

Zeitschrift: Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft
= revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera
d'etnologia

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

Band: 23 (2018)

Artikel: The neoliberal heritage affect : worldly heritage and naturalized nature
in central Vietnam

Autor: Larsen, Peter Bille

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007210>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 09.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE NEOLIBERAL HERITAGE AFFECT

Worldly Heritage and Naturalized Nature in Central Vietnam

Text: *Peter Bille Larsen*

Abstract

This article explores the transformation of heritage values from discourse to experience in a new affective economy. The case of Phong Nha Ke Bang National Park in Vietnam serves to demonstrate the intertwined role of affective experience and neoliberal heritage entrepreneurialism. Both are intimately connected through processes of heritage commodification and consumption prompting attention to heritage not only in affective terms alone, but how this relates to the political economy of tourism.

Keywords: *heritage, conservation, tourism, neoliberalism, affect, Vietnam*

Introduction

This article proposes the idea of a neoliberal heritage affect to make sense of contemporary transformations of heritage values from discourse to experience in a new affective economy. The case of Phong Nha Ke Bang National Park, a World Heritage site in Vietnam, serves to demonstrate the intertwined role of affective experience, shifts in heritage values and neoliberal heritage entrepreneurialism. The Asian World Heritage context is particularly evocative of such changing hierarchies of heritage values. The changing nature of heritage affect and the neoliberal projects are, we suggest, intimately connected through processes of heritage commodification and consumption prompting attention to heritage not only about affective terms alone, but how this relates to the broader political economy, the role of expert voice and the growth of public private partnerships. Heritage practice is today constituted by far more than expert discourse. This, on the one hand, concerns the growing role of geopolitics,

nationalist fervour and monetary calculations in shaping decisions (Meskell 2012). On the other hand, is the growing recognition of an affective dimension. The emotional outrage waged against heritage destruction or national pride mobilized with global listing testify to the centrality of affect and emotion. As Tolia-Kelly et al note: «heritage and its economies are driven by affective politics and consolidated through sensibilities such as pride, awe, joy, pain, fear» (Tolia-Kelly et al. 2017). The recognition of its constitutive role in heritage making has been described as the elephant in the room (Smith et al. 2015). There is undoubtedly a persistent tension between affective experience compared to how heritage is accounted for in discursive terms (Istasse 2016; White 2017) whether through particular heritage instrumentalities (Heinich 2013), authorized discourse (Smith 2006) or distinct emotional categories such as nostalgia (Berliner 2016). Recognizing the epistemological gap between affect and discursive terms including calls for «more-than-textual embodied approaches to heritage research» (Tolia-Kelly et al. 2017).

Yet, for starters, how do we then go about defining affect? Much discussion concerns the split between affect defined as nonconscious intensity, while emotion is relegated to the discursive realm (Massumi 2002). Yet, if much literature describes affect as «characterized by intensity [...] non-semantic, nonlinear, autonomous, vital, singular, indeterminate, and disruptive of fixed (conventional) meanings» (Martin 2013), my material points to the difficulty of disentangling the semantic and the non-semantic, the non-linear and the linear and not least the affective and the discursive realms. In fact, it is precisely ethnographic attention to the entanglements, which allows to elucidate contemporary shifts in the hierarchies of heritage meaning, neoliberal practice and its social effects discussed here.

In a nutshell, ethnography not only allows us to depict empirical detail and differences of affect, but equally to contextualize such difference as both a discursively mediated phenomenon and an experienced affect. This, I argue, allows us to reflect on the neoliberal heritage affect at the crossroads between discursive decline, the capture of heritage for profit and what it entails in a reworked value space exemplified by material from Central Vietnam. I have regularly returned to conduct research in the area since the late 1990s, most recently as part of a research project on the intersection between World Heritage and human rights (Larsen 2018).

Affective world heritage

The World Heritage context is particularly evocative about the contrast between global discourse and the role of affect. Joining the select list is not only about global sacrifice, but increasingly instrumentalized for national, political and economic goals. World Heritage sites, not least in Asia, have become a staple ingredient in the domestic and international tourism industry expansion of the early 21st century.

Phong Nha Ke Bang, Vietnam's largest protected area straddles the border with Laos in Quang Binh province and today covers more than 126,236 hectares. «Riddled with hundreds of cave systems – many of extraordinary scale and length – and spectacular underground rivers, Phong Nha is a «speleologists' heaven on earth», the Lonely Planet noted. The guide was reportedly instrumental in catalysing the park into the global tourism circuit¹. «We have beautiful cave systems, landscapes [...]. Everything you can imagine in Asia, South-east Asia, you can have it here», a local tourist guide told me

in 2015. A New Zealander described her cave tour to me as «pretty amazing [...] you kind of go in and it's this huge open space with stalagmites [...] kind of feels like you're on a different planet, really [...]». A British tourist equally described one cave «as looking almost alien like». «Quite surreal», her boyfriend added justifying his qualification by noting «how big it was» (personal interviews, 2015). Basic senses of size, color and vision mattered in the World Heritage tourism experience contrasting it with the technicality of geological values recognized by the UNESCO body in 2003. The mushrooming of blogs, guide books and local narratives concurred around the uniqueness and natural beauty of the national park. A growing number of tourists, both domestic and international, flocked to experience World Heritage through boat trips, water tourism or week-long adventure tours. Some were ready to pay as much as 3000 USD for a week of trekking and cave tourism. Central state officials even brought ambassadors on a grand tour to the site transported into the heart of the park with helicopters and special arrangements. Such experiences had little to do with the expert gaze and the particular geological history of the karst limestone complex underlying inscription on the World Heritage list, also known as the site's Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). At stake, I will argue were, however, not simply emotional outbursts or empty tourist narratives, but a trend of World Heritage values reconfigured through neoliberal dynamics in a reworked value space of authenticated nature affectivity.

The discursive crafting of heritage

The wider context of a place becoming heritage in the first place through discursive production is a natural starting point for the discussion. Heritage in the area had both colonial and post-colonial origins. Important here are the distinctions between a first period of emergent post-war heritage making, a period of nature conservation fueled by open-door policies in the early 1990s and the subsequent period of World Heritage making.

Post-war heritage making, in particular, involved a dual gaze combining the creation of a small protected area named after one cave (Phong Nha Nature Reserve, 1991) and a mosaic of memorial sites recalling war-time suffering. During the war, the road network allowed for the transportation of goods and people from the North Vietnam to the South becoming a target for heavy bombing. Heritage designation (*Di tích lịch sử Đường Trường Sơn – Đường Hồ Chí Minh*), visible through sign-

¹ <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/vietnam/north-central-vietnam/phong-nha-cave>, accessed June 10, 2017.

posts, not only recognized the role of the locality in the liberation of the South, but equally transported the recent past into the present of the nation state as a whole. The World Heritage gaze took a different turn with a ministerial request in 1997 to develop a nomination dossier for «the beauty of Phong Nha Cave». Vietnamese scholars involved in the first proposals observed how this soon led to a shift from local values of beauty towards embracing international criteria (personal interview, 2015). Facilitated by international experts, Phong Nha was decontextualized as globally significant by retrofitting local realities into global natural value categories. Its outstanding «values» would eventually be redefined as its geology, ecosystems and «one of the largest remaining areas of relatively intact moist forest on karst in Indochina, with a forest cover estimated to reach 94 %, of which 84 % is thought to be primary forest», as the UNESCO website noted. This discursive transformation of the Phong Nha Ke Bang reflected a common heritage process of reduction and recontextualization (Larsen 2018, Larsen et al. 2015). Presented in heritage terms as a limestone complex with multiple cave systems and forest areas, the larger cultural history of occupation, presence and transformation was reduced in narrative terms to that of a buffer zone (Larsen 2018). The core zone, if taken etymologically as derived from *coeur*, set the heart-beat for management around naturalized values, whereas the buffer zone indicated a place of liminality betwixt and between (neither within heritage, nor completely outside of it).

World Heritage listing would eventually parachute the area into the global scene and in prolongation attract a whole new heritage audience on the tourist trail. In 2014, almost 3 million tourists came to the province, doubling the numbers in 2013 leading to massive revenues for the province and individual entrepreneurs. While there was a history of tourism in Phong Nha dating back to the first half of the 20th century, dynamics changed in the 21st century region-wide tourism boom and unprecedented thirst for heritage (Giovine 2009; Hitchcock et al. 2010, Winter et al. 2012). The shift from low-key cave tourism, a small protected area and distant backwaters of Quang Binh province to become a major tourist attraction and driver of the provincial economy entailed something more than simply discursive transformation. One aspect, I argue here, involved a reconfigured heritage affectivity distinct from its discursive foundations of heritage discourse.

The ethnography of heritage affectivity

A particular affective dynamic was central to the changing heritage space in Phong Nha Ke Bang as well as *effecting* the way nature discourses and practices were evolving. Whereas

expert discourse generally speaks of how heritage is affected by external factors, this easily ignores the *affective* dimension as thought in current social theory. Certain forms of sensing have, indeed, rapidly become privileged forms of experience tied closely to particular notions of pure nature ready for marketing and consumption. This, I suggest, is tied to the convergence of neoliberal profit-tinkering around heritage commodities, World Heritage reductionism around single values and bureaucratic responses.

Consider the conflation between universality and the experience of the extraordinary. Superlatives such as breathtaking experiences, stunning views, and «senses awoken» during adventure visits to the area were both common and nurtured by the tourism industry. As a tourism operator told me:

What they are promoting is just beautiful, exclusive tourism... the area is a one-of-a kind area. You will not find something similar anywhere else in the world. They've also done a bit of remodelling in the villages as well to make things look nicer [...]. The area is just beautiful. You get to see how the ethnic minorities live. How the villages live. (personal interview, 2015)

The instrumentality of emotional experience and everyday life in tourism is well-rehearsed (Smith et al. 2015), at times carefully nurtured in narratives, site scenography and orchestration. Furthermore, affectivity of walking, sweat and leaches, which may appear pre- or non-conceptual, were at the same conceptualized, produced and carefully designed for experience realms of jungle experiences and the booming market for tourism development (Hübner et al. 2014). Gone were the images of a malaria-infested backwaters of the early 1990s, as well as the globally significant geological values, replaced by beauty and the one of a kind experiencing the real thing. In some respects, this also marked a return to home-grown and vernacularized local heritage aesthetics preceding universalist categories. The shift may seem commonplace, even insignificant, yet signalled caves and waterways as a particular affective space, source of beauty and entry-point to the ever sought authentic experience. It was neither the first affective engagement with cave reality.

Returning briefly to the wartime memorial sites, the Eight Ladies cave (*Hang Tám Cô*) located within the park raised particular emotions of loss and suffering from the not-so-distant past. During the war, as part of a system to keep the Ho Chi Minh trail system repaired during bombing raids, hundreds of youth volunteers, many from other provinces, worked day and night to maintain the circulation of goods and people. Under one particular bombing, eight youths were caught up

in the cave as a huge rock blocked their exit. Despite multiple attempts to save them, they eventually died and became a powerful site and symbol of popular sacrifice (*hy sinh*). As narrated to me by an ethnic minority elder.

I was vice-chair of the youth union back then. I would often stop by to have tea with the people when I went out for meetings in the province. When the rocks fell down and blocked the cave entrance. «Oh heaven, the people I know they have gone», I said. Four vehicles tried to pull the rocks away without succeeding. Too narrow, the trail [...]. What a loss [sin/ tòi], I thought. No one was burning incense. It took seven nights before they passed away. I told it back in the village and all came to see. (personal interview, 2015)

Today, the sites located on the road within the World Heritage site has been turned into a site of veneration of lost souls (*linh hồn*) and martyrs (*liệt sĩ*) visited by both official delegations, and individuals. Death anniversaries are organized standing in contrast to, yet also co-existing with, the tourism trail of nature, adventure and pleasure. The remembrance of martyrs in a not-so-distant history co-existed with the recycling of Phong Nha Ke Bang scenery as purified ahistorical nature by tourist operations and media. The latter was not merely an external gaze, but increasingly reproduced in domestic discourse suggesting its internalized nature. Consider the 2014 renomination process to recognize the area not just for its geological values, but equally for other natural criteria as well. The official document thus sought to convince the World Heritage Committee about additional biodiversity values with multiple lists of species etc. Now, fast forward to the World Heritage Committee in Bonn, 2015, when the proposal was debated. Park staff had joined the Vietnamese delegation and were nervously awaiting the Committee² deliberations, a critical moment where State nominations are assessed in terms of their merit in terms of Outstanding Universal Value. Yet, conversations were not merely about scientific discourse and value. As I was able to join the Vietnamese delegation at their table, their attention was directed towards the IUCN representative reading aloud elements of their written evaluation.

As I came with my laptop, a Vietnamese colleague asked me to help find a YouTube video made by ABC, an American news channel reporting on the Son Doong cave in the

site³. While the renomination was mainly about recognizing its biodiversity, the rather sensationalist news video spoke of hidden treasures and «the biggest cave in the world [...] visited by fewer explorers than outer space» suddenly seemed important. Compared to the rather dry biodiversity data and scientific arguments for inscription, even when beefed up with pictures of fauna and flora, the news channel communicated discovery, pride and recognition. It struck an experiential chord.

What resonated as important, I would argue, were not (only) discursively defined heritage values, but particular states of naturalized nature ready for mediatized global consumption. In the end, the Secretariat turned down the offer to show the video, yet clearly the video was suggested in the spirit of communicating values and pride in the global arena no longer framed in the World Heritage OUV framework, but reflecting the growing importance of mediatized public narratives and accounts of affective awe. In contrast to such attempts to inventory caves, animals and plant species pursued by under-funded science units, international cooperation and the occasional biologist team, there was equally another inventory in the making: that of heritage as economic commodity and political resource ready for globalized consumption through a particular affective bind. Such natural values, I suggest, differ in important respects from the geological interest in karst formation or speleological cave discovery, yet all happily, or rather unhappily, come together, co-exist and have consequences.

There were also important *passerelles* between the experienced and the narrated, between the affective and the discursive. Speleologists, for example, acting as guides linking the geological (Nguyen et al. 2012) and naturalistic with the experiential. Howard Limbert, a speleologist who had explored the cave system since the early 1990s was singled out by Vietnamese media as the «Briton who put Vietnamese caves on the map»⁴. On the one hand, he was credited for discovering the Son Doong cave system (reportedly tipped off by a local, *Hồ Khanh*). On the other hand, he had guided multiple film crews like ABC, BBC and National Geographic allowing for «worldwide recognition of this truly amazing cave» (Limbert et al. 2016). «I want to promote the beauty and distinctiveness of Vietnamese caves to the world», he

² The World Heritage Committee is the decision-making body responsible for the Convention. Key decisions include the designation of places as World Heritage properties.

³ <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/drones-inside-hidden-world-live-30999977>, accessed July 10, 2017.

⁴ <http://www.thanhniennews.com/society/briton-who-put-vietnamese-caves-on-world-map-7472.html>, accessed July 10, 2017.

added when interviewed by Vietnamese media⁵. Beneath the good story, was a more profound question not merely of discovering, but of nurturing and producing a distinct representation of nature. This was not limited to speleologists, but entailed the deepening of nature aestheticism readily mobilized both in cultural diplomacy and tourism efforts.

This brings us back to the affective language raised in the first sections of the article. People feel they can relate to and understand the unique UNESCO realm (Giovine 2009: 4), even if reconstituted in profoundly affective terms (rather than its discursive basis). In practice, scientific interest in geology and biodiversity co-existed, yet was also submerged, within an expansive sea of heritage commodity consumption of so-called natural values, experienced through states of wet, hot and profoundly natural intensity. Tourist talk and media accounts thereby entailed revision rather than recognition. Giovine speaks of a «heritage-scape...geared predominantly to off-mobile tourists – temporarily situated outsiders who can bring their own understandings of «culture» and «cultural diversity» to the site, experience a transformative encounter, and return to their home like secular missionaries, spreading their newfound knowledge of the site in relation to cultural diversity» (*op. cit.*: 6). A Swedish diplomat, according to the Tuoi Tre newspaper, compared the site to other natural wonders «such as the icebergs in Greenland, the mountains in Nepal, and the grasslands in Mongolia» adding «that the size of the cave, the stone pillars formed by stalagmites and stalactites, the springs, and the vegetation were all incredible to witness and will help the experience stick with for life». ⁶ Reified natural values of beauty showed little sign of local histories.

While such media talk may be staged rhetoric it also demonstrated how notions of naturalized nature were being recycled and reproduced in multiple fora. In December 2017, Donald Trump during his first visit to Vietnam spoke of how travellers «admire your magnificent limestone mountains, cycle through your many winding hillsides, or swim in the majestic Ha Long

Bay». ⁷ Heritage involved depoliticized safe grounds for personal pleasure, diplomatic exchange and flattery. Yet, such affectivity was not without moral and political ambiguity, as ethnography reveals. The experiencing of natural beauty and awe stood in contrast with what it silenced in an intensively produced, and increasingly fractured, space of re-authenticated nature.

The narrative shift from locality to globality expressed through idioms of passion and awe both decontextualized and individualized the heritage experience. Just as the European Union may turn sites of suffering into affective sites of a European ethos (Lähdesmäki 2017), Phong Nha Ke Bang was being produced as affective sites of authentic nature. Consider how the site was even used for shooting King Skull Island⁸, a recent Hollywood blockbuster, directed by Jordan Vogt-Roberts. Seeing in Vietnam a «perfect aesthetic» for the film, the director further qualified the look of the country as «gorgeous and otherworldly» noting the «raw, powerful and unspoiled beauty that general audiences hadn't experienced on screen before». ⁹ The story about how the Kong became King featured a Vietnam War era discovery of an unmapped island in the Pacific, where Kong is worshipped by natives as the island's guardian. Now, such a Hollywood cocktail of contemporary fantasies of native spirituality may seem a far cry from the anthropological interest in affect. Yet, from another angle, could the discursive non-sense and bricolage not exactly be seen as rehearsing a particular, and increasingly adhered to, neoliberal heritage affectivity? Did this not reflect a sliding shift of values from the question of integrity of geological and biodiversity values, towards the experience of authentic nature as wild and untouched, but nonetheless ready to be consumed? As the LA Times reported on the film: «it's like King Kong crossed with Apocalypse Now», the film's director putting it as «choppers, napalm, Hendrix and monsters». ¹⁰ Despite the obvious and profound contradictions between historical war narratives and real-life suffering, the film's use of the heritage space – as well as that of other World Heritage sites like Trang An and Ha Long – were celebrated and highly mediatized affairs. If Hollywood, and flashy

⁵ <http://www.thanhniennnews.com/society/briton-who-put-vietnamese-caves-on-world-map-7472.html>, accessed July 10, 2017.

⁶ <http://tuoitrenews.vn/lifestyle/35158/preservation-supersedes-profit-foreign-ambassadors-to-vietnam>, accessed July 10, 2017.

⁷ <https://vn.usembassy.gov/remarks-president-trump-president-quang-vietnam-joint-press-conference-hanoi-vietnam/>, accessed December 10, 2017.

⁸ <http://kongskullislandmovie.com/>, accessed June 10, 2017.

⁹ <http://e.vnexpress.net/news/travel-life/kong-director-says-gorgeous-vietnam-provided-the-perfect-reboot-3552193.html>, accessed June 10, 2017.

¹⁰ <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/travel/174384/kong-director-jordan-vogt-roberts-named-tourism-ambassador-of-vietnam.html>, accessed June 10, 2017. As they later argue: «feeling the past through embodied presencing of geological/environmental space-time is core to understanding identity, difference and alterity at heritage sites».

advertisements a quarter of a century ago were socialist taboos, the star gaze had long been internalized. Indeed, the hipster-bearded director of the film was even nominated by the government as the first foreign tourism ambassador of the country, underlining the intimate connection between value, cultural diplomacy and the importance of the external gaze¹¹. This, fundamentally neoliberal gaze, defied ideological difference and heritage as a collective project to be replaced by individualized production and consumption of aesthetic value.

The neoliberal heritage affect is arguably about producing globalized, transportable and consumable heritage commodities. Ambassadors flown in by helicopters, Hollywood crews using several tons of heavy technical equipment to create pristine affects, drones capturing bird-eye view aesthetics of landscape were all part of multiple chapters of the neoliberal spectacle of naturalized nature. Flourishing during the Summer of 2016 when the province was simultaneously suffering from a major pollution scandal and locals prohibited to consume fish, it was a tragic sort of irony that its nature was being recycled as signs of the deep unknown wilderness and pristine nature ready for global admiration and consumption.

Heritage dynamics were markedly neoliberal in the sense of construing value through commodity, exchange and marketing rather than through the modern trinity of science, state and management. Interestingly, readiness to transform heritage values and places into ever-new products worked hand in hand with the progressive deepening of bureaucratic regimes of management and protection. It also resonated with the particular Vietnamese variety of neoliberal state practice. In a booming tourism economy, provincial authorities attached much pride to the global recognition of the site speaking of «exploiting» cave tourism, facilitating entrepreneurship, but also calling for strengthened protection of the values. Affective expression of deep intensity in the caves illustrate the new attachments in a space largely reshaped through neoliberal revalorization in a public, yet privatized, realm of experience. A key effect of this affective state was thus not just the commodification, but importantly also the subordination of other local affectivities as unfit, impure or simply out of place replaced by national pride, global recognition and nature consumption.¹² How then do we attend to both affect and effect together rather than as separate realms of social life?

Towards an *Effective* ethnography of neoliberal modes of heritage affect

We might speak of *Effect* making use of my mother tongue alphabet (Danish) to combine effect and affect in one analytical gaze; to not leave the social dimension and shaping of affect unattended, nor to let the affective dimension of effect ignored. Can such an *Effective* ethnography challenge the constant risk of reproducing dualisms (Lutz 2017)? Of course not entirely, yet exploring the middle ground of effective affect and affective effects, offer important entry-points to contextualize rather than reify affectivity in isolation.

For some years, I have worked on the multiple human rights implications of World Heritage,¹³ not least in terms of its social effects (Larsen et al. 2017). The affective dimension has, however, admittedly been somewhat absent from my work. This is a gap in need of reparation.

While much has been said about discursive hierarchies, there were parallel inequalities of affect. Not all affective engagements are equal; some were either supported, accepted or considered (il)legitimate by authorized heritage discourse. Tourists pursued legitimate forms of affective experience based on consumption of the worldly nature, whereas the ethnic minority affects remained in a legal limbo between ancestral connection and illegalized forms and interference. They were profoundly non-worldly excluded from the space. Just as Greek artisans were both marginal and central to Greek nationhood (Herzfeld 2004), ethnic minorities were marginal, yet ambiguous subjects of cultural value of the World Heritage nature scape. While minorities had intimate engagements with the karst limestone area landscape as an ancestral living space, they often remained puzzled with or disinterested in official heritage values. The gulf between local affectivity of place and global discourse is not unusual. While both tourist and ethnic minority affects involved walking in the landscape, related to water and much more, they involved quite contrasting frames of sentient experience. My point here, however, is not merely to describe such affective diversity and dissonance.

Rather it concerns the shifting hierarchies of heritage affects and its effects. Much of my work has dealt with the effects of protected area creation on local livelihoods (Larsen

¹¹ <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/travel/174384/kong-director-jordan-vogt-roberts-named-tourism-ambassador-of-vietnam.html>

¹² Even social media campaigns to challenge private sector investment projects in part reiterated naturalized nature narratives about the uniqueness of the area.

¹³ A number of policy briefs from this work can be accessed through the following web-site. <http://projects.snis.ch/rights-world-heritage-system/policy-briefs/>, accessed June 10, 2017.

2008) and World Heritage designation on human rights (Larsen 2018). For ethnic minorities in Vietnam, the realm of forest policy has been a major transformative encounter shaped by social engineering and ideals of protected area conservation (McElwee 2016) as well as specific experiences with resettlement, prohibition of shifting cultivation and the loss of customary tenure rights. The eradication of customary shifting cultivation practices and hunter-gathering practices had long been a stated official goal of development and conservation policies leading to some minorities in Quang Binh abandoning dry rice cultivation altogether, to more or less informally accepted forest livelihood practices behind the scene. This was a critical social effect of conservation policy, whose affective dimension I now turn to.

Heinich has, in her pragmatic sociology, drawn attention to the role of expert practices and actions in the process of inventorying and distinct processes of *patrimonialisation* (Heinich 2013). One aspect of such practice in Phong Nha Ke Bang concerned the shifting space for tolerating local livelihoods by national park staff. Even if prohibited, local interpretations of regulations and rights were in part affectively constituted and entailed complex interrelationships between state officials and local representatives. Phong Nha Nature Reserve as it was called initially was not only small in terms of hired staff and extension in terms of hectares covered, it was also a managerial drop in a forest ocean shaped by very different territorial dynamics. Even if guards were expected to stop local livelihoods, *de facto* recognition long remained an everyday reality. Furthermore, the informal networks of commercialization, professionalized poaching teams and trade entailed shifting practices of illegal harvesting and corruption (Larsen et al. 2016). In hindsight, the affective dimension of such relationships, notably the former one, was not insignificant. For years, for example, forest guards more often than not shared everyday lives and spaces with impoverished local communities. This included an often direct sense of shared *tình cảm* (affection) with local hardships such as those experienced by the Arem, a resettled hunter-gatherer community. This weighed heavier than distant commands to fence of the area. In practice, guards often tolerated the continuation of local livelihoods quietly neglecting strict regulations. Much can be explained through the interstices (Navarro 2017) and the affective bonds of being together and occupying a negotiated marginal space between legality and legitimacy. Forest guards, in interviews for years, evoked notions of sympathy and respect for local practices to justify more flexible enforcement approaches despite formal frameworks denying indigenous inhabitants rights to customary resources and livelihoods. Yet, to make sense of this we need to contextualize affect (Smith et al. 2015), in part grounded in actual shared

spaces, particular hiring practices and the fundamentally common condition of precarity between the life experiences of local guards with short-term contracts and the insecurity of local livelihoods and living conditions of ethnic minority communities. Such affective conditions and context were crucial to understand social practices, not heritage discourse.

The neoliberal heritage affect arguably added a new twist to the relationship, illustrating how the affective dimension may take on a far more re-structuring (effective) role than what might be expected. The new dynamic of commodified nature affectivity overrode not just other value sets, but also other forms of affective connection. The ensuing spectacularization of natural affects, for one, generated a new legitimacy frame and reference point for bureaucratic control. Provincial authorities exerted pressure for stricter management (equally called for by the World Heritage Committee), translating global affect into specific effects for indigenous and local inhabitants. This resulted in a management push for new environmentalities; as one park official noted: «Through tourism people understand the value of what we have and the need to protect it [...] as visitors come they respect the need to protect forest, animals and caves better» (personal interview, 2015). As a result, space for tolerating local livelihood practices decreased, while the wider territorial space was increasingly opened up for investments and heritage consumption. Locals were equally enrolled in this naturalized nature, not as rights holders (Larsen 2018), but as service providers such as the local women hired to protect the environment (*môi trường*) around the Paradise cave (a privately leased operation), who tellingly noted their main job involved cleaning (*làm vệ sinh*). Their task, as local, was to recreate a clean space for tourism consumption. The intensified production of clean nature went hand in hand with a distinctive affective state of orchestrating individual, consumable heritage experiences, while undermining local socialities. While one should not deny the local job-creation involved, the wider context of transforming social and territorial dynamics should not be ignored either. Local officials and tourist promoters readily pursued activities to clean up nature and reduce unruly ethnic minority activities in favour of ensuring a cave environment open for tourism consumption. Neoliberalized affective commodities readily profiled in movies or experienced in expensive tourism packages, reduced nature to naturalized nature. The social effects were not coincidental, but the result of a powerful convergence of public and private interests around neoliberalized entrepreneurialism. As a tourist guide noted: «Everything is just opening up in the area. I think in the future a lot of new services will be open for visitors» (personal interview, 2015). Indeed, the push for individual adventure tours or ministerial level lobbying to allow for cable car development illustrated the profound push to capitalize on herit-

age and its affective economy. This trend entailed the reshuffling of the global hierarchy of value (Herzfeld 2004) not in the sense of imposed global heritage values on marginal localities, but through what Herzfeld elsewhere has called the neoliberal hijacking of history (Herzfeld 2010). The hijacking of geological history took place at the expense of other value sets and ancestral relationships. A sociality grounded in consumer relationships of producers and providers of tourism products of affect thus came to dominate and contribute towards undermining customary connection. They occupied different places in the shifting global hierarchy of value. Idioms of emotionality, not least expressed through personalized heritage consumption, put words to this space and value set.

Conclusion

Article 1 of the World Heritage Convention speaks of protecting Outstanding Universal Value «from the point of view of history, art or science» (UNESCO 1972). Today, there is little doubt about the growing role of outstanding monetary values and profits as well. In Vietnam, heritage has gone from being a marginal affair shunned by socialist development planners towards becoming a thriving space for public-private consortiums around privatized public goods and mega-investments in a new affective economy. This convergence between the will to preserve and the drive for profits, also entails significant transformations of the affective dimension of heritage. While the modernist salvatory heritage project privileged the discursive side of the coin, the current intensity of privileging the heritage experience is ever more flagrant in the context of downsized heritage bureaucracies and contested values. The end result is, however, not one of decontextualized bare affect to paraphrase Agamben (1998). Rather, what I call *Effective* ethnography allows to shed light on the mutual imbrications between the affective turn, neoliberal hijacking of the heritage project, discursive production and its profound social effects. Ancestral voices and experiences of making a living *in* the landscape were silenced in a new clean and green nature ready for consumption. The result in Phong Nha is a somewhat schizophrenic heritage reality at once involving experience near and lived out relations of affective nature, while distanced from century-old affective connection in the landscape. Such contradictions involved a combination of both effective and affective intensity. The significance of contextual analysis and discourse thus defies the distinction between the non-discursive affect and linguistically framed emotion, or at least points to the empirical limitations of such dichotomies. Indeed, to capture and challenge contemporary heritage dynamics, a combined grasp of both is today more necessary than ever before.

REFERENCES

- Agamben Giorgio.** 1998 (1995). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press (translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen).
- Berliner David.** 2016. «Multiple Nostalgias: The Fabric of Heritage in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR) », in Brumann Christoph, Berliner David (eds). *World Heritage on the Ground: Ethnographic Perspectives*. New York / Oxford: Berghahn publishers.
- Giovine Michael A.** 2009. *The Heritage-Scape*. Lanham: Lexington books.
- Heinich Nathalie.** 2013. *Le travail de l'inventaire: Sept études sur l'administration patrimoniale*. Lahic/DPRPS-Direction des patrimoines.
- Herzfeld Michael.** 2010. «Engagement, Gentrification, and the Neoliberal Hijacking of History». *Current Anthropology* 51(S2): 259-267.
2004. *The Body Impolitic: Artisans and Artifice in the Global Hierarchy of Value*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hitchcock Michael, King Victor, Parnwell Michael J.G.** 2010. *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions*. Copenhagen: NIAS
- Hübner, Anna, Phong Lý T., Châu Trương S.H.** 2014. «Good Governance and Tourism Development in Protected Areas: The Case of Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, Central Vietnam». *Koedoe* 56(2):1-10.
- Istasse Manon.** 2016. «Affects and Senses in a World Heritage Site», in C. Brumann Christoph, Berliner David (eds). *World Heritage on the Ground: Ethnographic Perspectives*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Lähdesmäki Tuuli.** 2017. «Politics of Affect in the EU Heritage Policy Discourse: An Analysis of Promotional Videos of Sites Awarded with the European Heritage Label». *International Journal of Heritage Studies*:1-14.
- Larsen Peter Bille.** 2018. «World heritage and Ethnic Minority Rights in Phong Nha Ke Bang, Vietnam: Domesticating Cosmopolitan Assemblages», in Larsen Peter Bille (ed.), *World Heritage and Human Rights: Lessons from the Asia Pacific and the Global Arena*. London: Earthscan/Routledge.
2008. «Linking livelihoods and Protected Area Conservation in Vietnam: Phong Nha Kẻ Bàng World Heritage, Local Futures?», in Galvin Marc, Haller Tobias (eds.), *People, Protected Areas and Global Change: Participatory Conservation in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe*. Bern: NCCR North-South, Swiss Centre of Competence in Research North-South, University of Bern.

Larsen Peter Bille, Nghiem Hoa, Nguyen Linh Giang, Nguyen Duy Luong (eds.). 2017. *UNESCO World Heritage Sites and Rights in Vietnam: Understanding the Issues and Looking Forward*. University of Lucerne, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences and University of Quang Binh.

Larsen Peter Bille, Wijesuriya Gamini. 2015. «Nature-Culture Interlinkages in World Heritage: Bridging the Gap». *World Heritage* 75.

Limbert Howard, Limbert D., Hieu N., Phái V. V., Kinh Bac D., Phuong T. H. and Granger D. 2016. «The Discovery and Exploration of Hang Son Doong». *Boletín Geológico y Minero* 127 (1): 165-176.

Lutz Catherine. 2017. «What Matters». *Cultural Anthropology* 32(2): 181-191.

Martin Emily. 2013. «The Potentiality of Ethnography and the Limits of Affect Theory». *Current Anthropology* 54(S7): 149-158.

Massumi Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham / London: Duke University Press.

McElwee Pam. 2016. *Forests Are Gold: Trees, People, and Environmental Rule in Vietnam*. Washington D.C.: University of Washington Press.

Meskeil Lynn. 2012. «The Rush to Inscribe: Reflections on the 35th Session of the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO Paris, 2011». *Journal of Field Archaeology* 37(2):145-151.

Navarro Yael. 2017. «Diversifying Affect». *Cultural Anthropology* 32(2):209-215.

Nguyen Hieu, Van Phai Vu. 2012. «Systems in Phong Nha – Ke Bang area». *Journal of Science, Earth Sciences* 28:217-229.

Smith Laurajane. 2006. *The Uses of Heritage*. London/New York: Routledge.

Smith Laurajane, Campbell Gary. 2015. «The Elephant in the Room: Heritage, Affect and Emotion», in Logan William, Craith Máiréad Nic, Kockel Ullrich (eds), *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, Wiley-Blackwell.

Tolia-Kelly Divya P., Waterton Emma, Watson Steve. 2017. *Heritage, Affect and Emotion: Politics, Practices and Infrastructures*. London / New York: Routledge.

UNESCO. 1972. *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. Paris: The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization meeting in Paris from 17 October to 21 November 1972, at its seventeenth session.

White Daniel. 2017. «Affect: An Introduction». *Cultural Anthropology* 32(2):175-180.

Winter Tim, Daly Patrick (eds). 2012. *Routledge Handbook of Heritage in Asia*. London / New York: Routledge.

AUTHOR

Peter Bille Larsen lectures in Anthropology at the University of Lucerne and works on environmental governance, social equity and sustainable development issues. Key fields include World Heritage policy and practice, international rights standards and the anthropology of international organizations. Primary fieldwork sites include the Peruvian Amazon, Vietnam, and global policy arenas. His recent books include *Post-frontier resource governance* (Palgrave, 2015), *The anthropology of conservation NGOs* (Palgrave, co-edited with D. Brockington, 2017) and *World Heritage and Human Rights* (Routledge, 2018).

peter.larsen@unilu.ch

*University of Lucerne
Institutional affiliation: Department of Anthropology,
Froburgstrasse 3
CH-6002 Luzern*