The management of minority heritage: critical challenges to Vietnamese Catholic heritage seen from the case study of Bui Chu church

Abstract

On 1 August 2020, wrecking balls began to demolish the Catholic church in Bui Chu town, in the Vietnamese province of Nam Dinh, putting an end to more than a decade of lively debate over whether the 1885 church building was to be preserved. The losing camp had favoured retaining the original structure and taking essential steps to enhance its integrity and safety; the prevailing camp argued to demolish the old church and replace it with a (larger) replica built with modern construction methods and materials. The present paper examines the positions and alignments among various actors, including church clergy, state officials at different levels, scholars of religion, heritage experts, journalists, and members of the congregation. These debates implicated complex questions of the continuity and value of colonial heritage, the effectiveness of Vietnam's legal system for protecting built heritage, and the sensitive historical relations between the state and Vietnam's Catholic minority.

Keywords: Bui Chu church; Catholic heritage; minority heritage; stakeholder debates; legal protections
Introduction

On the first day of August 2020, a heavy crane was mobilised to destroy two bell towers of Bui Chu church, thus leading to a massive amount of dust and noise in a small tranquil village in the Vietnamese province of Nam Dinh, about 110 km from the centre of Hanoi. The crane smashing holes and pushing the towers down was a bittersweet moment as the distinctive church was reduced to rubble. The destruction of the church occurred in a few hours but put an end to a years-long heated debate over Bui Chu church on various forms of media, including television, radio, newspapers, and social networking sites like Facebook. The destruction crystallised long-term thoughts and perspectives about the destiny of Catholic heritage and the Catholic church within a country – the Socialist Republic of Vietnam – that has had a sometimes-fraught relation with its Catholic citizens since liberation in 1945.

Although this is a broad generalisation, the debaters had essentially fallen into two camps. The camp that ultimately prevailed had argued to demolish the old church and replace it with a (larger) replica built with modern construction methods and materials while removing vital elements of the internal furnishings for re-use in the new church. The losing camp had favoured retaining the original structure and taking essential steps to enhance its integrity and safety, arguing that it represented a singular example of colonial-era Vietnamese architecture and an important example of local and national heritage. What is particularly noteworthy about these debates – as we shall see below – is that each camp included diverse members and viewpoints; and these did not necessarily reflect common expectations about which actors should hold which positions. By examining these debates and the alignments they produced, we can highlight critical challenges facing the management and conservation of Vietnamese Catholic heritage.
Heritage management is defined as a process of maintaining and enhancing the significance of a specific heritage and making it accessible to various groups of people (Armstrong 2014). According to Cody and Fong (2012, 101), the term "management" is a paradigm in heritage discourse that "became popular first in North America and Europe and then elsewhere." However, as has long been noted, the dominant Western approach to management seems to contradict Asian ways of heritage management, which often favour continual renewal and refurbishment over long-term preservation of an original structure. Asian countries have attempted to maintain the traditional continuity of their spiritual and social values (Armstrong 2014). Recent colonial heritage has added a vital layer of values to Asian nations since colonial history is accommodated in modern narratives. Moreover, colonial heritage has felt the impact of globalisation, particularly through international platforms like UNESCO, global tourism, and urban migration (Aygen 2013).

Between 1858 and 1954, Vietnam was colonised by France, with a short break in 1941-45 when Japan controlled the country. France left behind an immense heritage that included urban design and historical buildings serving cultural and religious uses (Logan 2014). Recent years have seen an expansion in Vietnamese heritage studies across topics, ranging from the heritage-making process (Logan 2014), the benefits of heritage listing (Brooks 2008), heritage development (Galla 2009), the role of capital cities (Logan 2002; Logan 2005), heritage commodification and politicisation (Bui and Lee 2015), the classification of heritage tourists (Nguyen and Cheung 2014), the perceptions of tourists (Le and Bui 2019), community's adaptive resilience (Bui et al. 2020), contemporary uses of Vietnamese cultural heritage (Le and Nguyen 2014), and heritage promotion (Nguyen 2019). When it comes to minority heritage, by delving into unique values in traditional buildings among Vietnamese minorities (Dang 2018), there is generally a need to conserve and promote minority heritage for socio-economic development (Doan 2017). More specifically,
other researchers have been studying several topics of Vietnamese minority heritage, including the management of Cham-pa towers (Tran 2014); the importance of pagodas in the Khmer's lives (Phung 2015), and linking the Ede's longhouse preservation and tourism development (Ho 2017).

However, very little has been researched or published regarding the degree about the significance of old Catholic churches or the extent to which they have been preserved. Catholicism was first introduced into Vietnam by European missionaries in the 16th century; and then, from the middle of the 17th century, missionary efforts were directed by the Paris Foreign Missions Society (Missions Étrangères de Paris). After the Philippines and Indonesia, Vietnam has the third-largest number of Catholics in Southeast Asia (Kendall et al. 2013). This religion has acted as a conduit for introducing Western culture and scientific knowledge and has led to a melding of Catholic practices with indigenous traditions (Nguyen et al. 2016). Early Catholic missionaries developed the Romanised form of Vietnamese script. Despite its historical importance, Vietnam's Catholic built heritage has been mostly omitted from cultural heritage registers and often left to deteriorate physically.

This paper aspires to shed light on challenges to the management and conservation of Vietnamese Catholic built heritage using an empirical case study of Bui Chu church in Nam Dinh province, about 110 km southeast of the Vietnamese capital, Hanoi city. It also compares Bui Chu with other forms of heritage conservation, thus leading to several suggestions for improving future management. A conceptual framework is used as the basis for exploring the case study - minority struggles against political control - this is affected in crucial ways by the context of single-party leading government in Vietnam. The research included field trips to Nam Dinh to investigate the debate over whether Bui Chu church should be kept intact or reconstructed. Interviews were conducted with local priests, people,
and local authorities to acquire first-hand data. After analysing the preliminary results, the research was developed further with discussions and interviews with architects, heritage experts, religion researchers, cultural managers, and government officials who had been directly or indirectly related to the church redevelopment proposal.

**Theoretical background and Research context**

**Heritage continuity**

There have been significant efforts to bolster and strengthen colonial heritage as part of the human legacy made by a myriad of Asian nations. Singapore could be cited as an example. Despite suffering from a substantial loss of its built heritage, the Singaporean government has considered its colonial heritage a vital component in national planning since the 1980s. Like Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines currently have no qualms in conserving areas by which both colonial indigenous heritage and local heritage co-exist. The protection of colonial heritage, including historical monuments and buildings, is also encompassed in the legal frameworks of many Middle Eastern countries (Ndoro et al. 2009; Daher and Maffi 2014).

Unfortunately, different governments undermine colonial heritage's association with their complicated past. In the Asian context, Seoul (Korea) is a six-century old city representing the co-existence of Korean, Chinese, and Western cultural elements in its built heritage. However, Japanese colonial heritage in Korea is rejected in emotional response (Rii 2002). Also, parts of Myanmar colonial heritage are deliberately obliterated to showcase modernisation and progress by the ruling regime (Silva and Chapagain 2013).

**Minority struggles against political control**

By definition, minority groups are considered "metaphors and reminders of the betrayal of the classical national project. This betrayal, which was rooted in the failure of the nation-state
to preserve its promise to be the guarantor of national sovereignty, underwrites the worldwide impulse to extrude or eliminate minorities" (Appadurai 2006, 43). Irrespective of the size and the high level of cultural difference, the cultural gap between the minority and the majority tends to cause frictions and may lead to ethnically related violence. Harrison (2010) indicates that many countries constitute diverse and a large proportion of ethnic minority communities. As a result, a plethora of heritage scholars and researchers have sought to acknowledge the motives behind heritage interventions, which are to achieve political goals and to strengthen national identity (Logan 2012).

György (2019) notes that since the formation of cultural heritage was closely connected to modern nation building, minority heritage is antithetical to the original concept of cultural heritage. Power and authority, from a cultural studies' perspective, are pivotal nodes that navigate relationships in society. In this view, heritage is seen as a component of the state's agenda that promotes the sense of national belonging. More specifically, heritage serves as a tool used by a nation to create its collective social memory (Hall 1999). Nonetheless, the idea that collective social memory can wholly represent a nation is questionable since not all actors are included. The place for the heritage of minorities in this so-called collectivity, thus, is subject to selection (Harrison 2010), which is understandable since minority groups are not the one that seizes the throne of power. That leads to a rough fact that the heritage of those who are underrepresented, oppressed, or simply seen as the "others" have been neglected for a long time.

Heritage among minority groups has to adjust to the new circumstances, so elements of heritage from the dominant groups have been fitted into minority family's routines (Nikielska-Sekula 2019). Even in some cases, the majority pursue an idea of destroying and purging minority heritage. This notion is consistent with Logan's findings:
cultural heritage is used and misused, even abused by those with the power to do so. It can be used to manipulate people, and governments commonly use it to shape public opinion or try to weld disparate ethnic and social groups into more cohesive and harmonious national entities (2016, 256).

It is noteworthy that when touching upon the concept of minority, most of the previous studies dealing with the topic of minority heritage have displayed a tendency of referring it to the notion of ethnic minority (Xu 2007, György 2019, Ghahramani et al. 2020). Instead, the concept of minority mentioned in this paper is closely linked to religious minority, which is also a group that suffers from segregation. Several studies have examined the experience of exclusion that religious minorities have to face. In Poland, non-Catholics are tagged as non-Poles (Zubrzycki 2006), while in Québec, the secular majority will be the one who finalises the decision on housing distribution for orthodox Jews, Muslims, and other religious minorities (Zubrzycki 2013). Although national heritage still needs to receive adequate attention, it is time to shift the focus to the local, ethnic, and other minority cultural forms (Asworth et al. 2007, 4). This research, therefore, is an endeavour to incorporate the Catholic heritage into the collective vault of Vietnam's national remembrance, ensuring that the heritage of religious minority groups does not stand on the marginal side.

Catholicism and the Vietnamese State: an unhalcyon history

There has been a delicate and sometimes antagonistic relationship between the Vietnamese state and Catholics since the 17th century. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Catholicism in Vietnam was criticised by the Trinh Lords (in Tonkin) and the Nguyen Lords (in Cochinchina). However, the Lords had to purchase weapons and other Western materials for the wars, so anti-Catholic policies were not strictly imposed (Nguyen 2009). Despite the aid provided by the French Bishop Pigneau de Béhaine to King Gia Long in the early 19th
century, subsequent Nguyen Kings adopted hostile policies towards Catholic missionaries. By exploiting the Nguyen King's persecution of missionaries, the French Catholic Emperor Napoleon III decided to invade Vietnam in 1858 (Goscha 2011). This event led to an enduring perspective of Vietnamese Catholics as clients of imperial administration (Nguyen et al. 2016).

During the First Indochina War (1945-1954), Vietnam Catholics' enthusiasm for autonomy resulted in widespread opposition to the independence movement led by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) (Keith 2012). From 1946, Catholics at Bui Chu and Phat Diem dioceses became effectively autonomous zones owing loyalty neither to France nor to the DRV. However, this situation ended five years later since the French insisted on controlling them administratively and militarily (Goscha 2011). As a result, there was a robust anti-communist role played by these two dioceses. Following the Vietnamese victory over the French and the Geneva Accords (1954), two rival governments maintained control: the DRV in the north and the Republic of Vietnam in the south. Under the northern Communist regime, the church urged up to nearly 900,000 Catholics to flee to the South (Denney 1990). The church in the Republic of Vietnam experienced greater freedom than its northern brethren and received support from the US (Phan 2013). In 1955, the DRV attempted to establish a patriotic church to separate Vietnamese Catholics from the Vatican through a letter "Decision of the Delegate Apostolic and Superiors of the Missions of Hanoi, Hung Hoa, Bac Ninh, Vinh, and Bui Chu." However, the Catholic hierarchy refused, considering this "a danger to the unity of the Church in Vietnam" and preventing the Catholic priests from joining this organisation (Nguyen 1979, 200). In Vietnam, therefore, the Catholic church remains under control from Rome, and there was never the establishment of a so-called "patriotic church", in contrast to the situation in China (Chu 2008).
Since Vietnam's reunification in 1975, there have been tensions and disputes between the State and the Catholics over the freedom of religious practices and church property. The government issued various legal documents to manage religious practices. The law states that religious freedom is guaranteed if it is not used to "undermine the independence of the country, to oppose the system of socialism, to undermine the great national unity of all the people, to prevent followers from fulfilling their duties as citizens, or to oppose the policies and laws of the State." However, these regulations seem vague; thus, they "leave more power in the hands of the state" (Chu 2008, 154). The 2004 Ordinance on Belief and Religion considers religious practices "internal affairs"; however, any activities must be registered with the Office of Religious Affairs (The National Assembly 2016). For instance, religious services involving foreigners, prior approval is required, but it is not feasible for the church to control foreigners' participation.

In recent years, Hanoi has seen land conflicts between the church and the Chien Thang Garment Stock Company at No. 178 Nguyen Luong Bang Street and between the church and city authorities at No. 42 Nha Chung Street (Nguyen et al. 2016; Xuan 2008). In 2009, the church was involved in another land dispute with local authorities (Dong Hoi, Quang Binh Province) regarding land possession around Tam Toa Cathedral. Many Catholics erected a tent chapel on the contested land, and seven Catholic activists were arrested, thus resulting in the largest religious protest in Vietnam's history (Thayer 2014).

**Bui Chu church: Its history and significance**

Bui Chu is one of the oldest churches in Vietnam, and its history begins in the same period as Vietnam's most notable cathedrals: the Saigon Notre Dame Cathedral in Ho Chi Minh City (1880), the Hanoi Cathedral (1886), and the Phat Diem Stone Cathedral (1889). Bui Chu
church was built in 1885 by Bishop Wenceslao Onate Thuan and had a basilica form with a length of 78m, a width of 27m, and a height of 15m.

Bui Chu is smaller than four other Vietnamese basilicas: Ke So (Ha Nam Province), Phu Nhai (Nam Dinh province), La Vang (Thua Thien Hue Province), and Saigon Notre-Dame Cathedral (Ho Chi Minh City); however, it possesses some unique values. In the mid-XVI century, Catholicism was first preached to Bui Chu residents, and Bui Chu subsequently became a centre of evangelisation in northern Vietnam (Bui Chu 2020; Keith 2012). Statistically, 26 out of 117 Vietnamese Martyrs were from Bui Chu Diocese, thus contributing to the popularity of Catholicism in Vietnam. Bui Chu church was renowned for its Baroque-style architecture, particularly its use of ironwood columns and line patterns and traditional motifs decorations, whereas most Vietnamese churches were built in Gothic style. The oval leaf patterns decorating the ceiling of the church were the most striking feature, distinguishing Bui Chu from all other Vietnamese churches. The church windows were intricately carved and decorated with Baroque style utilising some traditional Vietnamese materials. According to architect Hoang Dao Kinh, former Chairman of the Institute of Relic Conservation attached to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST): "Bui Chu church plays a significant role in the history of Catholicism in Vietnam. It is a salient example of Western and Eastern cultural interaction" (Nguyen 2019). Socially, Bui Chu church was a sacred venue that many generations of locals were emotionally attached to since it was to serve people’s physical and spiritual life.
Research Method

A primarily qualitative case study approach was deployed, beginning with the first field trips in mid-2019 (Yin 2018). Empirical data were subsequently collected through document review, observation, in-depth interviews, and group discussions.

The research included twenty-four interviews with various stakeholders to seek their views about Bui Chu church. The research participants were in a wide age range from the early 20s to 60s, both male and female. Specific identifiers were removed, and efforts were made to maintain the anonymity of the participants. A careful selection of interviewees who could reflect on their experiences of heritage management and conservation was made. Three interviews were completed with local priests from the Diocese of Bui Chu (Priest 1 to Priest 3). These people are considered to have the highest power over the management and conservation of Bui Chu church. Nine interviews with lay Catholics (Catholic 1 to Catholic
were made to provide individual comments. Information obtained from local priests and congregation members was then supplemented by the views of heritage experts, architects, media, and national, provincial, as well as district officials. Experts interviewed included three architects (Architect 1 to Architect 3), three heritage experts (Heritage expert 1 to Heritage expert 3), and two religion researchers (Religion researcher 1 and Religion researcher 2). These people are believed to have specialist knowledge of the research topic (Bogner et al. 2009). The last four interviews were undertaken with the collaboration from representatives from the Department of Cultural Heritage (DCH) of the MCST (Official 1 and Official 2); the Nam Dinh Province People's Committee; and the Bui Chu District People's Committee. All discussions, meetings, and interviews were tape-recorded or noted. Open-ended questions were used to elicit information from the participants in the interviews. These in-person interviews were further complemented by online materials and information released by media correspondents.

**Research findings**

Early 2019, the Institute of Relics Conservation (Viện Bảo tồn Di tích), a subunit of the MCST, along with a large pool of Vietnamese heritage experts and architects, surveyed and published data about Bui Chu's deteriorated physical condition. The findings revealed that the church structure was no longer robust because there were many big and small cracks on the walls. Wall materials were locally produced, including quicklime and sand; as a result, the composition of the wall gradually weakened over time. The findings highlighted that the bell tower made an angle of 2 degrees and was likely to collapse. The church’s exterior floor was about 70 cm higher than the church’s interior floor due to the sinking and various renovations. The church was subject to flooding and damage in the case of downpours (Tap chi Kien truc 2019).
Conflicting views on what should be done with the church

As mentioned above, views on the future of the church fell broadly into two camps: one view favoured retaining the original structure and taking essential steps to enhance its integrity and safety; the opposing view argued to demolish the old church and replace it with a (larger) replica built with modern construction methods and materials. The Diocese of Bui Chu and the Church hierarchy was clearly in the latter camp: they confirmed that they had planned to reconstruct the church since 2014 and received financial and material supports from Catholics and people of other religions. In mid-2019, when Bui Chu church was about to be dismantled to give way to a new church, a highly contentious debate among lay Catholics, priests, architects, heritage experts, religion researchers, and national, provincial, and district officials provoked much public and media attention.

Retain and conserve the church

The retention and conservation of Bui Chu church were strongly supported by all three Architects, both Heritage experts, Religion researcher 2, and Lay Catholics 5, 6, and 7. They acknowledged the church's significant values of architecture, building techniques, and history, and insisted that the appropriate response was to conserve Bui Chu church. For instance, once the Church's plans for Bui Chu church were announced, the three architects studying Bui Chu visited and examined the structure. Architect 1, who is responsible for conserving some historic buildings in Ho Chi Minh City, commented that the church possessed unique, delicate arches and carvings. The architects also confirmed that although parts of the church walls, ceiling, and floor were damaged and sunken, the structure of it was generally strong. Architect 3 acknowledged that the demolition of Bui Chu church could be an option in case the church was too weak and about to collapse, but he supposed that:
Overall, the structure of the church is good. It just needs some sort of restoration and conservation to stand more firmly and solidly. Reconstruction is the only option once the church cannot be saved.

Architect 1, who studied Analysis, Conservation and Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage in Italy, shared:

The best option is to preserve Bui Chu church. We need to learn how Italian people have skilfully approached, conserved, and respected their heritage for centuries.

These architects, along with a group of more than 20 other architects and heritage experts, submitted a petition calling for the church to be retained and conserved to the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, MCST, Chairman of Catholic Bishop's Conference of Vietnam, Government Committee for Religious Affairs and Nam Dinh People's Committee (Tuoi Tre 2019). They gave their assurance that the church contains "architectural gems thanks to its combination of French architectural style and traditional Vietnamese aesthetics, and its destruction is a huge loss for Vietnamese" (Martin 2019).

In support of the safeguarding of Bui Chu, the two Heritage experts emphasised that although Bui Chu church is administratively under the control of the Diocese of Bui Chu, it is a common asset for Vietnamese. Heritage expert 2, with 20 years of experience in Vietnam, warned about the prospect of heritage loss that future generations would come across:

Vietnam will prosper very soon. Future generations will be more exposed to a new school of thinking and knowledge through their abroad studies and works. Upon returning to their homeland, they will wonder who should take responsibility for heritage loss in Vietnam.
The arguments of the architects and heritage experts resonate with those of international specialists. Michael Petzet - a German architect and former president of ICOMOS, explains that replacement is not necessarily simpler than conservation and may represent technical challenges and barriers and can only be decided on a "sound scientific basis" (Petzet 2004, 20). This is consistent with Karlström's study of the difficulties facing the conservation of heritage having only local significance (2013) and reinforces the view that the past and its tangible remains play an essential role in allowing us to understand our identity. The fear of losing this is a crucial motive behind the desire to preserve the past that is widely accepted in the heritage discourse. There is a need to preserve the integrity of physical structures, so a need to conserve heritage as originally as possible prevails. There is a growing search for values of specific heritage buildings in our current society (Azizi et al. 2016). In heritage buildings, historical features are tangible parts of cultural heritage that provide an identity we belong to. They go beyond their aesthetic values to offer us a sense of place (Hubbard and Kitchin 2010).

Turning to the local context, a focus group discussion with three young local people (all Catholic laypeople) aged 18 to 25 asked that their identity be kept secret before they would participate. They feared that once their identity is revealed, they may find it challenging to live in the village since local priests and other lay Catholics might have a bias against them. Asking the priests to host weddings or funeral ceremonies would be more difficult in the future. Lay Catholics 5, 6, and 7 disagreed with the reconstruction plan and expressed their sadness. Lay Catholic 5, who lives next to Bui Chu, claimed that it would be ideal to find some ways to renovate the old building rather than pulling it down and building a completely new one since the old church sticks with his life. Furthermore, social and religious values of Bui Chu church need to be passed on to future generations, as per Lay
Catholic 6, who asserted that "young people have the right to inherit what their parents and grandparents have created."

One of the reasons why Bui Chu church should be rebuilt was that the old church was too small to accommodate lay Catholics for religious practices. However, this argument was rejected by Religion researcher 2, who was firmly in favour of church preservation. He proposed that in the case of important events and services, people could use temporary shelters to contain churchgoers:

No one builds her or his house, which is reserved for big events such as weddings or funerals. Instead, people would hire hotels, restaurants, or create temporary houses. So, it is true of the church. Regardless of the big or small-sized church, it cannot accommodate everyone at the church service. For important events and services, the local Catholics should build makeshift shelters.

The alternative, new construction of a large church, can result in a massive waste of money. In his business with the Diocese of Can Tho in southern Vietnam, Religion researcher 2 asked the diocese chairman why he had not built a bigger church, the chairman replying that

The church stays open for two hours, the rest of the day it is closed. Is a big church really necessary? As a result, I spend 50% of the diocese budget on preaching, 30% on the poor and the sick.

The religion researcher's idea was backed by two local interviewees (Lay Catholics 6 and 7). The latter saw an "offering" of 1 million dong (around US$42) per person to the church to finance a new building as a large amount of money. Some households have up to nine or ten members.
Dismantle and replace the church

In contrast to those arguing for retention and conservation of the original building, several voices wished to dismantle and replace Bui Chu church, including all three Priests; Lay Catholics 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, and 9; both Officials of different levels and a UNESCO expert (not interviewed, but as reported in the media). The most influential voices here were those of the local priests and lay Catholics.

All three priests said that the plan to knock the old church down and construct a new church was a tough decision, but there was no other option available. Accordingly, Priest 1, who had been managing Bui Chu church for more than ten years, emphasised that:

The church ceiling is made of traditional materials, including quicklime, stone, straw, and sand, which might not be in good shape for a long time. Under the impacts of hot and humid weather, along with frequent seasonal storms and hurricanes, the church has deteriorated. Two bell towers of the church inclined very much, and the church floor sank up to 70cm.

Priest 2 also asserted that:

Other priests and I wish to construct a new church on Hong Ngoc commune field and maintain the old church. Unfortunately, the procedure for obtaining land allocation and building permission, particularly for Catholic churches, is complicated and nearly impossible. Vietnamese Catholic churches have been hitherto built on the designated land.

Moreover, Priest 3 shared for the view of Priest 2 by highlighting what he and lay Catholics had done for the last few years:
After several years of waiting in vain, a decision to dismantle Bui Chu church was proposed even though we felt so sad to do so. we must take lay Catholics' life and security as the priority.

The unfulfilled wish to construct a new church on new land was confirmed through the interview with Official 1:

Nam Dinh People's Committee has advised the government about Bui Chu's request for land allocation to build a new church for six months, but no response from the state has been given.

A decision not to wait any longer and to demolish the old church to build a new one was considered a well-prepared and prudent move. The church clergy and Catholic followers understood that they could not achieve their wishes of land allocation for a new church since no response was received once the land request had been submitted to the State and the Prime Minister of Vietnam. They also considered that waiting longer was useless and could perhaps put many lives in grave danger due to the old church's safety. What had happened to Bui Chu priests and Catholics reflects the long-term tensions between Catholicism and the state because the church is "another institution that must be controlled" (Chu 2008, 181).

Lay Catholics 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, and 9 agreed with the replacement plan claiming that the church had deteriorated and posed threats to people. Lay Catholic 1 commented that

In rainy seasons, wind and water flow into the church from the bell towers. When the main doors are left open, the wind would come, blow or even wreck the walls indoors. Sometimes, small particles of the ceiling drop onto people who are participating in the church service. Some people were hospitalised.

Lay Catholics 2, 4, and 8 suggested that church reconstruction had been long-planned and prepared since 2014 before the decision was announced. Accordingly, many people,
including donors, had prepared finance and construction materials to build the church. Lay Catholic 8, who has lived in Bui Chu for more than 60 years, suggested that

Around two years ago, I was first asked about whether Bui Chu church should be rebuilt or kept intact. I was then provided with a photograph of the new Bui Chu church [as proposed] and asked for thoughts and comments. I am happy to know that the new church will primarily maintain the old church's architecture and landscape. Also, old materials will be utilised as much as possible for the new construction. Notably, the statue of Jesus Christ will be erected and kept at the existing place.

From a UNESCO's perspective, Michael Croft, the Head of the UNESCO's Vietnam Office, requested and received an invitation to visit the church from the Bui Chu Diocese in mid-2019, according to media accounts (he was not interviewed for this essay). Croft indicated that its severe degradation was easily seen by the naked eyes. The foundation had descended about 60 - 70 cm, and the front wall had cracked and was divided into two parts, and the timber roof beams were rotten. He suggested that Vietnamese society and economy were not in good shape during the time the church was constructed (1884); therefore, the church was not built with the best stone like other European churches of the same era (VnExpress 2019). Croft also posited that the preservation of the Bui Chu church should be understood in a broader sense. Preservation, which needs to ensure the security of the people and their rights to practise their beliefs, should include both tangible and intangible elements. While physical elements cannot last forever, intangible heritage has continuing value and cultural and religious practices. Continuing the cultural flow is more critical than preserving the tangible heritage.
This UNESCO perspective is consistent with Brown's research findings (2011). Brown contended that historic reconstruction reflects a debate between the value of actual materials and the value of original designs. "Authenticity", a key concept in place conservation under the World Heritage Convention 1972, referred until the 1990s to the former. Recent ideas of authenticity, however, refer to the existence of documentation that shows the continuity of traditional building function and design. For instance, during the Nara Conference on authenticity organised by ICOMOS in 1994, attention was given to a Shinto temple complex in Japan where the material structure is replaced every twenty years, but the process is authentic, having remained the same for about one millennium.

The reconstruction plan for Bui Chu church was further supported by Official 2 and district official who works for the Board of Culture and Information, Xuan Truong District:

As a 130-year-old building, Bui Chu church is too old to preserve, and it is time to replace it with a new one. It would be catastrophic if the church would collapse onto Catholics attending church services. The church has been granted the construction permission, so it has the right to start the work.

In terms of technical matters of reconstruction, Official 2 shared his view, saying that since the church is not a safe place to serve religious practices, a move to replacement is essential. There are two different ways of reconstruction: partial and complete reconstruction. Each way has its pros and cons, and it is up to church priests and lay Catholics to decide. However, according to Official 2, the most crucial factor in his view was to ensure and maintain stone foundations, church structure, wall decoration patterns, metal motifs, and the altar and other objects of worship.

Legal and policy issues over unrecognised heritage

In 2001, the Vietnamese Parliament passed the Vietnam Law on Cultural Heritage, which
was subsequently amended in 2009. The law states that Vietnamese cultural heritage is a valuable property of Vietnam, constituting part of the cultural heritage of humanity and playing a huge role in national construction and defence. In a recent meeting on the protection and promotion of Vietnam's cultural heritage for sustainable development on 27th July 2018, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc regarded heritage as an asset bestowed by nature or a product of a long and persistent process of human labour and creativity. He stressed that everything could be produced, made, and created, except for heritage. Thus, people must not damage, destroy, and sacrifice heritage for development for any reason. Losing heritage is like betraying the past and losing national identity. The law assigns the mandates to relevant stakeholder agencies, including the MCST, local governments, and management boards to focus on maintaining and promoting cultural heritage values (Duong et al. 2018).

However, the Law has highlighted some of the legal limitations confronting the management and conservation of Catholic heritage in Vietnam. The gap between theory and reality is notable. The first Article of the Law states that the cultural heritage under protection is composed of tangible and intangible forms material and spiritual products having historical, cultural, and scientific values that have been handed down from generation to generation. If we consider the case of Bui Chu church, literature pinpoints that the church possessed some unique values in terms of culture, history, and arts in Vietnam (Nguyen 2009).

Heritage expert 1 further postulated that Bui Chu church should have been long designated as a national-level site for its original historical, cultural, and architectural values. Article 29 points out three kinds of cultural heritage sites based on their importance, including (1) provincial-level sites, (2) national-level sites, and (3) special national-level
sites. No specific guidelines explain why a site is to be ranked as having local values, national values, or special national values; even if the criteria for these designations are not in the Law but are left to implementing regulations. Many heritage sites in Vietnam go unrecognised and are not protected legally, one such being Bui Chu church. Many unrecognised heritage sites may have outstanding values and merit listing (VnExpress 2019). Heritage expert 3 commented that

If there is something wrong with the Law of Cultural Heritage, faults or gaps should be amended or fixed. In the case of Catholic churches, a precise specification of local, national, and special national heritage sites should come into effect, so site managers must take proper measures.

Part of the challenge is that there is inadequate collaboration in managing Bui Chu church between the Nam Dinh Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism (NDDCST), Department of Construction, and the Xuan Truong District Board of Culture and Information. These institutions are legally responsible for Bui Chu church management and conservation. The NDDCST and the Xuan Truong District Board of Culture and Information are two provincial and district levels of managing heritage conservation and promotion in Nam Dinh province. The Department of Construction is conducive to regulating and controlling construction activities in the province of Nam Dinh. In 2016, the Department of Construction issued a permit that allowed Bui Chu church to be reconstructed. Around one year later, the NDCST put Bui Chu church into the Nam Dinh Provincial List of Cultural Heritage, bringing it under the guardianship of Nam Dinh Province since then. Bui Chu church has been put under the guardianship of Nam Dinh province under the 2001 Law. However, in 2018 the Department of Construction decided to renew the permit for the Diocese of Bui Chu once the old permit expired without having careful consultation with the NDDCST. In effect, both the
NDDCST and the Department of Construction did not comply with the rule and regulation of cultural heritage. The Official 1 from the DCH, MCST the Provincial Official reckoned that it was wrong for the Provincial Department of Construction to renew the permit. He confirmed that this incident revealed a lack of attention and a sense of irresponsibility between local authorities in Bui Chu management and conservation.

**Financial issues**

The local government manages Bui Chu church's construction and administrative activities without state funding since it has not been recognised as a National Heritage Site. Inscription on the provincial list does not attract funding. This means that the church does not receive any government funding for its management and conservation. The Vietnamese Catholic church organisation and Bui Chu church do not have financial resources themselves for adequate management and conservation. As Priest 3 commented,

> We could have managed and conserved the church better if we had enough financial resources as the work for maintenance and conservation is often costly.

Most of the church budget comes from local Catholics, philanthropists, and other donors. The majority of local Catholics live on farming as the primary source of income for their family. There are many members in their households, leading to the fact that they could not afford to offer much money. Lay Catholic 6 explained:

> I do not like offering too much money for the church's construction. There are five members in my family; we primarily live on cultivating three sào (1,080 m²) of rice. Every six months, we save around 100kg of rice and a haft of which is normally offered "voluntarily" to the local church. Other neighbouring church managers also come and ask us for donations that make our lives more difficult.
Heritage expert 1 also pinpointed that the lack of financial support meant church managers had no specific plans for combating issues related to the maintenance and repair of damaged parts of the church. It also reduced Bui Chu's ability to develop its relationship with other stakeholders (Lochrie 2016) and helped to explain the church's degraded situation. State funding support seems essential, and provision need not be problematic for a secular state such as Vietnam. Sproule (2005) contends that granting conservation funds to religious institutions does not mean endorsement of their religion. Instead, such grants demonstrate that the state is not wholly hostile towards religion and recognises the importance of historic religious buildings in the national history and community life. Indeed, Article 24 of the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2013) guarantees freedom of belief and religion and sees all religions as equal before the law (International IDEA 2013).

Another reason for explaining the shortage of funding is the church managers' distrust of the state. Religion researcher 1 shared that what happened to Phat Diem Cathedral (Ninh Binh Province) has provided a lesson for the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Vietnam. On the 100th anniversary of Phat Diem Cathedral (1988), the local government was involved in the process of preparing the church nomination dossier, and then it was designated as National Cultural Heritage. Since then, the church has faced a plethora of problems. For instance, visitors must buy tickets to have access to the church.

Moreover, conservation and management undergo more complicated procedures than they otherwise would. Priest 2 referred to the case of Phat Diem and emphasised that selling tickets for those who have their pilgrimage or pay a visit to the church is unacceptable for Catholics. Religion researcher 2 pointed out that once several Vietnamese churches have received state funding; the progress of church restoration or making becomes slower and even takes more time to complete than it will need. The quality of construction work is
another thing that many Catholics worry about. The shortage of financial resources has put Bui Chu church and other Catholic churches in a difficult situation by which the church could not be maintained and appropriately preserved.

While other heritage sites in Vietnam, including World Heritage, Special National Heritage, National Heritage Sites, and Buddhism-related institutions, have been allocated financial supports by the government and businesses, Catholic heritage has received fewer financial resources. The Complex of Hue Imperial Citadel could be cited as an example. At Hue Monument Conservation Centre (2017), historic conservation and restoration received a massive amount of funding, up to 600 billion dongs (equivalent to US$26 million) from both the central government (270 billion dongs) and the local government and international assistance (330 billion dongs) during 2011-2016. A similar trend is seen from various Buddhist temples and pagodas such as Bai Dinh pagoda (Ninh Binh province) and Tam Chuc pagoda, which have lately been very much invested by both the local governments and private companies to restore the degraded structures (Phat giao 2020).

**Discussion**

This study aimed to investigate the divergent perspectives of the various stakeholders towards critical challenges to Vietnamese Catholic heritage sites, as revealed by the case study of Bui Chu church. The conflicting views were exemplified by the 24 interviewees. They could be generalised into two camps - the supporters of the proposal to demolish the existing church and replace it, and their opponents. The two sides based their views on a multitude of factors, including legal and financial issues.

In Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia, colonial heritage is treated as an integral part of national development and well-conserved (Gonzales 2018; Idrus et al. 2010). Vietnam has had a different approach to its colonial
remains. A few French colonial buildings in Hanoi, such as the Municipal Theatre (Opera House) and the Presidential Palace, have always had landmark status. In the first few years of Vietnam's opening up under the Đổi mới policy, however, there was not much interest in the French imprint, particularly Catholic heritage – "a reflection of lingering anti-colonial sentiment" (Logan 2014, 65). Interest in the colonial heritage places has grown considerably since then due to international tourism and the efforts of local and international historians and planners (Logan 1996; Logan 2014).

Compared to Buddhist heritage, Catholic heritage, particularly the Catholic church, can be considered a minority heritage. The statistics made by the DCH, MCST uncover that there are 3,463 National Heritage Sites (Tap chi Kien truc 2018) and 107 Special National Heritage Sites (DCH 2018). Phat Diem church is the only Catholic heritage site recognised as National Heritage; by contrast, there are 15 Buddhist or Buddhism-related pagodas designated as Special National Heritage Sites. Therefore, there is a marked difference in how Catholic and Buddhist relics are treated and conserved in Vietnam. Without acknowledging what different communities' value in their environment, their built heritage will continue to be ignored and to decay for lengthy periods (Saïfi and Yüceer 2013) or only be recognised as part of national heritage by chance (Gard'ner 2004). Also, the tensions and conflicts between Catholics and city authorities concerning land disputes in Hanoi suggest a potentially 'bumpy ride' ahead between the Vietnamese state and Catholics. Consequently, a straightforward dialogue and a need to deliver a more inclusive past between these two institutions are essential in addressing unsolved issues and misunderstandings (Nguyen et al. 2016).

In addition to the conflicting perspectives between various stakeholders, the research showcases some conflicting views and actions between what the Catholic clergy desired to achieve and what they carried out are noted. In an interview with the general representative of
Bui Chu Diocese conducted by a correspondent of Ngôi Độc Thị (The Urban dwellers) newspaper, priest Joseph Nguyen Duc Giang confirmed that the Jesus statue would be put at the plaza and other artefacts and remains of old church will be kept in storage as precious artefacts. However, it appears that a handful of old objects or architectural fragments of the old church will not be re-utilised in the new construction (Hoang 2020). This is a stark contrast with the assurance from Bishop Thomas Vu Dinh Hieu that "all the furniture and ornaments in the old church will be installed in the new one [church]" in an interview conducted by the leading Vietnamese online newspaper of VNexpress (Viet 2020).

The Catholic clergy and many local Catholics shared the desire to dismantle the church and rebuild a new one (Viet 2020). However, what happened to Bui Chu church was a kind of destruction. Regrettably, the Church could not use the best methods of restoration in which, during the process of intervention, displacements and forces are strictly monitored to take control of dismantlement in real-time and reduce the lowest level of disturbance of heritage structure. The dismantled elements of heritage are stored and ready to be re-used in the framework of the restoration plan (Verstrynge et al. 2012).

Meanwhile, heritage destruction is a kind of political act by which an actor or a group seeks to represent their perspectives on the tensions by damaging and decimating the site or object in question (Shahab and Benjamin 2018). The academic literature contends that heritage destruction is deliberately conducted to erase the memories and rituals of a specific community or the ideology (Mitchell 2015). The destruction of Bui Chu church may sharpen the fragile relationship between the State and the Catholics, which has been problematic for a few hundreds of years. It is deemed a proper result of the intense and long-term disruptions in the quadrupedal relationship between the government, the Catholic clergy, local Catholics, and heritage experts and lovers. The state and local authorities were not interested in
preserving the church in the first place, and the Catholic clergy were keen on reconstructing the church. Catholic locals showcased either their agreement or their disagreement due to their narrow scope of knowledge, and heritage experts and lovers demonstrated their unwavering objection.

The Bui Chu study shows that the legislative system does not function well to preserve Vietnamese Catholic heritage. In theory, the government strongly supports heritage management and conservation since top Vietnamese leaders have acknowledged the importance of heritage in national economic and social development. In practice, however, many heritage sites, Catholic heritage sites included, have gone unrecognised and not been given sufficient consideration. There are no clear guidelines for documenting and recognising a site as Special National Heritage or National Heritage in Vietnamese law, and it is a time-consuming process for a heritage site to get listed by the government. Once a heritage site is designated on the National Heritage List, legal obstacles make it very challenging to undertake any conservation, restoration, and promotion activity, particularly for functioning Catholic churches. Appropriate policies and regulations are needed to ensure that Catholic heritage places are appropriately conserved and treated in line with other Vietnamese heritage. Besides, a new official mechanism is required to identify and protect heritage sites not recognised by current heritage legislation (Li et al. 2020; Ly and Hunter 2015).

The financial issue is another pitfall highlighted by the Bui Chu findings. This is considered a critical problem in any heritage conservation project, and especially in trying to conserve Catholic heritage places (Perovic et al. 2016). To ensure quality, it is usual for government to take a leading role in the maintenance and conservation of heritage assets (Gard’ner 2004; Rodgers and Van Oers 2011). Baarveld et al. (2013, 164) assert that the "preservation of cultural-historical values has usually been financed by governments." For
example, in Malaysia, the preservation and conservation of historical monuments and buildings are prioritised in the national cultural budgets (Aygen 2013). Similar examples are seen in the Portuguese heritage in Macau and British heritage in Hong Kong, China, and Christian heritage in Nagasaki Prefecture and the city of Nagasaki in Japan (Chaplain 2002; Henderson 2002).

**Conclusion**

Whether to maintain or to reconstruct is a complicated question for Vietnamese Catholic heritage as a kind of minority heritage. The answer seems not straightforward for those who read this article: keep the outstanding from the past and change the degraded for the future. It does not sound like this, yet heritage reconstruction is inherently dissonant (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) and becomes "a site of contestation and dissonance" (Viejo-Rose 2013: 126). This study examined the challenges to Catholic heritage conservation seen from a case study of Bui Chu church. Three principal challenges facing Bui Chu church are highlighted: conflicts and tensions over the Bui Chu historic reconstruction plans, legal and policy problems, and financial issues. The research has shown the need for and difficulty in obtaining colonial management and conservation knowledge in a country where Catholic churches are not part of the national mainstream of management, conservation, and promotion. Being excluded from the authorised heritage discourse is reflected in the sometimes tense relationships between the Vietnamese state and the Catholic church in Vietnam and sets the context in which the challenges mentioned above need to be understood (Nguyen 2009b).

Among the three challenges mentioned above, conflicting views between church retention and replacement are the most challenging obstacle Bui Chu church has encountered. There was limited cooperation between Catholic church managers and other involved
stakeholders (architects, heritage experts, and officials of different levels). The differences in opinion between the supporters and opponents of the Bui Chu reconstruction proposal are firmly held, thereby representing "unique history and circumstances that need to be taken into account in devising a fair and workable solution" (Kymlicka 1995, 1). Notably, the deliberate destruction of Bui Chu church marks the collapse of trust between Catholic followers and the state regardless of endless support from heritage lovers. In this case, Bui Chu reconstruction might be "used as a means to many ends, especially political ones" (Khalaf 2020, 10). Also, the findings suggest that widespread benefits would follow the government taking a more significant role in recognising more Vietnamese Catholic heritage places and creating better conditions for heritage conservation. This would involve amending legal frameworks, making financial assistance easier for Catholic church managers to access, and simplifying administrative procedures (Timothy and Boyd 2015; Li et al. 2020). Providing the clergy and congregations can be brought on inside and avoiding the difficulties at Phat Diem mentioned by Priest 2 and Religion researcher 1. The key is to establish goodwill and cooperation between the parties involved, so direct and frequent dialogues and contacts can occur. The old Bui Chu church has gone, but the debate remains alive among different stakeholders, thus leaving an unanswered question for the fate of many other Vietnamese churches.
References


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