

# Regional Identity of a World Heritage Site, Hoi An Ancient Town, Vietnam

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## Introduction

### Background and Objectives of Research

Today, most of the local people resorts to tourism to maintain their livelihood, increasing the number of shops for tourists gradually. Unfortunately, should this trend continue, the local culture will recede, leading to its disappearance.

In order to avoid such situation, various organization such as the United Nations are aiming for the development of “sustainable tourism” and stressing its importance. To realize this plan, maintaining the local culture while promoting it as the main tourism resource for the locals’ livelihood is vital. Thus, understanding the present situation of the tourist spots, local culture and lifestyle is the prerequisite for the plan.

Based on the above, the purpose of this research is to demonstrate the appeals of Hoi An Ancient Town through the understanding of: (1) present façade of the town, (2) the appeal of Hoi An Ancient Town from guidebooks, (3) the overall impression of the town that tourists and hosts hold.

## Outline of Hoi An

Hoi An is a port town located in Quang Nam Ministry, central Vietnam (Fig. 1). With total population of approximately 122,000 and the area of roughly 60km<sup>2</sup>.

Hoi An once flourished as a base of The Silk Road. However, its prosperity declined due to restriction policies implemented by the French colonials in the mid-19th century. Thus, Hoi An was left behind from the following development. Nevertheless, it is precisely due to this, the original townscape which encompasses the merge between Vietnamese and French colonial culture could still remain until the 20th century. The Vietnamese government designated Hoi An Ancient Town as a national important cultural property in March 1985. In March 1990, an international symposium was held in Da Nang, with the preservation of the Hoi An townscape emphasized as a top-priority issue. This sparked numerous architectural survey and building restorations to be conducted, which had been disregarded until then. With the cooperation from various countries including Japan, Hoi An city together with its locals eagerly commenced preservation movements. As a result, in December 1999, the city was registered as a World Cultural Heritage Site under the name of Hoi An Ancient

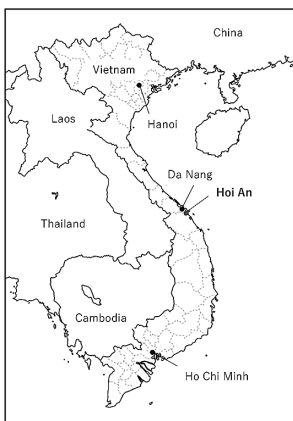


Fig.1. the location of Hoi An



Fig.2. the townscape of Hoi An

Town. The direct criterion is that Hoi An demonstrate the cultural integration of historic international trading ports while preserving the state of traditional Asian trading port well (Fig. 2).

After being registered as a World Heritage Site, Hoi An has undergone remarkably rapid economic growth. On the other hand, various negative influence was observed to local culture such as the uncontrollable increase of tourist shops. It is feared that putting excessive emphasis on the economy only will result in the homogenization of Hoi An, leading to the disappearance of its unique culture. There are not many cases where a residential area is registered as a World Heritage Site. Thus, it is important not only to preserve the physical heritage, but also to maintain the correlation between the culture and the lifestyle of local residents.

### Previous Research

Utsumi (1999, 2001) had conducted research which relate to this study, where the composition of the buildings were analyzed from the changes of townscape's façade photographs which are taken over the years. However, 20 years have passed since this research, prompting further study to be conducted to grasp the changes that have been occurred in Hoi An.

In addition, Utsumi (2016) conducted a questionnaire survey on tourists visiting Hoi An to clarify their behavior and evaluation of Hoi An. On the other hand, the appeals of the town to the local residents have not been clarified yet.

This study is based on the previous research, however, is considered unique in the following points:

1. Updating the present situation on the façade of the buildings that make up the streets of Hoi An
2. Deriving the appeal of Hoi An in multiple guidebooks
3. Conducting a questionnaire survey on both the tourists and local residents, analyzing the correlation between the image of Hoi An that tourists and the local residents hold.

### Methodology

This study was conducted by three methods: visual survey, literature survey, questionnaire survey. Through

the visual survey conducted in 2019, the façade types, façade colors, and the number of floors of the buildings were identified and established as the basis for this study. In the literature survey, the appeals of Hoi An that are depicted in the guidebooks were clarified by correlating the distinctive values and selling points from five guidebooks. Furthermore, questionnaire survey was conducted targeting 100 tourists and 50 local residents. By analyzing the acquired data, the following points can be derived: (1) tourists' expectation from Hoi An (2) the qualities that the hosts wish to extend.

### Visual Survey

Visual survey was conducted from September to October 2019. The subject of the survey are 374 buildings on the three main streets in Hoi An Ancient Town; Tran Phu Street, Nguyen Thai Hoc Street, and Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street. First, the façades of each buildings are captured in pictures. Then, the number of floors of the buildings, façade types and colors were recorded, and summarized for each street.

From the data summary, it was clarified that the ratio of the number of floors of the buildings and façade types are different for each streets (Fig. 3 and 4), while the façade colors for each streets relate significantly (Fig. 5 and 6). It is observed that more than half of the buildings have yellow based façade.

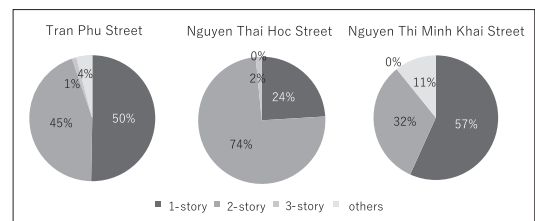


Fig.3. the number of floors of the buildings

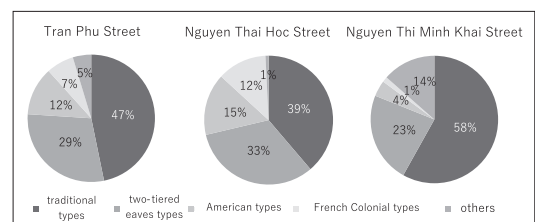


Fig.4. the façade types

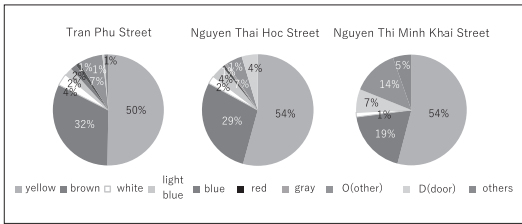


Fig.5. the color of the wall

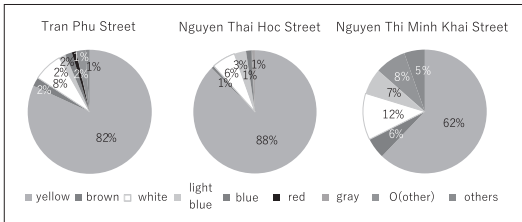


Fig.6. the color of the pillar

Furthermore, by comparing the facades of 47 buildings from past to present, which facades is documented in a previous research by Showa Women’s University, the specific changes that happened over time was analyzed.

As a result, it is observed that no change in both the number of floors of the buildings and façade types has occurred. However, it is noticed that there is a trend of unification of façade colors, from overly diversified colors such as pink and sky blue to yellow or brown.

### Literature Survey

Five Japanese Hoi An guidebooks were used for the literature survey by two methods; “word classification” and “image-word extraction”.

### Word Classification

The words that appear in the guidebooks are classified into; "seeing", "experiencing", "shopping", "eating/drinking", "housing", and "other", and further analyzed for which categories have more descriptions.

From all five guidebooks, 302 words about Hoi An were extracted. It was revealed that the most described category was "eating/drinking" with 103 words (34%), followed by "seeing" with 78 words (26%). On the other hand, "shopping", "housing", and "experiencing" have less description, 36 words (12%), 32 words (10%), and 24 words (8%), respectively (Fig. 7).

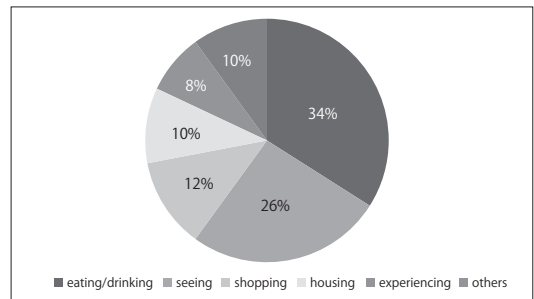


Fig.7. word classification

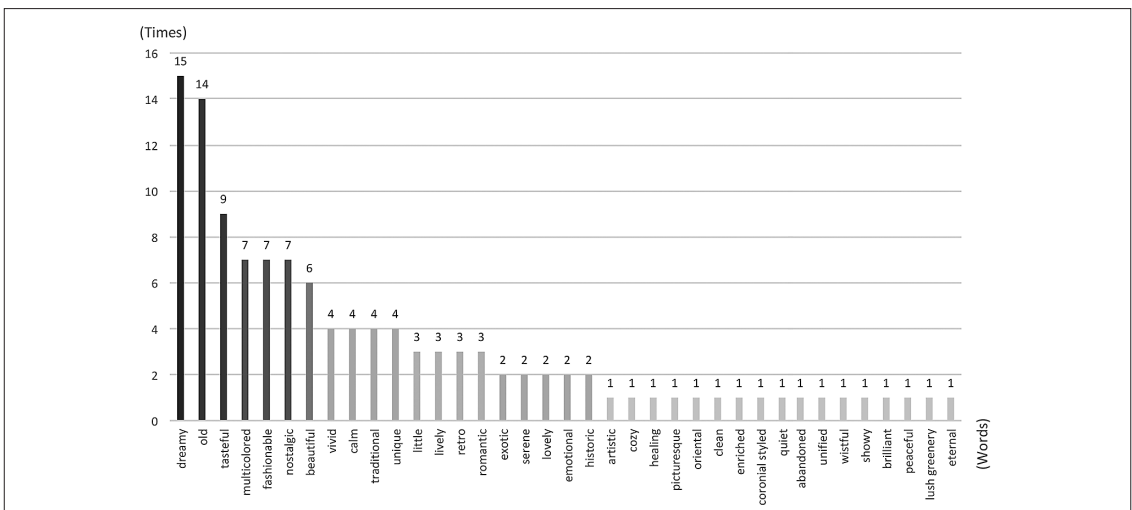


Fig.8. image-word extraction

From the word classification, it can be concluded that the appeal of Hoi An in Japanese guidebooks relates strongly to “eating” Vietnamese food and “seeing” the historical town. For the word “eating”, three items of “Cao Lau”, “white Rose”, and “Fried Wonton” were described as specialty dishes in 4 of the 5 guidebooks, putting these three items as the top major dishes of Hoi An. For the word “seeing”, 6 items such as “The Old House of Phung Hung”, “Old House of Tan Ky”, and “Japanese Covered Bridge” were described heavily in all guidebooks, so it can be said that these places are the main sightseeing spots in Hoi An.

### Image-Word Extraction

In this study, adjectives and adjective verbs related to townscapes of Hoi An from the guidebooks are extracted, and analyzed for words that represent the image of Hoi An Ancient Town.

As a result, a total 39 types of image-words were able to be extracted. Overall, the main impression of the town can be assessed as “relaxed” and “calm”, but with contrasting image such as “vivid” and “unique”. However, it is clear that “dreamy” is the most used word to depict Hoi An with 15 times usage. The next is “old” with 14 times, “tasteful” with 9 times (Fig. 8). Both “dreamy” and “old” appeared in all guidebooks, which makes it clear that Hoi An Ancient Town depictions in the guidebooks is a “dreamy”, “old” townscape.

### Questionnaire Survey

In this study, a questionnaire targeting tourists and local residents to evaluate the image and appeals that the subjects hold towards Hoi An Ancient Town was conducted. The survey period was 19 days from September to October 2019. The questionnaire was written in 4 languages; English, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese. The respondents were asked to select the language that was most convenient for them to fill out. The outlines of the questionnaire are as follows (Table. 1 and 2).

Table.1. the outline of the questionnaire to the tourists

Q1. What are you looking forward to most during your stay in Hoi An?
Q2. What is your impression of Hoi An after your trip?
Q3. What was exceptionally good/exceptionally bad during your trip?
Q4. Given the adjectives below, how appropriate is each word for describing Hoi An? ( a.Dreamy b.Old c.Tasteful d.Multicolored )
Q5. Hoi An Old Town is recorded as a world heritage. Did this fact have any influence on your choosing of Hoi An for travel?
Q6. Did you use any of the following guidebooks during your trip to Hoi An?

Table.2. the outline of the questionnaire to local residents

Q1. What is the most attractive activity in Hoi An that you would like for tourists to experience?
Q2. Given the adjectives below, how appropriate is each word for describing Hoi An? ( a.Dreamy b.Old c.Tasteful d.Multicolored )
Q3. Hoi An Old Town is recorded as a world heritage. How well do you know about the reason or history of this selection process?
Q4. As a host of Hoi An, what is of utmost importance to you?

### The Appeals of Hoi An

First, the tourists were asked for what they were looking forward to the most during their stay. From the 100 people subjected to the survey, 49 people (49%) were looking forward to “seeing” the most, while 20 people (20%) answered “eating/drinking” (Fig. 9).

In addition, the authors asked 50 people of the local hosts for the greatest appeal of Hoi An Ancient Town that they would like to extend to the tourist was. Similar to the tourists, the most common response was “seeing” answered by 26 people (52%), followed by “shopping” answered by 7 people (14%) (Fig. 10). The other responses include answers relating to publicization

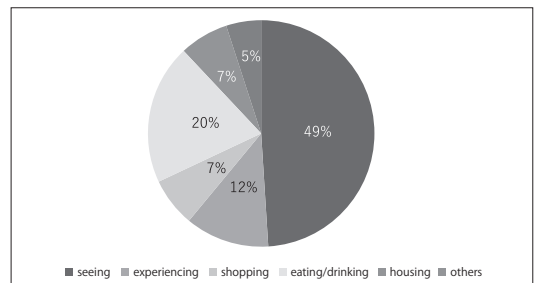


Fig.9. the expectation that the tourists holds

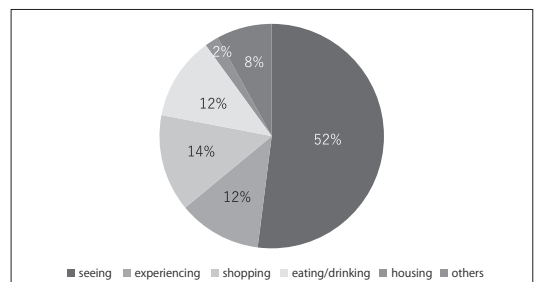


Fig.10. the appeal that the local hosts want to extend

among other things, such as “getting to know” Hoi An Ancient Town as a World Cultural Heritage site.

From these results, it can be concluded that both the tourists and hosts feel that the greatest appeal that Hoi An Ancient Town holds relates to “seeing”. Furthermore, the expectation that the tourists holds and the appeal that the local hosts want to extend are almost in agreement.

**The Image of Hoi An**

From Question 4 to the tourists and Question 2 to the local hosts, words such as “dreamy” and “old”, which were frequently appeared in the guidebooks were evaluated for its relevance to represent the actual townscape.

From the questionnaire to the tourists, it was discovered that there are 60% to 70% of the people who answered “appropriate” or “semi-appropriate” for each image-word (Fig. 11).

On the other hand, 27 hosts (54%) answered “inappropriate” or “semi-inappropriate” for the word “dreamy”. It is observed that there is a distinct contrast from the response of the tourists (Fig. 12). In addition, 31 hosts (62%) answered “appropriate” for “old”, which

concludes more hosts feel Hoi An Ancient Town to be “old” than the tourists.

From the mentioned results, the three words of “old”, “tasteful”, and “multicolored” are found to be suitable for the actual townscape for both the tourists and hosts. Specifically, “multicolored” is considered to be the most appropriate image-word for Hoi An. On the contrary, the word “dreamy” which found to be the most used descriptive word in the guidebooks was not appropriate image-word for Hoi An Ancient Town.

Furthermore, it was clarified that; (1) the tourists highly evaluate Hoi An Ancient Town, (2) the local hosts put the greatest importance in town preservation, (3) Hoi An Ancient Town as a World Heritage Site is widely recognized by both the tourists and the local hosts.

**Findings**

From the aforementioned study, the authors were able to clarify the present situation on the buildings’ façade in Hoi An Ancient Town, as well as the changes occurred from 2000. Furthermore, from the literature survey and questionnaire survey, the greatest appeal of Hoi An that both the tourists and hosts feel, that is seeing, was able to be determined.

Summarize what became clear below:

1. Compared to 2000, neither the façade types nor the number of buildings’ floor have changed. However, the dominant color of the façade is unified to yellow and brown.
2. Hoi An Ancient Town that is in the guidebooks is depicted as “dreamy” and “old” townscape with traditional dishes and unique buildings.
3. The expectation of the tourists and the activities that local hosts want to extend are in parallel with “seeing” the historical town as the main theme.

**Discussion**

As already mentioned, the appeal of Hoi An Ancient Town is historical old townscape, with its townscape preservation going well strictly in façade preservation. However, there are changes in spatial usage, where many vacant houses are turned to tourism shops, resulting in acceptance of chain stores and different cultures. If this situation continues, Hoi An’s unique lifestyle and culture

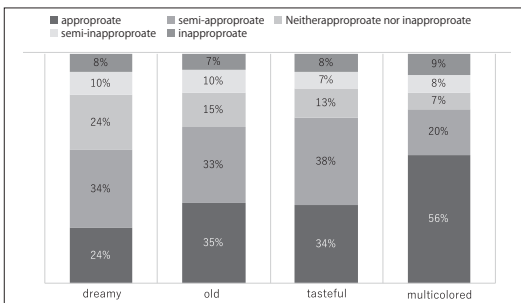


Fig. 11. the questionnaire to the tourists

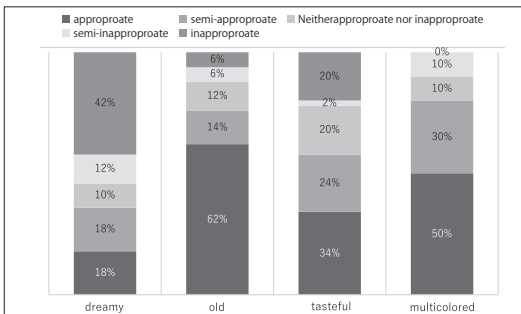


Fig. 12. the questionnaire to the hosts

will be lost, and when that happens, its architecture will be reduced to a mere decoration. Hoi An Ancient Town as well as might be considered as a theme park if that happens.

It is necessary not only to preserve the townscape, then, but to also maintain the unique culture of Hoi An. In the questionnaire survey, the tourists answered that “history and culture can be felt” and “the locals are kind” as the good points of Hoi An. So it would be best that the traditional culture of Hoi An to be promoted through “experiencing” oriented activities such as cooking class and homestay in Hoi An’s traditional houses.

## Conclusion

Let us say it again, the greatest appeal of Hoi An is “seeing” the historical old town. However, it is a slippery slope for town to become a mere tourist attraction should Hoi An be over dependent solely in promoting “seeing” oriented tourism. As opposed to that, it is necessary for the local hosts to be able to maintain their own tradition and local lifestyle on top of re-recognizing the cultural value their local identity holds. This could be realized through communication with the tourists, allowing for the potential of an “experience” based communicative tourism to develop. Which is the most desirable solution to the aforementioned problem. In conclusion, it is necessary for Hoi An to develop a way to “experience” Hoi An rather than “seeing”.

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