

War Tourism and its "Authenticity"

The largest tourism niche Vietnam profits from today, and has been since 1986 when the country began to encourage foreign investment and travel, is war tourism. The profits earned from the country's history and centuries of turmoil under western powers are undeniably beneficial to its economy. In addition to helping the country's economic wealth, such tourist exhibits also serve to educate those who had either never heard about the incidents or were ill informed by the media. To be able to see the location where the events took place first-hand offers both a more "authentic" experience for the tourist as well as an opportunity for the residents to clarify their history through personal narratives.

The authenticity a historical site can offer can also be wrongly construed from too much reconstruction. This happens when the intention for the tourist attraction becomes unclear as to whether it is meant for educational or entertainment purposes (Henderson 2000:279). As a consequence, the site becomes highly ineffective in informing visitors of its war history. If this is the case, "the visitor's experience at a heritage site is perhaps in danger of becoming one of 'mindlessness' " (Moscardo: 1996). Lippard also commented, "often the very techniques used to memorialize specific areas of the site, hide or even destroy the visible links to the past" (1999:121). The state of "mindlessness" that Moscardo refers to when discussing indifferent and passive tourism is similar to Young's "memory without consequence"(Lippard 1999:199). This happens when a rendition of a historical site has been overly constructed, perhaps in an excessively glamorized manner, to the extent where there becomes no need for the visitor to be cognizant of the surroundings and end up walking through the exhibit blindly, lacking introspection and contrition. By "over commodifying" a country's past through specific tourism niches, it risks damaging the inherent informative nature, which the site itself has the ability to offer all on its own.

In the following paper I will discuss the initial tourism boom in Vietnam by explaining the country's first tourism reform policy (Suntikul, Butler, Airy 2008:2). Subsequently, I will draw attention to how the onset of tourism has had both positive and negative effects for foreigners as well as residents. The war tourist attraction I will be focusing on is the Cu Chi Tunnels. By explaining the positive and negative effects of the exploitation of the Cu Chi Tunnels, I hope to portray how war tourism has the ability to both inform and raise

consciousness while at the same time extinguish an event's importance by solely providing "a kind of prurient entertainment" (Lippard 1999:129) Toward the end of the paper I will argue how tourism can be highly beneficial for both tourists and residents as long as authenticity is not the main objective for the touristic experience. Authenticity is immediately lost when the actual event ended in history and therefore, the experience can never be fully available to those who were not directly involved.

Doi Moi Policy:

After the American War in Vietnam, most of the French influenced tourist facilities, which had enticed both foreign and domestic travelers in previous decades, had lost their appeal due to war damages (Suntikul, Butler, Airy 2008:2). The post-1975 Vietnam suffered both socially and economically and the "reunification" of the north and south had yet to accomplish peace (Cooper 2000:167). As the communist government in Vietnam in the late 1970's early 80's ended up having complete control over all economic and political transactions, it closed the country's doors to almost all western foreign investment, which had a direct effect on the already weak economy. In 1986, the Vietnamese National Congress introduced an economic reform program that would transition the country from the communist centralized economy to a more socialist-localized market economy (Cooper 2000:167; 168). The transition served to promote the involvement of both state and private sectors in international trade and to encourage the private sector to be the heart of the newly reformed decentralized government (Suntikul, Butler, Airy 2008:2).

The name of the new reform program was "Doi Moi," meaning renovation (Henderson 2000:271). In 1987, a year after the reform was introduced, the congress released the Law of Foreign Investment in an effort to help the success of the "Doi Moi" reform. Most of the foreign investments that were offered after the release of these government policies were channeled towards Vietnam's tourism industry (Suntikul, Butler, Airy 2008:2;4;5). Tourism became the main contributor to the country's economic development; not only because of the foreign investment it encouraged but also due to the jobs it created for the local residents. In 1994, after witnessing the increasing Asian and European business investment in Vietnam, the U.S. finally lifted its 1975 ban on trade and investment in the country (Jansen-Verbeke, Frank 1995: 316). Soon after, in 1995, Vietnam was accepted into Associations of the organization of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN) and later, in 2007, welcomed into the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Suntikul, Butler, Airy 2008:2). After 30 years of turmoil and profound consequences experienced from the war, the "Doi Moi" reform and the promotion of foreign investment provided Vietnam with a new, refined image in the international market.

In 1995, the United Nations World Tourism Organization and United Nations Development Program collaborated to establish a "Master Plan" for tourism in Vietnam (Henderson 200:272). In addition to creating an outline for the country's very first tourism law, the plan was initiated to bring some form of organization to a market still in its infancy stages (Suntikul, Bulter, Airy 2008:2). The "Master Plan" capitalized on the country's wartime history for tourism enterprises, specifically concerning that of the U.S. and Vietnamese conflict. This specific conflict was a main focus for tourism most likely because it had such wide coverage throughout the world, which therefore guaranteed the attraction of foreign travelers.

The economic benefits are an obvious outcome of war tourism. However, to think that an entire country wants to exploit such tragic events only to reap its financial benefits would be narrow minded and a misjudgment of the country's character. Nations all over the world use their devastations and tragedies as outlets for business opportunities. However, it's important to realize that along with generating a significant amount of revenue, these types of sites also offer a place for the residents to tell their country's history to foreigners from their own experience (Lippard 1999:125).

The Cu Chi Tunnels

After the war, most of the Vietnam's cultural heritage sites, as Alneng put it, "were destined for great tourism in ruins" while at the same time the country was ironically blessed with other sites such as the Cu Chi Tunnels (2002). The Cu Chi Tunnels was a National Liberation Front garrison directly at the center of enemy territory during the American War in Vietnam. It was an underground network that extended all the way from Saigon to the border of Cambodia (Alneng 2002:473). In the 1940s it was originally constructed by the Viet Minh, however, as the communist forces operating in the south began to be recognized, the Viet Cong expanded the tunnels. The underground tunnels were extremely close, if not directly under the U.S. Army's 25th Infantry Division Camp in the district. Knowing of the tunnels existence, the U.S. did everything in its power to destroy them. But to their disadvantage, the three-story Viet Cong living units were impossible to demolish (Henderson 2000:275).

Today, a small section of these underground tunnels, which were used for the Viet Cong's "sleeping quarters, storerooms, hospitals, ordnance factories, kitchens and headquarters," have been opened up as a tourist attraction (Alneng 2002:473). On the Cu Chi Tunnels tour, visitors are lead by a guide who is well versed in their history. In addition, these tour guides often have personal wartime stories of their own to contribute to the tour (Alneng 2002:472). At the beginning of the excursion, the tourists are to watch a short film to inform them of the site's history as well as offer a briefing on how the war upset traditional Vietnamese lifestyles, the heroism of the Viet Cong, and the strategic significance of the tunnels (Henderson 200:277). Following the film, the guide gives a short lecture about the tunnel's structural layout with maps and models. After the movie and discussion, small groups are led through a well-maintained trail to see the remains of American tanks and artillery as well as the booby traps that were constructed by the Viet Cong to destroy the enemy. Once viewing these war vestiges, the guide shepherds the tourists to the tunnel's entrance. The entrance has been opened up, enlarged, and reconstructed in order to accommodate more bodies and make the tour comfortable for those participating. Along with the guide's historical overview on the inside of the tunnels, tourists are also asked to take tea and cassava in one of the tunnel's rooms; this was the staple diet of the soldiers during the war. These are available for the visitors to feel as though they are some how experiencing what life was once like at the site (Henderson 2000:277).

The tour comes to an end, like all traditional tourist venues do, with a gift shop. This is where one can purchase replicated war paraphernalia including, army helmets, dog tags, Zippo lighters supposedly left by soldiers after the war, and postcards depicting life in the Cu Chi Tunnels. Across from the gift shop there is a firing range where visitors can shoot a replica AK-47 rifle (Henderson 2000:277). The entire event can be captured through numerous photo opportunities by either posing with an AK-47, dressing up in Viet Cong attire or modeling next to a "rusty tank that had been pierced with bamboo spikes" (Henderson 200:277).

Discussion on The Cu Chi Tunnels

-The Positive Outcomes and Effects of War Tourism:

Perhaps locations where war, tragedy, and disaster have taken place in a country's history are often turned into tourist sites because it provides an opportunity for the residents to convey the historical event on their own terms. All too often, a country's history becomes "disfigured" when it enters into another population's historical narrative. Sites associated with war tourism

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can help distribute details that have been left out in the news, candy coated by films, or simply manipulated by different authorities to create a certain type of imagery. On the Cu Chi Tunnels tour, as Alneng explained, the guide opens the visit with "Don't believe anything you see or hear in Vietnam, because 90 percent of everything is government propaganda" (2002:473). Also, while Alneng discussed how the tour guides are expected to follow a rehearsed procedure, he made a point to indicate that the guide's dialogue often swayed away from the scripted narrative in order to express more personal stories about himself or his ancestor's experiences in the tunnels (2002:474). This was most likely a tool used to bring personality and real characters into the narration. Often times when people are given actual scenarios that occurred at a location, they are able to retain information as well as relate more to the place, people or event even when they themselves had not personally had the experience (Baumeister; Newman 1994). This is one of the main positive attributes of war tourism. Witnessing the history of an event from the local perspective has the power to restore humanity to its repetitious social commentary (Lippard 1999:125). Therefore sites, such as the Cu Chi Tunnels, have the ability to take sections of the Vietnam War, which has often been removed from its "geopolitical reality" and replaced by a "mythical box office war," and return its poignant reality by giving it personal context (Alneng 2002: 262).

All monuments and war locations have stories. However, if they are never visited these monuments and untold stories are worthless. As a result, the monuments would "not be doing their job" (Lippard 1999: 129). The Cu Chi Tunnel site is "doing its job" by providing an opportunity for people to make physical visits. Making the site available to the public simulates and educates various populations as well as offers a public space for a shared, common experience. As visitors witness the site's history through a tour of the tunnel, they are able to look around and share their reactions with other visitors. Crowds tend to arouse a similar emotive understanding. War sites also have the ability to offer a 'coming to terms' with the tragedy that has been put on display (Lippard 1999: 122;130).

-The Negative Effects of War Tourism:

Contrasting the positive attributes that Vietnam's war tourism can offer such as the educational benefits and economic prosperity, one has to question if these sites are in fact being displayed in a manner effective for informative purposes and not merely entertainment (Jerome, Tanner, Dupuis 2006). While war tourism can be didactic, too much "performance" can also

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result in a loss of the site's identity and authenticity, risking becoming an over commodified empty version of history not effectively invoking visitors to contemplate the incidents that occurred at the site's location; ensuing the "mindless tourist" (Alneng 2002:462; Moscardo: 1996).

A country's nationalism, for instance, can have negative effects on a war tourist site. It could blur the real facts with propaganda, leaving tourists unimpressed and questioning what was real and what was not (Henderson 2000:277). Henderson expresses this issue through his experience at the Cu Chi Tunnels. He interpreted a lot of the tour to be about how "The Viet Cong are heroes prepared to risk all for their country and the enemy are villains who deserve the harshest of punishments"(Henderson 2000:277). This mix of propaganda, entertainment, and education may give an uneasy and sometimes confusing combination of experiences for the visitor (Henderson2000:279). Alneng expressed his feelings about the propaganda he witnessed while watching the mandatory short film showed at the beginning of the Cu Chi Tunnels tour by calling it "Pathetic communist propaganda"(2002:272). He also referenced the emotions the film provoked in travel writer Harold Trumen, who commented, "Its [the film's] effect on me was to kill the desire to see anymore official history exhibits" (2002:474).

Lippard raises the question of what the motivation is behind tragic tourism in regards to the tourist (1999:119). However, instead of questioning the tourist's motivations, I would like to raise the question of motivation in regards to the residents or those who are responsible for the site's content in terms of tragic tourism. Henderson states that at the Cu Chi Tunnels "there is little attempt to address the complexities of the military and political history of the period and certain aspects of tunnel life and warfare are neglected or ignored". From his interpretation, it indicates to the reader that there is a lack of an initiative to convey the historical truth and perhaps more of a desire to provide a tourist "hotspot" solely for entertainment purposes. If this is the case, the representation and presentation of the site may be inappropriate for the material it is exhibiting (Henderson 2000:278).

On the Cu Chi Tunnels tour, there seems to be a lot of 'role-play'. Tourists are able to supposedly "experience what it was like to be a Viet Cong" by dressing the part (Alneng 2002:474). The visitors are given a uniform to wear, if desired, for a limited amount of time in order to be able to take a quick snap shot with a statue of a replicated Viet Cong member (Henderson 2000:278). Along with dressing the part, one can also experience the Viet Cong's

diet by joining the guide and other tourists for tea and cassava (as explained above) (Alneng 2002:474). These types of reenactments that are provided for the tourist's experience do not supply an adequate message about the tunnel's history. To understand the events that took place at a site, like the Cu Chi Tunnels, perhaps the history should only be seen and heard, not necessarily experienced; the conflict between spectacle vs. engagement (Lippard 1999:119).

These types of tourist attractions are not places where one can live vicariously through others because the "other's" experiences are no longer there to be relived (Lippard 1999:119). The tourist site is only the "shell" of the experience. Instead, history should be absorbed, contemplated, shared, and lamented. The participation, however, and the attempt to engage in the "experience," damages the authenticity. If one participates in a reenactment, when the tourists leave the site, the crucial elements of the event will not be taken away in their memories, only the snap shot of themselves or their children posing with a Viet Cong statue will be associated with the experience (Alneng 2002:474; Henderson 2000:479). When war becomes *over* commodified, education is sacrificed for entertainment (Lippard 1999:128).

Henderson discusses at the end of the Cu Chi Tunnels tour visitors are able to practice using an AK-47 rifle, for a price, on various targets (2000:277). Should history be "experienced" in this fashion, especially at a location where in the past, those same weapons were used to kill people? If one was to look at a gun in a glass case or see one from afar, that alone sometimes has the ability to spark memento. By having the tourist partake in using a gun seems to disassociate the weapons from the memories of all 10,000 deaths that took place in the Tunnels and in turn, replace those impressions instead with a lesson on how to aim at a desired target (Alneng 2002:473). This spoils the country's identity and the historical importance of the site.

A Conclusion on War Tourism

War tourism can provide positive and negative effects to both the visitors of the site and residents of the country. However, by using the Cu Chi Tunnels, I aimed to represent how the "goods and bads" of tourism cannot be considered in such black and white dichotomies. Tourism has brought some wonderful benefits for the local community in Vietnam in regards to their economy and being able to personalize their history. These types of sites can also educate and inform the tourists (Lippard 1999:129; Henderson 2000:269; Alneng 2002:474). At the same time, if the site becomes more interested in entertaining than educating the visitors, it can do a disservice for both the residents and tourists by neglecting what is resembled in the country's

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history and destroying its effectiveness for educational purposes. As a consequence of poor presentation of a country's history, the local community may end up at war with their own social identity (Alneng 2002:462). As for the tourist, the ineffectiveness of such sites can provide nothing worthy of retaining, resulting in the "mindless" tourist, who simply goes through the motions of a tour blindly, without reflecting on the site's purpose (Henderson 2000:278; Lippard 1999:123;129).

A war tourism site will never be "authentic" to a visitor who had not experienced the event first hand. Therefore, a site should only educate and inform the visitors to invoke a sense of profound connection and understanding, which at times may even have the ability to conjure up a sense of cathartic reflection. What must be realized, however, is the tourist attraction can only inform and educate the visitor to a certain degree, after a point, the imagery of the event is the responsibility of the tourist's own thoughts and manifestations. To force "authenticity" through role-play and reenactment can, I believe, jeopardize a site like the Cu Chi Tunnels of its organic historical and informative richness, creating a false and impersonal experience, sacrificing a tourist's private reflection for empty entertainment.

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