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# **Retailing in Places of World Heritage, Transition and 'Planned Authenticity'**

## **1. Introduction**

Economic geography scholarship on retail change in developing countries has primarily focused on the emergence and practices of 'modern' retail sectors. The main topics that have been explored in this regard include the globalization of transnational retail and the emergence of domestically owned supermarkets that serve growing markets of domestic consumers (e.g., Coe & Wrigley, 2007; 2009). Those topics are not the foci of this paper. Rather, this paper aims to explain the emergence and transformation of the tourism retail sector in Hoi An in central Vietnam; it explores the practices of and challenges facing the clothing retailers that serve global tourists visiting the ancient town. With reference to these clothing retailers, Hoi An is often referred to as the 'Tailor City' by both tourists and locals, and it has become one of Vietnam's most prominent tourist destinations (see Nhung, 2015; Trinh et al., 2014). The paper examines clothing retail activities that appear as 'authentic' and are commonly presented to tourists as 'tailoring'. Thus, the focus is on the retailers that have emerged in a context of ancient architecture and monuments, in which hundreds of clothing retailers, and the thousands of tourists who are their customers, have materialized.

The paper thereby contributes to broadening the discussion of retail geographies in at least three highly interrelated ways. First, it focuses on relatively small domestic retailers rather than modern retail formats such as supermarkets. Second, the examined retailers target incoming flows of foreign tourists in particular, not domestic consumers. Retailers connected to local tourism sectors have previously received little attention in academic research. Third, the study is set in a significant United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) heritage site and tourist destination. This facilitates reflection on how this type of international intervention affects longer-term retail development and change locally. This paper's analysis thus diversifies our understanding of the places behind World Heritage listings, which Timms (2010), for example, stresses as an important quest for geographers. Knowledge is gained regarding the relations between tourism retailers and the places in which they work – places in which tradition and heritage are commonly important to the products for sale, which may be considered extensions of place image (see also Swanson and Timothy, 2012). Retailers, along with their activities and products, may somehow become 'authentic' by appearing as part of a particular place's tradition and heritage. The present paper introduces the concept of 'planned authenticity' as a way of understanding how such processes play out in contexts of heritage tourism and transition, both of which characterize Hoi An.

Based on fieldwork conducted in Hoi An, this paper makes two highly interlinked propositions: First, although clothing retail and products in contemporary Hoi An may appear to be inevitably linked to the place, the products sold by retailers are not very place-specific. The production of clothing sold in the ancient town commonly transcends multiple geographical scales and is also much less linked to traditional activities than it appears to be, as it is increasingly industrialized and mass produced. Second, the opportunities and challenges of different retailers vary significantly and are related to the status of individual retailers within a network of tourism stakeholders. This variation should be seen in light of the transitional status of the Vietnamese economy and the way in which the emerging retail sector was planned as part of the country's heritage tourism strategy. The remainder of the paper is divided into the following sections. First, three bodies of relevant literature are outlined

focusing on (i) authenticity and heritage, including an introduction to the suggested concept of ‘planned authenticity’, (ii) retail geographies and tourism, and (iii) the political economy of the retail and tourism sectors in Vietnam. Second, the fieldwork methodology is briefly presented. Third, practices and challenges in the outlined context of transition and heritage within three identified segments of clothing retailers are examined. Finally, the findings are discussed and conclusions are presented.

## **2. ‘Planned authenticity’**

In the interphase of the heritage tourism and economic transition that characterizes Hoi An today, the much-debated notion of authenticity becomes essential, and also calls for reexamination. The debate on the interpretation of authenticity dates back at least to the 1970s and the concept of ‘staged’ authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), and it later moved toward a conceptualization of consumer culture and place branding, which underlines the spatial dimensions of the concept (see Knudsen and Waade, 2010). Waitt (2000) suggests using the term ‘perceived historical authenticity’ to underline how past events may be observed in various ways by different actors. Representations of the past are inherently selective but also linked to sectional interests within a society; thus, they are often intended to lead tourists toward particular sites and toward a certain understanding of those sites (see also Urry, 2002). Like heritage tourism, authenticity is intrinsically connected with place. Souvenirs of various kinds are commonly associated with aspects of the culture and heritage of the places tourists visit – and thus with the purchase of something ‘real’ (Swanson and Timothy, 2012b; Trinh et al., 2014). Related concepts of so-called imagined or invented authenticity have also been suggested and explored, including in Hoi An, where the focus has been on tourism activities other than clothing retail. James (2010), for example, shows how the relatively recent invention of

monthly lantern festivals in Hoi An may be considered a celebration of imagined heritage. The author shows how the city of Hoi An was not historically known as a particularly important origin of specific products – except perhaps, to a minor extent, of particular types of pottery and noodles. Thus, it is further argued that traditional handicraft skills now regarded as representative of the ancient town became so because of a selective commodification of particular ideas of history, tradition and heritage in the ancient city. This point somewhat reflects Wherry's (2006a) suggestion that market interfaces have been created for tourists and for those who produce and sell cultural goods designated by the state. Such products are regarded as linked to the state's self-perception and its idea of which particular culture is representative of the character of a place (see also Wherry, 2006b). Likewise, Trinh et al. (2014) note that the tourist authorities in Hoi An have generally promoted a selected and manipulated understanding of the authentic, while certain other aspects of the past are conveniently overlooked. Thus, heritage may become a focus of struggle and dispute over its use (see also Hitchcock et al., 2010). The role of international organizations such as UNESCO in these processes has been quite widely explored, and 'heritage' is rarely a purely local concern (Adams, 2010; Hitchcock et al., 2010).

For the sake of the present study, the discussion of authenticity is considered important to the analysis of the *products* sold by clothing retailers in Hoi An, of the *processes* by which such products are produced, and of the *planned modes* in which Hoi An was developed into a heritage tourism site that provide a context for the contemporary tourist retail sector. Such elements of authenticity, which stretch beyond buildings and monuments in Hoi An, are here considered not only 'imagined' but also carefully planned. They are a reflection of the transitional status of the Vietnamese economy. Tourists come to Hoi An to visit the heritage sites, often hoping to buy place-

specific products such as particular souvenirs and tailored clothes to remind them of the place they visited, accentuating the notion of Urry (1990, 2002) that with globalization, the value of the differences between places is increasingly branded and reflected in objects of consumption. It is suggested here that in the exploration of such processes in contexts where both heritage and transition are key constituents, a concept of ‘planned authenticity’ is useful. ‘Planned authenticity’ refers to more or less planned interventions leading to the introduction, or increased significance, of activities and products that were not profoundly attached to a particular place historically but now appear to be so. Such activities and products do become part of the tourist gaze; they play a role in the ways in which the gaze is constructed and maintained (Urry, 2002b; Urry and Larsen, 2011). Yet, they are not an example, or a direct part, of a commodification of culture or past events. They were not clearly attached to the place in the past, and are therefore not examples of a commodified ancient culture. Rather, they are carefully planned and relatively new activities that come to appear as authentic elements of the context in which they emerge. In Hoi An, tailoring activities and products arguably exemplify such planned authenticity. The heritage status of the city has contributed profoundly to creating a market where entrepreneurs can establish retail businesses and sell their products domestically in a space in which ‘the global’ – in the form of foreign tourists – is invited. These processes, as well as their outcomes, will be examined in the empirical section below.

### **3. Retail geographies and tourism**

Retail is a vital aspect of what is here seen as planned authenticity in Hoi An, and it is an important part of the tourism strategy and development of the Quang Nam region. Nation states and regions, not least in developing countries, have also been

widely concerned with promoting tourist industries for decades. Retailers selling various types of souvenirs and handicrafts often play an essential role in tourism economies, and products purchased by tourists may be important sources of income for local populations (see e.g., Wherry, 2006a). Despite its economic importance, however, tourism retail has not received much attention in the literature on retail geographies, nor has it been thoroughly analyzed in studies of handicrafts that have provided knowledge of the practices and livelihoods of rural artisans – more so than of retailers – in urban areas (see e.g., Gough and Rigg, 2012). Until a couple of decades ago, the role of retail in developing countries was a relatively new and unexplored area for researchers, including geographers. The importance of place in retail development was – until recently – discussed mainly as a factor that determined locational choice and the viability of market entry modes and retail formats for transnational retailers (see Wood & Reynolds, 2012; 2014). Nevertheless, studies based on the so-called new retail geographies have contributed to broadening our understanding of the importance of context by examining, for example, how transnational retail is influenced by political economies in host economies (Hobbs, 1997; Lowe and Wrigley, 2010; Wrigley et al., 2005). These researchers have insisted not only on merely exploring locational factors but also on seriously considering the economic and cultural geographies of retail (Coe and Wrigley, 2007; Tacconelli and Wrigley, 2009).

The current retail landscape in Hoi An should also be understood from a national perspective. It is important, for example, to understand that compared to the rest of Southeast Asia, modern retail formats have entered the Vietnamese retail scene slowly, with a very low share of total grocery sales of only 4% in 2013. For comparison, in Indonesia, the share was 16.5%, while it was 71% in Singapore. Vietnam also has the lowest share of foreign retailers in the region (Coe and Bok, 2014; see also Nguyen et



al., 2013). The insignificance of modern and foreign retail in Vietnam underlines the importance of understanding the dynamics of domestic retail in Vietnam and its ways of interacting with 'the global'. Coe & Bok (2014) emphasize that the change taking place within distinctive retail markets has multiple dimensions, including the construction of unique national markets shaped by retailers, institutions, regulation, consumer demands and supply networks. The multidimensional nature of this change highlights that to understand retail change in places of heritage and transition, such as Hoi An, we need to carefully explore a number of interrelated processes of transformation going on within and beyond the city. These will be briefly presented in the following and are connected to Vietnam's political economy and to the global dynamics at play, specifically the internationally driven preservation of the city as a heritage site and the incoming flows of global tourists.

#### **4. The political economy of tourism retail in Vietnam**

When Vietnam gradually re-opened its doors to the world with the introduction of economic reform in 1986, the state still played an essential role in the tourist industry. Disputes at the state level over maintaining political control versus reforming (parts of) the tourism sector have been noted (e.g., Lloyd, 2003). The industry has often been seen as including negative foreign influences that are difficult for the state to control; such influences also pose difficulties for those fractions of the Communist Party that feared losing political control. Thus, priority – not least in the form of resolutions and directives – was given to state management of the so-called cultural sector, with a focus on the backpacker segment of incoming tourists in the late 1980s (Lloyd, 2003). This was partly due to a strategy designed to attract the lucrative luxury segment of tourists, but it also reflected initial hesitation – and later mere intolerance –

toward backpackers, who were entering the country in increasing numbers and were also among the first Western tourists to visit Hoi An in the early 1990s. Backpackers were considered difficult to control and were seen as having negative socio-cultural effects (see Di Giovine, 2009; Lloyd, 2003). The level of involvement and control by authorities in the tourism industry has continued to be relatively high (Christian et al., 2011). The Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) has been the central institution for the industry and has been responsible for planning tourism development, training management and international cooperation since 1992 (Christian et al., 2011). Decades after the introduction of economic reform, some diversification of ownership in Vietnam's tourist sector has occurred, though the state maintains majority ownership in large corporations, such as Saigon Tourism, which manages vertically integrated activities including tour operators and hotels (Christian et al., 2011). Although VNAT is still considered important, regulatory power over the tourist industry has, at least to some extent, shifted from the central level to provincial and city committees, and thus, the Hoi An City Committee is now directly in charge of managing the ancient city including conservation of heritage and regulation of tourism and services. Most state-owned tourism companies are controlled at the municipal and provincial levels, which also possess the regulatory control to implement tourism directives coming from VNAT (see Christian et al., 2011). Such control encompasses the approval, registration and running of tourism businesses (some of which are directly under VNAT control), which has been shown to increase the role of 'connections' in Vietnam's tourism sector. Such 'connections' are symptomatic of a more general favouring of state-owned companies and unfair competition, which have often been stressed in the transitional economy, including but not limited to tourism (e.g. Gainsborough, 2003). An equivalent segmentation *within* the private sector between businesses with and without state

connections has also been previously highlighted (name of author withdrawn, 2011, 2009). In the tourism sector, Bennett (2009) has shown how private tourism businesses in Vietnam must negotiate with tourism officials at subnational levels to facilitate the establishment and running of their businesses (see also Gillen, 2016). These points are relevant to the empirical analysis of challenges facing retailers in contemporary Hoi An, as discussed below.

## **5. Researching retailers in tourist destinations**

Fieldwork in Hoi An was conducted over the course of 7 weeks in 2012 and comprised three overall, and interrelated, methods:

First, the author observed the activities of several tourists and retailers in the area to gain a broad understanding of the urban clothing retail and tourism sectors. Thereby, retail shops that individual tourists and tour groups commonly visited were identified, while tourists' interactions with shopkeepers and the practices of tour guides were observed.

Second, qualitative, checklist-based interviews that lasted between 30 and 90 minutes were conducted with shop owners and/or managers who were selected based on the observations referred to above. Interviewees were selected to include some that had been identified as receiving regular visits from tourist groups and some that mainly sold clothes to individual tourists such as backpackers. Interviewees were also chosen to include shops of various sizes and degrees of 'prominence'. Prominence was assessed by the extent to which retailers appeared, for example, on lists posted on the Quang Nam Tourism webpage. During the fieldwork, it became clear, however, that arranging

interviews with larger retailers was relatively difficult partly because there were comparatively few of them and partly because they were not all prepared to participate. Therefore, a total of 20 respondents, representing 8 smaller, 8 micro and 4 larger retailers were chosen to be interviewed during the fieldwork. The selected retailers were visited several times so that interviews could be combined with further observations of the number and types of customers, interactions with customers and tourist guides, products, working routines and production/sourcing processes. It became clear during fieldwork that the level of trust built up through the author's regular visits and informal chats with shop owners and managers enhanced the amount and type of information and also provided information on sensitive issues.

Third, interviews were conducted with informants identified as possessing a broader knowledge and/or a different perspective on the topics explored. These informants included expatriates in the tourist sector, tour guides and tourists. These interviews were valuable for data triangulation purposes; they provided other perspectives on, for example, retailers' perceptions of the behaviour and strategies of tour guides, as well as the expectations and sentiments of tourists regarding the clothes they purchased in the retail shops.

## **6. Retailers in Hoi An: selling clothes to tourists**

According to UNESCO (1999), Hoi An is a well-preserved example of what used to be an important international port for commodities such as cinnamon and silk in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. After that time, trade declined because – among other reasons – the river by which ships reached the town became clogged with silt. During the Vietnam War and the subsequent period of the planned economy, the area was further

impoverished (see, e.g., Di Giovine, 2009). The economy of the region became mainly agrarian, and like the rest of Vietnam, it was more or less isolated from the global economy, including the global tourism sector, upon which barriers and state monopolization were enforced (see Christian, Fernandez-Stark, Frederick, & Gereffi, 2011; Suntikul et al., 2008a; 2008b). Hoi An initially saw only slight increases in tourism when economic reform was initiated, but the number of foreign visitors rose rapidly when the city gained UNESCO heritage status in 1999. The town and surrounding region then became much more tourism-oriented. For instance, in 2010, 2.5 million visitors, of whom 40% were foreigners, visited Hoi An (Hildebrandt and Isaac, 2015).

The clothing retail market in Hoi An began to emerge in the 1990s, and its expansion can be divided into two overall waves. First, a planned wave containing a small number of more-or-less state-connected retailers began immediately after the city obtained its heritage designation. Second, a larger wave of retailers appeared at the initiative of the entrepreneurial owners themselves, who saw new opportunities arising in clothing retail. The current retail sector overwhelmingly contains domestically owned stores, though a smaller number of expatriates, including overseas Vietnamese, are also present. The retail sector consists of numerous smaller shops that are highly specialized in clothing, handicrafts and souvenirs. According to the retailers included in this present study, approximately 95% of the clothes are sold to foreign tourists. Only specific types of businesses such as souvenir and tailor shops, hotels and restaurants are allowed in the ancient parts of the city, underlining how heritage, conservation and tourism may lead to processes of selective commodification and urban development, as noted above (Di Giovine, 2009). Relocation of local communities or of people living in places that become living museums may also be a consequence of World Heritage designation (see

e.g., Buergin, 2003; Miura, 2010). In Hoi An, both types of processes have arguably taken place. It has previously been stressed that the negative effects, including those on local livelihoods, of heritage tourism have not received sufficient attention in Hoi An. Avieli (2015, p. 52), for example, notes that inhabitants who entered business in the tourism sector ‘had become very rich by international standards’. While we take this statement to refer more specifically to ‘developing country standards’ rather than ‘international standards’ per se, the following fieldwork-based empirical analysis will show how generalizations about the prosperity of businesses and people in Hoi An should be made with caution. The empirical section is divided into three sub-sections, in line with a somewhat rudimentary categorization of retailers into three segments of larger shops, smaller shops and micro shops (see Table 1). Importantly, this division does not follow precise quantitative firm categorization models that are based on, for example, number of employees, sales or turnover. Rather, it reflects a rougher pattern – identified during fieldwork – of how types of products, production modes and market segments tend to correspond to firm size, as illustrated in Table 1. In turn, these three groups of retailers are shown below to have different opportunities that are highly related to the encounter between heritage tourism and transition in Hoi An.

(Table 1 about here)

### ***6.1.Larger retailers: ‘Mass production’, ‘authentic’ products and tourist groups***

Larger retailers included in this study are all located in French-style buildings, in which they inhabit all floors, in the old town or in the adjacent streets. In these shops, the essence of ‘authenticity’ is clearly and intentionally reflected in the stores’ exteriors and interiors in a manner that may lead the customer to think of them as ‘natural’

representatives of ancient Vietnamese culture. Yet, they were generally established earlier than most other retailers in Hoi An, and they mostly date back only to the late 1990s, which contrasts with the way in which they have come to symbolize a step back in time to ‘real and traditional’, and pre-communist, Vietnamese culture. These larger retailers’ presentations of their shops and products during interviews, as well as during observations of sales situations, also differed from those of the two others types of retailers examined below: they clearly attempted to create and retain an image of ‘traditional shops selling tailored clothes’, as part of traditional Hoi An culture, in a relatively uncritical manner.

Compared to the other two types of retailers, the larger ones have a much more extensive selection of fabrics, which are categorized according to types of material, quality and origin so that similar fabrics may be ordered at different prices. They have relatively large showrooms for pre-fabricated samples of clothes, such as traditional Ao Dai, silk dresses and suits. These larger retailers are also distinguished from most smaller and micro retailers by having diversified their product ranges to include various types of accessories, such as bags, ties and jewellery. They target a segment of up-market customers, both individuals and tourist groups, and at the time of the fieldwork, they were also starting to offer online sales in a variety of measurements and fabrics. Clothes sold by these retailers are relatively expensive, and very little bargaining is accepted. It was repeatedly stressed during interviews and observational visits that the number of customers was large enough for bargaining to be unnecessary, which was generally considered an important part of retaining a local high-end brand.

These larger businesses are first and foremost retailers, and they are focused on in-house sales rather than production. Like other types of clothing retailers in Hoi An, they generally provide fast service to tourists, who stay only for a short time, rather than ‘slow and personalized tailoring’ of customized products. This is, not least, a consequence of the fact that although 80% of international tourists who arrive in Hoi An have been estimated to stay overnight, they stay only 3 days on average, while 20% are only day visitors (Nhung, 2015). Thus, there is a relatively short average time period during which products can be made and amended. When customers come to the shops to order clothes, they commonly select designs from the prefabricated samples or from pictures in magazines that are displayed for the purpose of possible imitation. The customers are measured in the shops, but very few products are made in-house. Store employees are therefore mainly selected based on their ability to speak English, French or Chinese, rather than their tailoring qualifications. Clothing products are mostly manufactured at relatively large production sites mostly located outside the city but close enough to meet the short lead times that are necessary when customers are tourists. Interestingly, despite these relatively industrialized production operations that are similar to the clothing export system (name of author withdrawn, 2007), the managers of larger retailers commonly referred to the seamstresses who work in the factories – and sometimes even to the factories themselves – as ‘tailors’ during the interviews:

‘We have two teams of tailors that work for this shop because we are a chain of 3 shops. If they are too busy, they subcontract to another tailor, which sometimes creates problems with quality. We do not have to do that often, because we work on a small scale (compared to export-



oriented producers). There is a lot of demand, and the system works well (Interview, 2012; text in bracket added by author).

A result of such production processes is that products are often mass-produced, if not in numbers (as the scale is obviously much smaller than for export markets) then in terms of production processes. In cases where a customer does what was often referred to as ‘asking for designs’ during the interviews – in most cases meaning ordering a piece of clothing from a picture to be imitated – several pieces of the ordered product may still be produced, as explained by one larger retailer – again referring to factory-like production sites as ‘tailors’:

‘(...) I have my own tailors – they cut and sew many of the same models at the same time because we see that if one tourist liked a dress, others will like it too. Afterward, we change the dress to fit that customer’s measurements’ (Interview, 2012).

Larger retailers are a clear part of Hoi An’s image as a ‘tailor city’ and an established part of what appears to be a network of major tourism stakeholders. During the fieldwork, the largest retail shops in the city, some of which were interviewed for this study, were repeatedly referred to as the ‘big five’ by smaller retailers, expatriates working in the sector and tourist guides. They are essential to the city’s retail landscape, with its flourishing consumption space of clothes and handicrafts, and they are often presented to tourists as an important part of the city’s heritage and tradition. For example, most of them are among the relatively few – out of all the retailers in Hoi An – that are featured on the Quang Nam Tourism official website (<http://quangnamtourism.com.vn/en>), on billboards, and in brochures handed out to tourists at hotels, restaurants and the airport. Nevertheless, it is argued here that these

larger retailers are, in fact, no less important than other retailers in Hoi An in what has become a place of sales for quickly produced and often imitated clothing, of which the authenticity and place specificity are both questionable. While the exact ownership structure of such large retail businesses was generally difficult to assess, the owners were characterized as ‘important’ during interviews with the owners themselves and with their personnel. In at least two cases, owners stated their origin as Hanoi, where they owned similar retail shops and had close relations to the state sector. All larger retailers stressed that they also owned other tourism sector entities in Hoi An, such as hotels, tourist agencies and restaurants:

‘(...) when lots of tailors opened in Hoi An, I had a bar and some large famous restaurants, and when I saw the demands of the tourists for clothes, I also opened a large tailor shop. I still have all these businesses and three tailor shops’ (Interview, 2012).

It was also sometimes noted by the owners of the smaller retail shops examined below that the tourism agencies own (parts of) the larger shops. While further research is needed to confirm this, it did become clear during the interviews that larger retailers were generally ‘connected’ to authorities and that they considered this connection to be a major reason why they are among the largest retailers in town.

### ***6.2.Smaller retailers: Networks, imitation and extreme competition***

Smaller retailers are primarily family-owned and often located on the ground floors of residential houses. Family ownership does not reflect long family traditions of being in clothing retail for the smaller retailers involved in this study. The respondents all stressed that ‘tailoring’ is a relatively new occupation for their families and that they entered the sector because they were inspired by Hoi An’s transformation into a ‘tailor

city'. Essentially, they had seen that clothing retail was a relatively lucrative business for other retailers, and they followed the same path. Like the larger retailers, the smaller ones produce a variety of clothing products, including Ao Dai, dresses, skirts, trousers, scarves and suits. They mainly target a low-to-mid market segment of individual tourists and backpackers shopping for relatively cheap 'tailored' products, according to the respondents. They commonly have a few sewing machines in their shops, which are sometimes used for smaller changes, but tasks done in-house are otherwise limited to receiving orders, measuring, and selecting fabrics and other materials. One owner of a smaller retail shop explains how she works:

'I first welcome the customers, listen to their demands, and get the clothes made depending on their choice of model. They also choose the fabric in my shop. Afterward, we measure and give the numbers to the tailors. When the tailors are done with the order, they bring the finished clothes back to us' (Interview, 2012).

It is interesting to note how owners of smaller shops, like owners of the larger ones, refers to their subcontractors as tailors while also placing signs with the word 'tailor' on their own shop fronts. The ready-made clothes are bought back to the store, where the customer tries them on, and changes and adjustments are agreed upon mainly if required by the tourist; adjustments are also usually made by subcontractors:

'Our job is that we welcome the customers that come to the shop, recommend fabrics, and tell them when to come back for the clothes. The clothes are made in my family's home, and we give parts of the order to neighbors. They all specialize in particular types of clothes' (Interview, 2012).

Subcontractors who produce the clothes are also more commonly stated to be family members or neighbours who seem to be organized in networks of small, specialized workshops. The degree to which these networks are horizontally organized or mere subcontracting requires more research. During the fieldwork conducted for this present study, they were referred to as highly specialized units that complement each other:

‘We decide which tailor to use because we have relations with some of them, since we have used them a long time. In the beginning, they made samples. There are both tailors in and outside the city. They are specialized in specific products and sometimes even parts of products, so you also have to pick the one that can do the job the customer ask for (Interview, 2012).

During the interviews, representatives of the largest shops in this segment stressed that they see themselves as moving away from using small specialised workshops in the future. Rather, they aim to manufacture larger quantities in their own factories. As was also the case for larger retailers, the design processes are best described as imitation or copying. One female manager of a family owned retail shop explains:

‘(...) the customers find designs on our PC or in magazines, and we try to make the same, or with the changes they want. I also sometimes try to draw designs. I did not learn that; I just try from looking at the pictures in magazines’ (Interview, 2012).

Other owners of smaller businesses use similar self-taught imitation processes, referred to as ‘designing’, although none of them had received any training, neither from participation in public training courses nor from tasks performed and learned within the family business. Not only being inspired by, but also directly copying, clothes presented in international fashion magazines is the norm rather than the exception for the Western-inspired clothes that compose the majority of the retail stock. The degree of copying carried out is underlined in the narrative below, in which a female owner of one of the smaller shops explains her difficulties reproducing parts of clothes that are not clear from the pictures:

‘We learned to design by looking at websites and clothes in other shops (...). The back of a dress is always difficult when you design this way. It is best when the customers bring a picture of the back of the dress as well’.

Fabric, commonly silk, is sourced from China, Danang or Ho Chi Minh City. While the exact origin of materials is not known – be it China or India – weak connections are again revealed between the products and any historic silk traditions – in terms of the materials used and the location of Hoi An.

One challenge was stressed by almost all smaller retailers, namely, harsh competition. Their views in this regard may be divided into two sub-issues that relate, in different ways, to the heritage status of the city and to the ways in which the heritage-related retail sector arguably emerged as a result of planning. First, competition *within* this segment of smaller retailers was repeatedly stressed as detrimental; that competition was unanimously seen as caused by the enormous and rapid increase in the number of retailers since the city’s heritage status designation. As noted by one respondent, ‘(...) it

*happens often that some shops have to close because the competition is too high. There are too many tailors for one city'* (Interview, 2012). Second, competition from larger retailers was generally considered not only high but also unfair. Such competition should be viewed in light of the ways in which provincial and city level planning in the aftermath of the heritage designation interacted with the transitional status of the economy. As a result, the ways in which retailers are (or are not) connected to tourism stakeholders today, and the consequent effects on the retailers' present opportunities, clearly vary. Nearly all respondents in this group of retailers emphasized that they regarded themselves as lacking the connections often considered necessary for the business to flourish. Such connections were identified during fieldwork to include two overall types, namely connections to (i) tourism authorities, and (ii) other tourism business entities such as hotels, guides and restaurants, which are themselves highly interconnected. While other studies have also shown how a lack of 'good relations' may lead to a deficiency of resources such as capital and land or to a dearth of export possibilities for private clothing businesses in Vietnam (Nadvi et al., 2004; name of author withdrawn, 2011, 2007), smaller retailers in Hoi An, interestingly, first and foremost stressed that such an absence negatively influences the number and types of tourists who become their customers. They also generally viewed their own lack of state relations as being in stark contrast to the alleged connectedness of the larger retailers and as constituting a significant reason for being uncompetitive:

(Name of larger retailer) and other large shops have their own introducers that work in tourist offices. Sometimes, they also meet the tourists in the airport and show them to their hotel and their shop, etc.

My biggest worry is that I have to sell my shop to one of the large ones,

as happened to many small shops here (Interview, 2012; name of retailer mentioned anonymized by author).

It was often stressed that tourist groups with guides seldom visit smaller shops. This was regarded as an effect of lacking connections and led to a paradox of wanting more customers from the most lucrative segment of the tour groups, while at the same time hoping to avoid them. On the one hand, not being visited by tour groups did mean a loss of possibly profitable sales. On the other hand, a number of respondents mentioned that guided group tour visits led to payments of commissions to the tourist guides:

‘(...) there is a rather sensitive issue in Hoi An. We have to pay commission, and few people know this. We pay the tourist guides, when they come here with customers from the hotels. 10% would be ok, but now we pay up to 30-40%, so there is little left for us (...). This is the worst in Hoi An (Interview, 2012).

Likewise, another scenario mentioned particularly by the smallest retailers in this segment, who almost never receive visits from guided tour groups, was stressed as the most unfavourable: individual tourists who decide to leave their guided tours to visit the shop on their own while the tour guide observes. This situation happens when ‘they (the tourists) go to the large neighbour shop with their tour group and see our shop on the way’ (Interview, 2012; text in brackets added by author).

While such visits sometimes lead to sales, they were also stressed to lead to very high commissions and thus a lack of profits from the products sold, as exemplified by one small retailer:

‘We do not often have tourist guides coming here with tourists because we have no relation to the tourist office or the hotels. But, sometimes a tourist leaves the group and goes in here on her own, and the guide will follow her and demand the commission from us when the tourist does not see it. If I refuse, he says something bad about my shop or products so that the tourists do not come back’ (Interview, 2012).

### ***6.3. Micro retailers: sourcing, ‘cultural goods’ and brand copies***

Retailers that are here categorized as ‘micro’ consist of very small one-person or family shops, of which the majority were owned and/or managed by women. They include shops of a few square meters and stalls located in and around the Hoi An Central Market. What really distinguishes the micro retailers examined here from the other two types of retailers is that none of them are even remotely involved in the production of clothes – they are retailers only. Again, many of them do present themselves as ‘tailors’ via the signs on their stalls, which – together with suggestions of a broad use of the word ‘tailor’ above – indicates that in Hoi An, the concept of tailoring is simply used to describe anything related to clothing production and sales.

All micro retailers included in this study stressed that living in Hoi An was a main reason for their entrance into clothing retail. They all had other, totally different occupations before opening their shops but had seen new opportunities rising when the inflow of tourists rose and other retailers emerged. In terms of the clothing products sold in these very small outlets, however, any connection to the place of Hoi An is virtually non-existent in terms of sentiment, tradition and place of origin. Clothing products are largely pre-manufactured and very cheap, and they fall into two overall categories: Firstly, manufactured clothes, especially t-shirts, similar to products that



may be purchased almost anywhere in Vietnam. These are often imitations of branded products or may have ‘cultural’ prints such as the Vietnamese flag, and thus they are not necessarily place-specific. These t-shirts are commonly sourced from markets in Vietnam’s larger cities, often by family members who live there. Labels indicate that they are often of Chinese origin, though the prints may have been added somewhere in Vietnam. Secondly, a variety of products such as scarves were sometimes referred to as ‘cultural products’ during the fieldwork. These are commonly bought from ethnic minorities who bring their products to the retailers from rural areas. Although both types of products’ connections to the town of Hoi An – and sometimes even to Vietnam – is thus vague, the interviewed retailers were commonly very aware of the value that tourists might attach to products they consider place-specific and authentic, and they sometimes ‘bend the truth’ to add value to those products. One female owner of a micro shop, for example, explains:

‘I mainly sell scarfs made by ethnic minorities and t-shirts with print. The tourists like these things. The Vietnamese do not. Some of the t-shirts are from China, but small shops in Hoi An agree that it is at least better to say they are from Saigon – the tourists prefer that’ (Interview, 2012).

As for the smaller retailers examined above, a major difficulty noted by micro retailers was the large number of competitors:

‘Our major difficulty is to get enough customers (...). The number of shops in the city has increased a lot. The competition is really high’ (Interview, 2012).

According to the micro retailers themselves and also based on observations, the main customers of these retailers are individual tourists, overwhelmingly backpackers. While this quite obviously corresponds to the cheap products being sold, it was also repeatedly stressed by the respondents that the reason they only serve this particular market segment is that they are not part of what they consider a closed network of tourism stakeholders. It was stated, for example, that they do not know the ‘right people’ and that they or their families are ‘not connected’. This was considered the main reason why they do not receive visits from guided tourist groups and was again seen as related to requirements for commissions, as explained by one respondent:

‘The tourist guides do not introduce the customers to our kind of shop, only to the large ones. These are the shops that can afford paying the guides’ commission’.

Observation of guided tour groups during the fieldwork accentuates the idea that they systematically visit specific shops and stalls, also in the central market. Tour guides seemed to more or less instantly steer the groups in the direction of specific stalls. Tourists randomly approached by the author explained how their guides had stressed that they should follow him to sellers he knows because these were more honest than others, for example, and that it was not advisable to buy from other stalls. The extent to which this is a pattern followed by guides in general requires more research. Likewise, whether those market stalls that were visited by tourist groups had gained their position owing to different forms of connections remains unclear. What was commonly stressed by retailers in the market, however, was similar to those concerns expressed by respondents in the segment of smaller retailers, namely, that when single tourists do not follow their guide to particular stalls but instead choose to visit their stalls on their own initiative, commissions had to be paid. It was also stressed

that such commissions were high, and that they clearly diminished, or even eliminated, any potential profits. In addition, considerable insecurity was attached to not knowing whether or not a guide had identified them as sellers to a tourist group. One female owner of a small market stall explains:

‘Most tourists come to Hoi An in large groups. Sometimes, I do not want to sell to them when they go to the market to avoid the commission, but it is difficult. And sometimes, I do not know if there is a guide and who he is, and that makes me insecure’ (Interview).

## **7. Discussion and conclusions**

This paper has explored the dynamics of clothing retail in the tourist destination of Hoi An in central Vietnam. It has examined how encounters of planning, tradition and globalization play out and influence the practices and divergent opportunities of clothing retailers. The most significant global processes at play are the ancient town’s UNESCO World Heritage site designation and the subsequent rapidly increased inflow of global tourists. The paper has shown how transition economy regulations related to planning and implementation of tourism, urban development and retail strategies, which are highly interlinked with the aforementioned global processes, have affected the current clothing retail sector. It has thus linked the literature on heritage tourism and retail geographies by exploring a number of quite different issues than those commonly examined in the literature on retail geographies. It has focused on a retail sector that is almost 100% domestically owned and in which consumers are not local populations but foreign tourists. It has explored the role of clothing retailers in establishing Hoi An as the successful heritage tourist destination it is today. These retailers sell not merely clothes but, equally importantly, the idea of clothes produced in seemingly traditional

and place-specific ways, although the vast majority of the retailers are relatively newly established, and the production of clothing products commonly transcends multiple geographical scales.

Exploration of the retail sector has led to at least two highly interlinked conclusions that nuance the discussion on heritage and authenticity in Hoi An. First, it is important to understand the role of the Vietnamese state in this process, not least in terms of preserving – or creating – the authenticity of a variety of products and sectors, including tailoring and clothing retail. Such planning may be considered to involve the ‘common’ urban preservation of ancient monuments and architecture, but it clearly reaches far beyond that into the lives of people and contributes to differentiating the possibilities of businesses. Second, the revitalization of the city that followed the World Heritage designation made certain people more powerful, some activities and products more important and ‘authentic’, and some retailers better positioned in Hoi An’s tourism economy than others. The paper has shown how the creation of a clothing retail market in Hoi An is thus linked to a well-planned configuration of an ‘authentic’ Tailor City, leading to a reconceptualization of the notion of authenticity in contexts of heritage and transition as the suggested concept of ‘planned authenticity’.

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### Highlights

- World Heritage designation led to rapid emergence of a clothing retail sector in Hoi An
- 'Tailoring' appears as a tradition but largely materialized with the sudden inflow of tourists
- Clothes sold by retailers to tourists today have few links to the place
- The prospects of retailers vary according to their status in the transitional economy



**Table 1: Types of clothing retailers in Hoi An**

Common products		Tasks performed
‘Micro shops’	T-shirts, brand copies, ‘cultural products’	Sourcing and sales
‘Smaller shops’	Custom-made and ready-made dresses, suits, Ao Dai	Measuring, some embroidery and sewing in-house.  Imitation.  Production in networks
‘Larger shops’	Ao Dai, silk dresses, suits  Accessories	Mainly measuring in shops.  Imitation.  Manufacturing at own/  subcontracted factories

Source: Own interviews, 2012