

From Memory Complex to Heritage Tourism Practices Linked With the Bien Hoa Ceramics Ecosystem, Dong Nai, Vietnam

Linh Duy Ta, Ph.D¹, Cung Nguyen, M.A²

¹Institute for Economic Development and Tourism Research in Ho Chi Minh City

²Cung Trading Service Education and Tourist Company Limited

ABSTRACT: Across diverse geographical regions globally, the art of pottery has been intricately linked with the historical development of humanity. The Bien Hoa pottery tradition, despite its relative youth, embodies significant historical, utilitarian, symbolic, and unique aesthetic values that resonate with the Vietnamese ethos of creative labor. These values, encapsulated within a memory complex, require careful unpacking to fully appreciate and elevate the legacy of Bien Hoa's ceramic heritage. This research posits that one effective method to disseminate and augment the heritage value of Bien Hoa ceramics involves harnessing the intrinsic worth of traditional craftsmanship in conjunction with practices of heritage tourism. With the objective of forging spaces for heritage tourism experiences tied to the Bien Hoa ceramics craft, the study delineates: i) the process of unraveling the memory complex tied to the Bien Hoa ceramics ecosystem; ii) preliminary explorations aimed at enriching the Bien Hoa ceramics ecosystem's value through heritage tourism endeavors.

KEYWORDS: Bien Hoa Ceramics, Memory Complex, Tourism, Heritage, Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Arthur Pedersen (2002) posited that "Tourism can serve as a catalyst for promoting cultural values by supporting local handicraft industries or by fostering targeted economic activities" (p.11). This assertion suggests that tourism functions as an economic engine with the potential to significantly contribute to the conservation and enhancement of cultural heritage values. In the modern era, the advocacy for heritage tourism is robust, positioning it as a critical strategy for global and Vietnamese implementation. Heritage values, enriched and perpetuated over generations, are culturally transmitted and preserved (Đặng Thị Tuyết, 2016, p.97). Yet, the integrity of these values may erode over time (Hoàng Thùy Linh & Ngô Thị Kim Liên, 2020, p.93). Heritage's vitality can fluctuate, influenced by temporal dynamics. The narrative of Bien Hoa ceramics exemplifies the vicissitudes of heritage through time. The research team anchors this study on the premise that the memory complex, mirroring the ascendancy and wane of Bien Hoa's ceramic heritage, is sculpted through the prism of cultural livelihoods, bestowing a unique image and brand essence upon Bien Hoa ceramics. Nguyễn Thị Phương Châm & Hoàng Cẩm (2022) critique the longstanding perception of cultural heritage as a relic of the past that embodies values, beliefs, and knowledge emblematic of a bygone era. This perspective has neglected the socio-economic facets of cultural heritage within modern contexts, rendering its association with progress—a notion typically aligned with the present and future—challenging (p.64). Complementarily, Trần Thị An (2020) articulates that "Heritage consists of narratives and values shaped by communities, transforming today's stories into tomorrow's legacies" (p.30). In the dialogue on memory within today's milieu, Tạ Duy Linh (2021) advocates for a reflective approach towards the past as a foundation for future projections, heralding it as a repository of invaluable ancestral wisdom. Drawing upon the insights of Nguyễn Thị Phương Châm & Hoàng Cẩm, Trần Thị An, and Tạ Duy Linh, this paper delves into the memory complex surrounding the lifecycle of Bien Hoa ceramics—from creation to consumption. This historical lens affords an understanding of how Bien Hoa's ceramic heritage has been shaped, evolved, and solidified into distinct memory complexes that have seeped into the collective consciousness. The contemporary perspective underscores the potential to repurpose these ingrained values into tourism offerings that simultaneously preserve and elevate Bien Hoa ceramics' heritage.

Hence, this article elucidates how heritage tourism practices can rejuvenate the memory complex tied to the Bien Hoa ceramics ecosystem. It posits heritage tourism as a dynamic conduit for perpetuating Bien Hoa's cultural identity, thereby amplifying the ecosystem's intrinsic values.

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2. DECODING THE MEMORY COMPLEX ASSOCIATED WITH THE BIEN HOA CERAMICS ECOSYSTEM

In the realm of cultural and heritage studies, Sharon Macdonald stands out as one of the pioneering authors to introduce the concept of a “memory complex”. Macdonald (2013) expands this idea into a “memory – heritage - identity complex” (p.5), highlighting a multifaceted relationship between these elements. This study identifies the Bien Hoa ceramics ecosystem as embodying such a complex, emerging from a rich history of integration and cultural exchanges among the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cham communities (Đỗ Bá Nghiệp et al., 2004, p.64), as well as between Eastern and Western cultures (Trần Đình Quả, 2017, p.49). This melting pot of influences has bestowed upon Bien Hoa ceramics their distinctive utility and artistic merit.

Trần Đình Quả (2017) traces the origins of Bien Hoa ceramics to the Vietnamese exploration of the Trấn Biên region and the subsequent settlement of Chinese artisans by Lord Nguyễn, marking the inception of a thriving ceramics tradition in the area known as Cù Lao Phố (p.13). He further notes that the golden era of Bien Hoa ceramics began in the early 20th century, enriched by diverse decorative influences from both East and West (p.49). Đỗ Bá Nghiệp and colleagues (1998) suggest that the establishment of pottery kilns by Chinese immigrants in 1679 laid the foundational stones for what would become the renowned Bien Hoa ceramics. The narrative continued as these artisans moved and evolved their craft, culminating in the iconic “turquoise with blooming flower” glaze that would symbolize Bien Hoa's ceramic legacy on the global stage, thanks to efforts led by Mr. and Mrs. Balick (French) as well as local artisans in the early 20th century.

This historical tapestry illustrates the Bien Hoa ceramics as a product of multicultural exchanges, evolving into a complex embodying collective memory, heritage, and identity. The vibrant and dynamic cultural practice space associated with Bien Hoa pottery underscores its significance in the export market (Phạm Quốc Quân, 2019, p.64) and its enduring legacy within the community (Nguyễn Thị Hồng Lan, 2023, p.71). Central to the ceramics ecosystem are various stakeholders including educational institutions, associations, artisans, collectors, consumers, researchers, and policymakers, each playing a pivotal role in sustaining and enhancing the craft's value.

The narrative of Bien Hoa ceramics, marked by its golden age and unique contributions to Vietnamese architecture and culture, such as the Ben Thanh Market's exterior decorations, embodies a living heritage continually enriched by its association with daily life, traditional motifs, and the collective memory of the community. This interweaving of past and present, of memory and identity, not only cements Bien Hoa ceramics' place in the annals of cultural heritage but also positions it as a cornerstone for future heritage tourism and economic development initiatives.

In summary, in the current context, Bien Hoa ceramics is one of the prestigious brands, which is renowned in the memories of collectors, consumers, and the community. It is a valuable resource for exploitation and tourism development.

3. SUGGESTIONS TO AMPLIFY THE VALUE OF THE MEMORY COMPLEX IN BIEN HOA CERAMICS THROUGH HERITAGE TOURISM

From the perspective of exploiting and developing heritage tourism from the "memory complex" and within the limits of this article, we introduce two main viewpoints as follows:

First viewpoint: The “memory – heritage - identity complex” associated with the Bien Hoa ceramics ecosystem serves as input material, playing the role of a unique tourism resource in creating heritage tourism experiences. With this approach, we believe the “memory complex” associated with the ceramics ecosystem needs to be vividly illustrated through the creation of tourism destinations linked to events, festivals, and tourism products.

Accordingly, tourism destinations, events, festivals, and Bien Hoa ceramics tourism products need to be recreated to "popularize" and transform tourists' understanding from “cognitive understanding to complete understanding”. The memory of the Bien Hoa ceramics ecosystem needs to be both “decoded” and “unpacked”. Accordingly, decoding is necessary to clarify identity and once the identity is recognized, it will be easier to create distinctive tourism products. Unpacking is to clarify the application potential of heritage values in the exploitation and development of tourism.

Second viewpoint: The “memory – heritage - identity complex” associated with the Bien Hoa ceramics ecosystem through the practice of heritage tourism is also a driving force for sustainable growth. This is because the values of the past - tradition are recreated and when disseminated, they will effectively ensure the vitality of the heritage is accumulated over time instead of facing the risk of diminishment. Although crystallized in the past, it does not mean that the “memory – heritage - identity complex” will not be forgotten in the present and future.

The two viewpoints aim to consider the “memory – heritage - identity complex” as one of the important resources for exploiting and developing heritage tourism associated with the Bien Hoa ceramics ecosystem. At the same time, other resources also need in-depth research. However, the result of this research has not had the opportunity to address market principles, human resources, policies, tourism resources, infrastructure, etc. We believe that the remaining issues require in-depth research, with strategic development projects for Bien Hoa tourism linked to ceramic heritage in the future.

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4. CONCLUSION

Building from the "memory – heritage - identity complex," we propose the creation of a dedicated space for heritage tourism practices centered around the Bien Hoa ceramics ecosystem in Bien Hoa city. This envisioned space should embody the "memory – heritage - identity" complex, serving as a tangible representation of these intertwined elements. The grounding in the "memory complex" plays a crucial role in celebrating and honoring the rich historical values and traditions intrinsic to the Bien Hoa ceramics. Furthermore, integrating heritage tourism practices builds upon this foundation, enhancing the relevance and dynamism of these cultural heritages within modern settings.

The synergistic integration of the "memory complex" with heritage tourism initiatives offers a holistic perspective that spans "past – present – future," ensuring a comprehensive appreciation and understanding of the cultural continuum. Through this approach, the unique attributes of the Bien Hoa ceramics heritage are not only preserved but are also actively promoted, contributing significantly to the socioeconomic and cultural landscape of Dong Nai province. This strategy also aligns with broader objectives aimed at fostering regional tourism development, showcasing how localized heritage can play a pivotal role in wider economic and cultural ecosystems.

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