

MOBILIZING INTERNATIONAL RESOURCES FOR THE CONSERVATION OF MY SON HERITAGE IN VIETNAM

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Keywords: resources, international resources, conservation, cultural heritage, My Son

1. Introduction

In 1999, the My Son Sanctuary was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List [1], granting it the highest level of protection under international conventions and formally recognizing it as part of the common cultural heritage of humanity.

This is an important prerequisite, ensuring that the future preservation of My Son strictly adheres to international scientific principles and standards. In response to the serious degradation of the My Son Sanctuary, UNESCO and the Vietnamese government have sought to play a key bridging role, coordinating bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs, and attract funding, technology, and experts from around the world to implement restoration and preservation projects for the Sanctuary.

The cultural cooperation program between the Vietnamese government and the Polish government in 1981 was a significant milestone, marking the beginning of international resource mobilization for the post-war preservation of the My Son Sanctuary in Vietnam. In 2002, the UNESCO World Heritage Fund provided significant financial support [2] and important technical expertise to prevent erosion and structural degradation of important architectural works, namely, several of the towers belonging to Group A [3]. In 2003, under the coordination of UNESCO, a tripartite cooperation project between UNESCO, Vietnam and Italy on the Conservation of My Son World Heritage Site was implemented [2]. From 2003 to 2013, the Italian government funded and implemented numerous in-depth restoration projects, particularly those addressing the complex technical issues of Champa brick building materials. Additionally, India, as a nation with a rich history in the conservation of ancient temple architecture [4], contributed to knowledge and expertise exchange, thereby strengthening the collective effort to preserve the unique historical and architectural value of the My Son Sanctuary.

Through the mobilization of international resources – with the key link being the coordination between the Vietnamese Government and UNESCO in preserving the My Son heritage – extremely important achievements have been made [3]. This work contributes to protecting the integrity of the structures while also drawing valuable lessons for the preservation of the Cham architectural system, ensuring the sustainable inheritance and development of the heritage [3]. The core values of the aforementioned cooperation programs (1) not only help save the architectural works at My Son from collapse, but also (2) represent a global sharing of responsibility for the cultural heritage of humanity, and (3) clearly demonstrate Vietnam's commitment to protecting and promoting the diversity and beauty of its unique cultural heritage [5], especially the My Son

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heritage, which reflects the "outstanding universal values" not only of Vietnam, but also of Southeast Asia and humanity.

2. Research methods

In the article, a qualitative method is used to clarify the issue: "Mobilizing International Resources for the Conservation of My Son Heritage in Vietnam". In addition, the thematic and discourse analyze the following points: (1) My Son temple complex recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage site, (2) Conservation state of My Son Sanctuary, (3) Harnessing international resources for the conservation of My Son heritage in Vietnam, and are based on primary sources archived by Vietnam, secondary sources archived on the UNESCO World Heritage Convention website, and works by domestic and international researchers on My Son Sanctuary. Using field research and interviews with My Son Sanctuary management staff and local residents, the authors collected important practical data to discuss the effectiveness of mobilizing international resources for the conservation of this international heritage site.

3. Results

3.1. My Son temple complex recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage site

The My Son Sanctuary is a famous historical and cultural heritage site in the Duy Xuyen region of Quang Nam province (formerly) and Da Nang city, Vietnam (currently). The sanctuary reflects outstanding universal values of Vietnam, Southeast Asia and humanity as a whole [6]. As the religious and political center of the Kingdom of Champa, My Son reflects over 10 centuries of human development in both political and spiritual terms, based on Hinduism and its regional influences [6-7]. Concrete evidence of this process can be seen in the architectural and sculptural relics of exceptional aesthetic beauty that have survived at the My Son Sanctuary in Vietnam [7], such as: E7, C1, C2, C3, B3, B4, B5.

The My Son temple complex was built over a period going from the late 4th century to the 13th century [8] to honor the Hindu deities: Krishna, Vishnu, and Shiva [9]. The My Son temple complex has a fairly diverse architectural and sculptural style [10] with 71 tower and temple structures, of which 25 are numbered alphabetically A, A', B, C, D, E, F, G, H, K and still exist today [5].

The My Son temple complex is divided into several groups, each following the same principle: each group consists of a main temple surrounded by smaller towers or auxiliary structures [11]. The main temple symbolizes Mount Meru – the center of the universe, the gathering place of the gods, and the worship site of Lord Shiva. The subsidiary temples are used to worship the gods who oversee the directions of the sky [12].

The temple towers in My Son typically have three main parts: (1) the base of the tower, representing the earthly world, (2) the body of the tower, representing the spiritual world, and (3) the roof of the tower, representing the divine [13]. The temples and towers were built with baked bricks and stone columns and decorated with sandstone bas-reliefs depicting scenes from Hindu mythology [9]. After the tower walls were built, artisans with specialized techniques carved exquisite flowers, figures, animals and other motifs, onto the surface of the tower's bricks [13]. The most impressive feature in

the construction of the temples and towers is the brickwork: the bricks, after being fired, were cut into blocks and then stacked tightly together [14]. Despite the passage of centuries, the My Son temple complex still stands [9].

With the unique historical, cultural, and architectural value mentioned above, My Son was honored to be recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage site [1] in December 1999. This recognition not only affirms Vietnam's precious heritage but also underscores My Son's position as one of the most important ancient holy lands in Southeast Asia, where every brick and every relic tells the story about a kingdom that has gradually faded into the past.

3.2. Conservation state of My Son Sanctuary

My Son Sanctuary stands as a profound testament to a vanished civilization, holding exceptional cultural and historical significance as a preeminent Hindu temple complex in Southeast Asia and the sole surviving vestige of this architectural lineage in Vietnam. For centuries, this sacred landscape evolved as a continuous labor and devotion, dedicated to the deities Krishna, Vishnu, and Shiva [9]. Today, however, the sanctuary faces a somber decline; these red-brick monuments, now haunting ruins with fractured walls and fallen crowns, call for urgent preservation to safeguard their fading splendor.

The My Son Sanctuary is located in a narrow valley with high average humidity and rainfall, which is favorable for the rapid and strong growth of forest trees; indeed, in time, as their roots developed, they have penetrated deep into the tower bodies, causing many temples to crack [15]. Additionally, the variability of nature – sun, rain, and floods – has caused soil erosion [16], leading to the deterioration [17], tilting, and subsidence of several temple towers in My Son, putting them at risk of collapse (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. View of the entire B3 tower tilting and settling more than 3 degrees toward the southwest, as captured in this photo by Dr. Dinh Van Trong.

Cradled by towering peaks and impenetrable jungles, the My Son valley once served as a rugged sanctuary for the Quang Nam liberation forces during the resistance against French and American powers. To strike at the revolutionary heart hidden within these ancient walls, French warships cruising the Thu Bon River in April 1947 unleashed a barrage of artillery, shattering the vestibule and main gate of Temple A10. The most devastating blow, however, came in August 1969: in a relentless effort to crush the resistance, American B-52s carpet-bombed the sanctuary's sacred core [10, 16]. This torrential bombardment leveled icons such as A1, A10, E4, and F3. Masterpieces of history and art were reduced to hollow ruins [18] or stripped of their crowns like B4, B6, and B7, while of the mighty B1, only a two-meter stone wall remains, a lonely witness to the devastation (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. The B tower area at My Son severely damaged by the Vietnam War (1954-1975). Photo by Tran Tuan Viet.

Human activities such as digging, searching for antiques, archeological excavations, or improper restoration and promotion of heritage values for tourism, have diminished the value and directly threatened the integrity of the My Son Sanctuary, risking the gradual loss of a priceless part of humanity's Champa heritage. A prime example is the case of the F1 tower, which was buried by earth and rocks after the carpet bombing raids in 1969. The tower suffered severe damage during the restoration process due to a lack of understanding and excessive haste. Specifically, the Vietnamese expert team at that time used motorized vehicles to excavate and remove the covering soil layer. As soon as the top layer of soil and rock was removed, the brickwork of the F1 tower body having lost its structural adhesion, peeled off and scattered. Faced with this situation, the research team had to urgently use a

system of props to support the tower's body and immediately halt the project. Currently, this monument is being temporarily protected by a corrugated iron roof and a system of steel rings around it to maintain stability (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. The F1 tower at My Son in Vietnam is at risk of collapse. Photo by Nguyen Quang Hieu.

3.3. Harnessing international resources for the conservation of My Son heritage in Vietnam

In 1981, the Vietnam-Poland Cultural Cooperation Program for the Restoration of My Son Temple Complex B, C, D was signed [19], under which the Champa Monument Restoration Subcommittee was established, headed by the architect Kazimierz Kwiatkowski (Kazik) [20].

To save My Son Sanctuary from collapse, from 1981 to 1991, Kazik and a group of experts began cleaning and restoring the temples and towers according to international scientific principles and standards, focusing on applying various methods [21] to preserve the original state as much as possible, maintain the relics in their current condition, and reposition brick and stone components that had shifted or collapsed to their original locations [22]. To ensure compatibility and authenticity during restoration, they embarked on in-depth material research to rediscover the ancient Cham material formulas and construction techniques. The results were, as Kazik reported, that they had successfully researched and manufactured restoration bricks and mortar binders [23] made from natural plant sources, equivalent to the original materials of the Cham towers. This timely outcome saved and restored over 30 structures at My Son from complete collapse, and My Son was recognized as a World Cultural Heritage site [21-22].

Next, to prevent the physical deterioration of the monuments and ensure the long-term integrity of the My Son temple complex, the World Heritage Fund of UNESCO raised a significant financial grant of 75,000 USD, in 2002, through its partner American

Express, to help clear the Khe, the stream at the section flowing between zones A and B, C, D [24]. This combined irrigation and archeological activity is a strategic measure against erosion, aimed at improving the area around the My Son Sanctuary [15], by controlling the flow of water, and stabilizing the geological foundation, thereby preventing the erosion and structural degradation of important architectural works in the Group A towers [3].

In 2003, under the coordination of UNESCO, a tripartite cooperation project between UNESCO, Vietnam, and Italy on the "Conservation of My Son World Heritage – Presentation and Training on the Application of International Standards in Restoration at Group G Towers – My Son Relic Site" was approved [2]. This project brought together archeologists and architects from the Leric Foundation and the Polytechnic University of Milan, Italy, and lasted until 2013, supported by more than 1.6 million USD in non-refundable aid [24].

The G tower group consists of 5 temple towers, with the main entrance facing west and the antechamber featuring 2 auxiliary doorways on either side. The doorways and false doors are framed by pointed arches, which are characteristic of the Binh Dinh style (12th-13th century). In the entrance archway, there is a terracotta carving of the goddess Lakshmi. Around the base of the G towers, terracotta Kala faces are arranged in square panels, creating a strong impression (Fig. 4). This makes the architecture of the G tower group stand out compared to the other tower groups [25].



Figure 4. The only intact Kala mask remaining at the base of Tower G1 in My Son. Photo by Trung Hieu.

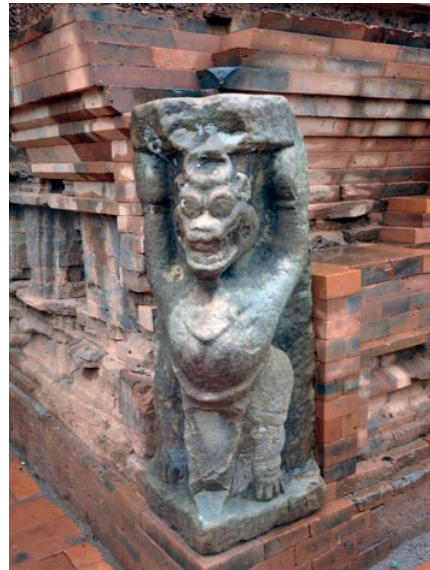


Figure 5. The lion statue at the base corner of Tower G1 in My Son remains intact. Photo: Tan Vinh.

The corners of the towers feature sandstone lion statues (Fig. 5), and the entire tower group is situated on a low hill between groups A and E, making it less susceptible to the negative impacts of the storms and floods that affect the area annually [5].

As part of the archaeological research at the G tower group, researchers with extensive experience in the conservation of ancient monuments in Italy excavated a large area of approximately 1800m², discovering 1200 artifacts through geophysical survey techniques in the G tower group area [3]. By applying the optical thermoluminescence method and sampling broken ceramic fragments and tiles, the study determined the age of the bricks [5] to be between the 12th and 13th centuries. Another achievement of the project is that through physicochemical analysis and the discovery of resin from the *Dipterocarpus alatus* Roxb. [5], researchers were able to decipher the construction techniques used to bind bricks in the building technique of Champa monuments. This discovery also helped to decode the mysteries of the construction techniques used in the ancient Cham tower and made it easier and more convenient for experts to restore the Champa monuments [23].

A highlight of the restoration work at My Son is the strict adherence to international standards [26]. Experts employed an "archaeological restoration" approach emphasizing the preservation of original elements, structural reinforcement, and reconstruction, only when sufficient scientific basis was available. They also successfully produced replica bricks highly similar (up to 90%) to the original ones, meeting the technical requirements for use in restoration work [5]. This achievement has made an important contribution to restoration efforts, particularly in the context of a severe shortage of original Champa bricks for restoring the temple-tower complexes at My Son in recent times.

Through the project, the C. M. Lerici Foundation and the Polytechnic University of Milan, also offered in-depth training and practical courses in archaeology, architecture, and monument conservation. In these courses, Italian experts focused on imparting advanced techniques, particularly in-situ preservation and the use of heritage risk management technologies [3]. They also established vocational training programs for restoration and directly participated in the supervision and provided guidance in the practical application of geometric surveying, archaeological excavation, and site mapping for a team of experts, as well as staff from the My Son Management Board, and local trainees. This comprehensive training led to the formation of a local workforce with high academic qualifications and skills to meet the requirements for the future preservation of the My Son Heritage in Vietnam [5].

Following the success of the trilateral cooperation project between Italy, Vietnam, and UNESCO, on October 28, 2014, the governments of India and Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Understanding on "Conservation and Restoration of the World Cultural Heritage at My Son" [27] with the aim of restoring the three temple towers K, H, and A [19]. To prepare for the conservation of the three temple towers, the Government of India assigned the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct a Pre-Feasibility Survey Report, which was subsequently approved by the Indian Government [4]. Following this, the Indian Government dispatched an ASI Technical Team to Vietnam to develop detailed cost estimates and documentation related to the restoration activities.

From 2017 to 2022 [28], the Government of India sent the group of experts to the site to carry out conservation and restoration work on the A, H and K temple complex using a carefully established methodology, specialized investigations, and restoration techniques [29]. The experts adhered to the principle of original preservation, prioritizing the reinforcement and reshaping of structures to make the monuments sustainable [3]. Experts conducted scientific excavations to determine the original morphology and foundations (such as at the A, H, and K tower groups), while also applying a selective relocation method, carefully rearranging the fallen brick components to restore the ar-

chitectural form [19]. Specifically, the restoration process focused on treating and protecting the original brick materials from weathering, using compatible restoration materials and mortar to ensure integrity and long-term durability, thereby restoring the historical appearance of the heritage complex. After completing the restoration of groups A, H, and K, to further deepen the traditional friendship and comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries, in 2024, the Government of India continued to support Vietnam in implementing the project to restore the new tower groups, with a focus on promoting cooperation in restoring tower group F [30].

4. Discussion

In our article, our research focused on:

- *First*, clarifying the goal of mobilizing international resources for the conservation of the My Son Sanctuary in Vietnam, in addition to highlighting the outstanding global value of the My Son Sanctuary that led UNESCO to recognize it as a World Cultural Heritage site, and summarizing its degradation. The article consistently emphasizes the importance and effectiveness of international cooperation in preserving the Sanctuary in the face of its current state of decline.
- *Second*, the core value of international cooperation between Vietnam and partners such as Poland, Italy, India, alongside the UNESCO World Heritage Fund, lies in their ability to mobilize diverse resources for the preservation of the My Son Sanctuary. We found that: (1) The World Heritage Fund was the initial financial resource, and partner countries also contributed specific and significant resources, (2) Poland provided resources in the form of expert and technical manpower with in-depth archaeological expertise to study the Champa brick structures, (3) Italy offered resources in the form of advanced technology transfer for material processing and conservation of sculpted reliefs on the heritage sites, (4) India provided resources in the form of direct restoration experience and specific funding for the restoration of large tower groups, based on architectural similarities with the temple towers. This combination has gone beyond mere capital, creating a comprehensive resource that includes finance, technology, knowledge, and high-quality human resources, helping Vietnam address complex conservation challenges whilst ensuring the sustainable and effective preservation of My Son.
- *Third*, common similarities in the conservation of My Son Sanctuary in Vietnam. (1) Conservation Projects: The Vietnam-Poland Cultural Cooperation Program for the Restoration of My Son Temple Complex B, C, D; Conservation of My Son World Heritage – Presentation and Training on the Application of International Standards in Restoration at Group G Towers – My Son Relic Site and Conservation and Restoration of the World Cultural Heritage at My Son strictly adheres to international scientific principles and standards, focusing on research, applying in-depth techniques, emphasizing the preservation of original elements, structural reinforcement, and maximizing the preservation of the monument's original state. (2) All projects have made efforts to conduct in-depth research on materials to find the ancient Champa formulas and construction techniques. They have successfully researched and manufactured replica bricks and mortar binders derived from natural plant sources that are equivalent to the original materials (achieving a high degree of similarity, up to

- 90%). They have also discovered traces of plant-based resin adhesive from the oil tree used to bind the bricks. (3) The restoration work focuses on reinforcing and reshaping the structures to ensure sustainability, while also repositioning brick and stone components that have shifted or collapsed back to their original locations.
- *Fourth*, Group B, where the most valuable architectural and sculptural works at My Son are concentrated and which served as the religious heart of the entire My Son Sanctuary, was the site where the Champa Royalty performed their most important rituals. Having endured the erosion of time and the devastating destruction of war, the temples and towers here have collapsed, tilted, and lost their original roofs. A concerning reality is that while many other tower clusters have experienced a strong revival thanks to support from international organizations (such as the G tower group with Italy or the A, H, K tower groups with India), the B tower group still faces significant challenges due to the lack of any large-scale international restoration project. Therefore, Tower B urgently needs multinational cooperation projects in the near future to access modern conservation technology and new scientific thinking. Investing in Group B towers is not merely about saving brick and stone structures, but also about protecting an irreplaceable piece of the world's cultural heritage. Let's take action so that these thousand-year-old towers have the opportunity to continue telling their story to future generations, because saving a Champa artistic masterpiece is an effort to preserve humanistic values before it's too late.

5. Conclusion

The history of the formation and development of the My Son temple complex spans more than a thousand years, as evidenced by the 71 temples we can still see today. Over time, natural disasters, and wars, and due to improper exploitation of the site for tourism, the number of intact temples and towers at My Son is no longer significant. Therefore, mobilizing international resources for the conservation of My Son Sanctuary is of great importance and necessity, helping the site to revive and shine more brightly in the future.

The cooperation between Vietnam and Poland, Italy, India, and UNESCO's World Heritage Fund in the preservation of My Son in recent decades has been of great significance. It has prevented the monuments from collapsing and shared the responsibility for preserving a priceless part of humanity's heritage.

Nevertheless, My Son Sanctuary, which is facing serious degradation due to time and climate conditions, requires urgent intervention. The World Heritage Fund serves as a mechanism for mobilizing and initiating emergency projects. Partner countries have brought specialized solutions: (1) Through the Cultural Cooperation Agreement in 1981, Poland established the foundation for mobilizing international resources for conservation work at the My Son Heritage Site in Vietnam. Under the visionary guidance of the architect, Kazik, Polish experts applied rigorous conservation principles that placed the 'status quo' of the ruins above all else. To ensure that every new touch echoed the ancient past, they embarked on exhaustive experimental research into materials, successfully recreating specialized bricks and traditional adhesives. (2) From 2003 to 2013, the tripartite cooperation between UNESCO, Vietnam, and Italy standardized the conservation of the reserve through a generous grant of over 1.6 million USD. Focusing on in-depth restoration for Group G, the Leric Foundation and the Polytechnic

University of Milan spearheaded the “archaeological restoration” approach – a philosophy of minimal intervention. This era witnessed two groundbreaking technical breakthroughs: the identification of the resin of *Dipterocarpus alatus* Roxb. as the secret of ancient adhesives and the production of imitation bricks with an astonishing similarity of up to 90% to the original. Beyond the physical stones, Italy gifted Vietnam a future, transferring risk management technologies and training a generation of local experts to become permanent guardians of this heritage. (3) Following the 2014 Memorandum, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) undertook the direct restoration of Groups K, H, and A. Employing a rigorous scientific methodology ranging from the precise excavation of original foundations to the delicate repositioning of dislodged masonry they treated every original stone with anti-weathering seals to restore a sense of enduring history. The success of the 2017 – 2022 phase transcended mere architecture; it forged a deeper bond between two nations, culminating in a fresh commitment to restore Group F in 2024.

Through these layers of international cooperation, one fundamental truth has been illuminated: the preservation of world cultural heritage in general. My Son in particular, is not only Vietnam's task, but also a shared responsibility of the international community. Together, we must mobilize resources from knowledge to technology, and even human and financial resources, to preserve an architectural masterpiece against the ravages of time, nature, and human activity.

Acknowledgments

This research is part of a university-level research project funded by the University of Economics -The University of Danang, under the grant number T2025-04-54.

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Summary

My Son Sanctuary is an ancient Champa temple and architectural tower complex designated by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage site. However, it is gradually deteriorating due to the effects of time, the environment, and human activity. To clarify the issue of "Mobilising International Resources for the Conservation of My Son Sanctuary

in Vietnam”, using collected materials, the authors employ qualitative research methods to clarify the conservation efforts for My Son Sanctuary through projects involving cooperation between the Vietnamese Government and the governments of Poland, Italy, India, and the World Heritage Fund under UNESCO. This is an important study initiative for both domestic and international researchers interested in the preservation of My Son in Vietnam, as part of the legacy of humanity’s shared heritage.

Riassunto

Il Santuario di My Son è un complesso architettonico di epoca antica, costituito da templi e torri, risalente al regno di Champa. L'UNESCO ha dichiarato il sito Patrimonio Culturale dell'Umanità. Tuttavia, è evidente un progressivo degrado, attribuibile agli effetti del tempo, dell'ambiente e dell'attività antropica. Al fine di fornire chiarimenti in merito alla "Mobilizzazione delle risorse internazionali per la conservazione del Santuario di My Son in Vietnam", gli autori impiegano i materiali raccolti e metodi di ricerca qualitativa per illustrare gli sforzi di conservazione del Santuario di My Son attraverso progetti che prevedono la cooperazione tra il governo vietnamita e i governi di Polonia, Italia, India e il Fondo del Patrimonio Mondiale dell'UNESCO. L'iniziativa rappresenta un rilevante contributo allo studio e alla ricerca per gli scienziati, sia nazionali che internazionali, impegnati nella conservazione di My Son in Vietnam, quale parte integrante del patrimonio culturale mondiale.