Making the Most of Heritage in Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract

Ambitious Asian cities, like all cities around the world, seek markers of world status such as globalised functions, major projects and events and the accompanying media attention in order to gain more favourable ranking in the global hierarchy of cities. In this process, heritage, with its pool of powerful icons, plays an essential role in creating desirable images of the city. This paper focuses on this political use of heritage in enhancing the status of Hanoi, the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam since 1975, within the reunified Vietnamese state, the Asian region and globally. Much of Vietnam’s effort focused on achieving World Heritage recognition for Hanoi’s historic Thang Long citadel. While inscription has no doubt had positive results for Hanoi in terms of global recognition of its heritage, the way in which it was achieved at the 2010 World Heritage Committee meeting in Brasilia contributed to the politicisation of the World Heritage system that many observers believe is undermining the objectives of the World Heritage Convention. Moreover, recent management decisions at the Thang Long-Hanoi citadel suggest that politicisation may now be extending beyond the inscription stage to include the post-inscription management of World Heritage sites.

Image-making, Nation-building and Capital Cities

It is now widely accepted that ambitious Asian cities, like all cities around the world, try to attract globalised functions that act as world status markers – international banks and stock exchanges, air transport hubs, and global organisations in the UN system – and they host major international events such as the UN, APEC and ASEAN meetings and Olympic and Asian Games (Logan 2005-6: 564). The aim is to use such functions, major projects and events and accompanying media attention to gain more favourable ranking in the global hierarchy of cities. In this process, heritage, with its pool of powerful icons, plays an essential role in creating desirable images of the city.

Such image-making also plays an important role in nation-building and therefore particularly concerns capital cities, the supposed hearts of the nation. Capital cities operate at three levels (Logan 2005-6: 560): first, they are home to their residents and provide local services for them; second, they are cities for all citizens of the state, performing capital city functions across the entire national territory; and third, they perform functions beyond the national borders, representing the state to the world outside. In other words, capital cities represent power both in and of the nation (Logan 2009). They must be cities worthy of the nation. They achieve this political purpose in many ways, including through urban planning and architectural design, the building of heroic monuments and the protection of buildings and precincts that reflect glorious moments in the nation’s past.
This paper focuses on the political use of heritage in enhancing the status of Hanoi, the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam since 1975, within the reunified Vietnamese state, the Asian region and globally. Vietnam’s independence was hard won through 30 years of war and Vietnam’s government wanted international recognition for the nation’s achievements. It came to realise in the 1990s that one way to win international recognition for Hanoi was through its heritage. The paper focuses on how and with what success it sought to protect the city’s heritage, given the rapid urban and economic development and social change that was occurring. Much of Vietnam’s effort focused on achieving World Heritage recognition for Hanoi’s historic Thang Long citadel, a process it is argued that is not without serious consequences for the World Heritage system.

**Hanoi Heritage and Development**

Hanoi lacks an imposing natural environment and its heritage is almost entirely the result of the construction activities of past inhabitants. The city is located in the bend of the wide and shallow Red River on a flood plain with a high water table and many lakes and ponds. Rainy season floods led to the construction early in Hanoi’s thousand-year life of a series of dykes that still exist. Much of what has become central Hanoi was reclaimed in the early twentieth century under the French colonial administration. Today suburban Hanoi sprawls across the river, where the airport is also located. What mostly captures the imagination, however, is the built city – the tri-partite ‘Old Sector’ town plan comprising the Thang Long-Hanoi citadel, a market town and French quarters, and the Vietnamese temples and pagodas and French colonial villas. Hanoi is a richly layered city, with reminders of all the periods in its evolution under a sequence of foreign military interventions – Chinese, French, Japanese, and American (Logan 2000). Thousand-year-old temples such as the Van Mieu (Temple of Literature) or the Den Bach Ma (White Horse Temple) survive not far from the colonial Hoa Lo prison (now a museum) and high-rise office and apartment buildings in what used to be the main French quarter south of the central lake, Hoan Kiem.

As regimes around the world change from pre-colonial to colonial and later to postcolonial, ideas about what features of the urban landscape are significant also change. The first official list of Hanoi’s heritage was drawn up by the École Française d’Extrême-Orient in the early twentieth century and focused on ancient monuments. A year after France’s disastrous loss in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, northern Vietnam became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with Hanoi as its capital. The authorities changed Hanoi’s street-names from colonial to revolutionary, added key buildings associated with the independence struggle to the official heritage register and began erecting a new set of socialist realist statues. Subsequently the

![Image of Hanoi Citadel](image-url)
Soviet design models were used to construct housing estates, mostly in suburban areas and now in dilapidation, a mausoleum for President Ho Chi Minh, and, nearby, a statue to Lenin, one of the last standing in the world.

A relatively new and symbolically important addition to the city’s monuments is a statue of Ly Thai To on the northern bank of Hoan Kiem. Ly Thai To was the founder of the Ly dynasty, ruler of the Dai Viet kingdom from 1009 to 1028 CE and builder of the Thang Long citadel. Erection of the statue in 2004 marks what seems to be an emerging tendency on the part of some ministerial and municipal decision-makers to see the Ly period (1009-1225 CE) as Vietnam’s halcyon days. Ly Thai To’s role in creating an independent kingdom resonates, of course, with the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam anxious as it has been to win international recognition for the nation’s (and its own) achievements.

**Vietnam’s Search for International Recognition**

When I first visited Hanoi in January 1990 the townscape seemed little changed from the 1930s. The generation of wars and United States-led trade and investment embargoes after 1975 had limited the amount of new building that could be undertaken. There was almost no re-development pressure in the city and much of the pre-colonial and colonial survived. Although it was heard occasionally that conservation was for ‘rich countries’, a luxury that cannot be afforded by Vietnamese society at this time (Tran & Nguyen 1995: 167), there was a strong appreciation of the city’s heritage among the city officials and professionals with whom I talked. The heritage was, however, narrowly defined – essentially temples, pagodas, communal and shop houses. A few major landmarks such as the Municipal Theatre (‘Opera House’) and the Presidential Palace were highly regarded, but generally there was not much official interest in the French legacy, a reflection of lingering anti-colonial sentiment, or in the Soviet influence. Several foreign ambassadors, however, were fascinated by Hanoi’s built heritage and, in fact, they led to UNESCO’s (and my) involvement in 1990 (Logan 1995, 1996; Whitlam 1997: 58-59).

The growth of international tourism after 1990, especially from France, also shifted the attitude of Hanoi’s policy makers towards the colonial heritage.

It was understandable, of course, that economic development would be more important to policy makers than heritage conservation. Hanoi’s long-suffering residents wanted to remedy their substandard housing conditions as quickly as possible: it was estimated that 50 per cent of Ancient Quarter households still shared a kitchen, 95 per cent a toilet, and 100 per cent the courtyard and corridor (Nguyen Huy Bay 1994). So, in the 1990s, the opening up of Vietnam’s economy that had begun in 1986 quickly led to investment in urban redevelopment by local residents as well as foreign investors. By the mid-1990s Hanoi had become a boom town. The authorities were, however, quick to see the economic importance of Hanoi’s historic ambience, especially as a main tourism asset and leading to jobs in tourism and associated handicrafts and cultural performances. Recognition of heritage as a vector of development then impacted upon the planning of the metropolis, most importantly with high-rise buildings being mostly located in peripheral areas after the Paris model. Keeping a more human scale in a historically rich central city seems to have genuine popular support, an early sign of which was the Golden Hanoi Hotel controversy in the late 1990s where the then Prime Minister, Vo Van Kiet, was forced to intervene personally to allay the public outcry – the first over an environmental issue in Vietnam’s history – by halting the construction of the high-rise hotel (Logan 2002).

Figure 2: Statue of King Ly Thai To, founder of Hanoi.
(Source: William Logan)
The Vietnamese government and Hanoi People’s Committee came to realize during the 1990s that one way to win international recognition for Hanoi was through its heritage (Logan 2009: 90). Precedents were set in two other Vietnamese cities – Hue and Hoi An – where inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List was bringing public relations and economic benefits. The Complex of Hue Monuments, inscribed in 1993, had become the basis of a lucrative cultural tourism industry. Visited by only 19,000 foreign tourists in 1990, the year that the Vietnamese government opened the country to foreign tourism, the number rose within 20 years to 1.2 million, while tourism-generated revenue jumped from 0.4 billion Vietnamese dong to 640 billion. Hoi An Ancient Town was inscribed in 1999. Tourist numbers have leapt from 58,834 in 1997 to 424,320 domestic and 606,477 international in 2007 (Hoi An Centre for Monuments Management and Preservation 2008: 47). Through the sale of tourist entry tickets, the municipal government has been able to restore properties, both state-owned and private, and has transformed the once deteriorating heritage town into a thriving tourist destination (ibid: vi).

In Hanoi there had been some thought in the early 1990s that the Ancient Quarter – the market town north of Hoan Kiem – might be nominated, but by the end of the decade the required authenticity and integrity for World Heritage inscription was lost. Changes to the built fabric had, in fact, a long history in Hanoi. French engineers had straightened and widened the roads and had torn down the gates that separated guild areas from each other, as well as all but one of the external gates in the city wall (Logan 2000: 72). The traditional thatched huts of the Vietnamese residents had been constantly renewed following the onslaught of typhoons, floods, fires and armies. Indeed, most of the Ancient Quarter’s buildings had been remodelled, extended or completely rebuilt since the 1930s (Nguyen Vinh Cat 1993: 3). In the three months from 19 December 1946 alone, more than 70 per cent of houses in parts of the Ancient Quarter were either damaged or destroyed as the French and Viet Minh nationalist forces struggled for mastery of Hanoi (Logan 2000: 136). Even worse damage was done by illegal demolitions and construction of medium-rise dwellings and mini-hotels through the 1990s.

Finding an alternative site to nominate in Hanoi proved not to be an easy task. Possibilities canvassed in the early 2000s included the Van Mieu, but its authenticity had been diminished by the largely conjectural reconstruction of the associated Quoc Tu Giam (National School). A combination of the Thang Long Citadel and the earlier Co Loa Citadel, now on the outskirts of Hanoi, was also considered, but it was thought that both sites suffered from inadequate research. Then, in 2002, spectacular archaeological remains of the citadel dating back to the seventh century were discovered at 18 Hoang Dieu Street adjacent to the central citadel area. Shortly afterwards the People’s Army of Vietnam announced its decision to vacate much of the central citadel site, creating previously unimagined possibilities to research and restore the citadel, open it up to visitors, and nominate it for World Heritage listing.

The discovery resulted from the Vietnamese Government’s growing practice of using major events as a way of positioning Hanoi in the national and international consciousness. The first major international events in Hanoi had been a Francophonie conference in 1997, several ASEAN meetings and the 2003 Southeast Asian Games. The most significant gathering of foreign leaders ever to occur in Vietnam, however, was when Hanoi hosted the 14th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders’ Meeting in November 2006. The meeting was planned to take place in the National Assembly building on Ba Dinh Square opposite Ho Chi Minh’s mausoleum and adjacent to the 18 Hoang Dieu archaeological site. The building required enlargement, and it was during test excavations for the foundations that the archaeological remains were uncovered. Excavation work ceased while the archaeologists explored further and mounted a case for conserving the site. A new building was erected instead in the southern outskirts of the city, served APEC apparently well, and is now a national conference centre. The old National Assembly building has since been replaced by a building of contemporary design. The archaeological discoveries – and the promise of more to be made – focussed renewed attention on the citadel, and from around 2005 this became the subject of Vietnam’s World Heritage nomination efforts.
Another factor propelling the nomination process was that Hanoi was nearing its 1,000th birthday. Scheduled for 10 October 2010, the celebrations were designed as both a nation-building and an international image-building exercise. That the archaeological discoveries at the 18 Hoang Dieu Street site inconveniently challenged the founding story of King Ly Thai Tho’s 1010 decision to create a new capital at Hanoi was quickly swept aside and the birthday message reshaped to emphasise that it was a thousand years of Vietnamese independence from China.

The Central Sector of Thang Long-Hanoi Citadel

The World Heritage nomination dossier was submitted in January 2009 and a decision to inscribe was made by the World Heritage Committee at its 34th Session in Brasilia in July 2010. The passage through the inscription process, however, had been difficult. The nominated area covered the most important part – the central axis of the royal citadel’s Forbidden City – but at the time the nomination dossier was compiled, some of this area was still covered by a clutter of army buildings and a sports arena. The nominated site comprised two physically distinct sections: the central axis of the Forbidden City and the archaeological site at 18 Hang Dieu Street. The nominated place is of great historical significance but this was not obvious visually. Outlying sections of the citadel lie beneath the ground and are possibly much disturbed by modern building construction. The nominated site had none of the «Wow!» factor that seems to be expected of World Heritage properties.

These complexities notwithstanding, the area nominated by the Vietnamese Government was the most essential, central and best preserved section of the former Thang Long-Hanoi imperial citadel. The importance placed on achieving its inscription was shown in the way the various government authorities quickly met the World Heritage buffer zone, legislative and management requirements. The site was added to the Tentative List sent to UNESCO in 2006 and it was recognised as a National Relic of Special Importance in 2009. Resources were mobilised from inside and outside the country to carry out research and conservation projects, and to build the capacity of the professional staff in the Thang Long-Hanoi Citadel management agency.

When it evaluated the nomination ICOMOS was not convinced and made a negative report. Hanoi’s 1,000th anniversary was irrelevant, of course, as far as ICOMOS and the World Heritage Centre were concerned. But its extreme importance to Vietnam meant that a successful vote was needed in Brasilia, rather than a Deferral, Referral or outright rejection. Many of the Committee members at the Brasilia meeting were not initially supportive, however, and it was only after intense lobbying by the Vietnamese team that when the vote came in 16 of the 21 Committee members were in favour, Sweden, Switzerland and Estonia voted against and two countries abstained.

Figure 3: Thang Long-Hanoi Citadel World Heritage site.
(Source: World Heritage Nomination Dossier, Volume 1)
The critical issue was whether the site possessed Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). The team that prepared the nomination dossier across 2007 and 2008 had struggled long and hard with this question. The requirement that nominating States Parties provide a Statement of Outstanding Universal Value (SOUV) was only introduced into the Operational Guidelines in 2005, well after the Hue and Hoi An sites were inscribed. There was, therefore, little expertise in Vietnam on the issue of satisfying the OUV hurdle. This emerged as one of the key matters we had to deal with in the capacity-building workshop that the UNESCO Hanoi Office invited me to conduct in early 2008 with the team preparing the nomination dossier. Eminent Vietnamese historian, Professor Phan Huy Le, chaired the workshop and my then university colleague, Dr Colin Long, provided back-up and later drafted much of the document. The workshop stressed Paragraph 52 of the Operational Guidelines which states clearly that a property on a State Party’s national heritage list will not be automatically inscribed as World Heritage. It was essential to show how the national heritage is of significance to the world more broadly.

Unfortunately the guidelines were not translated into Vietnamese at that time and the citadel team was not familiar with their content. They found the OUV concept strange: it was quite unlike the approach adopted in Vietnam after the 1984 Ordinance on Protection and Usage of Historical, Cultural and Famous Places which encouraged nomination of heritage sites (di tích lich su văn hóa) that commemorated heroes and people who had rendered great service to the nation. A further difficulty was to encourage the team to avoid patriotic language and ideological content that would raise the ire of other States Parties that were currently on the World Heritage Committee, especially when they might have been belligerents in the Vietnam War. In this respect it was perhaps fortunate that the three-year term of the United States terminated in 2009. A repetition of the enormous difficulties faced by Japan with its nomination of the Genbaku Dome in Hiroshima (see Beazley 2010) was to be avoided at all costs.

When the citadel nomination came before the World Heritage Committee, draft resolutions were passed back and forth and a final one was proposed by the Russians. The SOUV settled on three key features that give the citadel OUV: longevity, continuity as a seat of power, and the presence of a layered record of vestiges, including both underground archaeological remains and above ground architecture, planning and decorative arts. In terms of integrity, it was accepted that the nominated property captured all the attributes necessary to demonstrate the three elements of its OUV. In terms of authenticity, the standing monuments and subterranean artefacts and relics provided truthful evidence for the presence of the extensive complex of palaces that had existed within the Forbidden City. It was argued that because the citadel was so exceptional in terms of longevity, continuity as a seat of power and presence of a layered

Figure 4: World Heritage inscription – a major feature in Hanoi’s 1,000th anniversary parade, 10 October 2010.
(Source: William Logan)
record of vestiges there were few citadels with which it could be compared. Comparison was made with Asian citadels already on the World Heritage List – Beijing, Chang’an, Nara, Hue and Delhi’s Red Fort. A further comparison with 12 other old cities was prepared as supplementary information for ICOMOS but this seems not to have been taken into account.

In the end the intense behind-the-scenes lobbying and the debate on the floor of the World Heritage Committee session in Brasilia achieved what the State Party had hoped – inscription in good time for the October celebration of Hanoi’s millennial status. In the grand parade held on 10 October 2010 in front of President Ho Chi Minh’s mausoleum in Ba Dinh Square, a World Heritage float carried the Thang Long-Hanoi Citadel image, the World Heritage logo was featured on other floats, and banners hailing the inscription adorned lampposts throughout the inner city. The Vietnamese team had been advised to avoid anything that might look like pressure being put on the evaluation process or the Advisory Body, ICOMOS, and not to stress the connection with 1,000th anniversary celebrations in 2010. In retrospect this was naive. It was far too serious for the Vietnamese: the inscription simply had to be in place for Hanoi’s birthday. The Government of Vietnam was determined that Hanoi should not only dominate the country but be recognised as a leading regional if not yet world city.

In any case all was not over; indeed, the main work – that of managing the site, protecting its OUV into the future and making it accessible both physically and intellectually to the general Vietnamese public and overseas visitors – had only just begun. Following through on commitments made to the World Heritage Committee and ICOMOS in Brasilia, Vietnam has already carried out further archaeological investigations and has defined and is enforcing wider buffer zones. In December 2009 the Prime Minister gave a national commitment in Statement 348/TB-VPCP to carrying out these promises and implementing a ‘master management plan’ for the site. There will, of course, be new challenges and threats in the coming years, including the expected massive increase in tourism pressure. Appropriate conservation methods must be used and a sensitive approach taken to any adaptive reuse of existing structures. A rigorous system will be required to monitor impacts.

One of the greatest fears is that some Ministry of Construction planners want to demolish the French colonial buildings and take the site back to an imagined imperial heyday under the Ly dynasty. In Vietnam’s governance arrangements the Ministry of Construction is a super-ministry and its Vietnam Institute of Architecture, Urban and Rural Planning (VIAP), rather than municipal planners, is charged with drawing up master plans for cities and special precincts across the country. In July 2013 the Vietnamese media reported that VIAP had submitted a detailed plan to ‘restore and preserve the Thang Long Imperial Citadel relic site’ (Dan Tri International 2013b). This apparently followed a request from the Prime Minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, in November 2012 to turn the site into a ‘cultural and historical park’ that would preserve the archaeological remains and establish an architectural harmony with the adjacent Ba Dinh Political Centre (Dan Tri International 2013a). The work will continue to 2020 and ‘beyond if necessary’ and includes demolition of the colonial structures.

One of the French colonial buildings is the so-called Dragon House built by the French as its artillery headquarters in the late 1880s on the site of the citadel’s principal pavilion, the Kinh Thien Palace. The pretext for this demolition is to allow visitors to see the dragon’s tail, the head being in the flight of dragon stairs built in 1467 CE in front of the palace, but it is likely to be a major step towards reconstructing the palace itself. Indeed the VIAP report contains an architectural drawing of the citadel as planned for 2020 that shows the Kinh Thien Palace rebuilt and the blocks of colonial buildings currently in front of the palace site demolished to make way for a vast square. The newspaper report ends by noting that the planners have been requested to ensure the restored citadel ‘looks as much as possible as it looked originally.’ The fact the that the citadel evolved over more than 1,300 years is conveniently overlooked as, too, is the layering component of the site’s OUV for which it was inscribed on the World Heritage list. It seems the site is already well on the way to being turned into a Ly dynasty theme park.

In July 2014 international attention was drawn to an fire brigade access road recently constructed around the new State Assembly building (VAHS et al 2014). The road encroaches
between 1.5 and 3 metres into the World Heritage site and may have damaged some of the archaeological relics beneath. States Parties undertaking any works impacting on a World Heritage site’s OUV are required to notify UNESCO before the works are carried out. This was not done in this instance. Failure to protect the OUV effectively puts the Thang Long-Hanoi citadel on the slippery road towards World Heritage in Danger listing or even, as happened with Dresden in 2009, removal from the List.

**Vietnam’s Gain, World Heritage System’s Loss**

Changes in Vietnam over the last two decades have been enormous, economically and socially. Vietnamese heritage interventions have to be seen as elements in the overall planning of a developing country undergoing rapid urban transformation. Heritage is seen as an asset to be used for state purposes, both economic and political. Vietnam’s involvement in the World Heritage system marks the country’s blossoming confidence and sophistication in operating in international affairs.

Vietnam continues to push for further World Heritage inscriptions. Its Ho Citadel was inscribed at St Petersburg in 2011 and the Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex at the Doha meeting in 2014, on both occasions as the result of lobbying that enabled negative ICOMOS evaluations to be overturned on the floor of the Committee meetings. Vietnam currently has another six places on its Tentative List. Officials in the country’s heritage agencies appear to be generating this activity in response to enthusiastic statements from government leaders, such as the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nguyen Van Tho, who in an interview for the *Nhan Dan* newspaper in 2007 outlined four reasons for embracing the World Heritage program: (1) it was seen to fit with government policy, especially the resolution of 5th meeting of the Central Party Committee on ‘Building an advanced Vietnam culture with strong national identity’; (2) it promoted national pride and Vietnam’s image in the world; (3) it offered a global brand, and was a prerequisite to developing human resources, attracting foreign investment, especially in tourism; and (4) it could be a good and convincing tool to introduce Vietnam’s national identity to the world, especially its age-old history and rich culture. With such views held at senior government levels World Heritage listing will continue to be seen as a useful nation-building and international relations tool.

We should not be surprised by these events. As Regina Bendix has keenly observed:

> the time has come to move beyond ivory-tower outrage at beholding economic and political actors who know how to turn cultural segments into symbolic as well as actual capital. Heritagisation has to be understood as an ingredient of late modern life worlds (2009:254).

Another reason for not being surprised is that the Vietnamese have a long history of ‘bending with the wind’, of seeming to accept the foreigner’s will but quietly getting on with things in their own way. This can be seen, for instance, in Vietnam’s successful resistance to Chinese and French political control, but it can also be seen in terms of their resistance to international design and technical advice, such as Russian architectural proposals regarding the construction of President Ho Chi Minh’s mausoleum (Logan 2000: 200). Overturning the ICOMOS recommendation at the World Heritage Committee session in Brasilia in 2010, and subsequently at St Petersburg and Doha, falls into the same category, revealing Vietnam’s relentless determination to be its own master, which is understandable and, from their point of view, completely justifiable given the length of their struggle for national independence and international recognition.

While this has no doubt had positive results for Hanoi in terms of global recognition of its heritage, Vietnam’s actions at Brasilia have contributed to the politicisation of the World Heritage system that many observers believe is undermining the fundamental universal objectives of the World Heritage Convention (see, for example, Meskell 2013, 2014; Logan 2012, 2013). Recent events at the Thang Long-Hanoi citadel suggest that politicisation may now be extending beyond the inscription stage to include the post-inscription management
of World Heritage sites. All States Parties to the Convention want the World Heritage brand, but many do not want to be constrained by the World Heritage system rules and oversight, especially by the Advisory Bodies, that go with it.

References


