

# Tourism, urbanisation and globalisation in Vietnam



Vietnamese cities are key in the regional positioning of their country's tourism sector. The authorities have encouraged this role, aiming for a stronger urban hierarchy. From the local to the international level, tourism participates in the material and symbolic production of Vietnamese cities. It is a significant factor in urban growth and architectural changes, but tourism also fosters global integration.

Emmanuelle Peyvel & Võ Sáng Xuân Lan

IN 2014, THERE WAS A RECORD NUMBER of 38.5 million domestic tourists and 7.87 million international visitors in Vietnam, generating 7.3 billion euros.<sup>1</sup> According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTTC), that amount represented 9.3% of the GDP and 7.7% of total employment in that same year (including jobs indirectly supported by the industry).<sup>2</sup> This mobility is fast growing: in 20 years, domestic tourism has multiplied by a factor of 11 and international tourism by 8. While the growth of international tourism in Vietnam is impressive, we should keep in mind that it only represents a third of the visitors to Thailand and a seventh of those in China. Nevertheless, this country is an ever-more popular destination in Pacific Asia, which remains one of the most dynamic touristic regions in the world: this region received less than one hundredth of the international tourism flow in 1950, it now receives almost a fifth. By 2030, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) forecasts an average annual growth rate of 3.3% worldwide, 4.9% in Asia-Pacific. Therefore, Asia is today a center of gravity in the global tourism system, in which Vietnam fully belongs. Tourist nationalities reflect both regional and international links with the past: the Chinese, Korean and Japanese respectively occupy the top three places, the USA comes in 4th, Russia 6th and France 11th.

The growth of tourism is a consequence of the urban transformations in the country since *Đổi Mới*. Indeed, tourism and cities entertain a privileged relationship: cities are both gateways for international tourism and transit points structuring the tourist map of the country, but they are also destinations in their own right. For all these reasons, tourism is an essential actor in Vietnamese urbanisation, both materially and symbolically. It is a factor of urban growth and architectural transformations, but also fosters global integration with its associated flows of people, capital, practices and imaginary.

Tourism also contributes to urban lifestyles. It shows us the types of city-dwellers that the Vietnamese are becoming, the expression of their individuality, their aspirations and the meaning they assign to wealth. Tourism is a good way to understand how the Vietnamese society builds its relationship with time, both past and future. The Vietnamese city is increasingly valued for its emblematic places of both modernity – embodied by buildings and shopping malls –

Above: Tourism as a vector of globalisation: a Hmong woman in front of a pub at the Sapa Hill Station in 2007 (photo by Emmanuelle Peyvel)

and historical depth – with active heritage policies, and now 8 properties inscribed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage that contribute to an international recognition of the country.

We will study these transformations from a geographical perspective to better understand how tourism is actively involved in contemporary spatial changes in Vietnamese cities. This work was conducted by delving into French colonial archives, planning documents and official statistical sources, with participative observations made during long term fieldwork in Vietnam. At the national scale, we demonstrate that tourism is a factor of urban growth and ex nihilo constructions. At the regional scale, we highlight the role of cities in the structuring of major tourist regions. At the local scale, we analyse the role of tourism in the globalisation of Vietnamese cities.

#### Tourism as an urban and colonial creation

The history of tourism in Vietnam reveals the complexities of globalisation. Recreational mobilities, such as hydrotherapy and pilgrimage, are not new: travelers' tales echo Chinese aesthetics of landscape and body. However, the modern understanding of tourism appeared with French colonisation and the construction of the first infrastructures dedicated to tourism:<sup>3</sup> 7 seaside resorts (*Hòn Gay, Đồ Sơn, Sầm Sơn, Cửa Lò, Cửa Tùng, Nha Trang* and *Cap St Jacques*, renamed *Vũng Tàu*), and 5 hill stations (*Đà Lạt, Bà Nà, Tam Đảo, Mau Sơn* and *Sa Pa*). Those places were chosen for aesthetic and landscape considerations. However, the proximity to big cities, where settlers were concentrated, is essential in understanding the location of those stations and resorts. Indeed, those places were created for the rest and recreation of city dwellers.<sup>4</sup> In the North, Hanoi commanded three hill stations (*Sa Pa, Tam Đảo* and the small station of *Mẫu Sơn*) and four seaside resorts, that were directly dependent on medium-sized towns: *Cửa Lò* in connection with *Vinh*, *Đồ Sơn* and *Hòn Gay* with *Hải Phòng* and *Sầm Sơn* with *Thanh Hóa*. In the South, Sài Gòn's dwellers could enjoy the seaside resort of *Cap Saint Jacques* and the hill stations of *Đà Lạt*. They also gradually invested in seaside resorts such as *Phan Thiết* and *Nha Trang*. In the Centre, the settlers of *Tourane* (today *Đà Nẵng*), and to a lesser extent of *Huế* and *Faifo* (*Hội An* today), could visit the hill station of *Bà Nà* and the seaside resort of *Cửa Tùng*.

In the colonial context, these stations were outstanding, not only for the physical landscape, but also in the way they were conceived. Recreational landscape transgressed both the spiritual function traditionally given to the mountains by the Kinh people, and the livelihood function assigned to the sea by the fishing culture. Both the mountain and the sea were feared. That explains the extent to which hotels, sport fields, hiking trails, panoramas and belvederes that were built in the mountains, or seafronts and beaches developed along the shoreline, constituted profound spatial innovations. At that time, the practices and representations associated with these infrastructures were totally new to the Kinh people. Tourism was therefore not only a populating activity, it also participated in the circulation of urban practices into rural places such as *Đà Lạt*, on the mountainous plateau of *Lang Bian*, where phones, running water, electricity and even cinemas suddenly made their appearance with the first tourists.<sup>5</sup>

Tourism-driven urbanism has been sustained despite decolonisation, war and the *Bao Cấp* period; none of the recreational destinations have disappeared. Today, all of them still live off tourism, and three have even experienced demographic growth and economic diversification, giving them a complete city status. *Vũng Tàu* and *Nha Trang* now exceed 400,000 inhabitants; their economy is being diversified with oil and fishing, and even academics in *Nha Trang*. *Đà Lạt* has over 214,000 inhabitants living mainly from tourism, horticulture and academics today. Tourist conurbations have been built, particularly between *Phan Thiết* and *Mũi Né*, and between *Đà Nẵng* and *Hội An*. Mainly fuelled by big resorts, this phenomenon has led to the privatisation of the coastline, which can lead to conflicts with the local people who see their access to the sea increasingly restricted.

#### Urban hierarchy and the regional structuration of tourism

Today, cities are key in the structuring of tourism in the country. This function was encouraged by the Vietnamese authorities in their first development plan, for the period 1995-2000. This plan initially identified four tourism regions: North, Central, South Central and South of the country, each structured by a regional capital and a well identified urban network. The Northern region, stretching from *Hà Giang* to *Hà Tĩnh*, was arranged around Hanoi and secondarily by *Hạ Long Bay*, and by the seaside resorts *Sầm Sơn* and *Đồ Sơn*. Hanoi also gives shape to tourism by means of tours to 'ethnic minorities' in the Northern mountains, mainly through the town of *Lào Cai*. The Central region, stretching from *Quảng Bình* to *Quảng Ngãi*, was arranged around *Huế* and *Đà Nẵng*, and differentiates itself through visits to historical sites related to the former imperial capital *Huế*, to war heritage (with the DMZ) and to the Cham civilisation (with *Mỹ Sơn*). *Hội An* has continued to gain traction in this region, particularly since its UNESCO classification in 1999. More recently, the third and fourth regions were merged. Initially formed by the South of the Centre and the South, this entity now extends from *Kon Tum* to *Minh Hải*, and has been arranged primarily around HCMC, but secondarily also *Nha Trang* and *Đà Lạt*.

Even today, land use and development plans still confirm the central role of Hanoi in the North, the urban trio of Huế, Đà Nẵng and Hội An in the Centre, and HCMC in the South. Acting as the capitals of their regions, they can be a driving force for their territory. The inner suburbs of Hanoi benefit from increasing tourism, especially in some craft villages and remarkable pagodas.<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon is also striking in the Mekong Delta, where ecotourism is now well developed in Bến Tre, Cần Thơ, Sa Đéc, Vĩnh Long and Mỹ Tho. Tourism is in constant progression in the region of Long Xuyên and Châu Đốc with the normalisation of the Cambodian border. The State officially recognises a number of national tourism regions (*Khu du lịch quốc gia*; KDLQG); these are regions whose infrastructures have welcomed at least 1 million tourists per year, in an area larger than 1000 hectares. Today, there are 21 KDLQG (an estimated 39 by 2030), mostly located near big and medium-sized cities, because they have a recreational function for city-dwellers. The State recognition of these areas confirms the urban predominance.

Tourism contributes to the strengthening of the Vietnamese urban hierarchy: its flows, infrastructures and revenues are more concentrated in the East than in the West of the country, that is to say the most urbanised part of the country. While the provinces of Hanoi, Quảng Ninh and Hải Phòng alone account for over 15% of the country's hotel rooms, those of Bà Rịa, Vũng Tàu and HCMC have over 18%. However, the Centre region is more fragmented, resulting from the dual influences of both Hanoi and HCMC. Hanoi and HCMC together account for over 80% of the five-star hotels in the country. It is also in these two metropolitan centers that the leading structures of tourism are concentrated: between 2000 and 2009, Hanoi and HCMC together accounted for 67% of the country's total tourism turnover (see the map).

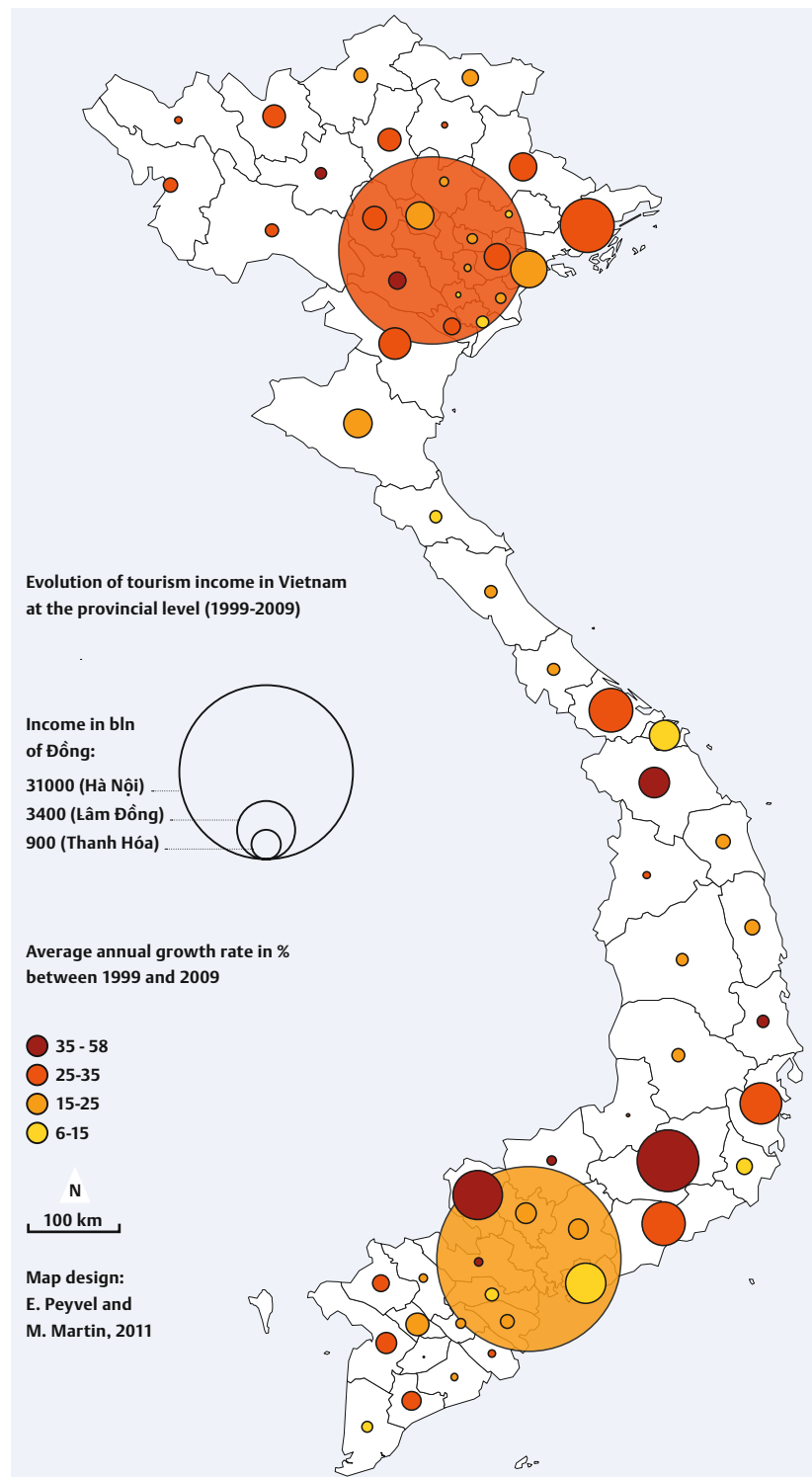
#### Tourism, a means of globalisation for Vietnamese cities

For Vietnamese cities, tourism is also a powerful means of integration into the global economy, since they are the main target of foreign direct investment. Global companies are established in the country, such as Accor, the world leader in hotel management, which has been authorised in the country since 1991. Less than 25 years later, it manages 16 hotels, representing more than 4000 rooms. However, this global capitalism follows a specific Vietnamese format, due to socialism.<sup>7</sup> The State remains a strategic player in the tourism sphere. Rather than pulling out of business abruptly for the sole benefit of the private sector, it has restructured its practices. It still oversees the development of tourism through laws, development plans and investments, especially in transport and training. The current investment plan, running until 2030 and amounting to 94.2 billion dollars, aims to deliver infrastructure upgrades, train the personnel according to international standards, and to align tourism with the discourse of sustainable development. Public actors are therefore essential, from the central to the local. *Saigontourist*, a company built in 1975 and revamped in 1999 under the control of the popular committee of the city, is a good example of the new modes of action of the State. With a total capital of over 152 million dollars, it acts as the owner, manager or investor in catering, accommodation, transport, sport and culture. In 2015, *Saigontourist* owned 54 hotels (including some luxury hotels of HCMC), 8 travel service companies, 13 resorts and 28 restaurants, making it the biggest tourism company in Vietnam.

The different transport modes used by tourists also confirms the urban predominance: cities are both hubs for national tourism and destination themselves. According to the results of the tourist expenditure survey (2013), if cars and minibuses are the most popular mode of transport, fostering a real spread of tourism across the country, airplanes are specific to large cities, with the exception of areas that have benefited from a strong-willed transport policy, such as *Điện Biên Phủ*, *Đà Lạt* et *Ban Mê Thuột*. In this perspective, it is interesting to note that tourism could legitimise the opening up of certain areas, such as the island of *Phú Quốc* and the *Côn Đảo* archipelago in the South of the country. As international and national hubs, big Vietnamese cities present the most varied modes of transport for tourists. While the train is slowly declining due to its slow speed and comparative cost, it is still present wherever airport connections are not yet effective (as in the axis Hanoi/Lào Cai). It also constitutes a popular mode of transport to domestic seaside resorts, as in the province of *Nghệ An*. Vietnamese cities act as tourist hubs, with one notable exception: they are not cruise cities, despite Vietnam being a coastal country. As a means of transport, the boat is still ignored, and the cruising market is almost inexistent, despite significant potential. The authorities are keen to develop the sector, especially in HCMC; by 2030, it aims to become a Southeast Asia tourist center by hosting cruise ships.

#### Producing the Vietnamese cities through and by tourism

At the local scale, tourism affects the architectural changes of Vietnamese cities. The seaside resorts built for this sole activity are organised according to the waterfront. Since the sea has



become a landscape, resorts stretch along the coastline. Now, this landscape determines the land value: the further away from the seaside, the less the land costs, and the less the city is dense. Socialism has profoundly changed urbanisation in these seaside resorts and the access to land. The Northern seaside resort of Cửa Lò, that depends mostly on domestic tourism, is a good example of this land functioning: the largest and most central locations are owned by the State, which built accommodations parallel to the sea. As a consequence, the most recent private accommodations are forced either to fit into the existing urban discontinuities, within the tubular forms perpendicular to the sea, or they are relegated to the edges of the resorts, where the land necessary for the most ambitious projects, such as golf courses, is located. In the bigger seaside resorts, like *Vũng Tàu*, *Nha Trang* and *Hạ Long City*, where international tourism increases the land pressure, the State can sell its well-located properties at high prices.

In the cities that tourism has not created, but where it was introduced, architectural and functional transformations also take place. Neighborhoods can revolve around tourism, especially in HCMC, with the backpacker area of *Phạm Ngũ Lão*, in Hanoi (36 Streets area) or in *Nha Trang* (between *Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai* and *Tuệ Tĩnh* streets, along the seafront promenade *Trần Phú*). The architecture and the functioning of these neighborhoods result from a hybridisation typical of globalisation, between local characteristics and globalised consumption patterns of leisure. Indeed, it is quite common in Vietnam for a district to specialise in an economic activity. In such areas, tourism is inserted into the existing grid of roads, made up of major arteries connected to a dense network of alleyways that are well-suited to tubular houses, and adapted to the land pressure, which tourism also favors.

The urban landscape is also specific because of billboards, neon signs, advertisement – often in foreign languages, mainly English, but also Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian and French. They create a cosmopolitan atmosphere, especially recognisable at night. Dedicated to pleasure, these neighborhoods have an exceptional concentration of bars, restaurants, travel agencies, nightclubs, spas and nail salons. Recognised as particularly cosmopolitan and permissive, they can be frequented by young and wealthy Vietnamese mingling with

travelers. They participate in the development of an urban rest and recreation culture (having a drink with friends, dancing, partying, etc.) that modifies the bodily and behavioral norms, visible in the outfits, alcohol and drugs consumption, and the presence of prostitutes, although formally condemned as social vices by the socialist regime. The entwinement of tourist and leisure practices also characterises the gamification of city centers, where festivals and exhibitions are more and more numerous. Closely associated with the event policy of major cities, tourism has become a matter of economic development and cultural influence for the authorities, as the example of the Huế festival shows us. As a result, many facilities have been redeveloped, especially on the waterfront (like in *Vũng Tàu* or in HCMC, with the *Nhiều Lộc* canal) and major urban parks, like the Lenin Park in Hanoi or the *Binh Quới* Park in HCMC.

#### Staging Vietnamese cities: tourism and the construction of national identity, modernity and authenticity

Finally, tourism contributes to the symbolic staging of the city. This function is primarily political, imposed by the socialist regime: regional and national capitals are privileged places for national building. It is there that one finds most of the museums, in particular those that specialise in history, war and national heroes. The most frequented museums are the *Hồ Chí Minh* Mausoleum and the museum of ethnology in Hanoi, and the War Remnants Museum and the Reunification palace in HCMC, two hot spots for both domestic and international tourism.

Vietnamese cities also have a symbolic role in the country's relation to time: today they embody both modernity and heritage. They provide a spectacle of modernity that by itself justifies a visit, as evidenced by the growing phenomenon of sightseeing from tower-tops (like the Bitexco Tower in HCMC, or the Lotte Center Skyscraper in Hanoi), but also by the increasing popularity of bars, restaurants and hotels with rooftop terraces. Shopping malls, as a quintessential urban activity, also constitute a destination for tourists. HCMC and Hanoi in particular guarantee access to certain products, especially imported or luxurious ones that can't be found elsewhere. Since 1997 and the opening of the Saigon Center (District 1), HCMC has added no less than a dozen major malls, all of them located in the city center (like Vincom Center in the Dong Khoi emblematic street, or Diamond Plaza, strategically located behind the cathedral) or in new centralities such as Saigon South. Visiting new buildings and shopping is an experience of urban modernity both for tourists and city dwellers who participate in the globalised circulation of leisure models and consumption patterns.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, some cities in the country build on consensual Vietnamese tradition and identity. Vietnamese heritages are the subject of specific protection and care. Among the 8 properties inscribed on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Vietnam, 4 are in cities: the Huế Monuments since 1993, Hội An ancient town since 1999, the imperial citadel of Hanoi since 2010 and the citadel of Hồ dynasty since 2011. Interestingly, HCMC is still struggling to play a significant role in the development of heritage in of the country.

**Emmanuelle Peyvel is Associate Professor at the University of Brest (France). Since 2005, her research deals with the development of tourism and leisure in Vietnam. Today, she's focused on the role of recreative mobilities in the construction and the globalisation of Vietnamese cities (emmanuelle.peyvel@univ.brest.fr).**

**Võ Sáng Xuân Lan is Associate Professor and dean of the Faculty of Tourism at the University Van Lang (HCMC). Her research focuses on tourism production, in particular sustainable and responsible tourism, and tourist behaviors (vosangxuanlan@vanlanguni.edu.vn).**

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