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. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), 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). 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, 4.5% in Asia-Pacifile. 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 1954. Indeed, tourism and cities entertain a privileged relationship: cities are both gateways for international tourist 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 relation-ship 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 – 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 field-work in Vietnam. At the national scale, we demonstrate that tourism is a factor of urban growth and ex nihilo constructions, with participative observations made during long term field-work 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 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 pilgrimages, 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: 7 seaside resorts (Hòn Đất, Đồ Sơn, Sơn Trà, Cửa Lò, Cùa Tông, Nho Trang and Cam Ranh), renamed Vũng Tàu, and 5 hill stations (Đồi Lạt, Bồ Núi, Tầm Dơi, Mùi Son and Sò Tơ). 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. In the North, Hanoi commanded three hill stations (Cù Pù, Tầm Dơi and the small station of Mùi Son) and four seaside resorts, that were directly dependent on medium-sized towns: Cù Lò in connection with Vũng Tàu, Đồ Sơn and Hòn Đất with Hải Phòng and Sơn Trà with Thanh Hóa. In the South, Saigon’s dwellers could enjoy the seaside resort of Cap Saint Jacques and the hill stations of Đồi Lạt. They also gradually invested in seaside resorts such as Phan Thiet and Mũi Tranh. In the Centre, the settlers of Tourane (today Đà Nẵng) and to a lesser extent of Huế and Núi Thành (Huế today), could visit the hill station of Bồ Núi and the seaside resort of Cù Lò.

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 Đồi Lạt, on the mountaneous plateau of Lang Bian, where phones, running water, electricity and even cinemas suddenly made their appearance with the first tourists.

Tourism-driven urbanism has been sustained despite decolonisation, war and the Boi Cvp period; none of the recreational destinations have disappeared. Today, all of them still live off tourism, and they 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. Đồi Lạt has over 214,000 inhabitants living mainly from tourism, horticulture and academics today. Tourist conurbations have been built, particularly between Phan Thiet and Mũi Núi, and between Đội Nông and Hiền 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 Quảng Bình to Quảng Ngãi, was arranged around Huế and Đội Nông, 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 civilization (with Mỹ Sơn). Mũi Núi then 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 Mê Linh and has been arranged primarily around Vũng Tàu, but secondarily also Nho Trang and Đồi Lạt.
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 the State. 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 $4.2 billion, 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 vigour 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 preponderance: cities are both hubs for national tourism and destinations 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 been deprived from a strong-willed transport policy, such as Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, Đô Lương or Đô Sơn. In this perspective, it is interesting to note that tourists could legitimately be seen as the driver of urban transformations.

Tourism has significantly contributed to the urban landscape. As a result of the tourism boom, the authorities have been eager to develop urban tourism. In the 1990s, one of their main objectives was to create a tourist-oriented economy. With the introduction of a new location, architectural and functional transformations have been introduced, architectural and functional transformations that are geared towards tourism or urban tourism. In this context, tourism has become a matter of economic development. It has been seen as a vehicle for sustainable development and a means for the authorities to bring development to their territories. Tourism is in the country’s symbolic stage. Today, they embody both modernity and heritage. They provide a spectacle of modernity that by itself justifies a visit, as evidencing the phenomenon of sightseeing from tower-tops (like the Bitexco Tower in HCMC, or the Lotte Center Skyscraper), but also by the increasing popularity of rooftops 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 gourmet restaurants, especially imported or luxurious ones that can’t be found elsewhere.

In 1997 and the opening of the Saigon Center (District 1), HCMC had added no more than 10 hotels located in the city center (like Vincom Center in the Dong Khiem emblematic street, or Diamond Plaza, strategically located behind the cathedral or in new cities like 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.

At the same time, some cities in the country build on consensual Vietnamese tradition and identity. Vietnamese heritage are the subject of specific protection and care. Among the properties inscribed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage in Vietnam, 4 are in cities: the Huê Monuments since 1993, Hanoi’s ancient town since 1999, the imperial capital of Hanoi since 2010 and the citadel of H-S dynasty since 2011. Interestingly, HCMC is still struggling to play a significant role in the development of heritage in the country.

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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 HCMC in the Centre, and HCMC and the Mekong Delta in the South. As the capital of their respective regions, they can be a driving force for their territory. The inner suburbs of Hanoi benefit from increasing tourism, especially in some of its most touristic villages and remarkable pagodas. This phenomenon is also striking in the Mekong Delta, where ecotourism is now well developed in the Cô Tô, Côn Đảo and the Mekong Delta. Tourism is in constant progression in the region of Long Xuyên and Chìo Đô with the normalisation of the Cambodian border.

The State officially recognises a number of national tourism regions (Khu du lịch quốc gia KDLGQ), these regions whose infrastructures have welcomed at least 1 million tourists per year, in an area larger than 1000 hectares. Today, there are 21 KDLQ (an estimated 39 by 2030), mostly located in near and medium-sized cities, because they have a recreational function for city-dwellers. The State recognition of these areas confirms the urban preponderance.

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, especially in the northern provinces of Hanoi, more concentrated in the East than in the West of the country, especially in the northern provinces of Hanoi and HCMC. Hanoi and HCMC together account for over 50% of Vietnamese tourists. In these cities, which are the economic engines of the country, tourism is in the biggest tourism company in Vietnam. 54 hotels (including some luxury hotels of HCMC), 8 travel agencies, nightclubs, spas and nail salons. Recognised as particularly cosmopolitan and permissive, they can be frequented by young and wealthy Vietnamese mingling with foreign travelers. They participate in the development of an urban rest and recreation culture (having a drink with friends, dancing, partying, etc.) that maintains the urban and tourist lifestyle, visible in the outlets, alcohol and drugs consumption, and the presence of prostitutes, although formally condemned as social vices by the socialist regime. Tourist- and leisure practices also characterises the gamification of city centers, where festivals and exhibitions are more and more numerous. Close to the market square of major cities, tourism has become a matter of economic development and cultural influence for the authorities, as the example of the H-festival shows that large-scale events have been redveloped, especially on the waterfront (like in Vũng Tàu or in HCMC, with the Nhị Nước lagoon) and major urban parks, like the Lenin Park in Hanoi or the Bích 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 H-S Museum of ethnology in Hanoi, and the War Remnants Museum and the Reunification palace in HCMC, two hot spots for both domestic and international tourists.

Vietnamese cities also have a symbolic role in the country’s relation to today: they embody both modernity and heritage. They provide a spectacle of modernity that by itself justifies a visit, as evidencing the 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 rooftops 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 gourmet restaurants, especially imported or luxurious ones that can’t be found elsewhere. Since 1997 and the opening of the Saigon Center (District 1), HCMC had added no more than 10 hotels located in the city center (like Vincom Center in the Dong Khiem emblematic street, or Diamond Plaza, strategically located behind the cathedral or in new cities like 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.

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