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**Contested Interpretation of Vietnam War Heritage:
Tour Guides' Mediating Roles**

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Abstract

The legacy of the Vietnam War associates Vietnam with being a destination for dark tourism. Located in the central Vietnam, Quang Tri, the former Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) has high density of historical sites left from the Vietnam War. Visitation to the war-related sites for commemoration and secular pilgrimage is among the top motivations for tourists arriving in the city. The current research seeks to investigate the mediating roles of on-site guides at the historical sites of Quang Tri. By observing on-site tour guide performance, analysing their narratives and conducting interviews with guides working at monuments and historical sites, and reflection of tourists visiting the sites, the authors provide a unique perspective of guiding at contested war heritage, where on-site guides perform multiple mediating roles. The findings of the study highlight the need to reappraise the role of on-site guides and have implications for the planning and development of guiding services at historic sites.

Keywords

*Dark tourism,
Vietnam war, tour
guide, interpretation,
mediation*

Introduction

War heritage sites play an important part in the process of struggling for independence in Southeast Asian states (Hitchcock, King, & Parnwell, 2009). Nationally important

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historical sites connect the past and the present in the sense of heritage defined by Smith (2006) as “a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present” (p. 44). The meanings and memories of past human experiences are recalled through contemporary interactions with physical places along the principles of cultural politics of where “even the very substance of a heritage is a political construction of what is remembered” (Richter, 1989, p. 109). The “dominant ideology hypothesis” (Ashworth, 1994, p. 20) asserts that governments will project a message legitimating their position. Therefore, official narratives in nationally important war-related sites are highly selective and contribute to “the effort to create more purely nationalistic narratives” (Long, 2012, p. 210). Narratives of historical places related to major wars for independence are commonly used to build patriotism on the domestic level (Timothy & Boyd, 2006), however, they appear differently to international visitors. The movement of people from different regions, social cultural and political backgrounds around the world for touristic purposes, therefore, complicates the interpretation of historical heritage sites, which are primarily designed to serve the domestic audience. However, the interpretation of contested war heritage sites has been poorly understood in tourism studies.

Visitation to war related sites, commonly known as war/battlefield tourism (Smith, 1996, 1998; Dann, 1998; Stone, 2006; Butler & Suntikul, 2013) is not limited to places where war has occurred but also cemeteries, monuments, museums and other institutions. Parallel to this terminology are general concepts such “thanatourism” (Seaton, 1996), “heritage of atrocity” (Achworth & Harmann, 2005) and “black spot” (Rojek, 1993). The act of visitation to these “dark” sites, or “dark tourism” entails a different meaning depending on how the experience is interpreted from place identify (White & Frew, 2016), geographic, cultural and religious perspectives (Hooper & Lennon, 2017). For instance, Cohen (2018) points out that dark tourism in the West is motivated by “the contemplation of their own mortality” while it is a counterpart of local customs, culture and religions for Asians (p. 169).

The tourist experience at dark tourism site encompasses awareness, education and entertainment (Kunwar et al., 2019), however, while some tourists may “be interested in interpretation that is educational, others may be seeking an emotional, spiritual, or sentimental experience” (Biran, Poria & Oren, 2011, p. 825). Therefore, the tour guide plays an important role in directing and influencing the interpretation of battlefield sites (Iles, 2008) in terms of both the manner in which the site is presented and the information the guide conveys (Sharpley, 2009). On-site guides have also seen as critical in endowing deeper understanding for tourists, not through instruction but by means of provocation (Tilden, 1977, cited in Miles, 2014). In other words, on-site interpretation is a co-creation process involving both on-site guides and tourists for crafting stories, reflections and understandings by sharing viewpoints and stories.

Despite being known as one of the most controversial wars of the twentieth century, research on the Vietnam War from a dark tourism perspective has been relatively ignored. Previous research about dark tourism in Vietnam, to name a few, offers an overview of war-related sites (Henderson, 2000; 2007, Schwenkel, 2006; Upton et al., 2018) which paid attention to popular sites near Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) in Southern Vietnam, such as Cu Chi Tunnel (Gillen, 2018; Le, 2014), or the War Remnant Museum (Laderman, 2009; Gillen, 2014) located in the city centre are relatively well addressed). In Northern Vietnam, Hoa Lo Prison located in the central precinct of Hanoi, the place detained political prisoners during French colonialization, then American pilots captured in the Vietnam War. Being listed as one of thirty most attractive dark tourist sites worldwide (Fonseca et al., 2016, p. 4), surprisingly, very little research has been conducted in this site (Logan, 2009). Being the border between the North and the South that hosted many fierce fights, Quang Tri is home of 436 important vestiges, the majority of them related to the Vietnam War (Quang Tri Tourism Guidebook, 2016). The relics are dotted around the city, making the entire city and its outskirts part of an integrated dark tourism complex. Despite holding a special position in the heart of Vietnamese (and to a lesser extent, American soldiers of the Vietnam War), research on dark tourism in Quang Tri former DMZ has long been ignored. Acknowledging an existing gap of dark tourism associated with the Vietnam War, the authors of this research aim to find out answers to the research question: What is the role of tour guides in creation of a 'host' perspective of war heritage sites? This research will employ qualitative critical narrative analysis, with evidence derived from qualitative in-depth interviews and observation to support the researchers in investigating the role of on-site tour guides at dark heritage sites.

Literature review

This is a review of the literature shaping the theoretical ground for the current research, which encompasses the conceptualization of dark tourism, visitation to and interpretation of war heritage sites. This literature review also specifically addresses the context of the Vietnam War with a focus on the DMZ area of Quang Tri from historical and political perspectives.

The term "dark tourism" appeared in the tourism literature in the mid-90s (Lennon & Foley, 1996). Dark tourism refers to visitation to death sites, battlefields, cemeteries, museums, prisons, and genocide sites. Parallel to this terminology are general concepts such "thanatourism" (Seaton, 1996), "battlefield tourism" (Ryan, 2007), and "tourism and war" (Smith, 1998; Butler & Suntikul, 2013). Visitation to death-related sites can also be termed as "cemetery tourism" (Logan, 2009), "ghost tourism" (Inglis, 2003; Davies, 2009; Holloway, 2010), "heritage of atrocity" (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005), or "fright tourism" (Bristow & Newman, 2004). Visitation to the dark sites provides

“awareness, education and entertainment on several cases of history and heritage, tourism and tragedies” (Kunwar et al., 2019, p. 105). Research on Holocaust sites and museums (Beech, 2000; Ashworth, 2002; Isaac & Cakmak, 2014; Kidron, 2013, Thurnell-Read, 2009), study of visitation to genocide sites (Beech, 2009; Lennon, 2009; Sharpley, 2012, Friedrich & Johnston, 2013), war-related sites (Farmaki, 2013; Iles, 2012, Johnnton, 2011, 2016), and atomic bomb sites (Bui, Yoshida, & Lee, 2018) has flourished in from the beginning of the 21st century, reflecting growing interest in dark tourism both from industry and academia.

The purpose of visitation to the sites of past conflicts includes commemoration, education, pilgrimage, and light entertainment in some circumstances (Dunkley, Morgan & Westwood, 2011). Consuming dark tourism is thus a means of confronting death in modern societies (Stone & Sharpley, 2008) as John et al. (2016) contend “visits to sites of death can be exceptionally powerful experiences, which may have deep personal impacts on a tourist” (p. 160), a kind of “psychological outcome” desired and satisfied by the tourists (Kunwar & Karki, 2019, p. 55). Demand for visitation to the dark sites is highly heterogeneous (Light, 2017) reflecting multi-layered and multi-faceted notion of dark tourism. However, Western and Asian visitation to the dark sites are not similar. For example, Kang et al., (2012) study dark tourism within a peace paradigm between North and South Korea; Yoshida et al. (2016) explore the matrix of educational and war tourism in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Japan), and suggest that Eurocentric perspectives of dark tourism are not necessarily applicable to other indigenous Asian perspectives. Cohen (2018) argues that in some Asian countries, namely, India, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, dark tourism can be dimensioned and affected by local customs and religious traditions. In particular, the belief in life after death, glorifying war death and customs of ancestor worship and religious ritual are all associated with dark tourism, thus, visitors to death-related sites can be motivated by mythical and inspirational stories. These characteristics also affect the interpretation at the site.

Interpretation in the context of tourism is considered as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Tilden, 1957, p.8, cited in Leshem, 2018). Previous studies have indicated the crucial role of tour guides in tourism (Bowman, 1992, Cohen, 1985, Schmidt, 1979; Dahles, 2002). Based on group characteristics, guides can be classified as official guides, alternative guides, or entrepreneurial guides (including commercial, event and coach tours); on the other hand, based on place characteristics, guides can be classified as private, independent, and residential guides (Bryon, 2012). The essential role of tour guides is to build a bridge to connect other stakeholders in the process of money flow, services, activities and information (Gurung, Simons,

& Devlin, 1996), with tour guides being “outer-directed” as organizers while tour leaders are “inner-directed” as entertainers and educators/teachers (p.107).

The key role of tour guide is not only as an experience broker (Jennings & Weiler, 2006), but also as a mediator (Weiler & Walker, 2014). A guide can broker visitors’ physical access to places, visitor encounters (interactions with the host community and environment), visitor understanding (cognitive access) and visitor empathy (affective or emotional access) (McGrath, 2007). Beyond the four roles of guides conceptualised in the literature, tour guides at sites of national importance also perform a political role. For example, Dahles (2002) addresses the way the Indonesian government uses propaganda to manifest and restrict both the narrative and tourist guide policy. In the case of sites linked to lost lives for nation-building and independence, the narrative certainly “provide[s] particular (political) interpretations of past events” (Sharpley, 2009, p.8). Therefore, on-site tour guides for historical sites also perform political and ideological roles embedded in official narratives of the sites designated to form part of the national history.

Interpretation of dark heritage sites is multifaceted and multi-layered in design and purpose (Sharpley & Stone, 2009), “while some tourists may be interested in interpretation that is educational, others may be seeking an emotional, spiritual, or sentimental experience” (Biran, Poria & Oren, 2011, p.825). Thus, it is not easy to interpret a site in a way that is satisfied by all the parties with different memories and perspectives (Boyles, 2005). If the interpretation is misled, trivialised or commercialised, it becomes “a barrier” to achieve both cognitive and effective outcomes of tourist experience (Kunwar & Karki, 2019, p. 52). The visitors’ experience might be influenced by on-site interpretation (Crawford, 2016). Interpretation of war-related sites is highly contested when the winners and the losers holding different memories of the same event (Baldwen & Sharpley, 2009). Therefore, “market separation” solution (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005) is proposed.

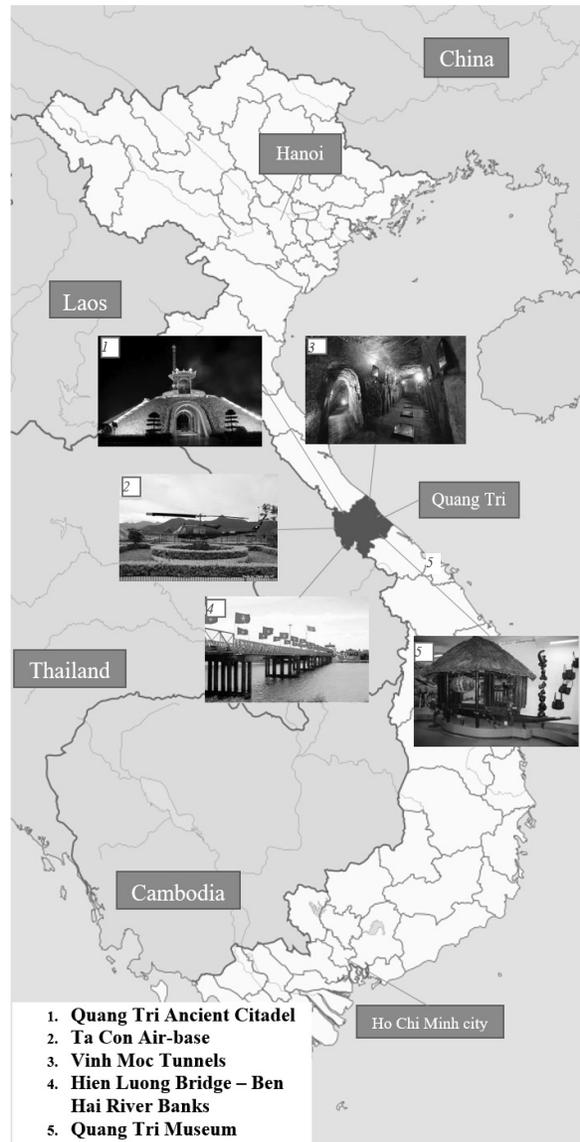
The notion of on-site interpretation is co-creation by the guides and the tourists (Strange & Kempa, 2003; Robb, 2009; Walby & Piche, 2011). When stories conveyed at the dark sites are contentious or multi-layered, visitors tend to ‘read’ or ‘see’ the sites through their own lenses of experience, knowledge, and perspectives (Light, 2017). For instance, veteran had first-hand experience at war sites can provide additional details, or shed different light on the stories delivered by guides. Therefore, not only the supply side, i.e. museums, relics, heritage sites provides interpretation, but also the demand side, i.e. tourists, pilgrimages, veterans... involves actively in the construction of the sites’ narratives.

In this context, on-site tour guides at dark sites in terms of both the manner in which they are presented and the information they convey are critical in endowing

deeper understanding for tourists, not through instruction, but by way of provocation (Tilden, 1977, cited in Miles, 2014). Tour guides at historic dark sites perform the additional role of storytelling and meaning-making for the tourist's trip. "The key to success in managing dark tourism attractions is to engage the staff in storytelling" to understand the proper narrative for every tourist (Wiltshier, 2016, p.44). The role of the tour guide becomes extremely important in places that mark important historical events, where tour guides perform all roles of logistics, and political and educational functions, in addition to storytelling and meaning-making of historical events.

The Vietnam War is controversial and complicated as it included the involvement of foreign forces. For the Vietnamese, the War reminds of a period of division along the 17th Parallel by the Ben Hai River in Quang Tri Province. Quang Tri is known for the fiercest battles of Vietnam War, giving the land sacred status in the national history owing to the enormous sacrifice of lives. There is a high concentration of war-related historical sites of the former DMZ, including the Ben Hai River and the Hien Luong Bridge. The area was known for the fiercest battles by American forces such as the Battle of Khe Sanh. Conversely, for Vietnamese, Quang Tri is the home of the Legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail (known as Truong Son Trail in Western literature), the Ancient Quang Tri Citadel, and the underground tunnels of Vinh Moc.

Figure 1. Selected war-related sites in Quang Tri, Vietnam



Owing to twenty-five years of the history of Vietnam War with involvement of various troops from different countries and political alliances, the war heritage of Quang Tri is highly complex and appear to have different meanings to different groups of visitors. For example, to understand the symbolic meanings of the sites, history and the war should be understood from various angles. For instance, sites

related to American troops such as Khe Sanh and Ta Con Airbase are interesting to international tourists driven by American involvement, while sites associated with fights and battles with Vietnamese involvement require an understanding of the war from the Vietnamese perspective. Therefore, on-site tour guides have incorporated many stories about what happened in the past from different sides of the war, and function mediating roles. How the on-site guide delivers narratives of historical sites remain an unanswered question and warrants further investigation.

Research methods

The authors employed a combination of qualitative methods. Data for the research were derived from observations and interviews with on-site guides, tourists, together with analysis of guide narratives. Qualitative methods utilise various skills, such as intensive listening, careful note-taking, detailed planning and sufficient preparation (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Interviews are the natural method when the “researchers send interviewers to ask the questions orally and to record respondents’ answers” (Barbie, 2010, p. 267). Based on the assumption that the narrative is “anything that tells or presents a story” (Jahn, 2017, p.1.2), the authors have made full use of the information obtained from the on-site guides interviewed to analyse how these stories were delivered.

The researchers conducted 14 interviews with six visitors, five on-site guides and three tour guides from tourism agencies over two weeks in late April 2019. Table 1 shows the respondents’ profiles. Each interview lasted about 30 - 40 minutes. Questions for on-site tour guides were about the types of tourists who visited the historic sites, tourists’ questions, attitudes and perceptions of the sites, and seasonality of visitation. The visitors were asked about why they visited, any new information/knowledge gained from the on-site guides; while also eliciting tourists’ comments on guides’ knowledge, attitude and skills. Questions about demographic characteristics of the informants were also asked.

Convenient sampling strategy was employed to recruit interview informants. A researcher observed tour groups visiting historic sites and recorded both guide’s narrative and visitor’s reaction. To recruit informants from group tours, the researcher approached tourists and asked for their consent to participate in the interview. The researcher stayed on sites to interview tour guides while they were in between services. Recruitment of informants was difficult in the hottest month of the summer when the study was carried out. Tourists got tired under the heat and often quickly returned to their air-conditioned cars and buses. Although the researcher had approached many potential informants, very few tourists agreed to participate in the study. The recruitment of tour guides for interview sample was easier as the guides often stay indoor at the site upon completion of their duty. In addition to 14 informants consented

to participate in the study, the researcher conducted more than 20 informal talks to visitors and guides on various topics in relation to site interpretation. Interview recordings were transcribed and analysed along with observations and field notes of informal talks.

Table 1. Interview respondent profiles.

Respondents	Gender	Nationality	Occupation	Residence
Tourist 1	Female	Vietnamese	Student	Phu Yen
Tourist 2	Male	Vietnamese	Veteran	Hanoi
Tourist 3	Female	Vietnamese	Unknown	Quang Binh
Tourist 4	Male	Vietnamese	Officer	Thanh Hoa
Tourist 5	Male	Vietnamese	Veteran	Ha Nam
Tourist 6	Female	Vietnamese	Unknown	Quang Binh
On-site guide 1	Female	Vietnamese	Tour guide at Vinh Moc Historical Relic	Quang Tri
On-site guide 2	Male	Vietnamese	Tour guide at Vinh Moc Historical Relic	Quang Tri
On-site guide 3	Female	Vietnamese	Tour guide at the Quang Tri Ancient Citadel	Quang Tri
On-site guide 4	Male	Vietnamese	Tour guide at the Quang Tri Ancient Citadel	Quang Tri
On-site guide 5	Male	Vietnamese	Tour guide at Hien Luong Historical Relic	Quang Tri
Tour guide 1	Male	Vietnamese	Independent tour guide	Hue
Tour guide 2	Male	Vietnamese	Tour guide	Hanoi
Tour guide 3	Female	Vietnamese	Independent tour guide	Quang Binh

In addition to interviews, participant observation was also employed to provide additional contextual data to aid the interview process. Having involvement with a given social group, the researcher is able to create a personal relationship with its members, and is able to describe their actions and motivations (Corbetta, 2003). The authors could observe visitor-guide interactions by following guided groups on their

tours. One of the two researchers was born and raised locally, became deeply involved with locals and built trusting relationships with tour companies. Their proximity to the culture, industry experience, and Vietnamese language skills, and intimate knowledge of local values and customs enabled understanding of the respective local contexts.

The authors adopted thematic analysis with a confirmatory approach to analyse data based on conceptual categories determined prior to reviewing the text (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). First, the authors analysed discourses of groups associated with tour guides and tourists separately. Second, the themes that emerged from different groups were compared, connected and organized into major themes that appeared on both sides, which centred on the interpretation of the given war-related site. Themes that emerged from interviews were triangulated with data derived from observation and presented in the findings of the study below.

Findings

Having analysed data collected from interviews and participant observation, four types of roles for tour guides emerged. The first set consists of ascribed roles for political and educational purposes, and the second set consists of mediating roles between contrasted elements such as past-present and war-peace, involving the mediation of visitor emotion and the mediation of visitor understanding.

Political broker

The Vietnam War is controversial and complicated with the involvement of foreign forces. Quang Tri is where the 17th Parallel by the Ben Hai River was set to divide former North Vietnam and South Vietnam after the Geneva Agreement signed in 1954, which led to twenty years of the war from 1956 to 1974. The province has a high concentration of war-related historical sites including the Ben Hai River, a natural border dividing North and South Vietnam that forms the DMZ area, and the Hien Luong Bridge which traverses the river. Former battlefields such as Ancient Quang Tri Citadel and Khe Sanh witnessed some of the fiercest battles of the Vietnam War where the various troops involved lost thousands of lives. For Vietnamese, Quang Tri is a sacred place of the legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail, where 20,000 lives of young Vietnamese were lost building a complicated logistical support network from North to South Vietnam. Their remains lay in nine national war cemeteries in Quang Tri. As a witness of important events the twenty-year Vietnam War, Quang Tri is a sacred place in the national history. Therefore, official narratives of national history associated with the sites are highly regulated and sharing these narratives is the official task of on-site tour guides, in fact reflecting Ashworth's (1994) "dominant ideology hypothesis" (p. 20). For example, a tour-guide expressed the following restriction in the interview:

The DMZ tour is usually chosen for learning about history... Tourists have often learned about these sites before arriving. Additional information was collected through the [on-site] guide's interpretation at the site. In my personal experience, I seldom express my political viewpoints as tourists might have a very different view on the related events I mention. I let the on-site guide explain the national narrative of the events as they are authorized to do so. (Tour guide 1).

Symbolic meaning can only be conveyed through skilful and knowledgeable guides who deeply understand and are attached to the sites. If qualified on-site guides are not available, ordinary group tour guides often omit the sites from the tour itinerary. For example, the ruins of the Quang Tri Ancient Citadel of the 81-day battle in summer 1972 is one of the most visited sites for domestic tourists. However, delivering the historical narrative and symbolic meaning of the site is not easy as explanation and is highly abstract. This special task can only be performed by professional on-site guides, and ordinary guides may find it extremely challenging:

Quang Tri Ancient Citadel is officially included in the package tour, but is often omitted from the itinerary for international travellers. Firstly, it is not easy to interpret as it requires deep and specialized historical knowledge. Secondly, the Citadel has a high symbolic meaning with very few tangible exhibits to show visitors. Apart from the common grave and museum, it is difficult to explain historical events that occurred in the past (Tour guide 2).

Educational broker

Educational activities are designed to carry out political ideology. Visitation to historical sites is an indispensable program that applies to all levels of education, from primary to secondary school and tertiary education in Vietnam. Historical site-visitation offers opportunities for critical thinking (Paul, 1990), situational instruction (Smith, 1989) and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) through activity-based learning. Political education is embedded in the official narratives of historic sites. Interactions through physical settings (the site) and symbolic interpretation performed by the guide retains students' interest in historical lessons. Generations of school and university students have come to Quang Tri to learn about the war and related events. This type of educational travel in Vietnamese is called '*du lich ve nguon*', which means educating the younger generation about their origin. In this context, the on-site guide performs as a broker facilitating visitor interaction with physical sites to enhance the educational experience.

Students are from universities nationwide, mainly from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, from the departments of history and tourism. There are also students from the Da Nang University of Science and Technology. Local

school and college students visit the site for the educational program on the occasions of Youth Day (March 26th) and National Reunification Day (April 30th) (On-site guide 1).

Educating younger generations about history is one of the major tasks for tourism industry and heritage site management in Quang Tri, which has been recognised by tourists:

Coming here, you will feel both national pain and pride very clearly that makes it the best place for the education of the younger generation (Tourist 3).

Site interpretation for the young audience, however, is slightly different from the official narrative for adults. In the narratives targeted at children, the stories often center on the skills for survival, ensuring continuity of lives, despite the hardship and darkness of the war, with remarkable examples of how children lived through wartime in the Vinh Moc underground tunnels:

Each person in Vinh Linh suffered through more than seven tons of bombs on average. However, life still arose from suffering and death; 17 children were born in the heart of the Vinh Moc tunnels (On-site guide 3).

Through meaningful interpretation, on-site guides convey messages on humanity, heroism, peace loving, goodness and selflessness. It reflects points made by Poria et al. (2009), that interpretation not only has a knowledge function to the tourist, but it can also build up their experience. Along with their functional role to convey a political message and educating young generations, on-site guides also performed a symbolic role as a bridge between the past and the present, while also reconciling conflicts between former enemies.

Mediating visitor emotions

Vietnamese veterans often visit former battlefields through regular programs organised by the Veteran Association, such as “Memorial of the old battlefields and comrades”, “Legendary road” on the occasions of national commemorative events such as Victory Day (April 30th), War Invalids and Martyrs’ Day (July 27th), and Independence Day (September 2nd). Visitation to Quang Tri includes pilgrims, visiting as a kind of ritual to pay respect to those who sacrificed their lives, as a way to connect the past and the present. Tour guides at the Quang Tri Ancient Citadel witness many emotional moments of veterans and their relatives when they have returned to the sacred land where their comrades and beloved ones lay. The guides become agents, mediating the past and the present, between the dead and the living, by telling the stories of the past battles.

Tourists shed tears when they hear the tour guide tell about soldiers’ painful stories from the war. There is a story of Le Van Huynh – a young soldier who could

predict what would happen to him and wrote a farewell letter to his mother and wife the day before the final battle, in which he was certain of his fate. He knew in advance where he would be buried and guided the family to find his remains. Here is a part of the contents of his final letter, read to tourists by an on-site guide at the Quang Tri Ancient Citadel:

I'm leaving, my mom please take care, as if I am always with you. Don't be sad, so my soul can be free. My father has gone so far to let you know how hard it is. Currently, I have grown up, then... Well, please don't be sad, I have lived my life for the future fatherland (Guides' narrative from the Quang Tri Ancient Citadel).

It can be affirmed that, for each different visitor, on-site tour guides play a different role. For Vietnamese tourists, they are mediating agents between the present and the past, while for international visitors, guides are telling them different stories and sometimes, helping veterans to heal their pain from the past.

Mediating visitor understanding

Almost half of a century has passed since the time of the Vietnam War, yet foreign veterans have kept coming back to the former battlefields to relive memories. Their motivation to return to Vietnam is to find out what has not been told and what is missing in the Western narratives of the Vietnam War by asking various questions to the on-site guides.

The most frequent question being asked is why American forces wanted to destroy Vinh Linh? How was life in the tunnel? Where did they find food? How did they light up the tunnel? What are Vietnamese attitudes towards Americans? Do Vietnamese hate Americans? (On-site guide 2).

By telling the stories from a Vietnamese perspective, on-site guides contribute to boosting mutual understanding between both sides, bringing a new perspective of the war to foreigners. One of the authors had the personal experience of guiding an Australian veteran who had fought in the Vietnam War. He returned to Quang Tri with the desire to build a water supply system for local people. He showed a photo taken in Khe Sanh when he was a young man in an army uniform. Visiting sites such as the Hien Luong Bridge, the Vinh Moc Tunnels and Khe Sanh to recall the battles of long ago and learning from guides' narratives of stories from the other side of the war, was a healing therapy for him. The trip to the former battlefields had somehow released him from the burden of the past.

The narratives and stories through guide interpretation shared and created new meaning and motivated tourists to explore the sites further. For example, after visiting and being interpreted to by an on-site tour guide's narrative, a visitor affirmed that:

From the national Highway 1A I can unconsciously see the old bridges, loudspeaker systems, flagpoles and some other items on both sides. Even knowing that this place had a long separation over 20 years, I really could not visualize the true meaning of the historical stories and what remains today until I was exposed to them by a guide's interpretation (Tourist 2).

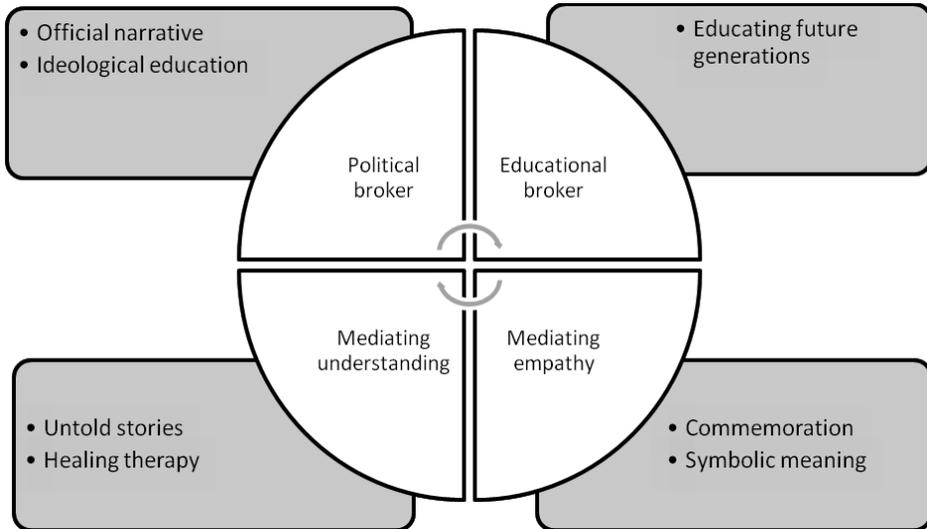
A good tourist product should be accompanied by professional guides and friendly staff in addition to service and facility quality, as well as including foreign language proficiency. Currently, only English tour guides are available in limited supply. It is impossible to meet the demands of foreign tourists with non-English speaking backgrounds requesting a tour guide at the sites.

In fact, our agency has some training courses for the employees. However, in addition to specialized knowledge, foreign languages are a major obstacle. Most employees do not study foreign languages. Although some foreign language classes are held, only a low level of English is offered. Some tourists require French- or Italian-speaking guides, which is impossible to be provided (On-site guide 2).

With all functions listed above, the on-site tour guides are those who make sites meaningful and worthwhile to visit. Hence, in parallel with the process of improving the quality and diversity of tourism products, it is necessary to improve the knowledge and skills of tourist guides at those historic sites. In particular, guides with good and diverse foreign language proficiency are limited.

Discussion

The purpose of this research is to investigate the roles of on-site tour guides in the interpretation of dark heritage sites of the Vietnam War in the case of Quang Tri, the war's former DMZ area. The authors employed qualitative critical narrative analysis driven from in-depth interviews and observation. The researchers identified four major roles of on-site tour guides in the dark heritage sites as showed in Figure 1. The division of four roles is for the purpose of conceptualisation and is relative as in reality, multiple roles are interchangeable and inseparable.

Figure 2. Four major roles of on-site guides

The roles of regular tour guides and on-site tour guides differ. Ordinary tour guides are responsible to facilitate a safe route following a strict timetable and designated itinerary (Cohen, 1985), while satisfying tourists with complete tour service and enhancing their overall experience (Huang et al., 2009). Differently, the key role of on-site guides at historic sites place emphasis on their role as a broker and mediator. Drawing on the four mediating roles for visitors' access, encounters, understanding and empathy asserted by McGrath (2007), our study finds out that on-site tour guides especially perform the latter two roles: being mediators for visitor cognitive and affective access. Beyond these ascribed roles, tour guides at nationally important sites in Quang Tri also perform the roles of political and educational brokers under the strict governance of official interpretation of the sites. These perspectives reflect Dahles's (2002) argument on government manifestation and restriction of the narrative and guiding policy in Indonesia. In the context of Vietnam, where political narratives are embedded in the educational system and curriculum, both political and educational roles become priority tasks to perform for on-site guides.

The important role of the on-site guide in storytelling and meaning-making for tourist trips reflects Uzzel (1988) points out that "emotions colour our memories and experience" (p. 152). The mediating role of on-site guides at controversial sites moves beyond understanding and emotion. The guides have acted as ambassadors to bring former enemies closer to each other. In other words, they perform the role of an ambassador of peace. Similarly, the mediating role of visitor emotional access, in fact, is the mediation between the dead and the living, between the past and the

present. The guides tell stories of death to visitors and interpret the past to the present audience. In that way, they perform the roles of political and educational brokers. The four roles identified for on-site guides are closely related and interchangeable.

Tourism and its development facilitates the movement of people from different regional, social, cultural and political backgrounds from around the world. Therefore, it complicates the process of heritage politicization as Richter (1989) defined as “a political construction of what is remembered” (p.109). Narrated on the basis of the winner of the war, site interpretation reflects authorised narratives of the national struggle for independence in Vietnam, which reaffirms Ashworth’s (1994) “dominant ideology hypothesis” (p. 20). The narratives of war heritage in Quang Tri asserts that governments would project messages legitimating their position, and therefore are highly selective and “purely nationalistic narratives” (Long, 2012, p. 210). Narratives of historical places related to national struggles for independence are used to build patriotism at the domestic level (Timothy & Boyd, 2006) however, they appear differently to international visitors (and some domestic visitors) with different backgrounds and understanding. Therefore, the on-site guide’s mediating role to enhance visitors understanding is highly challenging and complex and requires careful consideration about the stories being told.

Findings from our fieldwork challenge Ashworth and Hartmann’s (2005) notion of “market separation”. Visitors to the war-heritage are aware of the winners’ intention glorify their victory, and that ideology might frame the picture of the war. Their visitation to the war sites has often been motivated by their personal connection, history and memory of both individual and collective level. Once encountering contested interpretation of the war sites, tourists and guides might involve in a co-creation process when viewpoints and historical facts and truths are exchanged to enrich the experiences of the visitors and stories of the guides. Particularly, when Vietnamese government makes effort to close the painful past and promotes reconciliation for peace and friendship, the co-creation solution for on-site guiding has proved to be a feasible and appropriate option for contested interpretation.

Another significant finding from our study is the paradox of dark and light associated with war heritage pilgrimages in the Asian context. War death is not necessarily presented only as the dark side of the story. The way the Vietnamese commemorate the war dead and construct interpretation of tragic events is to glorify death, in which the soldiers’ sacrifices for nation-building and independence should be remembered and glorified. This notion reflects Heap’s (2009) contention “simply that dark tourism is really an attempt to package death in a sort of ‘glory way’ without right and wrong” (p.94). In this process, tour guides are those who convey the message of glorification. Hence, dark tourism does not only contain a “dark”, negative side, but also fuels a “light”, positive experience among the visitors.

Conclusion

This research analyses the roles of on-site tour guides in the context of war-related sites in Vietnam. It also reveals that apart from the historical value embedded in the physical component of the site, on-site tour guides significantly convey meaningful messages to tourists by enhancing their cognitive and affective access to historical sites with their knowledge and interpretation. They contribute to visitors' understanding of the political and educational contexts of the experience. The mediating role of on-site guides bridges the past and the present, and brings opposite sides of the Vietnam War to a common understating and empathy.

The research has several implications for theoretical development and practical implementation. In terms of the theoretical perspective, this exploratory research raises a question about the intertwined nature of political and educational aspects in dark tourism, together with the separation of emotional and cognitive elements of meditated experience at dark tourism sites. Thus, the dualistic dark-light tourism classification should be challenged and deserves further investigation. For practitioners, findings from the research emphasize the need to enhance the performance of on-site tour guides at historical sites, as they play a much more important role than information givers. The multiple roles which on-site guides play should be enhanced and recognised in the process of peace-building and carry on the education of history to future generations.

The current research, however, has several inherent limitations that shed light for future research. Firstly, the research is limited to a small number of guides and tourists. It is necessary to expand the scope of the interviews to encompass the viewpoints of government officials, international tourists and other institutions such as schools, who could provide diverse understanding of the historical sites. Secondly, the study mainly explores Vietnamese perspectives of interpretation. It would be beneficial for the literature to compare narratives of these historical sites across different groups of visitors of various nationalities or age groups to elicit further viewpoints. Finally, the study of tour guiding should not be isolated from overall tourist experience studies. These suggestions can contribute to the literature on dark tourism by making future studies more meaningful.

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