

Asia-Pacific Dialogue On Heritage and Authenticity

CONCEPT NOTE AND INDICATIVE PROGRAMME

Rethinking Heritage Authenticity:
An Asia-Pacific Dialogue for the Future of World Heritage

HA NOI – NINH BINH, VIET NAM
27 September – 1 October 2026

Dates	27 September – 1 October 2026
Venue	Ha Noi and Ninh Binh, Viet Nam
Convened by	Government of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam
In partnership with	UNESCO World Heritage Centre
Format	Two and a half conference days, complemented by arrival and registration arrangements, official and protocol events, and a technically structured field visit
Participants	Approximately 250, including international and regional experts, representatives of States Parties, the World Heritage Centre, UNESCO field offices, the Advisory Bodies, site managers, researchers, community representatives, knowledge holders and youth
Reference framework	World Heritage Convention and its Operational Guidelines; Nara Document on Authenticity (1994); Nairobi Outcome Document on Heritage and Authenticity (2025); Hoi An Protocols; relevant World Heritage Committee decisions

1. Background

At its **46th session**, the World Heritage Committee initiated renewed reflection on the concept of authenticity, acknowledging emerging challenges in the interpretation and conservation of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) across diverse cultural and geographical contexts. This reflection was further advanced through the establishment of an **Open-Ended Working Group** tasked with examining evolving understandings of authenticity and their implications for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention.

At its **47th session (2025)**, through **Decision 47 COM 5C**, the World Heritage Committee adopted the *Nairobi Outcome Document on Heritage and Authenticity* and requested that an agenda item on authenticity be placed before the General Assembly, recognizing the need for continued global dialogue on this foundational concept.

Within this evolving framework, **Viet Nam** presents a particularly relevant context for advancing global reflection on authenticity. As a State Party with a diverse range of cultural and natural World Heritage properties and long-standing engagement in conservation practice, Viet Nam offers an important **Asian perspective** on the relationship between continuity, living heritage, landscapes and contemporary development pressures.

Building on this foundation, the *International Conference on Cultural Heritage in Africa: A Dialogue on the Concept of Authenticity*, held in Nairobi, Kenya, from **6 to 9 May 2025**, constituted a major milestone. The conference brought together over 400 participants from all UNESCO regions and resulted in the *Nairobi Outcome Document*, which reaffirmed authenticity as pluralistic, dynamic and context-specific, and called for further reflection on its application within the World Heritage system.

In response to the Committee's request, and building on these developments, the Government of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, in partnership with UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, proposed to host the **Asia-Pacific Dialogue on Heritage and Authenticity** in Ha Noi and Ninh Binh in September 2026.

2. Purpose and Planning Assumptions

More than thirty years have passed since the adoption of the *Nara Document on Authenticity* in 1994. During this period, the World Heritage system has undergone substantial changes. Heritage is increasingly understood not only through the conservation of physical fabric, but also through continuing use, cultural practice, community custodianship, local knowledge, spiritual association, social memory and relationships between people and nature. At the same time, historical experiences, climate change, armed conflict, disasters, displacement, rapid urbanization, mass tourism, digital technologies and demands for greater community participation have created new conditions in which authenticity must be identified, evaluated and safeguarded.

Although the *Nara Document* established the fundamental principle that judgements of authenticity should be grounded in their respective cultural contexts, this principle has not yet been fully and consistently translated into World Heritage processes and practices. The 2025 *Nairobi Outcome Document on Heritage and Authenticity* provides renewed momentum to address this implementation gap by advancing a more pluralistic and community-centered understanding of authenticity — one that recognizes tangible and intangible attributes, continuity and change, and diverse cultural and knowledge systems.

Nevertheless, material evidence, original fabric and expert-led assessment often continue to carry greater institutional weight than living practices, periodically renewed structures, oral traditions, spiritual relationships and community-based systems of knowledge transmission. This imbalance can influence which forms of heritage are identified and documented, incorporated into national inventories and Tentative Lists, and ultimately considered for recognition under the World Heritage Convention.

The Asia-Pacific Dialogue on Heritage and Authenticity will therefore provide a structured regional platform to critically examine whether existing approaches to heritage authenticity remain adequate for the conditions in which heritage exists today. It will not seek to replace the *Nara Document* or the *Nairobi Outcome Document*, or to establish a separate regional standard. Rather, it will build upon these documents and subsequent developments in heritage theory and practice from the Asian perspective, to identify how authenticity can be interpreted and applied more consistently, inclusively and credibly within the universal framework of the World Heritage Convention.

The initiative is a direct response to the current international reflection initiated by the 2025 *Nairobi Outcome Document on Heritage and Authenticity*. The World Heritage Committee, through **Decisions 47 COM 5C** and **47 COM 11** in 2025 and **Decision 48 COM 6C** in 2026, encouraged similar expert dialogues in other regions and called for stronger evidence, practical tools and consolidated recommendations that could inform future World Heritage methodology and possible revisions of the *Operational Guidelines*. The Asia-Pacific Dialogue is designed not as another general discussion on authenticity, but as a regional contribution to this emerging global process.

Its central purpose is to examine Asia-Pacific cases systematically, including the practical case of the Thang Long Citadel in Ha Noi, Viet Nam, and to translate the findings into practical recommendations for heritage identification, Tentative Lists, Preliminary Assessments, nomination dossiers, evaluation, conservation, management, reconstruction and promotion, monitoring, training, and relevant national legal and policy frameworks. In doing so, the Dialogue will clarify how a broader but evidence-based understanding of authenticity can contribute to a more representative, balanced and credible World Heritage List, without weakening the requirements of Outstanding Universal Value, integrity, protection and effective management.

Planning assumptions

This plan sets out the minimum governance structure, intellectual workstreams, operational responsibilities and accelerated delivery schedule required to organize a two-and-a-half-day Asia-Pacific expert conference on heritage authenticity in the World Heritage system. The conference will be organized according to the following outlines:

- **Scale.** Approximately 300 participants, including international and regional experts, representatives of States Parties, the World Heritage Centre, UNESCO field offices, the Advisory Bodies, site managers, researchers, community representatives, knowledge holders, youth, social organizations and operational support staff.
- **Duration.** Two and a half conference days, supplemented by arrival and registration arrangements, official and protocol events, and technically structured field visits.
- **Delivery window.** Five weeks from formal approval to the opening of the conference. Given this compressed timeframe, the conference should build upon existing research, identified case studies and established institutional networks, rather than attempt to commission an entirely new body of research during the preparatory period.
- **Format.** A combination of policy plenaries, comparative case-study sessions, technical roundtables, facilitated working groups and field-based analysis. Each component should contribute directly to a defined set of technical and policy outputs.
- **Reference framework.** The conference will be grounded in the World Heritage Convention and its *Operational Guidelines*, the *Nara Document on Authenticity*, the *Nairobi Outcome Document on Heritage and Authenticity*, relevant World Heritage Committee decisions, the *Hoi An Protocols* as a regional technical reference, and recent international developments concerning community-centered custodianship and tangible and intangible attributes.
- **Methodological approach.** Selected case studies should be examined through a common analytical framework covering heritage values, tangible and intangible attributes, sources of evidence, continuity and change,

community and knowledge-holder perspectives, contested interpretations, authenticity, integrity, Outstanding Universal Value and management implications.

- **Expected contribution.** The principal result should be an evidence-based Asia-Pacific contribution to the international reflection on authenticity. Outputs should include practical recommendations, comparative case-study synthesis, methodological tools and clearly formulated proposals for consideration in future World Heritage policy and practice.

3. Conference Objectives

The conference will:

- Share Asia-Pacific experience on the meaning and assessment of authenticity across diverse cultural, natural and mixed World Heritage contexts.
- Identify practical challenges in applying authenticity concepts to conservation, reconstruction, living heritage, cultural landscapes, urban heritage and disaster recovery.
- Build consensus on recommendations for site managers, States Parties, Advisory Bodies and heritage professionals, drawing on the emphasis of the *Nairobi Outcome Document* on community-centered, community-driven custodianship and on the integration of tangible and intangible attributes.
- Strengthen regional professional networks and cooperation among World Heritage institutions, universities, communities, knowledge holders, youth, non-governmental organizations and technical agencies.
- Produce clear recommendations for applying authenticity in heritage identification, national inventories, Tentative Lists, nominations, evaluation, management, monitoring, training, and relevant legal and policy frameworks.
- Deliver an evidence-based Asia-Pacific contribution to the international reflection requested by the World Heritage Committee, supporting future methodological development and a more representative, balanced and credible World Heritage List.

Expected outputs

- A concise set of Asia-Pacific technical recommendations on heritage authenticity;
- a comparative synthesis of selected subregional case studies;
- a follow-up action plan identifying responsible institutions, required actions and deadlines for transmitting and applying the conference results.

4. Proposed Themes for Conference Discussion

Theme 1 · Authenticity in a Changing World

Examine how changes since the 1994 *Nara Document* — including climate change, disasters, armed conflict, displacement, urbanization, tourism, digital technology and evolving heritage practices — affect the ways in which authenticity is understood, assessed and safeguarded. The session will identify where current World Heritage approaches remain adequate and where further methodological guidance is required.

Theme 2 · Reconstruction, Recovery and Continuity

Assess how reconstruction, periodic renewal, repair and adaptation can sustain or undermine heritage values following conflict, disaster, environmental change or development pressure. Attention will be given to documentary and oral evidence, traditional knowledge and skills, community consent, continuity of function, and the limits of acceptable reconstruction. The session will propose principles for distinguishing culturally meaningful renewal from conjectural or value-eroding reconstruction.

Theme 3 · Living, Spiritual and Associative Heritage

Examine how authenticity is conveyed through ritual, belief, memory, language, use, traditional knowledge, social relationships and connections between people, place and nature, particularly where heritage significance is not primarily expressed through physical fabric. The session will develop practical approaches for identifying and documenting tangible and intangible attributes without freezing living heritage or separating practices from the places and communities that sustain them.

Theme 4 · Communities, Knowledge Holders and Contested Values

Examine how local communities, practitioners, elders, women, youth and other knowledge holders participate in defining, transmitting and safeguarding heritage values. The discussion will also address differences between and between communities, competing claims, displacement, restricted or sacred knowledge, consent, and the relationship between community knowledge and scientific evidence. The session will recommend principles for meaningful participation and credible evidence in authenticity assessments.

Theme 5 · From Regional Experience to World Heritage Practice

Test how the conference findings can be applied to heritage identification, national inventories, Tentative Lists, Preliminary Assessments, nomination dossiers, evaluation, management, monitoring, training, and national legal and policy frameworks. Selected Asia-Pacific cases will be used to develop an operational authenticity-assessment framework and recommendations contributing to a more representative, balanced and credible World Heritage List. The session will clearly distinguish authenticity from — while explaining its relationship with — Outstanding Universal Value, integrity, protection and management requirements.

5. Relevant Points from the 2025 Nairobi Outcome Document

The 2025 *Nairobi Outcome Document on Heritage and Authenticity* is directly relevant to the proposed Asia-Pacific Dialogue because it calls for a broader, more inclusive understanding of authenticity within the World Heritage Convention. Although developed through an African dialogue, its principles are useful for other regions with living heritage systems, community custodianship, spiritual associations, traditional knowledge, evolving cultural practices and complex relationships between tangible and intangible attributes.

- **Plural understanding of authenticity.** Authenticity should not be treated as a fixed or purely material test; it should be understood in relation to cultural context, knowledge systems, continuity, use, memory and meaning.
- **Community-centered custodianship.** Local communities, knowledge holders and bearers should be actively involved in defining, explaining and safeguarding the values that make a place authentic.
- **Tangible and intangible attributes.** Conservation practice should address physical fabric alongside practices, beliefs, oral traditions, skills, rituals, language, social values and associations.

- **Application across World Heritage processes.** The *Nairobi Outcome Document* points to the relevance of authenticity in nomination dossiers, evaluation, management, monitoring, training, and legal or policy frameworks.
- **Regional expert dialogue.** The World Heritage Committee has encouraged similar expert dialogues in other regions, making an Asia-Pacific conference timely and strategically aligned.
- **Operational follow-up.** The conference should therefore aim not only to discuss authenticity, but to produce practical recommendations, outcomes and training priorities, case-study guidance and inputs that could inform future regional and global reflection.

6. Indicative Programme

The programme below is indicative and remains subject to confirmation by the Government of Viet Nam and UNESCO.

Day 0 · Sunday, 27 September 2026 · Arrival of delegates

Time	Session
All day	Arrival and registration of delegates
Afternoon	Optional city tours

Day 1 · Monday, 28 September 2026 · Authenticity in a Changing World

Expected result: Agreement on the principal conceptual and institutional questions that the conference must address.

Time	Session
09:00 – 10:00	Official opening: Government of Viet Nam, UNESCO and institutional partners
10:00 – 10:30	Keynote address: Thirty years after Nara — why must the application of authenticity be reconsidered?
10:30 – 11:00	<i>Coffee break</i>
11:00 – 12:30	Framing plenary: From Nara to Nairobi — developments in heritage studies and the World Heritage system
12:30 – 13:30	<i>Lunch</i>
13:30 – 15:00	Session 1: Authenticity under climate change, conflict, disaster, displacement, urbanization and tourism
15:00 – 15:30	<i>Coffee break</i>
15:30 – 17:00	Session 2: Authenticity, integrity and Outstanding Universal Value — clarifying the relationships and evidentiary requirements
17:00 – 17:30	Day 1 synthesis: Issues requiring testing through Asia-Pacific cases
18:00 – 20:00	Welcome dinner hosted by the Chairman of the Ha Noi People's Committee

Day 2 · Tuesday, 29 September 2026 · Testing Authenticity through Asia-Pacific Cases

Expected result: Evidence-based findings on how authenticity can be assessed across different heritage contexts.

Time	Session
09:00 – 12:30	Optional visit tour at Thang Long Citadel World Heritage site
12:30 – 13:30	<i>Lunch</i>
13:30 – 15:00	Parallel case laboratories Case Laboratory 1: Reconstruction, periodic renewal, repair and continuity Case Laboratory 2: Living, spiritual and associative heritage
15:00 – 15:30	<i>Coffee break</i>
15:30 – 16:45	Parallel case laboratories Case Laboratory 3: Communities, knowledge holders and contested values Case Laboratory 4: Tangible and intangible attributes, evidence and acceptable change
16:45 – 17:30	Comparative synthesis: What do the cases confirm, challenge or add to existing World Heritage practice?

Method. Each laboratory will compare selected cases using the common authenticity-assessment framework. Presentations are to be short and followed by facilitated analysis rather than conventional panel discussion.

Day 3 · Wednesday, 30 September 2026 · From Evidence to World Heritage Practice

Expected result: Agreed technical recommendations, practical tools and a defined follow-up process.

Time	Session
09:00 – 10:15	Parallel working groups Working Group 1: Heritage identification, national inventories and Tentative Lists Working Group 2: Preliminary Assessments, nominations and evaluation Working Group 3: Management, monitoring, impact assessment and training
10:15 – 10:30	<i>Coffee break</i>
10:30 – 12:30	Working-group reports: Proposed methodological and policy recommendations Institutional roundtable: Responsibilities of States Parties, UNESCO, the Advisory Bodies, Category 2 Centers, universities and community partners Technical plenary: Review of the authenticity-assessment framework and Asia-Pacific recommendations Final plenary: Agreement on recommendations, follow-up actions, responsible institutions and deadlines Closing session: Presentation of the principal conclusions and next steps
12:30 – 13:30	<i>Lunch</i>
From 13:30	Transfer to Ninh Binh for the technical field visit

7. Technical Field Visit

The field visit should be organized immediately after the two-and-a-half-day conference, rather than replacing substantive conference sessions. It should function as a technical exercise, not a general guided tour.

For instance, at the Thang Long Citadel, participants should test the authenticity-assessment framework against:

- the property's Statement of Outstanding Universal Value;
- archaeological evidence and reconstructed or renewed elements;
- continuity of function, meaning and use;
- tangible and intangible attributes;
- community and institutional perspectives;
- management, interpretation and monitoring challenges.