

Reaching new heights. State legibility in Sa Pa, a Vietnam hill station



Jean Michaud^{a,*}, Sarah Turner^b

^a Département d'anthropologie, Université Laval, Pavillon Charles-De Koninck, 1030 ave des Sciences-Humaines, Québec (QC) G1V-0A6, Canada

^b Department of Geography, Burnside Hall Building, Room 705, 805 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Quebec H3A 0B9, Canada

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze the recent acceleration of tourism in the historical hill station of Sa Pa Town and District, in Lào Cai Province, northern Vietnam. The article builds on debates concerning state efforts to increase legibility in a frontier area, modernity at the state's margins, and critiques of mass tourism in socialist Vietnam. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork since 1995, we examine the state's modernist project for Sa Pa, exploring the roles of corporate entities and local state agents, and interpreting the impacts of recent tourism plans and policies on ethnic minority communities and Kinh residents. We reveal an underlying project among state officials and entrepreneurs to harness this marginal space on the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands regardless of cultural distinctions.

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Introduction

On February 2nd, 2016, the corporate giant Sun Group impressed its Vietnamese audience by inaugurating the 'Fansipan Legend – Indochina Summit' cable car. Heralded as a feat of engineering, the cable car immediately claimed two Guinness Book of Records entries (Fig. 1; [Fansipan Legend, 2015](#); [Tuoi Tre News, 2016](#) February 3). Moreover, this achievement struck a strong nationalist chord, being completed at the same time as the Vietnamese nation was being presented in state-controlled press and electronic media as being under threat from 'outside influences', referring to China's aggressive policy to take control of the South China Sea. The cable car opened to much fanfare, with media statements praising it as "the world's most modern [*hi n đại*] cable car," with the summit station described as an "artistic masterpiece amid the clouds" [*những tuy t tác ngh thu t giữa ngân mây*] ([VietnamNet.vn, 2016](#), February 2, online).

The famed cable car adventure starts at a height of 1500 meters on the outskirts of the town of Sa Pa in Vietnam's northern highlands, a popular hill station dating back to the French colonial era (1883–1954). The cable car transports tourists *en masse* to the summit of Mount Fansipan (*Phan Xi Păng*, 3143 meters), the highest peak in Mainland Southeast Asia outside Burma. Although all Vietnamese schoolchildren are taught of its existence, Mount Fansipan only held minor significance prior to these recent events, being located in a remote region bordering the Chinese province of Yunnan. Now, in the hands of Sun Group corporation, the mountain is being reworked into a powerful symbol of national pride expressing Vietnam's modernity, greatness, and resilience in the face of adversity.

In the past, small numbers of Vietnamese or foreign tourists attempted the ascent of Mount Fansipan, a three-day hike with no rock climbing or snowfields involved. Expeditions were facilitated by the hiring of local ethnic minority porters, as

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Jean.Michaud@ant.ulaval.ca (J. Michaud), Sarah.turner@mcgill.ca (S. Turner).

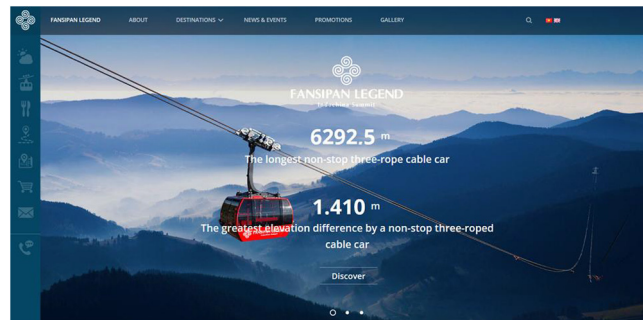


Fig. 1. Promotional website for Sun Group's cable car, Sa Pa District (Fansipan Legend, 2015, online).

well as a road through the nearby Ô Quy H pass (2035m elevation) promising a fairly quick return. But with the 18-minute cable car ride landing just 143m from Fansipan's summit, this former wilderness in the middle of Hoàng Liên National Park is now adorned with a highly modernist structure boasting restaurants and VIP rooms, teeming with Vietnamese tourists on the weekends. Moreover, a new highway inaugurated in 2014 has halved travel times from Hanoi to five hours, while an airport is being planned in the provincial capital, Lào Cai, located 35km away. Mount Fansipan's new accessibility, combined with its enhanced national reputation, has instantly turned it and nearby Sa Pa Town into one of the most desirable destinations for the country's growing urban middle class.

In this article, we critically analyze the expansion of tourism in Sa Pa Town and Sa Pa District (Fig. 2). Picking up the threads from our 2006 analysis of Sa Pa's tourism history (Michaud and Turner 2006), we examine the state's integrationist project for this town and district and its ramifications. After noting our methods, we outline the conceptual entry points for this study, namely state efforts to increase legibility (Scott, 1998) in a frontier area, modernity at the state's margins, and critiques of mass tourism in socialist China and Vietnam. We analyze recent vectors of change in Sa Pa Town and District before introducing the important actors involved, from corporate entities and local state agents to domestic and international tourists. We then delve into the impacts on and reactions of ethnic minority communities and local Kinh (Vietnamese lowland majority) residents. We reveal an underlying long-term project among state officials and many Kinh entrepreneurs to harness this marginal space on the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands and attach it firmly to the Vietnamese Nation-State while reaping major economic opportunities in the process.

Our qualitative methods combine fieldwork inquiries and documentary research. During more than 20 years of annual visits and several periods of intensive fieldwork, we have carried out conversational interviews with numerous actors in Sa Pa District's tourism industry, including lowland Vietnamese and ethnic minority Yao and Hmong tour guides (over 40), trekking businesses (over 20), homestay owners (over 10), restaurant and hotel proprietors and managers (over 45), drivers (over 20), and restaurant and hotel employees (over 90). The Yao and Hmong tour guides and hotel employees inter-

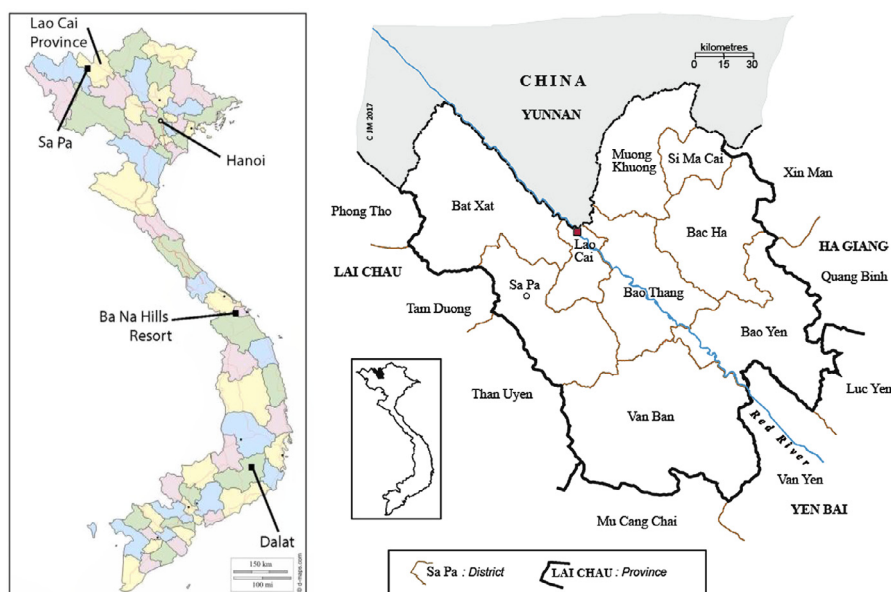


Fig. 2. Vietnam with locations mentioned in this article; Lào Cai province. Source: D-Maps.com; Michaud 2017.

viewed were predominantly female, the drivers all male, while other interviewees were a fairly even split of male and female. Tourists, both national and foreign, have also been interviewed, and we have completed semi-structured interviews with a number of town, district, and provincial officials, mostly men (over 20). Participant observation has been completed *in situ* by the authors since 1995, including stays throughout Sa Pa District to discuss the direct and indirect impacts of tourism processes with ethnic minority women and men (over 100). Discussions were completed in English, French, Vietnamese, Hmong, or Yao (Dao) languages with the assistance of interpreters/translators from the same ethnic group when needed.

Legibility, modernity, and tourism in the uplands

Political scientist James C. Scott suggests that the vast highlands southeast of the Himalayas shared today among ten countries – a region he calls *Zomia*, while we call it the Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud 2006, 2016) – have always been loosely linked to the lowlands via trade. Nonetheless, modern states have vigorously pursued the ‘enclosure’ and ‘legibility’ of this region, increasingly integrating upland areas through processes labeled as “development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration” (Scott, 2009, p. 4). Ethnic minorities are no longer able to seek refuge in these upland locales to withdraw from the state, following the “last great enclosure movement in Southeast Asia” (ibid.). Earlier, in his groundbreaking book *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), Scott argued that states, by nature, want to make their own spaces and populations ‘legible’. This is a broad strategic plan of territorial occupation that draws upon:

the creation of permanent last names, the standardization of weights and measures, the establishment of cadastral surveys and population registers, the invention of freehold tenure, the standardization of language and legal discourse, the design of cities, and the organization of transportation (Scott, 1998, p. 2).

Scott adds that, at a broader scale, a number of factors come together to support this political project, namely “the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large scale social engineering, high modernist ideology provides the desire”, while concurrently “the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the leveled social terrain on which to build” (ibid., p. 5).

We argue that the engineering of modern Sa Pa can be read as the latest evidence of the Vietnamese state’s intent to bring these remote highlands under central political control via such processes of legibility while also making this pursuit financially profitable. The enclosure of such a space, a project aimed to integrate people living in the territorial periphery, along with their lands, resources and livelihoods (Michaud and Turner, 2016), is best achieved by activating ever more exhaustive “distance demolishing technologies” with an emphasis placed on infrastructure projects (highways, railways, urban centers, hydro-electricity, and water control) (Scott, 2009, p. 11). These technologies aim to bridge the geographical but also historical, economic, political, and cultural gap separating these highlands from the lowlands’ national standards. Since the end of the Second Indochina War in 1975, the vectors of these enclosure and legibility processes have also included market integration, replacing common property with private land use rights, compelling shifting cultivators to settle, the promotion of cash cropping and wage work, building numerous fixed marketplaces, and establishing a comprehensive satellite coverage network for cellular phones and electronic media. Since 1993, this strategy has also included the relentless encouragement of the tourism industry. Scott surmises that across *Zomia*, the aim of such efforts is less about making local upland residents more productive and more to “ensure that their economic activity [is] legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that [are]” (Scott, 2009, p. 5).

In line with this drive for greater legibility, the economic development pursuits of the Vietnamese government faithfully follow a modernist approach. In Vietnam’s northern highlands ethnic minority dwellers have been increasingly persuaded by state propaganda to become more amenable to the market economy (Jamieson et al., 1998; Sikor, 2011). Recently, the district of Sa Pa, long considered in the national psyche as a site of pristine beauty inhabited by so-called exotic “minority nationalities” (Michaud, 2016), has acquired a whole new layer of meaning with high modernity now being represented by the cable car, the highway, and the consequent rise in the national chart of desirability for tourism, in a country determined to catch up with the world’s most advanced economies.

While scholars have rightly argued that modernity in the Global South should not necessarily be considered to follow the dominant Western discourse, nonetheless this does appear to be close to the state’s ideal in Vietnam. Here, the strong role of the state means that a neo-liberal, preordained path of Western modernity (though, as also in China, *sans* democratic institutions) appears to remain the dominant narrative. Yet, it is important to note that for ethnic minority communities, modernity incorporates a convergence of such institutional arrangements alongside a “divergence... of lived experience and cultural expressions of modernity that are shaped by what is variously termed the ‘habitus,’ ‘background,’ or ‘social imaginary’ of a given people” (Gaonkar, 1999, p. 16) and in such cases, the notion of alternative modernities becomes germane (Chatterjee, 1996).

State promoted modernity in Vietnam, as in China, warmly embraces mass tourism directed at the growing national middle class (Nyiri, 2006; Oakes, 1998). As Urry (1990, p. 2) notes, “To be a tourist is, like having a car, a marker of modern identity”. Tourism dynamics in Vietnam and China show a specific signature, with domestic tourists now being far more important for the industry than international tourists. A quick calculation of the size of the Chinese middle class – 400 million and growing – highlights the magnitude of the arithmetics at play. Nonetheless, until recently, this domestic tourism phenomenon was largely ignored by scholars (Chan Yuk Wah, 2006). There is now a rising number of affluent, urban residents in Vietnam and China being persuaded to believe in certain modernist interpretations of tourist locales. In both

countries, tourism landscapes, the natural and the artificially naturalized alike, are being swiftly engineered for this emerging middle-class tourist niche. High on the list are 'cutified' exotic ethnic villages and towns, sizable nature and adventure parks containing easily identifiable landmarks, and multi-functional entertainment centers. These old and new social spaces are inherently political; authorities get to select the locales, the forms of tourism to be developed, the budgets, the shares of the profits, and only certain groups of individuals have the power to go there as tourists and gaze at nature, physical as much as social. As part of a growing number of highland locales we briefly discuss further in our Conclusion, Sa Pa District in northern Vietnam has become one such modern constructed attraction.

Recent vectors of change in a colonial hill station

Officials in Hanoi and the provincial capital of Lào Cai have had an eye on the tourism potential of Sa Pa region for a while. It began with the opening up of the uplands to foreign visitors in 1993, which had been heavily restricted since the First Indochina War broke out in 1946. As a moderate-sized French colonial hill station (Jennings, 2003), though largely destroyed during decades of war, Sa Pa still had 'a name' in the early 1990s. This, along with the local climate, mountain landscape, and 'colorful' local ethnic minority residents, helped it to re-surface as a tourist destination. From 1993, the growth of the town's tourism industry was slow but steady. Then, in 1998, the provincial authorities engaged in a large tourism planning scheme (more on this below) designed to lay the foundation for the long-term expansion of tourism in the whole province and in particular in the star district of Sa Pa. Between 1995 and 2014, annual tourism numbers rose from 4860 to 826,000 (Lào Cai Department of Tourism, Sport, and Culture, 2016) and – post cable car and highway – topped 1 million in 2016 (Vietnam Multimedia Corporation 14 (VTC14), 2016).

One of the most obvious longitudinal vectors of tourism planning and development in the province has been the Lào Cai–Aquitaine project which emerged around 1998. The Aquitaine Region of southwest France and Lào Cai Province signed a formal Memorandum of Understanding in 2002 and have collaborated in the development of Sa Pa District's tourism sector, supported by millions of Euros from the European Union and the French Development Agency (AFD). Early on, this collaboration included the drafting of an Urban Development Master Plan for Sa Pa Town, followed by plans for arboriculture and viticulture. Since 2013, this collaboration has also included ongoing planning and management of Hoàng Liên National Park within Sa Pa District. In the words of the Aquitaine project's website:

The cooperation programs 2003–2007 and 2009–2012 [with a follow-up for 2013–2015] allowed the realization of a planning scheme and the production of a Master Plan for the controlled extension of the tourist town of Sa Pa, [...] support of ecotourism and the protection of biodiversity in Hoang Lien National Park. [...] The actions primarily aimed at the development of Master Plans and of tourist development in the Hoang Lien National Park area or in areas with high tourist pressure (Conseil régional d'Aquitaine, 2016, online ; <http://europe-international.aquitaine.fr/regions-partenaires/vietnam-lao-cai/>).

While the Aquitaine project included detailed recommendations regarding architectural renovations and new developments, and favorable limits of tourism in Sa Pa Town, the reality today shows the extent to which local authorities have overruled such plans. This is clear in the authorization of buildings exceeding four floors in height, the destruction of colonial architectural remains, the re-routing of road traffic, as well as infringements on the National Park, top of the list being the Fansipan cable car complex.

Beyond Sa Pa District, another major vector of tourism change has been the completion of the Hanoi–Lào Cai expressway. The previous ways to access Sa Pa from Hanoi were either via a ten-plus hour, bumpy drive, or more commonly on board a rickety, slow and oft-delayed train from Hanoi to Lào Cai City which took between eight and eleven hours, followed by a one-hour transfer via a local, randomly scheduled bus. Now, a four-lane highway, opened in September 2014, has halved driving times from Hanoi to Lào Cai City to 5 hours while making the ride safer and more comfortable. From Lào Cai City, it is then another 34 km to Sa Pa on a winding road, greatly improved over the past ten years, with persistent promises of additional upgrades in the near future. The Hanoi–Lào Cai expressway, deemed Vietnam's longest – one more modernist achievement – was designed to connect to China's Kunming–Hekou expressway completed two years earlier, eventually linking the capital of Yunnan to the Gulf of Tonkin (Tuoi Tre News., 2014, September 22, online). Yet, for many Vietnamese and tourist agencies alike, this new road link is known as the Hanoi–Sa Pa highway, which speaks to the perceived connection between the capital and this precise tourist destination. Now, growing numbers of tourists drive directly to Sa Pa by private car, while air-conditioned sleeper-coaches are doing a roaring trade, also direct from Hanoi.

Corporate actors

Such infrastructure improvements have attracted major economic actors. In 2015, the Lào Cai provincial tourism information center noted that Sa Pa was home to 126 businesses that provided nearly 2000 hotel rooms with more than 3600 beds. Newspaper reports noted that over half these rooms were in small-scale hotels, pointing to an opportunity for larger-scale players to tap growing demand (Vietnam Breaking News., 2015, May 4, online).

Now, thanks to the government's determination to elevate Sa Pa to the ranks of a major domestic and international tourist resort destination (VOV.Vn. 2016, May 31, online), powerful corporate actors including Sun Group, Bitexco, Truong Hai, and Hoa Sen Steel are pouring money into Sa Pa (VTC14 2016, online). Sun Group especially, is leading the field, acquiring vast

land rights in and around the hill station and managing a significant number of major tourism construction projects. Sun Group was founded in 2007, and is a giant real estate and tourism developer headquartered in Đà Nẵng City, central Vietnam (Sun Group, n.d. online; *Tuoi Tre News*, 2016, 2 March, online). Owned by a wealthy Vietnamese businessman now based in Ukraine, Sun Group focuses on construction investment, luxury real estate, and amusement and entertainment centers in Vietnam and abroad. With its flagship cable car now operating, Sun Group is aiming to complete the scheme by constructing a luxury hotel in the center of Sa Pa's old town. This will be the starting point of a train link leading to the cable car base three kilometers away, involving a tunnel also to be engineered by Sun Group. Sun Group's high visibility in Sa Pa led one long-term Kinh resident to say, in a resigned tone, that about half the town's land is now owned by Sun Group. He speculated that the Group must yield considerable influence over the local People's Committee, a point corroborated by a number of other residents (personal communications, May 2016, June 2017).

Towering over Sa Pa Town's central square, where city and nearby village dwellers socialize on market days, Sun Group has set up a large electronic screen constantly advertising its current and upcoming projects (Fig. 3). The attractive corporate video makes direct reference to another resort, the Bà Nà Hills Mountain Resort near Đà Nẵng City. A pattern hence appears; the colonial Bà Nà hill station was originally founded by the French in the 1920s (DeWald, 2008) and also suffered from the war. It has known a recent rebirth and nowadays boasts a Sun Group cable car that also broke world records, along with an amusement center and a Disneyland-style resort (Sun Group, n.d., online; *Saigon Times*, 2015, March 25, online).

Alongside Sun Group's activities, and also feeding on the tourist bonanza, dozens more tourist facilities are under construction in the town (Vietnam Breaking News, 2015, May 4, online). As well as the constant renovation of aging small-scale hotels and three existing 4-star facilities, a number of large, state-linked construction companies are building their own high-end hotels. These include the 4-star U Sa Pa Hotel, which opened in 2014 overlooking the central square, and the half-finished International Hotel Indochina (*Khách sạn Quốc tế Đông Dương*) at the southern tip of the town, poised to become Sa Pa's first 5-star hotel with 156 rooms (Fig. 4). The Aquitaine–Lào Cai Masterplan of 2005 allocated substantial space on the town's periphery to upscale private residential developments, and developers such as this one have been quick to jump on the bandwagon.

Trường Giang Sa Pa, a joint stock company, is investing 1.2 trillion VND (55.8 million USD) to build a 47 hectare complex named 'Sapa Jade Hill' with villas, hotels, country club, and shops on the road leading up to H u Thào commune



Fig. 3. Sun Group's promotional video in Sa Pa central town square. Source: Jean Michaud 2016.

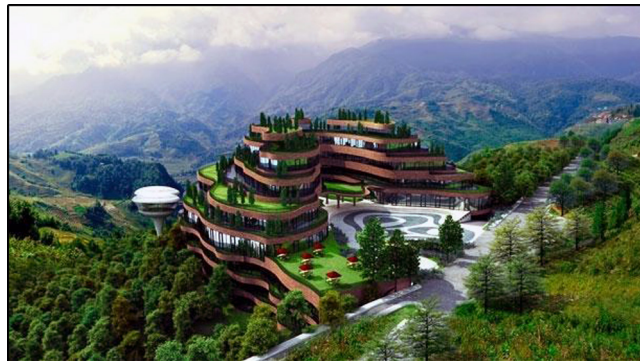


Fig. 4. Sketch design for International Hotel Indochina Sa Pa (Source: sapalaocai.com n.d. online). The artist remained discrete regarding the fact that the building lies directly across the road from the town's Vietnamese cemetery, a less than desirable position for potential Asian customers.

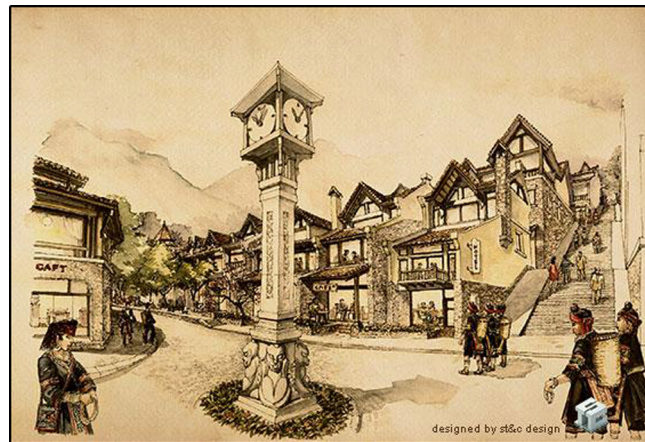


Fig. 5. Mecure's modern resort paradise (Source: [Mercure Sapa, 2016](#), online). Note the combination of modern living with female exoticism expressed by picturesque local minority women idling by.

([sapajadehill.com](#), n.d. online). Accor and Mecure will oversee different aspects of the complex, with promotional materials noting that “Mercure Sapa Resort & Spa is a world-class, sync, modern and eco-friendly resort paradise” (Mercure Sapa, 2016, online). Construction started in 2012 and as of May 2017 a series of villas had been completed, with much work still to be done if one is to put any faith in the billboards on-site and online (Fig. 5). No data were available at the time of completing this article concerning the rate of unit sales, yet it is clear that the target clientele are lowland urban middle-class consumers with enough discretionary money to afford an up country abode.

Big state plans

There are a number of specific state policies and plans for both Sa Pa District and Lào Cai Province that touch on tourism. One example is the ‘Lào Cai Tourism Development Plan, Period 2015–2020, Vision 2030’ (People's Committee of Lào Cai Province, 2016, June 22, online). We do not review all such plans here, as some overlap, others appear to be ignored by local officials and developers, while others remain rather vague. Yet, the plans promote visions of amusement parks and Disneyland-type models (Saigon Times 2015, March 25, online; VOV.Vn, 2016, May 31, online).

For example, the government administration for Sa Pa Town and District, located for twelve years in purpose built buildings on the north side of the town's artificial lake, is planning to move again. This time, the headquarters will shift several kilometers out of town on the Lào Cai road, where they will be built from scratch on former farmland in the vicinity of the new district hospital, already relocated in 2013. Meanwhile, Sun Group has bought these dozens of soon-to-be-vacated government buildings standing around the lake along with the rights to the prime real estate they stand on. The Group's plan is to build yet another major tourist nexus, focusing on Vietnamese restaurants, bars, and entertainment venues. Along with the relocation of the colonial marketplace to the vicinity of this lake in December 2014, this major development confirms a new spatial configuration of tourist consumption in the town.

It should be noted that urban areas in Vietnam are officially divided into six classes from 5, the lowest, to 1 plus ‘special cities’, all determined by population size and density, the percentage of non-agricultural activities, and the proportions of urban and rural land uses in the city's administrative units (Government of Vietnam., 2009). Sa Pa Town is presently a Class 3 urban area, while Lào Cai City is a Class 2 city. There are now plans to divide the existing Sa Pa District into two new entities, one urban, one rural (Fig. 6). The new municipality of Sa Pa City is to include the northern half of the current district, centered on its urban core plus an immediate periphery of easily-accessible minority villages where day trips and short-term homestays for tourists have already set in motion profound transformations for local minority residents. Ambitious local officials hope for the new northern section to gain ‘special city’ status (alongside only five other such cities in Vietnam), which would make it a centrally-controlled municipality removed from provincial administration.

In turn, the southern half of the current district, to be named Hoàng Liên District after the mountain range crossing it, would encompass the most rural segment of current Sa Pa District containing only ethnic minority villages. Informed Sa Pa Town residents confirm that the head town of this southern section would be built at Thanh Phú, a predominantly Yao commune (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Conveniently, a new road link has just been completed from the Lào Cai–Hanoi highway up to this southern area from a junction 40 km downstream from Lào Cai City, allowing this new district to feed on traffic coming directly from the highway.

These administrative changes, should they go ahead, would create two very different zones regarding population densities, ethnic composition, degree of urbanization, economy, services, and tourist desirability. The expanded Sa Pa City to the north would no doubt attract even more Kinh entrepreneurs and workers in hotels, restaurants, and shops. The city would cater mostly to domestic tourists arriving by car or coach and wishing nothing more than to relax for a weekend, ride the



Fig. 6. Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province, Vietnam: 2012 Boundary Planing Master Plan for tourist development produced by the Vietnam Institute for Urban and Rural Planning, Ministry of Construction. The projected division of the district in two halves appears clearly. (<http://www.viup.vn/en/Master-Planning-pla92-Construction-master-plan-for-Sapa-tourist-town-Sapa-district-Lao-Cai-province-d256.html>).

cable car, and touch Mount Fansipan without breaking a sweat. They would be able to contemplate nature as a picturesque landscape, eat familiar food, and frequently drink the evening away in karaoke bars before retiring to modern hotel rooms. The southern district of Hoàng Liên, by contrast, would remain entirely rural, with little infrastructure, virtually no hotels (the only one at the moment being the exclusive Topas Ecolodge), and a very high proportion (>95%) of ethnic minority farmers distributed among dozens of hamlets in various states of remoteness. With very little to interest the modernity-seeking lowland crowds, this new district would undoubtedly have far more appeal to the majority of foreign tourists who wish, above all, to discover the ‘authentic’ (MacCannell, 1999) and remote (Cohen & Cohen 2012) while engaging in physical challenges such as trekking, cross-country biking, and other ecotourism adventures.

Transforming tourists

Vietnamese middle class

Despite still having a communist regime, Vietnam has opened up to the market economy since the mid-1980s, and has a rapidly growing middle class. Groups of Vietnamese urbanites are now co-opting Sa Pa as a weekend retreat, keen to test their upmarket vehicles on the highway and then ride the cable car to Fansipan’s peak. The rise of domestic middle class tourism is notable in the brands of cars seen on the roads. Previously, the lack of a highway meant that tourists seldom drove to Sa Pa, and the few who braved the long, pothole-ridden route, complete with wandering livestock, tended to arrive in inexpensive, outdated cars. Now, Vietnamese car-owning tourists vie for extremely limited parking spots for their Lexus, BMW, Land Rover, and the occasional Rolls Royce. Hotels have been quick to note this change. For instance, the four-star Victoria Hotel now has its first ever Vietnamese manager, matching the increase of middle class Vietnamese now patronizing the hotel. Other hotels pay no attention to the Western pool of customers, with Vietnamese language signage and personnel only.

These national tourists currently have little interest in visiting nearby ethnic minority villages, considering them dirty and backwards. Just as Chan Yuk Wah (2006, p. 200) has noted for Chinese tourists visiting Vietnam, we also found that for Viet-



Fig. 7. Affluent Western tourists and a Hmong itinerant trader interact in Cán C u weekly market 2009. Source: Jean Michaud.

nameless tourists: “Very rarely would they search for ‘naturalness’ and a simpler, purer form of life, nor is there an urge for deeper communication with local people in unfamiliar places”. At best, they confine themselves to perusing the night market where ethnic minority vendors spread their wares on the town’s main sidewalks and gain a vivid confirmation of the superiority of Vietnamese (modern) civilization over these (pre-modern) people. Then they retreat to familiar restaurants, hotels, and bars for the rest of the evening.

Western affluent tourists and backpackers

As noted in our 2006 article (Michaud and Turner 2006), Western tourists continue to comprise two main groups, namely affluent tourists and budget or backpacker tourists. Back then, we noted that the local People’s Committee seemed content to ignore Western budget tourists, who typically arrive with plans to go trekking with a local minority guide for one or two days, stay in a minority-run homestay, and head to upland marketplaces to dive headfirst into this sea of exoticism. Alternatively, affluent Western tourists tend to arrive fairly unprepared and follow their Kinh guides, often travelling with them from Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City. Some are willing to do a short trek to a nearby local minority village but most favor day trips by car before retiring to the comfort of their hotel and spa (Fig. 7).

Since the opening of the highway, local Sa Pa residents, Vietnamese newspapers, television reports, and blogs have noted a decline in international tourists arriving in Sa Pa District (Zing.vn., 2014, November 19, online; VTC14. 2016, online; personal communication, May, 2016, June, 2017). Lào Cai Province’s Director of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, Mr. Nguyen Dinh Dung, concurred that foreign tourist numbers have declined greatly: “Foreign tourists prefer nature, open space, peaceful environment, tranquility; this explains the decrease in their number [to Sa Pa]” (VTC14. 2016, online). Indeed, it has become known in Western backpacker and expatriate circles that Sa Pa is now extremely crowded with domestic tourists over the weekends, which used to be when backpackers would visit ethnic periodic marketplaces. Budget hotel managers we interviewed in B c Hà, another upland town with a large and colorful ethnic marketplace, noted that they have seen a recent upsurge in Western guest numbers, in part due to tourists bypassing Sa Pa to avoid the crowds, and in part due to the competition from a new alternative; the Đ ng Vãn Karst Plateau Geopark in Hà Giang Province, for which B c Hà is a natural entry point. Growing numbers of backpackers now start their northern upland adventures in B c Hà where they can rent a motorbike or car and driver and head to Hà Giang Province and its spectacular karst formations and minorities much farther off the tourism radar.

Does this mean that Sa Pa’s heyday for Western tourists is past? Possibly. Or possibly not, especially if the District gets split in two. If this split occurs, the southern portion will still hold high potential for seekers of the exotic Other, while being relatively easily accessible, which is not the case for Hà Giang yet.

Chinese mass tourism

In 2006, we noted that a specific segment of international tourists likely to arrive in large numbers in the near future were Chinese nationals crossing by land from Yunnan (Michaud and Turner, 2006). We predicted that this group was likely to increase due to plans to open a casino in Sa Pa Town and proximity to the Chinese border. Citizens in both countries are currently forbidden to gamble in casinos on national soil, but are free to do so abroad; many casinos therefore dot either side of the lengthy Sino-Vietnamese border (Thanh Nien News., 2013 August 12, online).

In the ten years following our initial observations, the influx of Chinese tourists to Sa Pa Town has not been as great as anticipated. A slight increase in Chinese tour groups was noticeable on the streets of Sa Pa in the late 2000s and a small

casino was in operation at that time. However, this casino closed its doors soon after, with patrons favoring the much larger casino in Lào Cai City smack on the border. Local interviewees assessed that Chinese tourist numbers have remained fairly steady since 2006. In all likelihood this is due to a tourism policy and industry within China that aggressively works to keep the national middle class spending its income domestically. Political tensions are also currently running high between China and Vietnam regarding control of the South China Sea, as well as hugely unpopular Chinese investments elsewhere in Vietnam – popular discontent being strategically fanned by the state. In 2016 and 2017, Vietnamese tour operators and hotel and restaurant owners in Sa Pa were scathing in their critiques of Chinese customers. One noted “they are noisy, spit everywhere, know nothing about Vietnam, and never tip” (personal communication, May 21, 2016), while other interviewees were noticeably frosty to China as a whole due to political tensions (see also [Chan Yuk Wah, 2006](#)). As it turns out, a number of interviewees in urban China all confirmed to us that Vietnam has very little tourism appeal for them – if any.

Yet we still contend that with such a large supply of increasingly affluent tourists just 34 kilometers away, and the highways and rail links recently upgraded on both sides of the border, the long-term odds are that Chinese tourists will become an important segment of the Sa Pa tourism sector. Local authorities in Lào Cai Province and Sa Pa District are well aware of this potential bonanza, which contributes in part to the resolutely Chinese-style approach that mass tourism development is taking in Sa Pa.

What about the local ethnic minority population?

In this tourism frenzy, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that 85 percent of Sa Pa District's population is non-Kinh and non-urban, belonging to rural ethnic groups to whom the state planned tourist boom is partly alien ([Fig. 8](#)). The same could be said of the *Bà Nà* ethnic population in Central Vietnam, where Sun Group made its earlier investments. But despite demographics in favor of minority groups, the plans to modernize Sa Pa display the will and desires of a small number of powerful Kinh agents governing this upland region alongside their corporate collaborators, and are designed to serve their political and economic interests first. We have exposed this uneven situation in our previous article on Sa Pa ([Michaud and Turner 2006](#)), in which we explained how, in a rigid top-down decisional structure dominated by Kinh, little attention is paid to local minority groups' preferences; their rights, civil or ancestral, are not given particular consideration and the central state's will, closely reflected in local policy, prevails.

It still remains the case that for the Kinh-controlled provincial and district local authorities, ethnic minority residents – mostly Hmong and Yao (Dao) farmers with little formal education – are not nearly as welcome to be part of Sa Pa Town's tourist planning as government entities and large-scale developers are. Minorities are relegated to the role of exotic commodities in tourist packages where “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” ([Michaud and Turner, 2006](#), p. 803).

It is little surprise then, that ethnic minority interviewees are not keen on the recent upsurge of Kinh middle class tourists. Among many concerns, it is fairly common for minorities to experience overt racism in their interactions with Kinh lowlanders. Hmong and Yao interviewees noted that Kinh tourists often poke cellphones in their faces to take photographs without asking or thanking them, will touch or grab their clothes or jewelry without asking permission, and will laugh at their Vietnamese language skills. One young Hmong woman noted, “I don't like the Vietnamese. We don't like them because they are mean to us; they stare and laugh and call us names” (personal communication, November 2015). A middle-aged Yao woman selling textiles in Sa Pa Town added, “I don't like selling to Hanoi tourists. The foreign tourists are kind and smile; the Hanoi tourists are rude and always want a very cheap price” (personal communication, May 2016).



Fig. 8. Rurality in Lao Chải commune, Sa Pa District, 2014. Source: Jean Michaud.

Textiles, often in the form of small blankets, soft toys, bags, jackets, and hats made from pre-worn and restyled clothing garments, are the most common goods that ethnic minority women sell as part-time traders in Sa Pa Town. Minority vendors also bring orchids and songbirds to sell to domestic tourists. Such goods are clearly not part of the local government's modernist picture for the town, and vendors have had to find creative ways to circumnavigate increasing restrictions on their trade. For instance, though previously able to roam the town's streets to sell itinerantly, albeit with fluctuating degrees of control and confiscations of their goods, since 2015 all such vendors have been warned that they must sell from specific, small stationary spots in the town. A number of vendors complained that such restrictions mean their sales have dropped drastically; many now follow trekking groups to surrounding ethnic minority villages instead, hoping to 'guilt' foreign tourists into buying goods from them after they have walked together for 4–5 kilometers. Others have set up small stalls in minority villages where no such rules apply, attempting to entice tourists as they pass on their treks (see [Turner and Oswin, 2015](#)). Another significant blow to ethnic minority vendors has been the relocation of Sa Pa town's old colonial market from the town's centre to about one kilometer away in January 2015. While there is more space in the new marketplace, ethnic minority traders selling from small stalls there are extremely unhappy about this move. Few tourists are visiting their new trading area, located upstairs at the far end of a market otherwise focusing on food and industrial items, with no prominent signs in Vietnamese or English pointing tourists to these traders' designated space.

In other words, the local authorities' project for ethnic minorities, even if they are the overwhelming majority of the District's population, is to sideline and instrumentalize them in order to allow a modernist tourism project to fully unfold. To put it bluntly, minorities, in the eyes of the authorities, represent the past, a state of backwardness that the modern Kinh are all too happy to leave behind. The only room left for their cultures is as an object of curiosity and, all too often, derision.

The local Kinh (and other Critics)

Long-term Kinh residents in Sa Pa Town are not naïve regarding who is reaping the benefits of the new developments occurring around them. These individuals migrated from the lowlands in the first waves of population relocation in the early 1960s, while others followed after the legalization of tourism in 1993. Those directly involved with tourism are grateful for the additional income that the increase in domestic middle class tourism is bringing. For instance, lowland Kinh tourists are recognized as a significant source of revenue, especially by Kinh stall-keepers in the new marketplace: "We didn't like it when they moved the marketplace here, but now sales are increasing again. Hanoians can get to this market in their cars and park around here, so things are ok now; not great, but ok" (personal communication, January 2016).

However, long-term Kinh residents are also highly skeptical of the overall rewards. Two themes stand out in these discussions: the greed of construction firms and of the local government, and negative impacts on the local environment. Market stall operators, hotel employees, and local tourist van drivers all note the immense control that Sun Group has gained over the direction of tourism development in Sa Pa Town and nearby locales. They comment that the local People's Committee is too fast to agree to Sun Group initiatives and no public consultation is undertaken with regards to tourism-related plans in the district. One interviewee noted: "We get told nothing about the plans for our town, nothing. One day there's a school there and that's where our kids go, the next we are being told it has to move because investors now own that land. Move a school!" (personal communication, May 2016).

The environmental impacts of increasing tourist numbers and tourism development plans worry long-term Kinh residents. They express dismay over the cable car project and wonder how much forest in the National Park was destroyed to build it. A tourist guide lamented that the thrill of conquering Fansipan's summit has now been lost, and that on his one trip in the cable car he shared the summit with loud tourists littering it with hot dog wrappers. The town's water supply is also an increasing concern, with some residents wondering how long it will take before serious shortages transpire due to increasing demand. Moreover, significant littering occurs along the town's main access roads and near tourist sites such as the cable car departure point – this has become so bad that a local social enterprise stopped waiting for the state to act and has started annual clean-ups. The lack of parking and increased traffic on the local roads has also become a particular sore point.

There have been wide ranging media critiques of recent developments in Sa Pa. Notably, BBC Vietnam ran an article in Vietnamese (2016, February 2) at the time of the opening of the Fansipan Cable Car that highlighted its pros and cons. Those in favor, including senior state officials, explained that the project was important for people to be able to enjoy one of the country's famous sites, and that they had observed no environmental damage themselves. These officials argued that without the cable car few people could access Fansipan's summit, and that during previous treks no one had controlled rubbish collection. Yet journalist Nguyen Trung Dan, who has previously petitioned on behalf of the people of Bà Nà concerned with the hill station development in that Central Vietnam province, explained that in Sa Pa: "With the construction of the cable car, the golf course, villas on Fansipan, people have destroyed the natural beauty of this mountain." He added: "The important thing now is that people voice their opinions against the way that tourism is exploited like colonialism and is only for some people with money" ([BBC Vietnam, 2016](#), February 2, online). Perhaps even more striking, given state control over the media, VTC 14, a state run television channel focusing on natural disasters, ran a piece in 2016 that heavily criticized the changes occurring in Sa Pa Town, as well as the impacts of nearby hydroelectricity schemes on ethnic minority livelihoods (VTC14 2016, online). The opening lines included: "This is not Hanoi or some large city in Vietnam, this is but a corner of Sapa, a small town perched on the side of the Fansipan mountain range. Once a beautiful, romantic, peaceful town, Sapa is now a groaning, moaning, noisy construction zone" (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

As specific as it may be, this case can be compared with several other places boasting similar characteristics, also within the Southeast Asian Massif. Among other things, these locales share with Sa Pa the hallmarks of a strongly centralized communist state in charge of local decision-making processes. One of them, Dalat, a famous colonial hillstation in southern Vietnam, immediately springs to mind (Jennings 2011). In nearby Yunnan, so does Lijiang, which has become a tremendously popular tourist destination for the Chinese middle class, who flock in droves to experience a unique cocktail of nature and culture in comfort – cable car rides included – with a staggering 17.3 million visitors in 2014, 95 percent of whom were domestic (Salazar & Zhang, 2013; Tourism Bureau of Lijiang Historical Town, 2015, online). Dali, an old and picturesque Bai city on the shore of Erhai Lake in western Yunnan, presents a similar story – also with cable cars, while heavily exoticized (and eroticized) Lugu Lake and Jinghong also underline a clear pattern of tourism modernization in China's Yunnan province (Tapp 2010; Wang & Morais, 2014).

While the magnitude of all these tourism ventures outstrip Sa Pa or Bà Nà by far, the resemblances are striking and point to a trend within Asian communist polities when it comes to developing tourism and increasing legibility within the Southeast Asian Massif. The reformatting of remote ethnic minority mountain locales to become beacons of modernist Chinese development preceded that of Bà Nà and Sa Pa by nearly two decades but otherwise followed a similar path, underlining a trend now expanding in Vietnam. This should not come as a surprise. Both regimes have followed a comparable path away from collective centralized economies over the past three to four decades to adopt market approaches. The Communist Parties in both countries still hold the reigns of all political and ideological matters, including cultural policies for minorities (Michaud, 2013), but have also allowed a degree of freedom for private enterprise. This is especially the case when the projects imagined by these enterprises are synergetic with the state's political visions.

As Tim Oakes has noted in relation to China, “tourism is a particularly meaningful metaphor for the experience of modernity in that it displays both modernity's relentlessly objectivizing processes as well as its promise of new and liberating subjectivities for those participating in either side of the tourism encounter” (Oakes, 1998, p. 11). He goes on to argue that “the prospects for a rational, disciplined, and patriotic modern society in China are very much being laid on the doorstep of the tourism industry,” (ibid. p. 228) and we would suggest that the same is currently true for upland Vietnam. Nyiri (2006) has similarly critiqued the dominant role of the state in China's tourism scene, noting that this creates very specific domestic tourism developments and experiences (see also Yang et al., 2008). Indeed, a new tourism landscape is emerging in Sa Pa District, one where middle class urban Vietnamese talk with specific dialects, dress in certain styles, wave the latest cellphone on the end of their selfie-sticks, and visit modern tourism sites. New social spaces are being created, causing frictions and tensions for some local residents, while financial rewards and benefits accrue for entrepreneurs, large-scale investors, and local officials.

Returning to James C. Scott's argument, the Chinese and Vietnamese governments “see like states” (1998): they are concerned with the national economy, wanting both to keep the new middle class spending locally and to absorb cultural minorities on the fringes into the Nation. But these governments also think in terms of security on the frontiers (the Vietnam–China border war of 1979, which caused significant damage to Lào Cai City and a temporary exodus of most Kinh residents from Sa Pa Town, is still fresh in everyone's memory). They welcome private initiatives by trusted businesses that will reinforce the state's presence on the national fringes at little additional cost, while contributing firmly to generating taxes and creating jobs. They encourage projects that will keep the national middle class seeking entertainment within the country, instead of spending their newly acquired wealth overseas. Not unlike the early period of the Walt Disney empire in the USA in the 1950s, with its standardized understanding of what matters in modern life and its clichéd characterization of ethnic differences in that country (Wasko, 2001), the Vietnamese state currently keeps control over the ideological message conveyed by tourism development to the national population. The state confines tourism development to a top-down, pre-approved sets of ideas, propositions, and cultural formats. This includes what officials in Vietnam have euphemistically called “selective cultural preservation” for minorities, answering to an ideological as much as to a pragmatic agenda. Private and semi-private promoters know very well that their projects will not be allowed to proceed if they do not adhere to such ideals.

Sa Pa is a geographically and symbolically remote area, until recently loosely attached to the Nation, where distinctive populations kept themselves one step removed from the lowlands' national modernizing projects for as long as they could, epitomizing Scott's 2009 argument of state flight. These ethnic minority populations have been a source of irritation for a growth-oriented and resolutely modernist state that does not particularly see the point in sustaining particular identities when these stand in the way of fast and steady progress at the national level. Again, like Lijiang, Lugu Lake, the Bà Nà hills, and countless similar remote human settlements around the world, Sa Pa has been earmarked for an economic makeover. Sa Pa is now firmly bound to follow a modernist agenda and reach a new level of integration into the state project, in this case blending scientific socialism and neoliberal principles on a grand scale. In such a project there is little room left for cultural distinction and local desires.

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Jean Michaud is Full Professor, Département d'anthropologie, Université Laval, Pavillon Charles-De-Koninck, 1030 avenue des Sciences-Humaines, Québec, QC G1V-0A6, Canada. Email: jean.michaud@ant.ulaval.ca He just published "What's (written) history for? On James C. Scott's Zomia, especially Chapter 6½" in *Anthropology Today* (2017). Sarah Turner is Full Professor in the Department of Geography, McGill University, Montréal, Québec, Canada. Email: Sarah.Turner@mcgill.ca. They co-authored with Christine Bonnin *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands* (U. Washington Press, 2015).