



Retailing in places of World Heritage, transition and ‘planned authenticity’

Lotte Thomsen

Department of Management, Society and Communication, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark, Porcelaenshaven 18, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Retail
Heritage tourism
Transition economies
Planned authenticity
Clothing
Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dynamics of retail landscapes in places where World Heritage designation and economic transition occur simultaneously. Empirically, the paper focuses on clothing retail in the significant tourist destination of Hoi An in Vietnam. It shows how the creation of a clothing retail sector is highly linked to the well-planned configuration of an ‘authentic’ Tailor City, leading the paper to reconceptualize the notion of authenticity. The concept of ‘planned authenticity’ is introduced. Planned authenticity refers to the outcome of interventions that lead to the introduction, or increased significance, of activities and products that were not profoundly attached to a place in the past. These are not examples of so-called commodified ancient culture, but carefully planned and relatively new activities appearing as authentic elements of contemporary tourism sectors. Based on fieldwork conducted in Hoi An, the paper identifies three groups of clothing retailers that are positioned differently in a highly competitive context of such planned authenticity. These retailers sell not only clothes but also the idea of clothes produced in seemingly traditional and place-specific ways, although the vast majority of retail shops are relatively newly established and the production of clothing products commonly transcends multiple geographical scales.

1. Introduction

Economic geography scholarship on retail change in developing countries has primarily focused on the emergence and practices of ‘modern’ retail sectors. The main topics that have been explored in this regard include the globalization of transnational retail and the emergence of domestically owned supermarkets that serve growing markets of domestic consumers (e.g., Coe and Wrigley, 2007, 2009). Those topics are not the foci of this paper. Rather, this paper aims to explain the emergence and transformation of the tourism retail sector in Hoi An in central Vietnam; it explores the practices of and challenges facing the clothing retailers that serve global tourists visiting the ancient town. With reference to these clothing retailers, Hoi An is often referred to as the ‘Tailor City’ by both tourists and locals, and it has become one of Vietnam’s most prominent tourist destinations (see Nhung, 2015; Trinh et al., 2014). The paper examines clothing retail activities that appear as ‘authentic’ and are commonly presented to tourists as ‘tailoring’. Thus, the focus is on the retailers that have emerged in a context of ancient architecture and monuments, in which hundreds of clothing retailers, and the thousands of tourists who are their customers, have materialized.

The paper thereby contributes to broadening the discussion of retail geographies in at least three highly interrelated ways. First, it focuses on relatively small domestic retailers rather than modern retail formats such as supermarkets. Second, the examined retailers target incoming

flows of foreign tourists in particular, not domestic consumers. Retailers connected to local tourism sectors have previously received little attention in academic research. Third, the study is set in a significant United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) heritage site and tourist destination. This facilitates reflection on how this type of international intervention affects longer-term retail development and change locally. This paper’s analysis thus diversifies our understanding of the places behind World Heritage listings, which Timms (2010), for example, stresses as an important quest for geographers. Knowledge is gained regarding the relations between tourism retailers and the places in which they work – places in which tradition and heritage are commonly important to the products for sale, which may be considered extensions of place image (see also Swanson and Timothy, 2012). Retailers, along with their activities and products, may somehow become ‘authentic’ by appearing as part of a particular place’s tradition and heritage. The present paper introduces the concept of ‘planned authenticity’ as a way of understanding how such processes play out in contexts of heritage tourism and transition, both of which characterize Hoi An.

Based on fieldwork conducted in Hoi An, this paper makes two highly interlinked propositions: First, although clothing retail and products in contemporary Hoi An may appear to be inevitably linked to the place, the products sold by retailers are not very place-specific. The production of clothing sold in the ancient town commonly transcends multiple geographical scales and is also much less linked to traditional

E-mail address: Lt.msc@cbs.dk.

activities than it appears to be, as it is increasingly industrialized and mass produced. Second, the opportunities and challenges of different retailers vary significantly and are related to the status of individual retailers within a network of tourism stakeholders. This variation should be seen in light of the transitional status of the Vietnamese economy and the way in which the emerging retail sector was planned as part of the country's heritage tourism strategy. The remainder of the paper is divided into the following sections. First, three bodies of relevant literature are outlined focusing on (i) authenticity and heritage, including an introduction to the suggested concept of 'planned authenticity', (ii) retail geographies and tourism, and (iii) the political economy of the retail and tourism sectors in Vietnam. Second, the fieldwork methodology is briefly presented. Third, practices and challenges in the outlined context of transition and heritage within three identified segments of clothing retailers are examined. Finally, the findings are discussed and conclusions are presented.

2. 'Planned authenticity'

In the interphase of the heritage tourism and economic transition that characterizes Hoi An today, the much-debated notion of authenticity becomes essential, and also calls for reexamination. The debate on the interpretation of authenticity dates back at least to the 1970s and the concept of 'staged' authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), and it later moved toward a conceptualization of consumer culture and place branding, which underlines the spatial dimensions of the concept (see Knudsen and Waade, 2010). Waitt (2000) suggests using the term 'perceived historical authenticity' to underline how past events may be observed in various ways by different actors. Representations of the past are inherently selective but also linked to sectional interests within a society; thus, they are often intended to lead tourists toward particular sites and toward a certain understanding of those sites (see also Urry, 2002). Like heritage tourism, authenticity is intrinsically connected with place. Souvenirs of various kinds are commonly associated with aspects of the culture and heritage of the places tourists visit – and thus with the purchase of something 'real' (Swanson and Timothy, 2012; Trinh et al., 2014). Related concepts of so-called imagined or invented authenticity have also been suggested and explored, including in Hoi An, where the focus has been on tourism activities other than clothing retail. James (2010), for example, shows how the relatively recent invention of monthly lantern festivals in Hoi An may be considered a celebration of imagined heritage. The author shows how the city of Hoi An was not historically known as a particularly important origin of specific products – except perhaps, to a minor extent, of particular types of pottery and noodles. Thus, it is further argued that traditional handicraft skills now regarded as representative of the ancient town became so because of a selective commodification of particular ideas of history, tradition and heritage in the ancient city. This point somewhat reflects Wherry's (2006a) suggestion that market interfaces have been created for tourists and for those who produce and sell cultural goods designated by the state. Such products are regarded as linked to the state's self-perception and its idea of which particular culture is representative of the character of a place (see also Wherry, 2006b). Likewise, Trinh et al. (2014) note that the tourist authorities in Hoi An have generally promoted a selected and manipulated understanding of the authentic, while certain other aspects of the past are conveniently overlooked. Thus, heritage may become a focus of struggle and dispute over its use (see also Hitchcock et al., 2010). The role of international organizations such as UNESCO in these processes has been quite widely explored, and 'heritage' is rarely a purely local concern (Adams, 2010; Hitchcock et al., 2010).

For the sake of the present study, the discussion of authenticity is considered important to the analysis of the *products* sold by clothing retailers in Hoi An, of the *processes* by which such products are produced, and of the *planned modes* in which Hoi An was developed into a heritage tourism site that provide a context for the contemporary

tourist retail sector. Such elements of authenticity, which stretch beyond buildings and monuments in Hoi An, are here considered not only 'imagined' but also carefully planned. They are a reflection of the transitional status of the Vietnamese economy. Tourists come to Hoi An to visit the heritage sites, often hoping to buy place-specific products such as particular souvenirs and tailored clothes to remind them of the place they visited, accentuating the notion of Urry (1990, 2002) that with globalization, the value of the differences between places is increasingly branded and reflected in objects of consumption. It is suggested here that in the exploration of such processes in contexts where both heritage and transition are key constituents, a concept of 'planned authenticity' is useful. 'Planned authenticity' refers to more or less planned interventions leading to the introduction, or increased significance, of activities and products that were not profoundly attached to a particular place historically but now appear to be so. Such activities and products do become part of the tourist gaze; they play a role in the ways in which the gaze is constructed and maintained (Urry, 2002; Urry and Larsen, 2011). Yet, they are not an example, or a direct part, of a commodification of culture or past events. They were not clearly attached to the place in the past, and are therefore not examples of a commodified ancient culture. Rather, they are carefully planned and relatively new activities that come to appear as authentic elements of the context in which they emerge. In Hoi An, tailoring activities and products arguably exemplify such planned authenticity. The heritage status of the city has contributed profoundly to creating a market where entrepreneurs can establish retail businesses and sell their products domestically in a space in which 'the global' – in the form of foreign tourists – is invited. These processes, as well as their outcomes, will be examined in the empirical section below.

3. Retail geographies and tourism

Retail is a vital aspect of what is here seen as planned authenticity in Hoi An, and it is an important part of the tourism strategy and development of the Quang Nam region. Nation states and regions, not least in developing countries, have also been widely concerned with promoting tourist industries for decades. Retailers selling various types of souvenirs and handicrafts often play an essential role in tourism economies, and products purchased by tourists may be important sources of income for local populations (see e.g., Wherry, 2006a). Despite its economic importance, however, tourism retail has not received much attention in the literature on retail geographies, nor has it been thoroughly analyzed in studies of handicrafts that have provided knowledge of the practices and livelihoods of rural artisans – more so than of retailers – in urban areas (see e.g., Gough and Rigg, 2012). Until a couple of decades ago, the role of retail in developing countries was a relatively new and unexplored area for researchers, including geographers. The importance of place in retail development was – until recently – discussed mainly as a factor that determined locational choice and the viability of market entry modes and retail formats for transnational retailers (see Wood and Reynolds, 2012; Wood and Reynolds, 2014). Nevertheless, studies based on the so-called new retail geographies have contributed to broadening our understanding of the importance of context by examining, for example, how transnational retail is influenced by political economies in host economies (Hobbs, 1997; Lowe and Wrigley, 2010; Wrigley et al., 2005). These researchers have insisted not only on merely exploring locational factors but also on seriously considering the economic and cultural geographies of retail (Coe and Wrigley, 2007; Tacconelli and Wrigley, 2009).

The current retail landscape in Hoi An should also be understood from a national perspective. It is important, for example, to understand that compared to the rest of Southeast Asia, modern retail formats have entered the Vietnamese retail scene slowly, with a very low share of total grocery sales of only 4% in 2013. For comparison, in Indonesia, the share was 16.5%, while it was 71% in Singapore. Vietnam also has the lowest share of foreign retailers in the region (Coe and Bok, 2014;

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7353667>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7353667>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)