



# CONTENDING VISIONS OF A HILL-STATION IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract:** This paper examines a situation of national and international tourism development in post-socialist Vietnam, as it unfolds in the small northern hill-station town of Sa Pa. It investigates to what extent tourism dynamics today can be seen to be mirroring the French colonial scene of the past and suggests similarities and distinctions between these two eras. Revealing the current day contending representations of tourism in this town, the paper emphasizes the competition among multiple actors. These include the economic victors (Vietnamese and international tourists, local state authorities, Vietnamese and overseas entrepreneurs), and those largely left behind, the ethnic minorities. **Keywords:** Vietnam, hill-station, colonial tourism, post-socialist tourism, Sa Pa. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Résumé:** Visions contestées d'une station d'altitude au Vietnam. Cet article explore une situation de tourisme national et international dans le Vietnam post-socialiste pendant qu'elle s'est développé dans la petite station d'altitude de Sa Pa dans le nord du pays. Il examine à quel point la dynamique actuelle peut se voir comme une réflexion de la scène coloniale française du passé et évoque des ressemblances et des dissemblances entre ces deux époques. En révélant les représentations du tourisme qui s'affrontent actuellement dans cette petite ville, l'article souligne la compétition entre les multiples acteurs. Ceux-ci comprennent les vainqueurs économiques (touristes vietnamiens et internationaux, autorités gouvernementales locales, entrepreneurs locaux et internationaux) et ceux qui ont été plus ou moins laissés à l'écart: les minorités ethniques. **Mots-clés:** Vietnam, station d'altitude, tourisme colonial, tourisme post-socialiste, Sa Pa. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

In October 2003, Sa Pa, a hill town of 6,000 inhabitants in the North-west Vietnam highlands, celebrated what local state officials announced to be the “100 year anniversary of tourism in Sa Pa”. Prior to the event, the town was still only just emerging from decades of lethargy and was definitely not looking its best; hence action was swiftly taken. The 34 km mountain road linking Sa Pa with the provincial capital and train terminal Lào Cai was radically improved. Major

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infrastructural works in the town were commissioned, beautification of parks and streets was undertaken at a rapid pace, ornamental urban furniture was cemented in place, and a sizeable artificial lake was filled just in time for the arrival of the first centennial guests from all over Vietnam and beyond.

Yet it was not possible for the authors to find someone who could explain what actually occurred of relevance to Sa Pa, not to mention tourism, 100 years prior to 2003. Archival evidence on colonial “Chapa” in France indicates that only ethnic highlanders inhabited the site prior to French installation, with the first permanent civilian resident arriving there in 1909, not as a *Voice of Vietnam News* online report stated: “Sa Pa was developed as a scenic resort by the French in 1903” (2003). Before 1909, for about ten years, only a small contingent of colonial troops was more or less regularly stationed there, the first permanent group arriving in 1910. A few agronomists, foresters, and health administrators also saw the site briefly while assessing the northern highlands’ potential. Might these be considered by today’s authorities to be the first tourists?

Indeed, when one undertakes a historical review of the town’s tourism growth during French colonial times, its subsequent ruin during the First Indochina War (1946–54) followed by its very modest recovery until the economic renovation in the 1980s and a massive rebirth over the last 12 years, no mention of 1903 is to be discerned (Michaud 2001). What is found, though, is a series of intriguing similarities—albeit with twists—in the tourism development of the site during the French colonial period, and since the re-emergence of the town in 1993 as an international site. The year 2003, thus, was the rightful 10th anniversary of the opening up of the region to international tourism, a rather modest claim, which would be only moderately conducive to attracting masses to the site, though “off the beaten track” tourists might arguably be enticed by this relative freshness.

While the successful conversion of former colonial hill-stations into modern and flourishing destinations around the world has generated steady interest since a seminal article by Spencer and Thomas in 1948, a relatively small number of studies has been devoted to such locales in socialist regimes (Light 2001). It is true that with the recent opening up of socialist economies to liberal market imperatives, case studies have been conducted in post-socialist (Sikor 2001) heritage cities (in particular in Eastern Europe and the Balkans), in booming urban centers (coastal China is a good example), and in beach resorts (for instance, in the Eastern Mediterranean and Cuba). But in the meantime, the field of reconversion or creation of hill-stations in post-socialist countries has been neglected—the only exceptions known seems to be Reed (1995) and Jennings (2003) addressing Đà Lạt in central Vietnam. In the mountains of post-socialist Asia (China, Vietnam, Laos, and to a degree, Burma), a study of the impacts of tourism development also needs to incorporate the important aspect of cultural exoticism, these highlands being host to an array of “colorful” minority groups (Michaud 2006). With the massive infrastructural and financial investment China is currently

making into its southwest highland destinations, in Yunnan in particular, a new field of tourism studies in the social sciences researching hill-stations and tribal exoticism is quickly emerging. This article is a contribution to this recent theme and offers new findings and interpretations in the field of competition and alliance between actors on the local scene, underpinned by contending visions of what tourism is and what it should be.

In actively and creatively blending socialist politics with the market economy (on China see Lew and Yu 1995; Qiao 1995; Qiu, King and Jenkins 2002; Sofield and Li 1998; on Vietnam see *Euromonitor International* 2004), Vietnam is interesting because it presents a multiethnic blend (Dang, Chu and Luu 2000; Khong 2003). Unlike China, it has also known European colonialism (Pelley 2002), the presence of which in Sa Pa has left specific imprints, and about which there are now competing visions. The town embodies socialist Vietnam's turn to the market economy in a consummate fashion (on market economy penetration in Vietnam, see Than and Tan 1993; Fforde 1996; Boothroyd and Pham 2000). In this previously forgotten rural community ruled by cooperatives and local party cadres, national and international tourism has exploded and private business flourishes (Di Gregorio, Pham and Yasui 1997; Pham and Lam 2000). The blend of socialist and capitalist ideals reveals perplexing paradoxes to the outside observer. Party governance is still strongly enforced, while a horde of new entrepreneurs move in to capitalize on every economic opportunity booming tourism can offer (Lloyd 2003). Contradictions flare up, diametrically opposed visions of local development collide, and the crystallization of these struggles scar the town.

Once the elite French, it is now the newly affluent urban nationals who arrive in Sa Pa in droves, bringing with them the signs of Vietnamese symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984). To understand how these elements articulate in Sa Pa, a voyage through local history is first required, which will allow, in turn, an analytical investigation into the socioeconomic and political elements that have determined how tourism is now conceived, formatted, and consumed in the town.

Information for this paper has been collected over nine years from an extensive variety of sources, either directly by the authors during yearly visits to Hà Nội and Sa Pa, by commissioned state researchers, or by graduate students working on location. The authors have also searched the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence and Paris. The situation described in this article reflects the state of the town in June 2004.

## THE REINVENTION OF A HILL-STATION

It is most likely that the Sa Pa watershed was first inhabited by minorities of the Hmong, Yao, Tày, and Giay groups, these being the four main minority groups still present in the district today (Census of Việt Nam 1999; Condominas 1978; Dang et al 2000). The *Kinh* (the ethnic Vietnamese) had never colonized this highest of Vietnam's valleys,

which lies in the shadow of Phan-Xi-Păng (Fansipan), the highest peak in the country.

It was only when the French debarked in highland Tonkin in the late 1880s that Sa Pa, or *Chapa* as they called it, began to appear on the national map. In the following decade, the future site of the town started to see military parties as well as missionaries from the *Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris* visit the site (Michaud 2004). In 1894–96 the border between China and Tonkin was formally agreed upon and the Sa Pa area, just to the south of this border, was placed under French authority. Indeed, from 1891 the entire *Lào Cai* (Lao Kay) region, including Sa Pa, came under direct colonial military administration set up to curtail banditry and political resistance on the sensitive northern frontier.

Thanks to an attractive continental climate, by 1912 a military sanatorium for ailing officers had been erected along with a fully fledged military garrison. Initially, official villas were built only for the military “top brass”. Yet in the late 1910s, company villas were established by important corporations wanting to mark their economic success, to be used as vacationing sites by deserving managerial staff. The upper layer of the civil administration soon joined in with the *Lào Cai* Resident and the Tonkin Resident Superior having official residences built. Then, from the 1920s onwards, several wealthy colonists with enough financial capital also had a number of private villas constructed in the vicinity.

Chapa thus began to be utilized in set ways. From the start of the summer season in June, the French social elite posted in the Delta sent their families and household staff ahead to enjoy the comforts of their villas, until they could join them for a few days or weeks at a time. Families then completed their stays by August or September before shifting back to their urban residences. Industrial enterprises and colonial administrators behaved somewhat differently, using their villas to treat deserving staff and their families with a week or two of free holiday in the pleasant company of Tonkin’s European elite. For all, Chapa, with its alpine feel and continental climate, was considered an “escape back to France” (Jennings 2003:168). For the rest of the year, only the surveillance and maintenance staff remained in Chapa, these being Kinh employees who, along with a few shopkeepers servicing them, constituted the only permanent residents of the town. The military remained stationed in their barracks nearby, and the highland minority population lived in the surrounding hills.

Gradually, the privileged of colonial society were joined in Chapa by a less select group of French nationals. A few private entrepreneurs who had the ear of the top administrators in Tonkin assessed that the hill-station could also be used as a profitable holiday destination for slightly less affluent, yet still desirable colonists, including an unknown but presumably small number of affluent Vietnamese vacationers. Three or four small hotels were erected and their owners jointly set up the *Syndicat d’Initiative de Chapa*, a promotional Tourist Bureau. Their target was modest in number and their guests always remained a minor proportion of Chapa’s benefactors.

The bureau launched a publicity campaign in 1924 with a *Livret-Guide de Chapa* (*Syndicat d'initiative de Chapa* 1924). The booklet attempted to convince less affluent French clientele to visit for short summer stays, with the healthy qualities of the location being praised, and the climate and contact with nature topping the list (Jennings 2003; Reed 1995). Walking routes as well as the local main attractions were highlighted including the town's market to which "colorfully dressed Mèo [Hmong] and Man [Yao]" highlanders came to trade and socialize. Walks or horse rides to the nearby picturesque Cát Cát waterfall were keenly proposed. In 1928, according to information provided by transport businesses found in archives, 900 Europeans tourists answered this call, 90% of them for a stay of three weeks or less. A victim of its own success, the hill-station's hotels and the few vacant villas that could be rented out were sometimes insufficient to accommodate everyone, and some years a number of families could not find a place to stay, not even in a "native house".

With the early fall of France in the Second World War and due to the Vichy government siding with the Nazi, the elite colonists living in Indochina no longer had the option of going to Europe for their summer holidays. After a short period of confusion, many turned their attention to the few holiday resort options within the Indochinese Union, including Chapa and Đà Lạt. Thus, World War Two constituted an unexpected and important cause of development for hill-stations in Indochina.

This new period of success was to be also Chapa's colonial swan song. At the end of the War, a new and long period of hostilities began in Tonkin that was to last until 1954. In the process, most of the 200 or so colonial buildings that had been erected in Chapa were destroyed, either by Việt Minh sympathizers in the late 1940s, or in the early 1950s by French air raids. The vast majority of the town's population fled for their lives, and the former town entered a prolonged sleep. It was only in the early 60s thanks to the New Economic Zones migration scheme set up by the new socialist regime (Fall 1967, Hardy 2002) that fresh inhabitants from the lowlands started to instill new life in the site. Collective workers, farmers, and a few local party cadres joined forces with the local minorities over the next 30 years to etch out a living from the difficult terrain. Of the town's former colonial glory, only ruins remained.

In 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party introduced a range of reform measures known as *Đổi Mới* or economic renovation (Duiker 1995; Ronnås and Sjöberg 1991). The reforms, a process of moving away from central control towards a market economy while maintaining a socialist state, allowed for a multisector economy, decollectivization, private ownership, and liberalized foreign trade and investment (Luong 1993; Ronnås and Ramamurthy 2001). The *Đổi Mới* era boosted the national economy and allowed for new employment opportunities in the private sector in Vietnam, which in turn gave rise to new groups of affluent urbanites (Nee 1989). Characterized by unparalleled levels of consumption, these groups are marked by a

newly emerging lifestyle in which expensive pleasurable pursuits have become central, not least of which is tourism (Bocock 1993).

As a counterpart, in 1992 the last obstacle to Sa Pa's full rebirth as a prominent holiday destination was lifted as, for the first time since the colonial period, the decision was made to open the door to international tourism from virtually all countries beyond the faltering communist brotherhood. By the following year, Sa Pa was back on the tourist trail, this time for a newly emerging local elite and a variety of international arrivals.

### *Sa Pa Today*

Many of Sa Pa's potential tourists currently tend to head to the main lowland cities, to natural beauty spots such as Hà Long Bay, or to the Central Highlands' hill-station of Đà Lạt for their holidays, with beaches considered a prime destination. Hoping to tap into these established tendencies, as the observer can appreciate from the newly emerging spatial layout of the modern town of Sa Pa, its District and Lào Cai Province authorities would very much like the hill-station to be perceived as another Đà Lạt.

Decisionmakers have thus formatted the town's landscape accordingly. Perhaps the most telling sign of this imitation is an artificial lake created in 2002–2003 on what was a disused outskirts of the town. Another key feature aimed at attracting Kinh guests is the three kilometer clean and easy concrete walkway leading uphill from the town to the Hầm Rồng stone forest, a natural curiosity, crossing on its course a large human-made garden where a "traditional" minority dance show is performed for tourists. Another very popular walk is the concrete pathway leading downhill to the Cát Cát waterfall that slices through a real, albeit rapidly touristifying ethnic minority Hmong hamlet. As part of the bargain, ironically, the shores of the Sa Pa lake are now home to a brand new road, the only one in town empty and wide enough for local youth to race their motorcycles into fourth gear, reminiscent of the infamous illegal motorcycle stampedes that plagued the celebrated Hoàn Kiếm lake in Hà Nội in the late 90s. An evening stroll around the "peaceful" lake also treats the punters to quite a few karaoke tunes simultaneously discharged from different locations around the water and amplified over it. But more on that progress later.

These developments materialize the vision that the local authorities have for the future of the town, that is, a sanitized rendition of nature that can be walked through on paved footpaths. This vision has also become perceptible in a number of other dramatic changes occurring to the physical landscape. While not all of these have been implemented by the People's Committee directly, their authorization has been necessary for both state and private developers to be granted the leeway for modifications and expansions to occur. One of the most immediately obvious is the phenomenal growth over a decade in the number of hotels and guest houses (Di Gregorio et al 1997). These establishments are either state-owned or in private hands.

State hotels have led the boom, some built quickly and then seemingly left empty, as those commissioned to erect them could take advantage of substantial loans from the state for the building phase, while the profitable management of the final product was not an absolute requisite and thus sometimes forgotten. These hotels are usually large, ornate, and adorned with vast and vacant lobbies. They employ staff who often appear to care little for their guests. Though these hotels can vary in size and location, most have been built around or close to the new lake, the most monumental being the official district and provincial People's Committee guest houses.

Hotels that are privately financed, owned, and operated, in sharp contrast to the state-owned ones, are significantly more stylish, make efficient use of all their space, and staff are usually quick to respond to their customers' needs. While the state-sponsored hotels prefer to be more significant statements of grandeur and show little restraint in spending, the private ones tend to be tall, narrow, three- or four-storied buildings, one or two hotel rooms wide, with, as is common everywhere else in Vietnam, no paint on their side and back outside walls, leading to a vista of the town which contains a considerable amount of grey concrete (Parenteau et al 1995; Logan 2000).

Another major change in the town's landscape is the upsurge in tourist shops, privately owned except when they are associated with a state-sponsored hotel. They range in style according to what is on offer and their target customers. The majority sell goods such as small bags and T-shirts with short statements on the beauties of Sa Pa embroidered or printed on them, wooden snake toys from China, and so on, all goods that by Vietnamese privileged urban and Western standards are considered "tacky". There are also a few up-market boutiques, selling chic hangings that incorporate interpretations of Hmong and Yao highlanders' designs, sewn together by local Kinh women. These boutiques chiefly attract Western tourists and some urbanites from Hà Nội, although the latter tend to balk at the inflated prices (Jonsson and Taylor 2003).

Lastly, the development of the town's physical infrastructure since the boom started is significant. Streets have been straightened and resurfaced, new ones have appeared, spacious sidewalks have been laid, sewage and storm water drains have been hidden underground, lavish cast iron lampposts have been set, as well as decorative pine trees planted. Rubbish bins have been fitted and street cleaners are on daily duty. A public park built during the colonial years has been redesigned and is now adorned by footpaths, tile patterns, seating, and an oversized public fountain. As is common in Vietnam, a couple of multicolored, illuminated flashing ornaments on posts also entertain those on their evening stroll. Most strikingly, perhaps, the old market place, previously designed with open halls on dirt ground and shabby stalls, has been demolished and totally reshaped into a series of large multifloor modern concrete and metal buildings, with the grounds concreted throughout (Michaud and Turner 2003).

All in all, Sa Pa now looks clean, modern, well lit and serviced, even opulent in certain areas, and it appears capable of handling a steady

growth in road traffic. This is quite a contrast to 10 years ago when it reflected more the picture of a dusty provincial Vietnamese hamlet, its houses in disrepair, its dark and silent streets after nightfall roamed only by stray dogs, the whole place smelly under the midday sun, with hardly more than a dozen Soviet-made Minsk motorbikes slowly negotiating the pot-holes. Thus, with such major efforts, has the People's Committee been successful in attracting tourists to Sa Pa? Regarding the Vietnamese urbanites in particular, has it managed to detract any from more popular Đà Lạt? To answer these questions, its tourists must be described.

### *National Tourists in Sa Pa*

This paper distinguishes three separate groups of Vietnamese tourists currently visiting Sa Pa, with their combined numbers shown in Table 1 (Sa Pa District Tourism Office 2004). First, and least in number, are indeed some of those post-Đổi Mới newly affluent consumers mentioned above, predominantly Hanoians but also Saigonites and a few originating from Hải Phòng or Đà Nẵng, who come to this destination in air-conditioned private cars and SUVs, which look somewhat out of place next to the unpretentious Russian military jeeps ruling the mountain roads. These relatively young tourists arrive generally in couples for a weekend trip, and most frequently visit to gaze at the countryside while enjoying the cooler temperatures. They will often combine Sa Pa with a round trip through Hòa Bình, Sơn La, Điện Biên Phủ, Lai Châu, and down the Red River valley back to Hà Nội. In Sa Pa, they might take in a walk through the Hàm Rồng stone forest, or down to the waterfall. They buy fruits in the market and perhaps a few souvenirs, while a small number consider purchasing goods

**Table 1. Official Yearly Numbers of Tourists to Sa Pa, 1995–2003<sup>a</sup>**

YEAR	Total	% increase	DOMESTIC	% of total	INTERNAT'L	% of total
1995	4 860		3 960	81%	900	19%
1996	8 450	74%	5 920	70%	2 530	30%
1997	13 400	59%	10 940	82%	2 460	18%
1998	21 700	62%	17 660	81%	4 040	19%
1999	34 320	58%	27 640	81%	6 680	19%
2000	57 800	68%	46 530	81%	11 270	19%
2001	78 100	35%	63 480	81%	14 620	19%
2002	96 680	24%	79 620	82%	17 060	18%
2003	138 622	43%	100 702	73%	37 920	27%
<b>Average</b>		<b>53%</b>		<b>79%</b>		<b>21%</b>

<sup>a</sup> Grindley (1998) has pointed out that these official figures, collected by hotel owners and reported to the local police, are incomplete and represent only a fraction of the real tourist circulation in Sa Pa. Experience tends to confirm his observation.



being sold on the street by highlander women. More often than not they patronize the best of the state-owned hotels.

Broadly speaking, this select group could be considered to mirror the French elite class who once holidayed in Sa Pa during the summer months, staying in their personal villas. The current affluent Vietnamese clientele are still pulled by the attractions the *Livret-Guide de Chapa* heralded in 1924, namely the local climate, the scenery, and a walk to the waterfall. However, there stop the similarities. In contrast, today's affluent population is not that keen to have prolonged contact with nature, and enjoying the town's amenities proves far more attractive than visiting unclean highlander villages.

The People's Committee and some determined private entrepreneurs have decided to join forces in an ambitious scheme to profit from these urban elite tourists. Not all the details of this new venture are available yet, secrecy being kept in fear of competition, but a few kilometers up the valley from Sa Pa town, a several hundred hectare housing development with stunning views is currently under development. In time it is due to be adorned with upmarket private villas for sale. Presumably, only the very affluent from the deltas will be likely customers for this pricy exclusivity. This initiative is an exact replication of patterns of the colonial past in the hill-station.

The second group, still Vietnamese with wealth to spare, but clearly not on par with the affluent group just considered, and not so game nor wealthy enough to venture to Sa Pa by their own means, are members of many package deals available from travel agencies in Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and Sài Gòn (Hồ Chí Minh) (*Euromonitor International* 2004). These groups, often older couples or families with children, are undertaking a preformatted "grand tour" of Vietnam. If originating from Sài Gòn, for instance, this tour will include the usual musts: a foray into "traditional" Vietnamese rural life in the Mekong delta, followed by a popular beach around Nha Trang or Hôi An, the old imperial capital Huế, dramatic Vinh Hà Long (Halong Bay)—the latter three registered as UNESCO World Heritage sites, which adds to their attractiveness—and the capital Hà Nội with its historical, architectural, and cultural assets. At the appropriate point along this itinerary is routinely added one leisurely mountain location for its cooler climate and the romantic natural scenery, either Đà Lạt in the central highlands or Sa Pa in the north.

When the participants of these tours reach Sa Pa they are easily recognizable, clustered in groups and constantly wearing their white tourist caps. These caps—beyond obvious practical usages—might also be perceived by the bearer as a symbol of a newly attained social status expressing publicly a capacity to engage in this form of consumption. Once on location they tend not to be adventurous, often sticking to the most popular streets in town and only venturing further on those concreated footpaths, and if in doubt, lying in their hotel rooms chatting, keeping an eye on the children, napping, or watching television. They have purchased all-inclusive packages; therefore, the hotels where they stay—most of the time privately owned—also provide all their meals. These tourists thus contribute very little directly to the economy of

establishments other than the ones they stay at, though they make a real difference for the enterprising hotel owners who have successfully lured them through deals they themselves secured with national level travel agencies.

Regarding similarities with the past, and bearing in mind some understandable reservations, this group's composition and expectations could arguably be paralleled with those middle class colonial French families and Vietnamese affluent who came independently to Sa Pa for short periods in the 20s and 30s, and who stayed in the handful of private hotels that were built precisely to accommodate them. They too were not the uppermost elite in society, but had some money to spare and sought a respite from the lowland heat while enjoying their annual vacation as a family.

The third group, perhaps the most fascinating one because it embodies the unique combination of a socialist regime with modern tourist demand, are the state workers from various levels and government branches. They belong to the socialist *biên chế* system, those with a state position considered permanent. Far more secure in their jobs than private sector workers, state employees also have the opportunity of enjoying statutory perks, one possibility being an annual free collective trip for a few days somewhere in the country. In principle, the destination is decided collectively but it is generally the head of each work unit who has the final say.

Reminiscent of the wholly socialist era when all aspects of state employees' lives were taken care of by their employer whose duty was to keep the proletariat's spirits high, with the opening up to market economy these "freebies" are today considered far less fashionable than the costlier, but trendier, private packages. Nevertheless, to the pragmatic mind they are indeed still free, and *biên chế* trips allow employees to relax in the familiar company of their coworkers without having to care for the children, who are normally not invited.

Possible *biên chế* destinations vary greatly depending on the region where the workers are based, on the number of potential participants, on their particular interests, and on the amount of money available that year. A common trip could include a weekend in a provincial capital, an outing to a nearby picturesque or historical feature, or, if the cost is not excessive, a trip to the urban cores of Hà Nội or Sài Gòn (always popular), or to one of the standard national attractions listed earlier. Crucially, Sa Pa is thus on the list of possible *biên chế* destinations.

Overwhelmingly, the state employees who elect Sa Pa for such a trip are groups of men, sometimes reaching up to 100 at a time. While national figures are not available to ascertain whether this gender disparity in *biên chế* tourism is found nationwide, from conversations with Vietnamese colleagues, it could be safely assessed that this is so, reflecting the general power imbalance in this gendered society. In Vietnam, a woman's most important role, whether she has a job or not, and despite her position at work if she has one, is considered that of the sole performer of household and childcare duties (for more on women's position in society over time in Vietnam see [Quinn-Judge 1983](#); [Good-](#)

kind 1995; Fahey 1998; Soucy 2001). Routinely, this means that *biên chế* holidays are only accessible to women state employees if they are unmarried or if someone other than the husband takes charge of the house duties for the duration of the trip. Judging by the very small number of women workers seen on *biên chế* trips in Sa Pa, such prospects seem rare, pooled perhaps with the wish not to participate in such a trip, a hypothesis on which there is not yet available information.

*Biên chế* tourism in Sa Pa is thus overwhelmingly a male affair and their general activities are geared accordingly. Tourists logically stay in state-run hotels that sometimes show explicit connections to the *biên chế* system such as the substantial “Workers’ Federation of Lào Cai Province Guest House, Sa Pa Section” (Liên Đoàn Lao Động Tỉnh Lào Cai, Khách Sạn Công Đoàn Sa Pa). Such hotels are set up and managed precisely to offer *biên chế* work units competitive prices and a panoply of ancillary services. Regular tourism activities consist of leisurely group strolls around the town during the day, gazing at the unfamiliar scene, while waiting for the evening to settle. Then, the groups come to life and turn to patronizing their hotel’s dining room, drinking beer and rice alcohol while toasting each other, energetically singing along to karaoke tunes for the whole neighborhood to appreciate. Later, a significant proportion of them engage in prostitution sometimes made conveniently available on location by their hosts. Yet again accentuating the point that *biên chế* tourism is usually an all male endeavor, it is not rare to see *biên chế* males exhibiting their most recent affair: either a female “friend” companion, a colleague the man is having an affair with at work, a more established “minor wife”, a local sex worker, or an urban prostitute “brought along” for the trip.

Why such an association between Sa Pa and sex? It is a fact that traveling per se often involves sex consumption all over the world (Thorbeck and Pattanaik 2003). It is even more so for Vietnamese men, for whom it is a near requisite (Law 2000; Truong 1990). In effect, in Sa Pa, there is widespread publicity created around the theme of the Sa Pa “Love Market”. This is an incorrect label explicitly found in Vietnamese and overseas guidebooks, repeated by national advertisements, tourist agents, and printed on everything from brochures to postcards, to label the weekend activities of the highland ethnic minorities who come to the town’s marketplace. Just as they did during the colonial period, highlanders come to Sa Pa market not only to buy and sell goods, but also for social purposes, to see friends and family from other hamlets, and for unmarried youth to “hangout”, flirt with each other, and possibly find a partner (Michaud and Turner 2003). A few may engage in extramarital affairs among themselves if the conditions are favorable, though not in public as the tale would have it. These practices, considered morally slack in Kinh culture, have been inflated by the national Vietnamese press—helped in this matter by complacent local authorities seeking publicity for Sa Pa—to titillate the male Kinh’s fantasy. Thus, for many Vietnamese men, Sa Pa and its “Love market” are now considered to be the locale where

promiscuous sex can easily be obtained (see Jean Baffie's 1989 analysis of the same fantasy projection on highlanders in Thailand by lowland male Thais).

Again in comparison with French times, the hotels used today by *biên chê* state tourists mirror the sites created by the colonial industrial societies such as the Collieries Society of Hongay and the Cement Industry of Haiphong, or the state administration such as the Lào Cai and Tonkin *residences*, all of which, as mentioned earlier, erected corporate villas in Sa Pa where their deserving staff could be sent on vacation. However, when it comes to assessing the nature of their main pastimes on location, and despite the well known fact that many male colonists did mingle with local partners, it is doubtful that the parallels continue much further between those colonial tourists and their counterparts today.

Once these distinctions are made between the three categories of current nationals, some specific features can also be found across the board. All three groups display a particular, restricted taste for nature and the surrounding rural environment. As a local guide put it in 2004, "the Vietnamese tourists don't really want to walk far at all. They see a walk to the waterfall as a serious trek and all need to get a lift back up the hill. They attempt it in city shoes. The women wear high heels on a route where Westerners would be wearing trekking boots". Kinh tourists also tend to approach the local minorities in a very set way through cultural performances prepared for touristic consumption in locations and at times fitting the tourist agenda. Very rarely will national tourists to Sa Pa take the trouble to visit a minority village and see for themselves the reality of highland life, as this would be perceived as totally unnecessary (compare national tourists in China in Lew and Yu 1995; McKhann 2001; Oakes 1997, 1998; Swain 1989, 1995). This attitude will be commented upon more in the next section, but first, there is a need to consider the other main category of tourists visiting Sa Pa, the foreigners.

#### *International Tourists in Sa Pa*

Again it is suggested here that three categories can be made, namely the budget Western tourists or backpackers, the affluent Westerners, and the Chinese. Certainly, the group that the People's Committee has been happy to ignore as much as possible, but who appear just as determined to visit anyway, judging by the regularity with which they have arrived in Sa Pa since 1993, are foreign tourists of the backpacker type. In Sa Pa, these are essentially Westerners varying in age from those in their early 20s to seasoned tourists in their 60s.

In comparison with Vietnamese, backpackers arrive in Sa Pa with completely different goals in mind. They tend to turn up on Friday mornings, most having traveled from Hà Nội to nearby Lào Cai by night train or bus. After exploring the town for a day, they head to the colorful market on Saturday morning, closely followed by a trek to a highlander village or two, sometimes with highlander girls as their

guides, other times with formal guides arranged via the privately owned guesthouses they have registered in. After these two days, many take off in packed chartered minivans early on Sunday to be driven to the neighboring district of Bắc Hà three hours away, where another colorful Hmong market is held. They typically return the same day to the train station at Lào Cai to catch that evening's night train back to Hà Nội. A small portion of more committed backpackers stay longer, sometimes visiting more highlander villages in the district, taking on the three-day Phan-Xi-Păng climb, or slowly preparing to head by local bus or rented Russian jeep for their next destination, typically Lai Châu to the west or Bắc Hà to the east, on a popular five- to six-day loop from Hà Nội.

A few nongovernmental organization surveys of this segment of the tourism market have shown that they overwhelmingly come to Sa Pa to see the ethnic market, to visit the minority villages on treks, and to get away from the crowded lowlands (Di Gregorio et al 1997; Grindley 1998). Getting their feet dirty by walking in the rice fields appears to be a daily must, while actual contact with the highlanders, because of language constraints, is generally limited to chatting with their guides, minority market saleswomen who can speak some English or French, or attempts at sign language in a village they might visit. There are about six minority communes (xã) that can be reached with relative ease on daytrips from Sa Pa town, either on foot or with the help of land transport such as motorbike-taxis or jeeps with drivers. Sleeping over in such communes is officially not legal for foreigners, although a few daring tourists and a handful of up market trekking agencies are now succeeding in doing just that.

In Sa Pa, it is nearly exclusively the private sector that caters to backpacker needs. State-owned facilities, with their overstatements of grandeur, indifferent staff, fluorescent-lit dining halls, and noisy karaoke bars, have little appeal for these individual tourists. Their tastes lean towards the more intimate, better suited private guest houses that have made it into the guidebooks, and that offer the amenities they are looking for most, namely, out of town trekking tours, an internet connection, an appealing terrace to "hang out" on and chat with fellow tourists, and many flavors of fruit shakes.

The second category of international tourists is a small affluent Western segment, albeit temporarily faltering due to episodic health scares such as SARS and avian flu. The four-star, French owned Victoria Sa Pa Hotel fittingly poised on a hill overlooking the town is at the moment the only venue that caters to this category with "international standard" facilities. It offers rooms from US\$85, an indoor swimming pool, a lavish and tasteful dining hall with an international menu, a fleet of SUVs and Mercedes minivans to visit in the vicinity, and its own exclusive carriages and restaurant car on the train from Hà Nội. Or, if time matters, an alternative chartered helicopter ride from Hà Nội, 354 km away, is also possible—at a price.

These affluent foreigners have a variety of origins, from the West most commonly, but some also originating from affluent Asian countries (Biles, Lloyd and Logan 1999; Pye and Lin 1983). In general,

customers arrive unprepared and hence willing to follow the programs proposed by the hotel, that is, see the colorful Sa Pa market, be driven to a few minority villages, and enjoy the surroundings of the pool; anything, really, as long as they can take pleasure in their comforts, too. Indeed, successive managers of the Victoria Sa Pa have confirmed to the authors that their average customers have scant information on Sa Pa prior to their trip, having booked a package through a travel agency overseas that could guarantee them a “good level” of comfort throughout their vacation. They represent the international segment of up-market mass tourism that hops from one secure accommodation to the next, with only moderate interest in the precise destination and the cost. This group could be considered, along with the emerging Vietnamese elite (the first category of national tourists), as replicating the desires of the colonial independent tourists of the past who came to stay in the private hotels in the town. The latter, like today’s affluent foreigners, were not part of the elite as such, but had enough personal wealth to afford the relatively onerous trip.

The third category of foreigners, a specific segment of Chinese clientele, will only be touched upon as it is still largely a prospective one. Wholeheartedly supported by the local People’s Committee, an international casino is soon due to open its doors in the town. Since Vietnamese citizens are forbidden by law to gamble in casinos in Vietnam, the clientele being explicitly wooed by this proposal are the Chinese who live within driving distance across the border in Yunnan. How many of them will actually come, and what their impact will be when they are not busy gambling, still remains to be assessed. This issue will be returned to below.

### *Contending Visions Versus Reality*

There are in Sa Pa contradicting visions by multiple users. Of interest here first is the dichotomy in the minds of the affluent urban Vietnamese when comparing this to other destinations such as the hill-stations of Đà Lạt or Tam Đảo. For those urban Vietnamese interviewed, whether *biên chế* or private, male or female, Sa Pa is not perceived as being on par with Đà Lạt, the most favored highland destination in the country. Indeed, the urban Vietnamese discourse comparing the two can be summarized neatly by this 2004 quote from a young Hanoi: “you go to Đà Lạt for a honeymoon, a romantic getaway, the tranquility, quality time with your partner, the nice French architecture, and the climate. You go to Sa Pa for the Love Market and the climate.” For a number of affluent urban Vietnamese, Sa Pa is thus a lesser Đà Lạt where romance perhaps is reduced to its most pragmatic definition: sex. This dichotomy with other hill-stations appears to be strikingly similar to that which emerged during the French colonial period. On 29 September 1928, faced with a growing demand for accommodation and access by potential users belonging neither to the military or the affluent elite to be able to spend time at the hill-

station, the Resident Superior in Tonkin wrote the following statement to the Governor General of Indochina:

Chapa must be considered as the complementary station to Tam Dao [and one might add: Đà Lạt], the latter, in future, not being sufficient for the needs of the population and by its very organization having evolved towards being a luxury station. While Chapa remains for those with average incomes and large families. It is essential to maintain this character.

Hence it appears that Sa Pa's lowest ranking in comparison to other hill-stations in the eyes of today's affluent Hanoians is a close rendition of the colonial administration's take.

Second, Vietnamese tourists to the highlands need Nature (denoted here with a capital *N* to be inclusive of physical and human elements) to be interpreted and then (re)presented in formats suiting their mental imagery (Amirou 1995; Theobald 1998). This particular taste requires wilderness be kept at a safe distance, to be gazed upon during daytime, tourists retreating to the civilized *urbs* for the night. Highland non-Kinh villages are perceived as expressions of human "rawness", of a lack of civilization, and as such are of no more than limited interest for the "civilized". Only the colorful, exotic and benign expressions of material culture, such as clothes, music and dances, are deemed worthy of (detached) attention (Jonsson and Taylor 2003), a reduction some observers have named "selective cultural preservation" (Evans 1985; Koh 2002). Indeed, such a vision of Nature in association with tourism is widespread in East and Southeast Asia, commented upon by numerous authors (McKhann 2001; Oakes 1998).

As for the foreign crowd of backpackers, their vision of Nature does indeed include the highland minorities, and encountering them is thus a must for their visit to be a success (see Cohen 1989, 2001 for a similar analysis in Thailand). Sa Pa town itself is perceived by the majority of backpackers as noisy, unsightly, and ultimately an infringement on Nature. Modernity shocks them, urban sprawl drives them away, karaoke excesses and rampant prostitution are judged sickening; they came here precisely to get away from it all. The backpackers, while explicitly caring for the underdog, here the "minority" 85% population of the district, and voicing qualms about the current urbanization of Sa Pa, nevertheless still enjoy the amenities of the town, the good transport system, pleasant food, continuous access to electricity, and the internet communication facilities.

Even so, the popularity of Sa Pa for backpackers is likely to decline. There is already a tendency, in their discourse, following the most popular guidebooks, to label it as increasingly "worn out", a "spoilt" destination where the damages of "bad tourism"—presumably understood to exclude the backpackers themselves—have made interactions too "commercial" and rendered a visit less appealing (Butler 1980). If, despite this negative connotation, they still come to Sa Pa, it is chiefly for its central and convenient location from where they seek out the exotic Other that they visit on outings of two or three days, using Sa

Pa as a base. Thus, it is possible that in time, another town may dethrone Sa Pa as the northern backpacking haven.

Turning to the affluent foreigners, they certainly appear to be less disappointed by the current turn Sa Pa is taking, not seeming to even notice it. With little prior information and few precise expectations to begin with, just living in a four-star hotel in this remote town seems an exotic enough experience. Moreover, in a rare show of unity, the local authorities *and* the industry seek their patronage eagerly. Per head, it is calculated that they bring in far more money than budget tourists, their smaller numbers making them easier to keep track of (Tremblay 2002). The hotels where they stay pay more taxes and employ more people, and add to the prestige to the town. Enterprises ostensibly catering for them obtain extra facilities, such as a Danish travel agency now authorized to build luxurious bungalows and organize home stays among minority villages in a remote corner of the district. Indeed, by focusing on attracting the good and the great among foreign tourists, Sa Pa's authorities show that they know where the profits lie.

#### *The Single Vision of the Local Authorities*

Sa Pa's local authorities do not want to miss out on the current economic boom in Vietnam. They perceive tourism as their only alternative. Returns cannot wait many years, but have to be reaped as soon as possible. In this sense, Sa Pa's People's Committee is totally in tune with other remote areas of the country eager to "catch up" with the lowlands, at any cost.

In this frenzy, there is little room for second thoughts. Opportunities are seized immediately or they may be forever lost to competitors. Thus, while the model Sa Pa is manifestly trying to emulate is that of Đà Lạt, that model has a huge head start on Sa Pa. Đà Lạt has remained in operation without interruption from its foundation through to 1975. It is a 150,000-strong city. It has a history locals still remember vividly, a lot of colonial architecture, and a high quality local fruit and vegetable industry highly reputed across the country. In the national psyche, Đà Lạt already *exists*; it *has* made it.

Still, Sa Pa tries hard to catch the wave, often at the expense of the environment. Local authorities have inflated infrastructures way beyond local needs, have built up vacant lots with dozens of new, prestigious, but purposeless and mostly empty state buildings, and have created a lake when water is in short supply, for which, presumably, an armada of duck-shaped fiberglass pedal boats awaits to be launched. As mentioned earlier, a new development being carved out of a mountain near the town will soon be ready for the building of private villas for the ultra-affluent from the cities. In addition, another prestigious hotel, five-star this time, is planned in the southern surrounds of the town. All just like Đà Lạt.

Conversely, irreversible damage is done to the colonial architectural heritage. As a rule, there is a lack of concern shown for any historical



colonial buildings left in the area, and rather surprisingly while French colonial houses are in high demand for restaurants and prestige office headquarters in Hà Nội (Logan 2000), in Sa Pa they are either being used as second tier People's Committee offices, are left to crumble in disrepair, are being built upon in such a way that the colonial heritage is clearly ignored, or are being leveled to the ground to make room for new projects. On the town's periphery, while it is laudable that the local authorities have decided that a specific rubbish disposal site would be more appropriate than throwing the town's waste over a cliff as was done in the past, the new rubbish dump is now piling up right next to the old, unattended French military cemetery, itself in the process of being eaten away by the progress of a limestone quarry.

These observations are not an attempt to force an outsider's view regarding the importance of restoring colonial architectural heritage on others, since the Vietnamese have many varied perceptions and memories of the colonial period which they may not wish to see reflected in the present day built environment. Rather this is a reflection on the fact that the conservation of French colonial buildings is already being undertaken by Vietnamese investors elsewhere in the country, as well as colonial villas similar to those few still standing in Sa Pa being considered by affluent urban Vietnamese as attractions in Đà Lạt (Jennings 2003). Even in Sa Pa, new buildings, when aiming for prestige, sometimes follow the shape of the old Alpine villas, demonstrating a live connection in the sponsors' minds between the old and the new.

The exoticism of the ethnic minorities living in the district, a powerful magnet for foreign backpackers, is consciously down-played by state authorities. The recent multiplication of "minority cultural shows" in several state enterprises, mostly commissioned, managed and performed by Kinh, only emphasizes that the genuine participation of non-Kinh minorities in local tourism development is out of the question. Prioritizing sanitized renditions over reality again, a "minority cultural village" is planned close to town where Vietnamese tourists on a leisurely stroll will be able to "see" selected cultural expressions *in vivo*, at fixed times, and in manageable formats (such misrepresentations of minority cultures also exist elsewhere; Wood 1984, 1997). In the meantime, minority women and girls who used to freely wander the town looking for potential buyers for their ethnic garments and trinkets—for many the only contact they will have with minorities while in Sa Pa—are under increasing pressure to conform, now being pushed to sell their goods from a featureless concrete room in the market for a daily fee paid to the local council.

The most notorious recent initiative, perhaps, is the international casino mentioned earlier, being launched in the hope of attracting wealthy Chinese gamblers. Yet, due to Sa Pa's location and because such a casino already exists in Lào Cai town much closer to the border, those who will come to Sa Pa are not likely to be "high flyers" but people who live within a few hours drive of the border and for some reason would not want, or would not be granted the right to attend the more prestigious Lào Cai venue. In other words, these will be provincial

Yunnanese who may, as a local private hotel owner put it in 2004, “get drunk, demand prostitutes and be noisy everywhere”.

In terms of the social dynamics in the town, even before these additional developments take place, change is already rapid. To cater for the large groups of male tourists, karaoke bars are cropping up throughout the town at an alarming pace. From these one can hear, from lunch time onwards, the painful strains of men—very rarely women—attempting to mimic their favorite stars while becoming ever more drunk. In close association with the karaoke bars, prostitution is also on the increase in town, with a number of more established private hotel operators becoming increasingly worried about this trend, some daring to refuse male guests bringing prostitutes onto their venues, a costly business decision.

At the end of the day, however, it must be acknowledged that from the point of view of most of the town’s dwellers, the picture remains bright. For nearly all of the local officials, entrepreneurs, hotel managers, transport operators from motorbike drivers to provincial bus owners, those selling industrial goods or construction materials, even the average town citizen (practically all Kinh) Sa Pa now lives through the most exhilarating economic time of its history. The incessant climb in Vietnamese tourist numbers is considered a blessing, triggering a tremendous increase in building construction and a demand for the kind of services that Kinh are readily equipped to satisfy, thanks to their trade connections in the lowlands. Whether there are, or will be, adverse effects from the unrestricted commercial development based upon the local tourism industry that now constitutes their life-line, is not a topic that locals really want to discuss; elation is the prevalent sentiment, and the honeymoon is far from over. Despite some inconveniences, virtually everyone in the town declares him or herself glad to be able to participate in this new growth. As for the vast majority of “minority” highlanders living in the surrounding landscape, and given the current balance of power in the district, it is less than assured that they will ever share equitably in the benefits of this golden age.

## CONCLUSION

Sa Pa’s economic success has been unflinching since the beginning of the tourist boom in 1993. On average over the past 10 years, the number of tourists has increased by over 50% each year (Table 1) and shows no sign of faltering. Both as a locale and an object of desire and mass consumption, it grows incessantly in size and popularity. However, tourism development in Sa Pa, as distinctive as it may be in its particulars, is largely a tributary of national factors connected to the booming economy of post-socialist Vietnam. Not only can Sa Pa’s story and economic success be compared to other former colonial hill-stations in Vietnam such as Đà Lạt and Tam Đảo, but it is also going through a phase similar to foreign hill-stations like the Cameron and Genting Highlands in peninsular Malaysia, Bogor in Java, Baguio in Luzon, Maymio in highland Burma, and Dalhousie and Mussoorie

in the Indian Himalaya (Reed 1995). Moreover, beyond colonial nostalgia, it also bears in its current stage of development obvious similarities with exceedingly popular destinations in China's southwestern highlands such as Dali, Lijiang, and Lugu Lake, all cashing in, like Sa Pa, on a mountainous setting and pleasant climate combined with cultural exoticism and tribal imagery.

In Sa Pa, the similarity found in tourist motivations between the French colonial era and today, though far from absolute, is revealing. Ultimately, however, judging by the lack of historical knowledge and even interest among the majority of both foreign and national tourists coming to Sa Pa, this similarity could prove to be merely a consequence of the same features in the same circumstances attracting those with comparable interests. What is clearly common to both time periods, however, is that representation prevails over reality, fantasies prove to be more effective baits than authenticity, and the consumers' desire for exoticism meets the enterprising hosts' craving for modernity (Harkin 1995; Urry 1995). Everyone, then, is a winner in this economic and symbolic complementarity. Or are they?

Not quite. Here, as in many similar cases studied elsewhere in the developing world (Britton 1993; Harrison 2001; Nash 1989), nearly all the winners seem to be on the same side, that of the industrial and state-sponsored entrepreneurs supported by the local and migrant labor they command. Across the fence, local cultural minorities, in spite of constituting 85% of Sa Pa district's population, are basically left to watch and hope for beneficial effects to trickle down, deprived as they are from access to economic success and political power in the state apparatus due to their cultural distinctiveness, their lack of formal education, and their limited economic capital (Butler and Hinch 1996). Tourism in Sa Pa is in the hands of the elite, the wealthy, powerful, and enterprising 15% Kinh minority, rubber stamped by a handful of Party-agreeable minority representatives. These elites define what tourist needs they are going to cater for, they construct the promotional image of the town and the district to be projected to the outside, and in effect, they actively demote all that does not fit that picture (Olivar-Smith, Arrones and Arial 1989). They have elected as their focal group the Vietnamese middle-class tourists and it is their values (a secure approach to Nature, easy holidaying, and leisure spiced up with temporary sexual permissiveness for male tourists) that now determine the demand. For commercial motives underpinned by political ones, the foreign backpackers' wants, fueling only 20% of the local tourist flow, are paid little more than lip service by the authorities.

Back to this article's opening question, why was 2003 acclaimed to be the "100 year anniversary of tourism in Sa Pa"? In all probability, not for the principle of dutifully recalling history. It shows instead all the signs of having been a maneuver to gain national and international attention and funding to upgrade a neglected provincial town and turn it into a prime destination. With a timely spruce-up operation joined by a vigorous advertising campaign to entice ever more affluent Vietnamese urbanites to come to the area in the future and boost its economy

accordingly, Sa Pa, in one local newspaper advertisement, was boldly branded “the destination for the new millennium”. Socialist ideals have given way to competition among mercantile interests, bringing Sa Pa up to liberal speed, now able to partake in the growing rivalry among hill-stations in upland Asia. **A**

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