

Vietnam's Highway No. 1: corridor of power and patrimony*

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Routes as cultural heritage

Recently there has been considerable interest internationally in 'cultural routes' (or 'itineraries') as part of cultural heritage. These are known in some parts of the world as 'heritage trails' although in Australia this term tends to be used for shorter, more localised walks through historic areas. The Council of Europe led the way, establishing a program of European cultural routes that is managed from a specialised institute located in Luxembourg. The program's first initiative is the St Jacques de Compostela Route. This consists, in fact, of two itineraries that commence in central Europe, cross France, the Pyrenees and northwest Spain, and end at Santiago de Compostela, the famous Christian pilgrimage site of the Middle Ages. In the United States and Canada, efforts have been made to commemorate the 'Underground Railroad' - the route taken by slaves trying to reach freedom before the Civil War – by protecting a series of key sites along its length. UNESCO is supporting the Silk Road Project for developing cultural heritage and cultural tourism along the traditional medieval silk trade routes between southeastern Europe and China.¹

The growth of interest internationally in cultural routes has led ICOMOS to add to its network of 'International Scientific Committees' a new ISC on Cultural Routes.² At its inaugural meeting in Madrid in 1994 the ISC defined the basic principles for its operations.³ According to the opening address from the chair of the ISC, Maria Rosa Suarez Ducassi Inclan, of Spain, cultural routes can be seen as 'a very fertile concept', providing

an exceptional framework for the dynamics of mutual understanding, a pluralistic interpretation of history, and a culture of peace. It is based on population movements, encounters and dialogues, and the exchange among and cross-fertilization of cultures in time and space.

The concept of cultural itinerary or route:

- Illustrates exchange and dialogue among countries and regions;

- Reveals a multiplicity of dimensions that extends and enriches its primary function.

This is a grand concept, then, rivaling in its breadth the notion of the heritage area. A final point from Ducassi Inclan's paper tightens the definition and effectively and usefully limits the application of the concept of cultural route: to be regarded as having heritage significance as a cultural route, it must possess a set of values whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The concept is included in the *World Heritage Convention Operational Guidelines* where Article 19 also makes this important limitation, indicating that it is the series of points along the route that must be considered in terms of meeting outstanding universal value criteria and not the component points taken individually.

Nevertheless it remains a large concept and one that may need further consideration in order to clarify its application and limit the number of inappropriate cases that may be put forward by Member States to the World Heritage Convention under the category of 'cultural routes' over the next few years. This paper seeks to apply the concept to what is clearly the major cultural route in Vietnam – its Highway No. 1 – in order to specify further the attributes that a route needs to have to be identifiable according to the ISC and Operational Guidelines definitions, and manageable by the Member State. It may, of course, be that the definitions themselves need to be modified, although this would be a slow and arduous process.

Vietnam's Highway No. 1

The route now known as Highway No 1 has been in existence as a clearly marked and maintained roadway for at least 200 years. Before that it was the line along which the movement of people, animals and goods passed, although the tracks may have wandered within a wider band. This cultural route has seen the sweep of Vietnamese history for that last 1000 years. It runs the length of Vietnam from the Chinese border to the Mekong, and is the major route linking the country's two population centres and economic poles – the political capital, Hanoi, in the north and Ho Chi Minh City, the economic stronghold, in the south. It is Vietnam's 'main street'.

The geography of Vietnam determines that this has been so. The route follows the corridor taken by the Kinh Viet people as they moved south from their historic heartland in the Red River delta. Fast-flowing rivers and streams, prone to frequent flooding, had to be negotiated and crossing points became fixed at least by the late eighteenth century. The presence of the Annamite Cordillera confined the movement to the mountain slopes running down to the coast in what is now central Vietnam. As the Kinh Viet began moving into this area from the tenth century they confronted and eventually defeated the kingdom of Champa (AD 1470-1). Moving on, they skirted the central plateaux and, by the eighteenth

century, arrived in the fertile Mekong River delta. Once the centre of the Funan empire (first–fifth centuries AD), by the eighteenth century this area was occupied largely by peoples belonging to the Khmer empire, itself also in a state of decline. Since then the Kinh Viet have pushed on into Khmer lands bordering and within the area of present-day Cambodia, an ongoing source of friction within the region.

The shape of modern Vietnam makes it difficult to govern and manage, and there have been and remain strong centrifugal tensions that pull the north and south apart. At times the links between north and south were especially tenuous and even broken. In the eighteenth century open conflict erupted between the Trinh warlords, who dominated the royal court in the north, and the Nguyen lords who controlled the new territories in the south. The two parts were re-united under the progressive but short-lived Tay Son regime, and the north-south cultural route and corridor of power was firmly re-established under the ensuing Nguyen dynasty (1802-1945). In order both to assuage and entrench their hold over north and south, the first Nguyen emperor, Gia Long, decided to create a new imperial capital at Hue, on the cultural mainstreet in central Vietnam.

Backbone of the Modern Vietnamese State: The Colonial Period

Step by step Vietnam was absorbed into the French colonial empire. Southern Vietnam became Cochinchina with the capture of Saigon in 1859. The north became the Protectorate of Tonkin in 1883, and the centre, or Annam, came under French control in 1884. Cambodia and Laos were added in 1863 and 1893 respectively. Under the French Indochinese Union, Hue remained the indigenous capital for the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin, but the French installed their own Indochinese Governor-General in Hanoi, giving that city considerable national capital powers. Cochinchina, based on Saigon, was held as a colony; it therefore came under the Governor-General in Hanoi for colonial matters but was, at least as far as the French were concerned, beyond the authority of the court in Hue.

Initially this was no more than a generalised corridor followed by invading northerners. But from the early twentieth century, the north-south route taken by the expanding Kinh Viet was physically reflected in the ‘Route Mandarine’, a key piece of road infrastructure soon paralleled by the main Vietnamese railway line. These allowed the Governor-General’s colonial headquarters in Hanoi in the Protectorate of Tonkin, to link with the imperial court in the Protectorate of Annam and the main port and economic centre largely created under the French at Saigon in the Colony of Cochinchina.

The highway broken and rejoined: cold war, reunification and renovation

The road was always a target of attack in times of political unrest, so much so that during the Vietnam War another highly significant Vietnamese cultural route –

the Ho Chi Minh trail – was opened up to maintain the movement of soldiers, arms and supplies between north and south. The year 1975 saw another reunification and the re-emergence of Highway No. 1 as Vietnam's main street. But its length and the rough terrain it traverses are reminders of the continuing fragility of the Vietnamese state. Efforts are constantly being made, particularly from the Hanoi end, to strengthen the highway's linkage function, in particular to reinforce the primacy of Hanoi as the capital, a position that is threatened by the economic dominance of Ho Chi Minh City in the south. A scheme to tunnel beneath the treacherous Hai Van Pass is currently under consideration.

Issues in recognising cultural routes

Participants in this conference have been asked to address the following headings:

- Routes and cultural identity, the links between cultures and the impact of routes on cultural practices;
- The relationship between routes and the natural environment and the impacts on the natural environment;
- The appreciation and understanding of land and culture through routes;
- The distinctiveness of cultural routes in Australia compared with other countries, and links between Australia and the Asia-Pacific region;
- The relevance of cultural routes in today's world – recognition, interpretation and management.

Vietnam's north-south route can be analysed under these headings. Clearly the route is intrinsically linked to Vietnamese cultural identity (or at least that of the dominant Kinh Viet). The route symbolises the expansion of Kinh Viet political and cultural power and the emergence of the modern Vietnamese state. Its geographical location was determined by the physical environment, being channeled between the frequently swampy sea coast and the rugged Annamite Chain. In return, this corridor of movement had a major impact on the natural environment, leading to the spread of Kinh Viet agricultural and urban land use patterns and the creation of distinctive cultural landscapes.

The story of the opening up and maintenance of this corridor over many centuries provides an innovative and useful way of investigating and interpreting Vietnam's political and cultural history with its ebbs and flows, invasions and wars. This is a story of immense interest to Australians, given Vietnam's proximity to Australia, Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and in the development processes that followed the introduction of the *doi moi* (economic renovation) policies in 1986. On the other hand, there is little evidence to suggest that contemporary Vietnamese see the north-south corridor as a 'cultural route'. For them, the main focus is on the route's political and economic roles.

What is needed for a 'route' to be identified as 'a cultural heritage route'? Clearly a major reconceptualisation of its role is essential. The highway is a cultural heritage feature in its own right, a road that reflects the ebb and flow of power in Vietnamese history and the expansion and imposition of Kinh Viet cultural patterns over most of the area making up the modern Vietnamese state. But is it feasible to attempt to protect a linear feature such as this? The Vietnamese route is not as tightly focused as the St Jacques de Compostela route, being much more multi-dimensional in terms of heritage themes and values. The principal intellectual theme is that of building the nation and this may allow the definition of the key heritage values represented in a general theoretical way by the highway. But it is less easy to identify the attributes, the reflections of the highway's heritage values on the ground. This is an essential requirement if we are to formulate the route's Statement of Significance, the statement from which the management program will flow.

Beads on a string: serial heritage sites

In fact the kilometres of tarmac, potholes and uneven dirt verges tell the current day observer very little about power and culture. Fortunately the highway also connects many of Vietnam's proclaimed and potential cultural heritage sites that tell the Vietnamese story. Like the exemplar St Jacques de Compostela pilgrimage route, these key places are the beads on the string, stopping places on the trail for tourists wanting to understand the country's history.

These sites include:

- the 1000-year old capital city, Hanoi, the 'cradle of Vietnamese civilisation';
- the nineteenth-century imperial capital at Hue, representing the reunification of Vietnam in the nineteenth century under the Nguyen dynasty;
- the historic trading port of Hoi An, an example of an early, pre-colonial stage of economic and cultural globalisation;
- the Cham ruins at My Son and Nha Tranh and the Cham museum in Da Nang, representing the remnants of the Champa empire defeated by the expansionist Kinh Viet;
- the port city of Da Nang, constructed as Tourane by the French and, close to the Vietnam War DMZ, the site of a major US airbase; and
- Ho Chi Minh City, which, as Saigon, was the centre of the anticommunist effort during the Vietnam War vestiges, but which, following Vietnamese reunification, is today the commercial and industrial hub of the country.

The royal citadel and mausoleums of Hue, the ancient port town of Hoi An and the Cham ruins at My Son have been inscribed as cultural properties already on the World Heritage List, added in 1993, 1999 and 1999 respectively. The Vietnam National Commission for UNESCO and the Hanoi People's Committee are now beginning to work on a new submission for the ancient citadel of Thang Long (Hanoi) and the adjacent market town known as Pho Co or the Ancient Quarter,

together with Co Loa, the nearby citadel that preceded the construction of Thang Long. In addition Vietnam has one natural heritage property on the List – Ha Long Bay, inscribed in 1994.

The fact that Vietnam already has a number of listed sites is important in light of a key decision taken by the World Heritage Committee at its 24th Session at Cairns, Australia, in December 2000. The Committee sought to strengthen the Committee's 'global strategy' that is aimed at correcting the List's heavy imbalance in favour of Europe, North America and Asian countries such as China and India. It was decided that only those countries currently under-represented on the World Heritage List might put up more than one new nomination per year. Vietnam would probably not be regarded as under-represented, and so has an interest in pursuing serial site modality, the advantage being that a number of sites could be nominated as a single serial inscription. There might be sense in the Vietnamese heritage authorities seeking to re-interpret the list of towns – the 'beads on the string' - in terms of the Highway No. 1 nation-building theme.

Conclusion

On the one hand there is some urgency for the Vietnamese heritage authorities to consider this suite of cultural sites for protection, perhaps even for World Heritage listing. On the other hand, there will be enormous resistance from other branches of government, in particular those involved in the construction of national transport infrastructure. Road transport represents 79.6 per cent of Vietnam's passenger and 64.7 per cent of freight transport.⁴ It was estimated in 1997 that National Highway 1 would be unable to meet the increasing demand by the year 2000, despite upgrading with funds provided by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. Such upgrading is constrained in three locations where it runs through low-lying, flood-prone areas and also in heavily populated areas, towns and cities. Alternative north-south highways are therefore already being constructed, such as the 1690 km-long Ho Chi Minh Highway.

Officially referred to as National Highway No. 14, this road is designed to become the main north-south route for motor traffic, linking 14 provinces and most major cities but avoiding urban, populous and industrial areas. Between Hanoi and Vinh it runs to the west of National Highway No. 1. It then joins Highway No 1 to Da Nang, passing through a tunnel under the Hai Van Pass, before taking the route of the historic Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was used to take supplies from the North to the South along the Truong Son Mountain Range during the Vietnam War. After following the Trail across the Central Plateau the highway will end in Ho Chi Minh City. In February 2000 the Prime Minister signed the opening of the first 1000 km section from Pho Chau (Ha Tinh Province) to Ngoc Hoi (Kontum Province) and work began under the supervision of a leading consulting company from Cuba.⁵

There is a sensitive relationship between Highway 14 and the natural environment through which it passes. The road works threaten the natural environment and are already causing concern to environmentalists. The scale of the project and its impact on Vietnam, both good and bad, is enormous: overall the road will open up 10 million hectares of land to agriculture and industrial development and allow the relocation of 28 million people.⁶ But specific sections of work threaten key elements of Vietnam's physical and cultural heritage. For instance, in the case of Phong Nha Nature Reserve, an area being considered by UNESCO for potential World Heritage listing, blasting of the mountain sides to make way for the road – 4.5 tonnes of explosives for every kilometre – are seen as a major threat to the area's limestone caves.⁷ Further north, the highway will cut through Cuc Phuong National Park, Vietnam's oldest limestone mountain forest, upsetting the ecological system and destroying scenic amenities.⁸

It has, too, potential to disturb the cultural heritage sites on the Vinh-Da Nang section where it joins Highway No. 1. Considerable road widening is inevitable and possibly realignment will also occur. Even cultural heritage sites already World Heritage listed, such as the Hue complex of monuments or the Cham monuments near Da Nang, will feel the impact. Given the unlikelihood in the Vietnamese context that the road works will be stopped, perhaps the most that can be hoped for is that sufficient pressure can be brought to bear on the national government to ensure that the new road works are kept outside the heritage site boundaries. In the case of Hue, this may require the construction of a ring road around the city and outlying imperial mausoleums. But this would have enormous social benefits in addition to ensuring the safety of the heritage sites and monuments. City dwellers would be relieved of the heavy through-traffic of trucks that currently clog up the main roads and pollute Hue's city centre and suburbs.

Vietnam's highways are closely linked to the evolution and maintenance of cultures and cultural practices. Highway No 1 represents both the path that the dominant Kinh Viet took as they spread their political and cultural influence from the Red River national core and the bonds that tie the north and south into a single political and cultural unit, difficult as the maintenance of that linkage has been at numerous periods in the past. An awareness of the role that the route has taken allows us to understand better the way that Vietnamese national identity has evolved and exists today. Highway 14 will reinforce the linkage, impacting on the natural and cultural heritage in new ways. It will enable the Hanoi political and cultural heartland to exert a larger influence over the rest of the country. Together, Highways 1 and 14 encapsulate a quite distinctive pattern of national evolution, one that contrasts strikingly with the Australian pattern where the current 'nation' – the Commonwealth of Australia – was established as a series of coastal entry points for largely European settlers from which settlement of the vast interior proceeded.⁹ While the origins of Highway 1 might be lost in the mists of the past, the relevance of cultural routes in today's world remains. Their cultural

importance should be recognised, their roles interpreted and the heritage sites along them managed for the enjoyment and education of new generations of Vietnamese and foreign visitors.

Endnotes

¹ See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/heritage/index.html> on the UNESCO Silk Road project.

² The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) was set up by UNESCO in 1965 and is the peak international body of cultural heritage professionals. The Australian national committee – Australia ICOMOS – was founded in 1976. See <http://www.unesco.org/wnc/mwnc/pages/doc/main.html> for a *Report on the Expert Meeting on Routes as Part of the Cultural Heritage*, Madrid, 1994.

³ See Guy Masson, Presentation on behalf of Maria Rosa Suarez Ducassi Inclan, President, International ICOMOS Scientific Committee on Cultural Routes, paper presented to the Australia ICOMOS 'Making Tracks' Conference, Alice Springs, 23-6 May 2001.

⁴ Nguyen Cong Thanh, 'Truong Son in the times of industrialization', *Saigon Times*, 8-14 March 1997, pp. 14-16.

⁵ Ngo Binh, 'The road to the future', *The Saigon Times Weekly*, 8 April 2000, p. 14.

⁶ 'A new backbone route', *The Saigon Times Weekly*, 26 February 2000, p. 23.

⁷ Chris Lang, 'Vietnam: Road-building threatens Phong Nha Nature Reserve', *WRM Bulletin*, no. 41, December 2000.

⁸ Da Trang, 'The controversial route', *The Saigon Weekly Times*, 21 October 2000, p. 26.

⁹ A similarity exists, however, between the conquest of the original Indigenous inhabitants of Australia by the dominant European settlers post-1788 and the invasion of Cham and Khmer lands by the Kinh Viet in Vietnam.

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