The “Huu Vu Hall” in the Imperial City of Hue, Vietnam: Theater of History and Consuming Emperor’s Power in the context of Heritage Tourism

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines the interactions between contemporary people and their memories of emperors, focusing on the Hue Imperial City, a significant historical site that served as the Nguyen Dynasty center of power for over 143 years. It was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1993 and has since been restored and developed into a renowned historical consumption tourism destination in Vietnam.

The Huu Vu Hall was historically a significant location where high-ranking military officers changed their attire before audiences with the emperor. Currently, it has been re-produced as a replica of the emperor's throne room, serving as a theater for transforming “commoners” into emperors and royalty in memory through physical performances, costumes mimicking imperial and royal attire, and gestures and postures resembling those of emperors and royalty. This is directed by imperial costume designers and a team of photographers and has garnered significant attention from both Vietnamese and international audiences. Hue Imperial City thus becomes a historical space encompassing academic issues of restoration, reinterpretation, and reuse of the history of the Hue emperors as a Theater of Historical Consumption in the Context of World Cultural Heritage Tourism..

Keywords: Hue Imperial City, Theater of History, Social Memory, Historical Consumption, Heritage Tourism.

Introduction

The Imperial City of Hue (hereafter referred to as the Imperial City), located in Hue, Vietnam, served as the residence and administrative center of the Nguyen Dynasty emperors, Vietnam's last Dynasty. The Nguyen Dynasty ruled Vietnam for 143 years, beginning in 1802, when Emperor Gia Long proclaimed himself emperor after defeating the Tay Son Dynasty, and ending in 1945, when Emperor Bao Dai abdicated and handed over power to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Duiker, 1981). The Nguyen Dynasty built the Citadel in Hue, elevating the city to the status of a royal capital centered around the Imperial Palace, with the Palace as the heart of the capital. Following the end of the imperial system, the Imperial Palace became a significant historical landmark closely associated with the imperial institution.

In 1993, the Hue Imperial City was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, a "reproduction of memory space," redefined as Vietnam's first World Cultural Heritage site. This World Heritage status transformed the Hue Imperial City, a national historical site

associated with the old feudal system, into a cultural heritage site representing the memory of all humanity (UNESCO, 1993). Importantly, in this new sense, the Hue Imperial City has become one of Vietnam's most prominent "Theaters of Historical Consumption," with tourism facilitating the consumption of Hue's imperial history in various forms. This includes the transformation of contemporary commoners into emperors and members of the Nguyen Dynasty in history, as explored in the "Huu Vu Hall," the subject of this research. Key international academic themes related to this work include Social Memory, Re-Production of space, and Historical Consumption.

Research Methodology

This research is a basic qualitative study employing field data collection at the Hue Imperial City, a UNESCO World Heritage site focused on cultural and historical consumption tourism, as well as documentary data. Historical documents on the Nguyen Dynasty and Vietnamese history from the Nguyen Dynasty to the present were studied to understand the phenomena of "production of the Hue Imperial City" and "re-production of the Imperial City" as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The research utilizes Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of "The Production of Space," national historical memory concepts from Niamh Moore and Yvonne Whelan (2007) on "Heritage, Memory and The Politics of Identity," and Jerome de Groot's (2009) concept of "Consuming History" as its primary research themes. The research findings are presented using a descriptive analysis with illustrations. The research results are as follows:

Result of Research

Part 1: The Imperial Palace of Hue: The production of the Supreme Power space of the Nguyen Dynasty

The Hue City was constructed as the highest sphere of power in the Vietnamese kingdom between 1802 and 1945. It is considered a type of "space" in the sense of "The Production of Space," which Henri Lefebvre explained as encompassing the dimensions of Physical Space, Social Space, and Mental Space. The creation of such spaces involves a process known as "The Production of Space" (Lefebvre, 1991). In this context, the researcher uses this framework to explain and analyze Hue City as the constructed sphere of supreme power in the ancient Vietnamese kingdom, as follows:

1.1 Hue: Its history as the capital of the Nguyen Dynasty

Hue, located in central Vietnam, is the former capital of the Nguyen Emperors and boasts a history spanning more than 700 years. It retains distinctive Vietnamese cultural, architectural, and artistic values. Geographically and culturally, Hue serves as a nexus where physical space (geology and climate), social space (administrative divisions), and mental space (local culture) intersect.

Originally located within Thua Thien Hue Province, the surrounding region has long been widely known as "Xứ Huế" (the Land of Hue). Historically, Hue was part of Thuan Hoa, a territory ceded by the Champa Kingdom to Dai Viet in 1306 as a royal dowry (Tran, 1971). The area was later developed into the fortified city of Phu Xuan, which became the main seat of power (*Chinh dinh*) for the Nguyen Lords in 1687 (Phan, 1960). Subsequently, Hue served as the imperial capital of Vietnam during

the Nguyen Dynasty from 1802 to 1945, functioning as a royal city that housed the imperial palace and the dynasty's central administration (Hue Monuments Conservation Center [HMCC], 2015). During the French colonial period, Hue maintained its status as the administrative capital of the protectorate of Annam (Karnow, 1994).

Regarding the origin of the name “Hue,” there is no definitive source confirming when it officially emerged. However, some historical sources suggest that Emperor Le Thanh Tong of the Le Dynasty was the first to mention this name. Additionally, the name appeared in the memoirs of Pierre Poivre, a French merchant who visited Phu Xuan (Hue) in 1749. Prior to this, in 1745, Le Floch de la Carrière, a French cartographer and naval officer, drafted a map of the coast of the Dang Trong region (Cochinchina), capturing critical areas such as the Bay of Da Nang (Tourane) and the waterways connecting to Hoi An, which clearly marked Hue. The toponym was subsequently recorded by the French as “Hué” (Vu, 2020).

1.2 Hue as Capital and the Establishment of Imperial Authority under Emperor Gia Long (1802-1820)

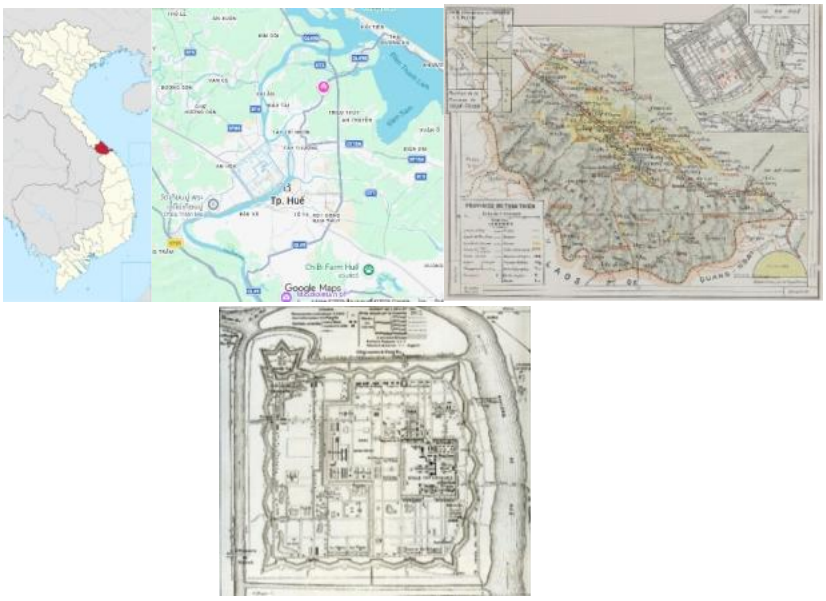

Figure 1: The location of Hue city, the city plan of Hue in relation to the Perfume River (Song Huong), and the spatial layout of the Hue Imperial Palace.

Source: Phan, T. A., 2016. *Hue: Citadel and Palaces*. Da Nang Publishing House

After Nguyen Anh defeated the Tay Son Dynasty and ascended the throne as emperor in 1802, taking the name Gia Long, he unified Vietnam after over two centuries of conflict. He established the Nguyen Dynasty and centralized power in Hue. Hue thus became the capital of the Nguyen Dynasty thereafter. Gia Long began constructing the political and administrative architecture and built the Hue Imperial City as the emperor's royal residence and administrative center. The Hue Imperial City thus became the emperor's sphere of imperial authority, standing as the ultimate symbol and center of the Vietnamese kingdom.

The design and construction of the capital city of Hue began in 1803, covering an area of approximately 5.2 square kilometers. It demonstrates adaptation to the landscape and traditional Vietnamese geomantic (feng shui) principles. The Imperial City of Hue was built in the style of Eastern imperial palaces, influenced by the Forbidden City in Beijing and Nanjing, and incorporated Western defensive

elements. The palace grounds were integrated into Hue's city plan. Under the supervision of Emperor Gia Long, the project involved all parties, from the Hue court, military, and civilians, creating a large and strong fortification system. With immense wisdom, effort, resources, and lives, the Imperial City became the center of Vietnamese governance, politics, and socio-cultural affairs (Phan,1998).

Emperor Gia Long died in 1820. His son, Emperor Minh Mang, succeeded him and continued the development of the Nguyen Dynasty. Emperor Minh Mang implemented many reforms, most notably establishing Hue as the country's complete political, cultural, and historical center. He completed the construction of the fortifications and palaces that his father had started, finishing them in 1832.

In the early reign of Emperor Minh Mang, he organized the palaces along a north-south axis, with the Thai Hoa Palace as the center of this "corridor of power." This axis extended from the main Ngo Mon Gate to the Thai Hoa Palace, Can Chanh Palace, and Can Thanh Palace (Phan, 2016).

1.3 The Hue Imperial City**: The center of power for the Nguyen Dynasty emperors through its symbolic system**

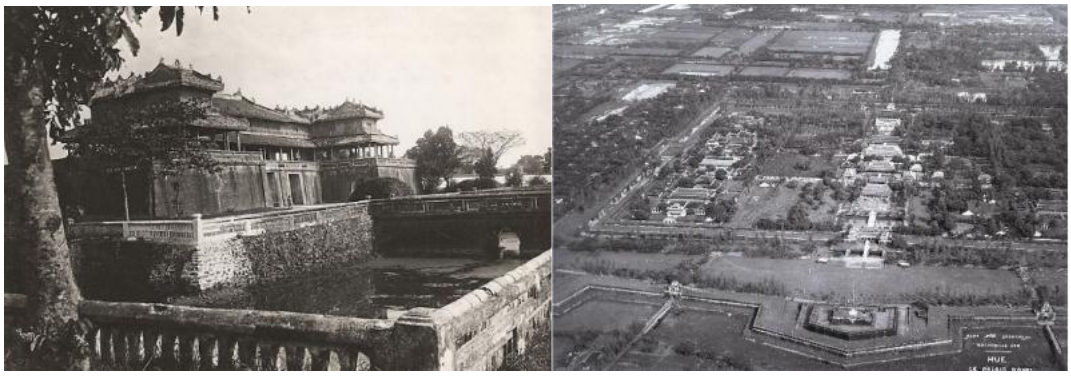

Figure 2 The "Ngo Mon Gate" (Noon Gate), a fortified monumental structure serving as the principal entrance to the Hue Imperial City, alongside an archival aerial photograph of the palace complex captured in 1919.

Source: Archival photograph (1919) on display at the Hue Imperial City. Photographed by T. L. Nguyen during fieldwork, October 12, 2025.

The symbolic system is related to "signifiers," which may be objects, things, phenomena, traditions, or rituals. These "signifiers" are given meaning or "signified" by a particular group of people for a specific social benefit (Denzin, 1992). In this context, the researcher uses this concept to explain the Hue Imperial City as a "signifier" that was "signified" at the national level of Vietnam in the past, as follows:

The Hue Imperial City served as the royal residence, administrative epicenter, and ceremonial core of the monarch. Consequently, it constituted a unique space that perfectly embodied the symbolism of the emperor's supreme authority and prestige over Vietnam during Emperor Minh Mang's reign. Located on the north bank of the Perfume River, the heart of the capital faces south and structurally consists of three superimposed walled enclosures as follows:

The Citadel (Kinh Thanh): The outermost and largest wall, which housed officials, soldiers, and commoners, featuring a perimeter of nearly 10 kilometers with numerous land gates and water gates.

The Imperial City (Hoang Thanh): The second walled enclosure, accessed via four primary

gates, including the monumental Ngo Mon Gate (Noon Gate). As the main southern entrance, Ngo Mon represents the dynasty's absolute power and symbolizes the transition between the profane outside world and the sacred space within.

2.1 The Thai Hoa Palace (Supreme Harmony): The central hub of cosmological power where the emperor sat upon the throne, signifying the political legitimacy and grandeur of the dynasty during state ceremonies.

2.2 The Imperial Ancestral Temples (The Mieu / Thai Mieu): The sacred space symbolizing filial piety and the eternal legitimacy of the royal lineage.

The Forbidden Purple City (Tu Cam Thanh): The innermost restricted sanctuary exclusively reserved for the private residence and daily governance of the emperor and the royal family.

Within these imperial precincts, the core power structures are organized as follows:

3.1 The Can Chanh Palace: The daily workplace of the monarch, symbolizing his executive and administrative governance.

3.2 The Can Thanh Palace: The private residential quarters of the emperor.

Therefore, the structure of the Hue Imperial City is a system of symbols designed to establish Vietnam's political and administrative power, with the emperor as the supreme authority. It is an architecture that embodies the physical and symbolic functions of power over Vietnam in every element. From its strategically located setting in Hue, chosen for its geomantic (feng shui), to the layout of the imperial palace’s walls, gates, and buildings (including residences, administrative offices, performance stages, celebratory areas, ceremonial grounds) and even the attire of the emperor, royalty, and nobility, everything embodies a system of class symbols, each with its own unique form and markings.

As Phan (2016) noted, the construction of the Hue Imperial City and Citadel was an attempt to create a new national symbol, with central power concentrated within the precinct, thereby becoming the sacred center of the country. During this era, the authority of the Nguyen Dynasty was manifested not only through formal politics but also in the architecture, royal attire, and court ceremonies.

1.4 The life of the emperor in the Imperial City and the symbolic interactions of power with the nobility and people within the palace grounds

The Hue Imperial City constitutes a unique space that seamlessly blends Confucian cosmology with the meticulous principles of Vietnamese geomancy (*feng shui*). Its multi-layered architectural configuration reflects a rigid hierarchy of power executing a spatial regulation of behavior among the emperor, the aristocracy, and commoners. The emperor's life was dictated by a more exclusive system than that of commoners. Daily routines, clothing, and related materials such as beds, seating, furniture, paintings, fenestration placement, and household utensils were strictly governed by the cosmic principles of yin and yang. This architectural orchestration created a microcosm with the sovereign at its absolute center, effectively transforming the palace into a grand stage where the emperor's life unfolded as the central performance within a permanent, sacred, and ritualistic space.

The life of the Nguyen Dynasty emperors within the palace was strictly regulated. All activities, from eating and dressing to sleeping, walking, reading, communication, and receiving envoys, had to adhere to the Nguyen Dynasty's code of ethics. The emperor's daily routine was structured: every morning, he would wake up early (around 5:00 AM), change into his imperial robes, participate in the

ceremony for reviewing state affairs, and then proceed to work at the Can Chanh Palace. At noon, he would rest in the Can Chanh Palace, and in the afternoon, he would continue reviewing imperial memorials. Evenings were spent reading books or drafting imperial decrees, while the Forbidden Purple, within the innermost walls, served as the private residence of the emperor and royal family. This area was under the strictest security measures.

The rigid parameters imposed by these ritualistic systems and state celebrations ensured that the Nguyen sovereigns maintained absolute authority and veneration. Every gesture, utterance, and action of the emperor represented the nation as a "living ritual." The palace precincts constituted both the most private sanctuary and the most powerful locus of authority; they operated as a theater guarded and sustained by strict protocols, imperial regulations, and courtiers (Truong, 2015). Accordingly, the palace served as a spatial stage displaying the ritualized life of the Nguyen monarchs, which can be analyzed in relation to the architectural layout as follows:

The institutional personnel structure within the palace was segmented into specific social groups associated with distinct architectural structures and functional quarters:

The Imperial Guard Posts (Điếm trực) were located on either side of the pathway in front of the Can Thanh Palace courtyard. Their duty was to maintain strict security and formally signal the emperor's arrival, with personnel dressed in standard imperial guard uniforms.

The Imperial Secretariat and Cabinet Offices (văn phòng trực Nội các / Cơ mật viện) served as the working and administrative quarters for high-ranking officials primarily focused on state consultation. Strategically situated near the Can Chanh Palace, these officials were responsible for compiling official records, archiving state documents, and copying imperial decrees.

The quarters for eunuchs, close courtiers, concubines, and palace maids were responsible for the meticulously organized management of royal attire, supplies, and various internal court rituals.

Furthermore, the residential and functional zones of the female officials (*Nu quan*) and maids within the inner court served the sovereign's private life, strictly overseeing the complex ceremonial regulations regarding royal cuisine, attire, rest, and imperial banquets.

1.5 Court Attire as a "Signifier" of the Nguyen Dynasty's Power

Figure 3: *Visual Representations of Power and Elite Material Culture in the Nguyen Court*

(Left) Emperor Khai Dinh seated upon the imperial throne, attired in full ceremonial court regalia. The sovereign's vestments, combined with the ornate throne and surrounding decorative motifs, explicitly encode the

institutionalized asymmetric power dynamic imposed on ordinary citizens. (Right) An archival photograph delineating the daily life of high-ranking members of the royal lineage within the inner court, showcasing artifacts representative of the dynasty’s elite material culture.

Source: From archival photographs on display at the Hue Imperial City, courtesy of the Hue Monuments Conservation Center. Photographed by T. L. Nguyen during fieldwork, October 12, 2025.

Within the Hue imperial court, the emperor's attire and physical appearance functioned as a structured “language of power’’ signifying the sacred status of the son of Heaven while simultaneously projecting the cosmic order upon the palace geography. Every minute detail of the ceremonial vestments was rigorously dictated by a strict hierarchical framework (Phan, 2010). The sovereign donned either ceremonial Dragon robes (*Long bao*) or ordinary imperial gowns (*Hoang bao*); princes and royal relatives wore golden crowns and held ivory tablets (*hot*); meanwhile, civil and military officials were meticulously segregated by rank, each bound by precise codifications regarding their specific crowns, robes, court regalia, and casual wear. *The Imperially Commissioned Administrative Code of Dai Nam* (*Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le*) stipulated exact 'chapters, ranks, and decorative emblems' for every class of headwear and garment, effectively reinforcing the subtle institutional distinctions among different socio-political strata within the court (Bui, 2012).

According to *The Imperially Commissioned Administrative Code of Dai Nam* (*Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le*, Volume 105) and the historical reconstructions in *Ngan Nam Ao Mu* (Tran, 2013), the Nguyen Dynasty emperors donned three primary institutional tiers of attire within the palace precincts:

Ceremonial Garments (Con phuc / Imperial Sacrificial Robes): The highest-ranking, most sacred vestments, combined with the ritual crown (*Mu Mien*), worn exclusively during paramount state rituals such as the Nam Giao sacrificial ceremony.

Grand Court Attire (Long bao / Ceremonial Dragon Robes): Worn alongside the *Cuu Long Thong Thien* crown during major dynastic events, including coronation ceremonies, New Year court assemblies, and formal bi-monthly grand audiences at the Thai Hoa Palace.

Ordinary Attire (Hoang bao / Ordinary Imperial Gowns and Casual Wear): The yellow imperial gown (*Hoang bao*) was worn during daily executive governance and consultations with close officials at the Can Chanh Palace, while casual wear was reserved for the sovereign's private life within the private quarters.

The ceremonial robes of the Nguyen Dynasty emperors were typically brilliant yellow, embroidered with five-clawed dragons, the supreme signifier of absolute imperial authority. Yellow symbolized the center, the primordial energy of heaven and earth, signifying the emperor as the "Tai Chi" in the Confucian cosmic order. The vestments also incorporated the embroidered motifs of the Twelve Auspicious Ornaments (Thap nhi chuong), including the sun, moon, stars, mountains, and dragons, as well as symbolic representations of fire, grain, and ritual axes. These imperial garments were thus epistemologically conceptualized as symbols of "the unification of heaven, earth, and humanity." When each emperor wore these robes during important ceremonies, he became the 'cosmic body,' especially while executing pivotal court duties. Consequently, the entire Imperial Palace precinct operated as the grand architectural stage for the political and administrative universe of the Vietnamese nation-state.

However, in executing his daily administrative duties, the sovereign would don simpler attire than the elaborate, cosmos-symbolizing "Tai Chi" regalia mentioned above; these ordinary court

garments consisted of silk or handwoven silk robes in yellow or dark red, which still retained critical iconographies such as dragons and clouds. Every morning, while reviewing ngự tiền văn thư (imperial memorials), the emperor would change into lighter imperial functional robes. In the afternoon, he returns to his formal silk or handwoven brocade vestments. According to *The Imperially Commissioned Administrative Code of Dai Nam* (Volume 72), "the emperor wore three distinct types of robes each day, shifting in accordance with temporal shifts and official duties." This rigid routine demonstrates that time and authority were systematically coordinated through clothing; each garment served as a 'ceremonial time marker' in the court's daily life. Consequently, the imperial robes of the Nguyen dynasty did not merely function as human apparel but served as crucial instruments of social order and as institutionalized symbols of power within the Hue court (Son, 2019).

Furthermore, the imperial establishments, including their symbolic agency within the aforementioned arena of power, have been actively reproduced within the historical-consumption dimension in the contemporary context of world cultural heritage, a socio-spatial phenomenon that this article will analyze comprehensively in the subsequent Revitalization section**.**

Part 2: The Powerlessness of the Hue Imperial City and the End of the Emperor

2.1 The Hue Imperial City and Court under French Colonial Power (1883-1945)

Following Emperor Gia Long's establishment of the Nguyen Dynasty and the subsequent construction of the imperial capital in Hue from 1802 onwards, the palace precinct functioned as the absolute epicenter of political and administrative authority in Vietnam. However, in 1858, during the reign of Emperor Tu Duc (Reigned 1847-1883), French colonial forces initiated their invasion of the realm. France exerted overwhelming geopolitical and military pressure on the Nguyen court, precipitating a severe erosion of the dynasty's once-absolute sovereignty. Vietnam ceded both Cochinchina and Tonkin to French control, leading to the total colonial subjugation of the country and the formal establishment of a French protectorate over the entire Vietnamese territory.

The year 1883 marked a catastrophic turning point in the realm's sovereignty. On August 25, 1883, France forced the emperor Hiep Hoa to sign the unequal Treaty of Quy Mui (the Harmand Treaty in Hue), effectively ceding administrative, military, foreign, diplomatic, and fiscal authority over Vietnam to French control. This treaty stripped the Nguyen dynasty emperors of their absolute power, effectively reducing their governance to mere internal administration. Furthermore, any pivotal decision required the explicit countersignature and approval of the French representative in Hue, who served as the Resident-Superior of Annam (Brocheux & Hémery, 2009).

The following year, France pressured the emperor's court into signing the Treaty of Patenôtre on June 6, 1884, formally placing the entire territory of Vietnam under French protection. Under the framework of the Treaty of Patenôtre, France established a double protectorate over Tonkin and Annam. The Nguyen dynasty emperor’s duties were limited to the Hue Imperial City, where they held the title of "Emperor of Dai Nam." Their sole responsibility was to use the title "Emperor," but all substantive state mechanisms, including foreign affairs, finance, taxation, and national defense, were thoroughly monopolized by the French colonial administration. From this historical juncture onward, the Nguyen monarchs operated primarily as puppet rulers, serving merely as institutional representatives to legitimize treaties dictated by France. Consequently, the Imperial City and the Hue court devolved into a mere theater for accommodating the ritualized actions of the emperors in the execution of colonial mandates (Murray, 1980).

In the colonial context, the Hue Imperial City was transformed into a theatrical stage for the performative display of colonial dominance, serving as a highly symbolic yet powerless political residence for the sovereign. Although the emperors of the colonial era, ranging from cooperative monarchs like Dong Khanh and Khai Dinh to defiant sovereigns such as Thanh Thai and Duy Tan, continued to nominally reign within the palace walls, donning their ceremonial regalia and maintaining traditional court rituals, the functional nature of the palace grounds underwent a radical shift. Crucial architectural spaces, including the Thai Hoa Palace, Can Chanh Palace, and Can Thanh Palace, were increasingly co-opted for colonial diplomatic ceremonies. Within these subjugated spaces, the emperor was compelled to receive French officials and formally endorse decrees tailored to satisfy the geopolitical mandates of the protectorate regime (Phan, 1999).

Historian David G. Marr (1981) argued that the colonial Hue court during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a "theater of sovereignty" where court rituals, ceremonies, palace architecture, and imperial vestments were meticulously preserved primarily for the performance before French and Vietnamese audiences, as well as serving as a spatial zone for cross-cultural integration with French art and culture. This hybridity is heavily manifest in the architecture and court regalia of the late Nguyen era, particularly during the reign of Emperor Khai Dinh (1916-1925), when Western decorative idioms began to exert a profound influence within the Hue Imperial City. The architecture, interior design, and visual art of the Kien Trung Palace, Ngo Mon Gate, and Dai Cung Mon Gate functioned not only as physical backdrops for court audiences and diplomatic ceremonies but also directly informed the stylistic evolution of ceremonial attire. Consequently, the sovereign donned imperial robes and dragon crowns executed in a highly novel, hybridized style influenced by European sartorial designs (Phan, 2017).

Thus, the Hue court during the protectorate period shifted from a locus of real power to a purely symbolic entity, enduring as a form of “ritualistic existence.” The space of power was re-represented as a theatrical performance monitored by the French and commemorated by the Vietnamese, positioning the emperor as a politically powerless and distinctively desanctified figure within the court rituals

2.2 The Vietnamese Revolution, coinciding with the end of the emperor and the status of the Hue Imperial City (1954 -1968)

Because the capital city of Hue was the official seat of the French Resident-Superior of Annam, and the Hue Imperial City functioned as the institutional epicenter under colonial oversight, both the city and the palace precinct became primary strategic targets for the revolutionary forces fighting for national independence. This long-standing struggle culminated in the revolutionary victory of August 1945. Emperor Bao Dai, subsequently abdicated the throne at the Ngo Mon Gate, formally relinquishing the Nguyen Dynasty's imperial seal and sword to the representatives of the provisional revolutionary government. This momentous event marked the dissolution of the Nguyen Dynasty, Vietnam's final monarchical lineage, signaling the end of the Hue Imperial Palace's political status and the definitive collapse of the feudal power structure that had been propped up to serve colonial interests. Bao Dai, therefore, passed into history as the last emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty and the final monarch of Vietnam's dynastic system (Brocheux & Hémery, 2009).

Figure 4: Emperor Bao Dai on his imperial palanquin during his coronation ceremony in 1926.

Source: From the archival collection on display at the Hue Imperial City. Photographed by T. L. Nguyen during fieldwork, October 12, 2025.

Following the abdication ceremony, a profound silence has enveloped the former Hue Imperial City, inaugurating its transition into a national historical memoryscape, steeped in the material traces of both the Nguyen Dynasty and the Vietnamese colonial era. The Thai Hoa Palace, where the majestic cadences of Nha Nhac (court music) once resonated during audiences, was rendered silent. The Ngo Mon Gate, once the grand architectural stage for paramount royal ceremonies, transformed into a monumental threshold devoid of its sovereign. Consequently, the entire spatial layout of its monuments, gates, and chambers devolved from an active locus of authority into sanctified "spaces of historical memory."

2.3 The Imperial City in the Context of Military Conflicts (1946 -1968)

From 1946 to 1968, the former capital of Hue endured prolonged geopolitical turmoil and structural devastation caused by two consecutive wars: the First Indochina War (1946 -1954) and the Vietnam War (1954 -1975) (Tran, 2005). The pivotal spatial and historical disruptions manifested as follows:

In early 1947, French colonial forces launched a major offensive to reoccupy the capital city of Hue, which was then garrisoned by the Viet Minh. Fierce urban warfare raged for six weeks, reducing substantial portions of Hue's urban epicenter to ruins and inflicting heavy casualties on the civilian population. During this conflict, the Hue Imperial Palace became a highly volatile battleground. Extensive fires ignited by the shelling completely destroyed core architectural monuments, including the Can Chanh Palace, Kien Trung Palace, Dien Tho Palace, and Truong Sanh Palace. The entire precinct suffered catastrophic damage from heavy artillery and aerial bombardment, resulting in the systemic destruction and irreversible loss of invaluable imperial artifacts, ceremonial vestments, and court musical instruments.

After the Viet Minh revolutionaries achieved victory and liberated Vietnam from French colonial rule, the country entered a geopolitical fracture known globally as the "Vietnam War," which resulted in the geopolitical division between North and South Vietnam from 1954 onward. Throughout the 1954 -1968 period, Hue was situated within the southern jurisdiction, located in perilous proximity to the 17th parallel and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). As the South Vietnamese administration established Saigon as its official capital, Hue was relegated to the status of a "remembered capital." Consequently,

the urban landscape and its vacant imperial palaces were left to deteriorate severely under the impact of natural disasters and extensive termite infestations in their structures, effectively marginalized and neglected by the southern government amid escalating wartime priorities (Goscha, 2016).

However, in early February 1968, the historic capital of Hue suffered its most catastrophic destruction in history when the city once again transformed into a fierce urban battleground. The conflict raged intensely for twenty-six days, during which the People's Army of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front seized control of the majority of the city, including the perimeter of the Imperial Citadel. Subsequently, allied US and South Vietnamese forces launched devastating counterattacks to recapture the urban center, deploying extensive aerial bombardments and heavy artillery. The Imperial Citadel, caught in the crossfire of both factions, sustained severe structural devastation. Although operational restrictions on heavy weaponry had initially been instituted to preserve the irreplaceable cultural heritage, these preservation mandates were systematically disregarded as the intensity of the combat escalated.

The devastating military engagements destroyed 160 of the original architectural structures within the precinct, leaving only 10 monuments intact. Within the Imperial City, a vast portion of the tangible cultural heritage sustained irreversible damage and was reduced to rubble. Today, many of the surviving brick walls still bear profound bullet and shrapnel scars, serving as somatic evidence of the fierce urban warfare. In the aftermath of this cataclysmic battle, civilian life in Hue was plunged into extreme hardship and economic stagnation for a protracted period (Hue Monuments Conservation Center, 2015).

Part 3: Revitalizing the Imperial City in Memories in the Context of a World Cultural Heritage and Historical Consumption

History and memory are intrinsically intertwined with the past across multiple analytical tiers: individual, local, state, and international. At the national level, history functions fundamentally as a politics of memory to be adopted as national history, including elevating objects, artifacts, and spaces related to those memories to national historical heritage (Huyssen, 2003), and in some cases, to world cultural heritage (Brian Graham, 2007) through restoration and reuse as historical tourist attractions (Srivastava, 2019). The researcher presents the Hue Imperial City in the context of restoration and reuse under the explanatory guidelines of the aforementioned academic issues as follows:

3.1 The Hue Imperial City in the Context of Restoration as National Historical and Cultural Heritage

Following the extensive war damage inflicted upon the Hue Imperial City from 1945 onward, the geopolitical reunification of Vietnam was achieved on April 30, 1975, culminating in the formal establishment of the “Socialist Republic of Vietnam” in 1976, with Hanoi designated as the administrative epicenter. During the immediate post-war era, the new government did not initially prioritize architectural restoration in the Hue precinct, as state resources were heavily concentrated on nationwide infrastructure reconstruction. Furthermore, within the ideological framework of the period, the Hue Imperial Palace was primarily perceived as a spatial relic of the feudal system, an institutional structure traditionally antithetical to socialist paradigms.

Figure 5: The systematic conservation and architectural restoration process of the Hue Imperial City precinct.

Source: From the archival exhibition on the architectural restoration of the Hue Imperial City. Photographed by T. L. Nguyen during fieldwork, October 12, 2025.

The Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam recognized that the former Hue Imperial City possessed profound international resonance as a critical site of historical and cultural heritage. This was particularly true for France, the former colonial power with deep historical entanglements with Hue's monumental landscape. Recognizing these shared historical trajectories, the French administration expressed its intention to cooperate with the Vietnamese government to preserve and restore the imperial structures alongside shared colonial architectural footprints. Upon mutual agreement, the systematic restoration of the Hue Imperial City precinct commenced, catalyzed by both academic expertise and financial subventions from the international community, notably France, Japan, and Poland. A pivotal milestone occurred in 1981, when UNESCO officially launched the International Campaign for the Safeguarding of the Monuments of Hue, an institutional preservation endeavor that remains active to this day (Nguyen, 2015).

Figure 6: The architectural restoration of the Hue Imperial City continues to this day, meticulously guided by archival photographs. The Hue Monuments Conservation Center has strategically positioned these original photographs within both active restoration zones and unrestored archaeological sites, enabling heritage tourists to cognitively reconstruct the Hue Imperial City in its original, pristine state.

Note. From the archival collection on display at the Hue Imperial City. Photographed by T. L. Nguyen during fieldwork, October 12, 2025.

With the initiation of the Doi Moi economic reform policy in 1986, Vietnam transitioned from a centrally planned economic system reliant on the socialist bloc toward a market-oriented economy. As the nation opened its borders, it established robust diplomatic, economic, trade, investment, and tourism relations with the rest of the world. Consequently, Hue, the Imperial City in memory, and its former Imperial City became important elements in international historical tourism. Simultaneously, international collaborative initiatives involving Vietnam and France (EFEO, UNESCO, and the Hue Monuments Conservation Center) sustained the meticulous restoration of key architectural monuments, such as Ngo Mon Gate, Thai Hoa Palace, and the Ta Vu and Huu Vu Hall, gradually reclaiming the palace's original spatial integrity. In 1993, the Complex of Hue Monuments was officially inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list, marking the first such designation in Vietnam (Hue Monuments Conservation Center, 2022).

The former Hue Imperial City has therefore been radically redefined as a world-class locus of historical and cultural memory. Simultaneously, this historic Imperial Palace has become a "Theater of Historical Consumption" amid intensive cultural and heritage tourism (UNESCO, 1993).

3.2 New Meaning as a World Heritage Canonization and Historical Consumption Tourism

Since its inscription on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in 1993, the historical Imperial City has been rigorously commodified as a tourist zone for the consumption of feudal history and culture. Opened to tourists since 1994, the Hue Imperial City has become one of the most important heritage tourist destinations in Vietnam. Every year, millions of domestic and international tourists visit to admire the palace's architecture and participate in various festivals held in remembrance of the former capital, such as the Hue Festival, court music performances, and exhibitions of costumes and ceremonies, recreated from Nguyen Dynasty documents. These are filled with symbols of the "highest class" of the emperor, superior to commoners, reflected in the space, buildings, attire, traditions, and royal rituals. When imperial power was abolished... The imperial status was also process of spatial de-classification and desegregation. Consequently, the state successfully transformed what was once an elite enclave, opening up democratic avenues for contemporary citizens to access and experience the history of the Nguyen court as a shared national and public heritage.

Therefore, spatial reconfigurations and architectural renovations were undertaken within the Imperial City to fulfill its adaptive function as a paramount theater of historical consumption, manifested as follows:

The Thai Hoa Palace, formerly an exclusive, highly codified space where high-ranking mandarins presented memorial reports to the sovereign seated on the throne, now functions as a curatorial space displaying the original imperial throne, ceremonial regalia, and meticulously restored gilded halls. Conversely, at the contiguous archaeological site of the Can Chanh Palace (the emperor’s daily administrative locus) and the Can Thanh Palace (the sovereign's private residential palace), both of which were completely destroyed by fire in 1947, their surviving historic foundations have been transformed into an open-air memoryscape. Within this precinct, the strategic placement of archival photographs enables heritage tourists to visually and cognitively reconstruct the dynamic interplay between the political administration and the intimate everyday court life of the Nguyen Empire.

The building of the Imperial Cabinet (Noi Cac), has been repurposed into an institutional

exhibition space for imperial decrees, speeches, and court documents. Concurrently, the former imperial guardhouse and watchtower have been adapted into rest and service areas, amenities for heritage tourists, while meticulously preserving the physical traces of their original architectural forms. The Ta Vu and Huu Vu Hall, originally serving as the administrative offices for civil and military mandarins, respectively, now serve as primary curatorial spaces showcasing authentic court costumes, ceremonial attire, and material artifacts (Leisen & von Plehwe-Leisen, 2005).

Part 4: The "Huu Vu Hall": The Theater of Imperial Role-Playing in Heritage Memory.

The simulation of imperial sovereignty within cultural memory constitutes a pivotal dimension of historical heritage consumption at the Hue Imperial City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Historically, the emperors were ensconced in elaborate, semiotically dense vestments strategically designed to performative-wise anchor their status as the absolute center of Vietnamese power while executing state rituals within the palatial chambers, a highly restricted space institutionalized as a realm of absolute sanctity. Within the context of cultural heritage tourism, this historical memory has been spatially recreated as a historical stage for "Imperial Role-Playing in Memory". Through the commercial appropriation of replicated golden robes and the act of ascending a replica throne, the "Huu Vu Hall" is effectively transfigured into a "Theater of Simulated Sovereignty in Memory**."**

4.1 Court Costumes and the Consumption of Symbols of Power in the Former Hue Imperial City

The costumes of the emperors and members of the Nguyen Dynasty imperial family are all imbued with symbols of power. Important costumes include dragon-embroidered Dragon robes (Long bào), formal headdresses, the Binh Thien crowns, golden slippers, jade-encrusted belts, and concubine attire, etc. Each garment was meticulously crafted not only to showcase supreme aesthetic value but also to function as a highly encoded apparatus of state power. Through institutionalized edicts regulating the formal structures, iconographic motifs, and symbolic registers displayed on the attire alongside the exclusive monopoly over premium materials used in their production, the sovereign established a distinct, supreme semiotic matrix reserved strictly for the throne. Furthermore, these garments were intrinsically integrated into the structural performativity of royal rituals, manifested uniquely across the continuum of both Grand Ceremonial Attire (Đại Triều lễ phục) and Regular Court Vestments (Thường Triều lễ phục) (Cadière, 2015)

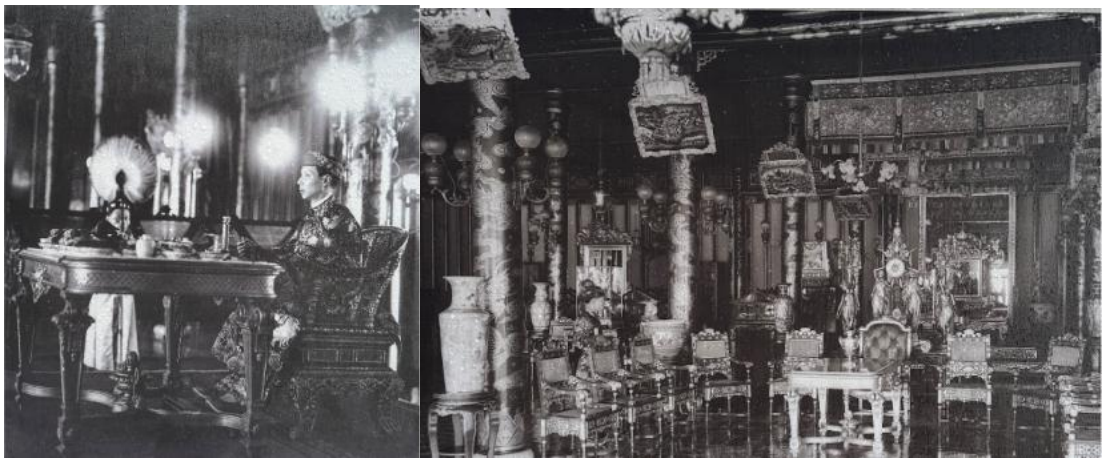

Figure 7: Emperor Khai Dinh at the Can Chanh Palace in 1924 (left), and the interior view of the Can Chanh Palace circa 1920 (right).

Source: From the archival exhibition "Emperors in Memory" at the Hue Imperial City. Photographed by T. L. Nguyen during fieldwork, January 20, 2025.

Although imperial costumes, as a material culture, function as a symbolic language that distinguishes and demarcates social hierarchy and the order of absolute power. The transformation of one person's body into that of an "emperor" who wielded power in Vietnamese society for 143 years, before being declassified from Vietnamese politics and governance after the end of the Nguyen Dynasty in 1945, has not been erased from national and popular memory. On the contrary, it has been revived and reused in the context of heritage tourism at the Hue Imperial City today (Ashworth, 1994; Smith, 2006). Thus, imperial attire manifests in two distinct ontological categories. The first group comprises the authentic imperial artifacts preserved within the Hue Royal Antiquities Museum, embodying the "material memory" of sovereign power. It serves as the foundational baseline for historical inquiries and empirical reconstructions (Tran, 2013). Furthermore, it constitutes the primary epistemic source for various projects dedicated to the revival of court rituals and vestments in the post-colonial and modern eras, as well as for the tactical invention of traditions curated to cater to historical tourism, the latter representing the second ontological state of royal attire (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Tran, 2013).

4.2 “Huu Vu Hall” (The Right Wing): From a space of administrative power to a stage for consuming history through the Simulated Sovereign Attire

The “Huu Vu Hall” is architecturalized as the “right wing” structure, located on the right side of the Thai Hoa Palace, on the central axis of the Hue Imperial City. Symbolically, the structural configuration of the left and right wings embodies the binary order of dynastic governance: while the Left Wing (Ta Vu) was designated for civil mandarins symbolizing state administration, the Right Wing (Huu Vu) was reserved for military mandarins, signifying martial enforcement and executive power. Constructed concurrently with the Thai Hoa Palace in 1805 during the reign of Emperor Gia Long. In the past, the “Huu Vu Hall” served as a strategic precinct where military officials and high-ranking courtiers assembled to regulate ceremonial protocols and where the sovereign held select consultations with his military ministers (Phan, 2005).

Following the abdication of Emperor Bao Dai and the consequent dissolution of the Nguyen Dynasty in 1945, the Huu Vu Hall was stripped of its original administrative-martial functions and left derelict for nearly four decades. Particularly during the intense military conflicts between 1946 and 1975, the structure sustained severe architectural trauma; while its outer masonry and primary structural carcass survived, its timber framework and interior aesthetics were heavily degraded. The original furniture and decorations appurtenances were utterly destroyed, necessitating an extensive, systematic conservation and restoration campaign in the subsequent decades (Hue Monuments Conservation Center [HMCC], 1996). Its original function was altered, becoming a stage for historical tourism, showcasing a de-classified democratized simulacrum of imperial sovereignty through the use of imperial costumes. This specialized precinct has since attracted substantial tourist gaze from visitors seeking to engage with the region’s socio-historical heritage.

4.3 Restoration and Restructuring

The intense military conflicts within the Imperial City precinct between 1946 and 1975 transformed the Huu Vu Hall into a highly compromised site. What remained of Huu Vu were historical photographs and the memories of some who worked and experienced the city before its destruction. These were used as evidence and guidelines to reconstruct the building between 1986 and 1988, with the rigorous stewardship of local conservators and international heritage specialists in the following decades. The roof's structural integrity was systematically restored, and the damaged decorative patterns were reinforced. The roof was restored and the decorative patterns strengthened.

The walls and ceilings of Huu Vu were restored and decorated in a European style with a traditional imperial motif in interface with early 20th-century Western architectural influences.

Since the early 1990s, within the strategic framework of the Hue Monuments Restoration initiatives, the Huu Vu Hall has been selected as one of the pilot projects in the "Conservation through Adaptive Repurposing and Public Interpretation" strategy. This restoration project was carried out by the Hue Monuments Conservation Center (HMCC), in collaboration with UNESCO and the French Development Agency (AFD), to transform Huu Vu Hall from an administrative building during the Nguyen Dynasty into an active laboratory for exhibition, educational outreach, and immersive heritage experiences. This long-term spatial reconfiguration progressed through calculated operational phases: initially focusing on the structural stabilization of the timber framework, roof tiling, and iconic dragon iconography; followed by the rigorous preservation of interior surface aesthetics and wall decorations; and culminating in the institutional installation of an interactive display system featuring costumes, rituals, sound, and lighting.

This transformation represents a paradigm shift in heritage preservation methodologies within Vietnam. Instead of simply "maintaining the status quo," it has been transformed into a vibrant space where reenactments of memories can be experienced, allowing for learning and exploration, allowing heritage consumers to cognitively investigate and co-construct the history of the Nguyen Dynasty within contemporary memoryscapes (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Smith, 2006).

4.4 The "Huu Vu Hall": Theater of Consuming Emperor's Power in the context of Heritage Tourism

Following extensive conservation, the Huu Vu Hall serves as an "active heritage exhibition and interpretive space," recreating the working and ceremonial areas of the Nguyen Dynasty emperors. Inside, it displays imperial robes, crowns, headdresses, shoes, seals, jade pens, and imperial decrees and artifacts, all reconstructed within the original palace grounds. Furthermore, the museum serves as a "Theater of Consuming Emperor's Power," a performative arena where contemporary heritage consumers dialogue with the dynastic past. Hue Monuments Conservation Center (HMCC) has licensed renowned fashion designer Quang Hoa Ao Dai Design, a fashion house deeply anchored in the historical reconstruction of imperial couture, to offer a "Transformation and Impersonation of Emperors and Royal Family" service. Visitors can choose to wear special costumes modeled after imperial and royal attire, including dragon robes, Nhật Bình robes, and high-ranking mandarin uniforms, thereby transfiguring themselves into temporary simulacra of emperors, empresses, or imperial officials.

Figure 8: The operational sequence of tourist performance and consumption of imperial power signs within the Huu Vu Hall, structured into three primary phases:

The Commercial Transaction: Selecting a precision-replicated imperial garment and purchasing the institutional service ticket;

The Bodily Metamorphosis: Staff-facilitated dressing process to transfigure the tourist’s physical identity into a simulated sovereign image;

The Spatial Performance: Executing photography and staging on a performative platform modeled after the imperial throne room.

Source: Photographed by T. L. Nguyen at the Huu Vu Hall, during fieldwork, February 2, 2026.

Simultaneously, “Quang Hoa Ao Dai Design” established a localized “Theater of History” by integrating simulated replicas of the imperial throne, the sovereign’s desk, and a ceremonial palanquin. These scenographic elements are curated within an atmospheric ambiance enhanced by warm amber illumination and soft, melodic court music. Rather than physically reconstructing architectural divisions, the exhibition space offers a theatrical and symbolic evocation of dynastic life, visually gesturing toward the emperor's private leisure, tea culture, and the institutional domains of court officials and imperial attendants. By transforming this historical edifice into a performative node of cultural consumption, the repurposed pavilion and its integrated exhibition layout have become a highly popular destination for contemporary heritage tourists.

The micro-process of consuming imperial power signs within the matrix of heritage tourism at the Huu Vu Hall initiates with selecting costumes from historical photographs and examples of past emperors and other individuals who have been dressed and photographed in various locations. These examples are displayed via a computer interface, functioning as a visual catalog of simulated identities. Concurrently, heritage consumers undergo a brief epistemic socialization: the service facilitators provide contextual narratives regarding the historical ownership of each costume and accessory, the specific state ceremonies and ritual occasions for which they were prescribed, and their socio-political symbolism within the dynastic hierarchy.

Figure 9: Historical tourists being dressed up and photographed by professional photographers as part of the Consuming Emperor's Power service at Huu Vu Hall.

Source: Photographed by T. L. Nguyen at Huu Vu Hall during fieldwork, February 2, 2026.

Eventually, these heritage consumers determine the precise "hierarchy of sovereign status" they wish to attain through a performance on this stage and purchase tickets to undergo this transformation into an emperor and member of the royal family, as "consumers of imperial power signs within the matrix of heritage tourism."Tickets purchased grant access to a recreated imperial palace stage for photography. Consumers are dressed and made up by "Quang Hoa Ao Dai Design," choosing costumes, changing into emperor and royal attire, and having their makeup and hair styled by the team. They are then handed over to a photography team in a recreated imperial palace room. Posing experts will guide consumers to sit and pose at various points, such as the throne, the emperor's palanquin, the work desk, the coffee and reception area, while professional photographers take pictures. While participating in role-playing, consumers can also have their companions take photos of them using smartphones and personal cameras, as desired.

Figure 10: Mr. Quang Hoa, a young Hue fashion designer fascinated by imperial attire, manages Huu Vu Hall, a space where history tourists can experience imperial culture. He explains the recreated imperial costumes, available for purchase and viewing by the public and interested tourists.

Source: Photographed by T. L. Nguyen at Huu Vu Hall during fieldwork, February 2, 2026.

In the case of Huu Vu Hall, this occurs specifically when visitors, as tourists, transform into emperors through role-playing, costumes, space, and unique memories captured on camera. These include individual photos, couple photos (husband and wife as emperor and empress), and group photos (family, parents, children, grandparents as emperors and royalty). These unique photographs become "special memories" and can be used as avatars, shared as exciting "life content" on Facebook and other social media, or printed as important photographs according to each person's needs, marking a memorable experience of consuming history at the Hue Imperial Museum.

Discussion

The "Huu Vu Hall" in the Imperial City of Hue, Vietnam, is one phenomenon that indicates the interaction between the "present" and the "past" of humanity and human society at the national level in Southeast Asia. It illustrates the production of special spaces to distinguish the "emperor" from commoners, portraying him as the highest authority and possessing superior prestige. This is achieved through symbolic systems encoded in the construction of the imperial palace, its halls, and various rooms as stages of "power", and in the form, patterns, content, and special decorations of the emperor's attire. This transforms the biological body into that of an emperor, granting him power over commoners despite their shared physical appearance. Furthermore, the operations within the imperial palace, through various ceremonies and rituals, are intertwined with the encoding of special meanings for the emperor. After the revolution defeated the French and the emperor abdicated, the emperor's sacredness was abolished. The imperial palace and the emperor thus became mere relics of the past, a historical memory for both Vietnam and France, the former colonial power.

Consequently, the historical legacy of the Hue Imperial City and the Nguyen Dynasty emperors holds profound significance for both Vietnam and France, a resonance that culminated in its designation as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site. Concurrently, through multifaceted processes of heritage tourism, this specialized mnemonic space has been reproduced and transformed into a "theater of historical consumption."

In particular, "Huu Vu Hall" within the Imperial City serves as a prime locus illustrating the dynamic interplay between past and present, history and tourism, and heritage per se versus the active construction of heritage to revisit bygone eras. Specifically, the commodification of the "emperor in memory" has emerged as a pivotal selling point for tourism at the Hue Imperial City World Heritage site. Visitors thus become consumers of a "reminiscent imperial power," co-creating idiosyncratic experiences as contemporary actors portraying "emperors." Clad in regal attire within the authentic spatial confines of past monarchs, they simultaneously reflect their own subjectivities within contemporary society. This renders "Huu Vu Hall" a compelling model for conceptualizing the diverse modes of past-present interaction across other human societies.

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