolism and the craft skills that allow places to be periodically restored, even rebuilt, as a sign of respect to gods and ancestors.

The study of myth, memory and links with group and individual identity are...
particularly fashionable in Western academic and literary circles at this time. Many reasons have been given for this, including connections with fin-de-siècle nostalgia and end-of-millennium anxiety. In fact, most societies hold longstanding beliefs about their pasts that are based on myths bearing little resemblance to the events that gave rise to them. Instead these myths take on a life and 'reality' of their own. The historian Wang Gungwu argues that history and myth are interdependent in every culture — but that this point is not well appreciated in Western historiography. Fanciful interpretations of history become myths; myths become 'facts' which help shape events, the future's history.

In most societies, myths are used one way or another as propaganda tools to shape the community's perception. The myths become 'received truth', their ideological function altering with changes in the regime in power. They are very often attached to monuments and sites that still exist today, giving the stories from the past an immediacy and currency. Religious parables and other stories have a similar function, as demonstrated by the promotion of Burmese Buddhist historic monuments and sites as icons of Myanmar nationalism by the current junta in Rangoon. The Vietnamese government — indeed all governments — use the promotion of particular cultural forms as a way of boosting a sense of community, usually identified in ways that conform with the values of the ruling group. No arts, environmental or heritage policy-making avoids this completely.

In the field of heritage conservation, myths are important and are often benign. They are themselves part of society's intangible cultural heritage as well as giving meaning to places associated with them. To take a prime example, the myth of Venice's perfect union of society and space was propagated by the Venetians themselves and moulded into the landscape of their city. It has become a symbolic landscape of enduring significance for Europeans and, now by its inclusion in the World Heritage List, the entire world. It is no accident that the city became the location for the principal statement of cultural heritage conservation practice, the Venice Charter, adopted in 1964 by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). Nor is it accidental that the charter focuses on the venerability of the built structures, seeing authenticity in terms of the intactness of the physical fabric. But while the Venice Charter suits the stone structures and archaeological ruins of Europe, this is not how most of the world views heritage significance. In East and Southeast Asia — and to move to the geographical focus of this paper, in Vietnam — intangible factors are more important, either as giving meaning to physical structures or as intangible heritage features in their own right.

Hanoi, Vietnam's 1000-year old capital city, maintains numerous myths about the venerability and the uniqueness of its architectural features and planning practices, such as the vaunted marriage of water and earth (design harmony between water and built features). As the following examples show, the heritage significance of many buildings lies not in their bricks and mortar, but in the myths attached to them, the interventions of the gods and the fanciful tales of kings.
Den Bach Ma

Den Bach Ma or 'White Horse' temple (Figure 1) is located in the heart of the Ancient Quarter. It is a humble building, renewed at irregular intervals – but it is the locale of an important myth explaining the formation of early Hanoi – and it is this above all else that gives Bach Ma enormous significance. Legend has it that Thang Long’s builder, King Ly Thai To, selected the gods of the To Lich River and Long Do mountains as guardian spirits of his new capital, perhaps because they were believed to have visited considerable mischief on the previous Chinese occupiers of the site. During the construction of the citadel, however, the earthen walls kept collapsing as soon as they were built. After making offerings at the Long Do temple, the king saw a white horse come out of the shrine, circle the site from east to west, then disappear back into the temple. The king immediately ordered the walls of Thang Long to be built on the perimeter traced by the horse’s footprints. Since that time, the Long Do temple has also been known as the Bach Ma ('White Horse') temple. The white horse figures frequently in Chinese mythology, reflecting the strong Chinese influence on both the courtly and popular urban cultures after the thousand years of domination.

Den Hai Ba Trung

Tucked away among poor quality housing in the area south of the French Quarter is...
another humble temple, little known to tourists, but of immense heritage significance to the Vietnamese. The temple is part of a religious complex housing a Buddhist convent and controlled by a head nun. It sits on the western side of a large courtyard, outside of which is a small lake with a ring of betel trees along its bank (see Figures 2 & 3).

One of the most interesting ways that the Vietnamese urban elite maintained a distinction from the Chinese was in the greater freedom allowed to women. Daughters, as well as sons, could own and inherit land and serve as trustees of their ancestral cult funds. Women are well represented among the most successful rebels against the Chinese overlords – especially Trung Tac and Trung Nhi (the Hai Ba Trung or ‘Two Trung Sisters’) – who staged a successful rebellion against the Chinese and ruled briefly in AD 39-43, and Ba Trieu in the 2nd century.

In the case of the ‘Two Trung Sisters’, the uprising was a reaction to the Chinese governor’s policy of active sinicisation. Here the cultural resistance flowed over into political resistance. The sinicisation policy included the promotion of the southern Chinese style of irrigated agriculture and use of the plough drawn by ox or water buffalo, and the promotion of Chinese customs and ceremonies. In addition, Chinese colonists had occupied and developed the best lands and had drawn the Vietnamese into colonial service as functionaries and militiamen. The indigenous aristocracy became increasingly hostile and the execution of a Vietnamese nobleman in the year AD 40 sparked a rebellion led by his widow and
her sister – the two Trung sisters. The legendary Chinese general Ma Yuan came south to repress the rebellion in AD 43. The sisters, on elephant back, led the Vietnamese armies into a desperate last stand against the Chinese invaders. The Vietnamese people ended up under more rigorous Chinese administration and enculturation than before.

But, despite their ultimate failure, the Hai Ba Trung came to be seen as symbols of resistance to the Chinese in particular and to demands for independence in general for the ensuing 2000 years or so. The oral legends and the stories by historians such as the 13th-century Le Van Huu transformed memories of the Trung sisters, Ba Trieu, Ly Thai To and others into historical forces in their own right. The Trung sisters are thus memorialised in the temple built in AD 1142 by King Ly Anh Tong, in line with the Chinese practice of constructing temples dedicated to heroes and genii. It was originally built on the banks of Red River. Various myths surround its location. According to one common legend, after disappearing in the River Hac, the two sisters metamorphosed themselves into stone statues that drifted downstream to the Dong Nhan River where they scared away enemy boats.

These sources attribute tremendous supernatural powers to the women, particularly the ability to break drought. It is said that King Ly Anh Tong’s prayers to them for rain were so successful that he took the statues to Hanoi and built a temple in their honour north of the city. Not long after, the sisters appeared before him in a dream and asked him to build a temple for them in their native village of Dong Nhan.
The King obeyed, and his dedication is said to make it the most significant temple in Hanoi. Every year, on the fifth day of the second lunar month, the locals gather at Dong Nhan village and walk in procession to the Nhi River to collect water as offerings to celebrate the anniversary of the two sisters. The celebration traditionally lasted for 3 days.

**Van Mieu**

The Van Mieu is perhaps the greatest single heritage property in Hanoi. Its heritage significance does not lie principally in individual buildings, so much as in the ensemble of historical elements and the Confucian and other meanings attached to them. Again the Van Mieu has been restored and repaired repeatedly over 900 years - but its symbolic importance has been retained and the interventions have used traditional skills (see Figures 4 & 5).

Considerable adjustment to the original physical conception of the complex has occurred over this time span. In the 17th century there were only three courtyards. Under the neo-Confucian rule of King Gia Long - the founder of Vietnam's last, Nguyen dynasty - the complex was remodelled to add the first two of today's courtyards. This created five compartments within the complex, the number five having special significance in Confucianism (five elements, five virtues, five commandments, five sorrows, five cardinal relationships, five classics). The sequence of changes is too long and complicated to dwell on here. But the works undertaken in the 1990s are worth mentioning. These works are continuing at a faster pace at the moment, with funds from the central government as well as Vietnamese state enterprises and foreign bodies.

In 1993–1994 eight pavilions were rebuilt over the Van Mieu stelae that record the names of those who had passed the mandarinate entrance exams (Figure 6). Seventeenth-century documents show the pavilions’ existence at this time, but they were gone by the early 20th century. In the 1960s, during the Vietnam War, the stelae were buried in sand and surrounded by a thick concrete wall to protect them from the danger of bombing.

![Image](Figure 4 Khue Van Cu Pavilion, Van Mieu, commonly used as an icon for historic Hanoi. (W. Logan))
Figure 5  Restoring the Great Hall of Ceremonies, Van Mieu, in 1995. (W. Logan)

Figure 6  The Van Mieu stelé pavilions, reconstructed in 1993–4. (W. Logan)
In 1992, after 20 years of discussions with Vietnamese and international experts, the State Centre for Cultural Building Design and Monument Restoration produced a design for eight pavilions to cover and protect the stelae. No exact drawings of the eight early pavilions appear to exist, and the restoration has proceeded as an attempt to blend with the existing architecture of the Van Mieu and using traditional building methods. These are recreations, involving the historical imagination — perhaps fanciful in the way Viollet-le-Duc’s recreation of French Gothic buildings was fanciful — an approach no longer generally favoured by Western heritage practitioners following the Venice Charter. The reconstruction took place in 1993–1994, with half the costs met by the Ministry of Information and Culture and half by the American Express Company (see Figures 7 & 8).

By Western standards these reconstructions are not authentic; by Vietnamese standards their reconstruction is desirable, not only to keep alive the sense of the historical place but also to protect the stone stelae from further climatic effects. Further work at Van Mieu is now being funded by the national government as Hanoi readies for the celebration of its 1000th birthday in the year 2010.

**Ancient Quarter**

Another of the ‘myths’ — using the term differently to refer to a modern rather than ancient myth — is that the fabric of Hanoi’s Ancient Quarter is truly old. In fact, as the 1993 survey by Nguyen Vinh Cat of 33 old streets in the Hoan Kiem district...
showed, very little is ancient. Of the 2345 houses existing in 1993, only 7 per cent had been built before 1900, 9 per cent between 1900 and 1930, while the remaining 84 per cent were newer than 1930. In other words, the fabric is less venerable than that to be found in the inner suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne.

Some changes in Hanoi were to be expected because of political events, the climate, the materials used, and the lack of maintenance. Apart from some stone towers, Vietnamese architecture traditionally used timber as the main building material. In Hanoi, brick, bamboo and thatch are also used, but the bricks are relatively soft and the bamboo and thatch flimsy. The hot, humid climate and the easily inflammable nature of many of the materials meant that buildings did not last long and either experienced frequent renovations or have disappeared. In the Ancient Quarter, only the brick and tile houses of the more substantial Chinese traders survived the Black Flags' last ditch stand in 1883. The French colonial authorities subsequently tidied up the Ancient Quarter (ville indigène) – streets widened and straightened, guild gates removed – so not even the street patterns are intact. Only one of the gates in the wall surrounding the Ancient Quarter – known at different times as the Thanh Ha Gate, the Porte Jean Dupuis or Cua O Quan Chuong – has survived. Certainly the Ancient Quarter remains a market area marked by street specialisations, but they are not the same specialisations as would have been found there at an earlier time. In short, while the Ancient Quarter is the subject of concerted heritage planning efforts (with two sets of regulations promulgated in the 1990s), what exactly is the justification for such efforts?
To many Western conservationists the Ancient quarter and historic structures in other parts of Hanoi seem to lack authenticity and their 'significance' is therefore reduced. Arguments for heritage protection in the face of counter arguments for re-development are correspondingly more difficult to make. But this bears on differing conceptions of heritage authenticity or integrity, where a sharp contrast exists between the Western and East Asian (including Vietnamese) approaches. The Western approach, as encapsulated in the 'Venice Charter’ emphasises the authenticity of the physical fabric. Where new materials have to be added to a heritage item, they should be clearly distinguishable from the original. The East Asian approach is indicated in the more recent (1994) joint UNESCO and ICOMOS ‘Document of Nara’. This East Asian statement – which also encapsulates the Vietnamese approach to heritage protection – emphasises cultural relativity, rather than universal standards in heritage preservation. It allows a much greater focus on showing reverence for a building and its symbolism by the periodic renewal of physical structures and on preserving the craft skills involved in such restoration and reconstruction.

In other words, the intangible aspects are given higher status in determining the significance of the tangible heritage of historic places than generally occurs in Western societies. In particular, myths – both ancient and modern – help to make Hanoi a special city. Much of the significance of old Hanoi is, in fact, iconic rather than strictly historical. The heritage importance of the Ancient Quarter lies more in the belief of the area’s historical quality than in the physical reality. It is important to the Hanoi people that this belief is maintained; it is one of the chief keys to their cultural identity, but considerable intellectual adjustment is needed on the part of many Western cultural heritage professionals embarking upon conservation work in Hanoi and other Vietnamese cities.

endnotes