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A Middle-Class Suitcase: Unpacking Domestic Tourism in Vietnam

EMMANUELLE PEYVEL

TOURISM HAS STEADILY INCREASED in Vietnam since the *Đổi mới* reforms (figure 12.1). In 2019, the country registered 85 million domestic tourist trips as compared to 18 million international tourist arrivals, a 4.7-fold difference. The revenue generated totaled US\$32.8 billion, of which 14.5 billion came from domestic tourism (Bộ Văn hóa Thể thao và Du lịch 2020). Between 2015 and 2019, domestic tourism flows increased by a factor of 1.5 (from 57 to 85 million), and its revenues by a factor of 2.1. All these figures show that domestic tourism is a major pillar of Vietnamese tourism growth.

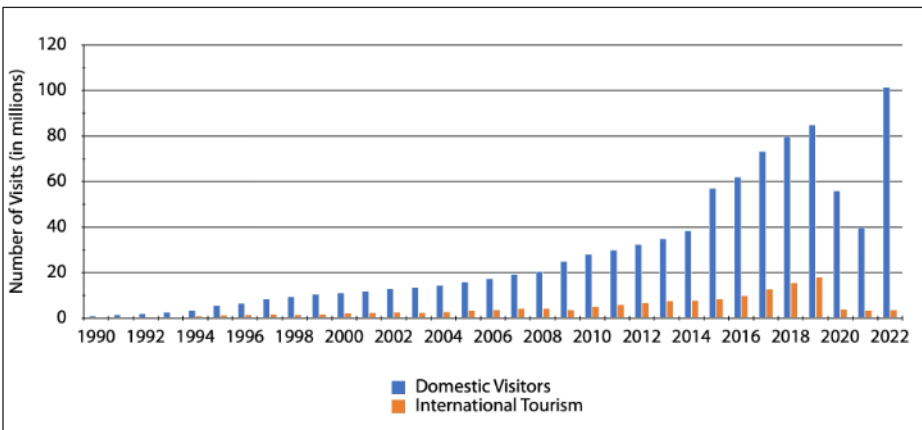


Figure 12.1: Combined growth of domestic and international tourism in Vietnam (number of visits). (Source: <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn>)

The collapse of international tourism in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak has boosted the recognition of domestic tourism, which had previously been overlooked, even by academics (Peyvel 2016; Bui and Jolliffe 2011). It was officially encouraged by the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism’s “Người Việt Nam đi du lịch Việt Nam” program (figure 12.2) that began in May 2020 (Nga 2020) and that helps sector professionals promote their offers. Although domestic tourism has not fully compensated the losses of international tourism, it has acted as a significant shock absorber in the face of the crisis.



Figure 12.2: Promotional campaign encouraging domestic tourism during the COVID-19 period. (Source: Minh Châu 2021)

The Vietnamese situation is not unusual: with a few rare exceptions in the world, domestic tourism is always higher than international tourism (WTO 2020). In addition to the standard economic indicators, domestic tourism is an excellent way of measuring how wealth is distributed, thus enhancing our understanding of social stratification and inequality. Moreover, its development is often seen as a marker of social progress. Indeed, it is correlated with the industrialization and tertiarization of the economy and the introduction of paid holidays and labor legislation, in accordance with Article 24 of the Declaration of Human Rights.

Although the impressive figures over the past thirty years demonstrate the growth of domestic tourism in Vietnam, the phrase “everybody is a

tourist” is misleading: not everyone can be a tourist, and not all provinces take advantage of tourism. This chapter identifies the populations and territories that benefit from domestic tourism (or not) in an attempt to avoid artificially simplifying and essentializing a statistical category. In doing so, it argues for acknowledging the diversity of tourist resources and practices as central to a complex understanding of the Vietnamese middle class today.

*Understanding the Vietnamese Middle Class through
Tourism Practices and Locations*

The definition of the middle class is the subject of an abundant, contradictory literature. Recognizing and defining it is a challenge for several closely related reasons. Politically, the middle classes do not really have an official existence in Vietnam. The descriptive term *tầng lớp trung lưu* (middle class) used in official discourse serves to bolster class unconsciousness among a significant part of the population, to the benefit of the regime’s stability.

These apparent paradoxes explain why today the Vietnamese middle classes are everywhere and nowhere at the same time, as Ann Marie Leshkovich explains:

Everywhere, because Honda motorbikes, recently renovated homes, upscale cafés, and imported fashion testified to an urban middle-class on the rise, a perception echoed in media and government-sponsored visions of the cultured family whose cosy emotional relations were enabled by material conveniences and leisure activities. . . . At the same time, the middle class seemed nowhere, in that people tended not to identify as middle class (*giai cấp/tầng lớp trung lưu*). Instead, they talked about being modern (*hiện đại*), having enough to live (*có đủ sống*), being civilized (*văn minh*), having culture (*có văn hóa*), or being appropriate (*phù hợp*). (Leshkovich 2014:175)

Since *Đổi mới*, social membership has been based less on production than on consumption, but the latter can be observed through practices that are more or less concealed, as they can be looked upon with suspicion (see Harms, this volume, and Hansen, this volume, on the tensions and anxiety that are part of being middle class in the socialist market economy).

Thus, the Vietnamese middle classes reside in both visibility and invisibility. While that makes them difficult to define, their multiple spatial footprints make the analysis of their practices and spaces even more

rewarding. Through landscape analysis, Lisa Drummond (2012) shows the many layers of public, consumption, and circulation spaces in Hà Nội. Yet, if the city is the most favored place to study the middle classes due to the social inequalities generated by the accumulation of wealth in these paradigmatic places of capital, social stratifications cannot be restricted to the city. They are at work in all spaces occupied by the consumer society (see also Hansen, this volume). Therefore, the study of tourist locations extends the study of Vietnamese middle classes by following their practices and movements in places beyond their daily lives. Such an approach helps us to understand the ways in which they claim their social position in changing Vietnam.

As map 12.1 indicates, the places where the Vietnamese middle classes practice tourism are telling of their relationship to the body, time, space, and wealth. It shows how they project onto these places the values that they seek to claim as distinctive, such as being modern (*hiện đại*) and civilized (*văn minh*). Yet, turning rural, mountain, and coastal productive places into recreational ones has major consequences on the land, the landscape, and their economic functions. Land speculation, densification, and planning are a direct consequence of the production of recreational and contemplative places. Within these places, the unequal concentration of wealth reshapes the gradients between private and public, clean and dirty, male and female spaces due to the progressive urbanization and integration into consumer society, as demonstrated by To (2012).

The transformation of the coastline between Đà Nẵng and Hội An is representative of these sociospatial changes. The 30 kilometers of coastline are now seamlessly occupied by resorts, large complexes of hotels and villas with swimming pools, spas, restaurants, cafes, and golf courses. They have sprung up over the last twenty years under umbrella Vietnamese corporations (e.g., Vinpearl, Naman Retreat) and foreign ones (e.g., Sheraton, Hyatt, Accor, Furama). They operate in a self-contained way and are closed off from the outside by high walls, heavy gates, security guards, and video surveillance. The result is an almost total privatization of the coastline that heavily restricts the access of local populations to the beaches. This impedes the prior functions of the beach as a source of freshness that is increasingly necessary in the face of global warming, as a place for social and recreational activities (e.g., *tập thể dục* gymnastics, relaxing, and socializing) for neighboring communities, and a resource providing supplementary food and

nutrition, for example, through fishing or harvesting coconut groves. These resorts are not just isolated ramifications of international tourism, they are part of the global encounter and domestication of the tropical island iconic landscape for which three key elements are combined: white sand, coconut palms, and a turquoise sea (Löfgren 1999). The construction of these resorts has established a new relationship with the place through the introduction of new standards of hygiene: swimming pools are considered cleaner and less dangerous than the sea, garbage cans encourage waste collection, and each resort has dedicated personnel for maintenance and cleaning tasks. Meanwhile, the heavy construction accelerates coastal erosion as the ripraps no longer allow natural sand dynamics despite regular sand supplies.¹ Gardens and golf courses, watered with fresh water, complete the ecological nightmare. These tourist areas, as they develop, gain in centrality on a national and regional scale as spaces of investment and wealth concentration. They become more accessible by road and air travel with the development of transport infrastructures such as highways and airports that connect them with major cities. The rise of low-cost airlines such as Vietjet Air and Bamboo Airways, alongside Vietnam Airlines, has enabled the democratization of air transport and improved access to formerly remote mountainous regions such as Điện Biên Phủ and Buôn Ma Thuột. At the same time, they lead to the marginalization of local populations, as privatization, hygiene standards, and the use of comfort technologies (such as air conditioning or the Internet) justify withdrawal to the private sphere. Consequently, the seaside or highland resorts are purposely built to generate contrast with their surrounding social and spatial environments, in order to feed into the middle classes' distinction project.

This process is well illustrated by figure 12.3, a photograph taken in the former colonial hill station of Bà Nà (Central Vietnam), which Sun Group corporation, one of Vietnam's largest real estate developers, rebranded as Bà Nà Hills in 2013. The pastiche buildings reminiscent of France and the dedicated transport infrastructure with six cable cars are hardly integrated into the natural environment of the highlands. Instead, a logic of enclosure and domination in relation to the surroundings prevails. The resort is indeed a tourist bubble that offers visitors everything they need in terms of accommodation, food, and entertainment in a scheme of effortless consumption. In addition, standing at nearly 1,500 meters above sea level, the multiple viewpoints and panoramas, including the new Golden Bridge (Cầu Vàng),



Figure 12.3: Bà Nà Hills, a paradigmatic middle-class tourist destination. (Photo by the author, 2016)

are designed to look down on the natural space, while paradoxically defacing it. As a heterotopia, namely a localized utopia, requiring rigid norms of operation (Foucault 1984), the place deliberately maintains a disconnection from its immediate environment, functioning as an island in it. This results in a strong control of both employees and tourists, who are monitored everywhere and at all times.

Blurring the Lines: Tourists On-site and Online

The processes of individuation at play in these tourist sites is also worth considering. The practice of photography, a middle art par excellence (Bourdieu 1995), is striking in its capacity to enhance the bodies of these classes in a new way. By subjects adopting flattering poses in renowned places, staging themselves in uncommon and therefore distinctive activities,

displaying their bodies on the beach or during sports activities, they feed a new self-consciousness. These practices have clearly been democratized with smartphones and the selfies they allow. Before, owning a camera was more socially distinguishing. Alternatively, professional photographers were, and are still, appreciated by large groups, although their number has considerably decreased. In any case, the new self-consciousness is one occupied with being happy, whether alone or with family, friends, or as a couple. Bà Nà Hills, in particular, has become a romantic destination for young couples to spend their honeymoon, a relatively recent practice in the country that has much to do with new notions of happiness and the good life.

This new self-consciousness supported by photography is very often mediated through social networks. These virtual networks can also be considered as new spaces for the Vietnamese middle and upper classes to produce material and social effects via the sociability and visibility of this social and economic capital. The practice of photography itself is based on the consumption of expensive objects, smartphones, and dedicated cameras, which also partakes in a distinctive material culture.

Finally, the use of photography in a tourist context supports another relationship to time in its capacity to isolate unique moments whose exceptional character reinforces their distinctiveness. It is a question of keeping a trace. More than the landscape or the monument visited, it is the act of posing in front of it as a testimony of the subject's visit that counts (see figure 12.4). These photographic practices feed a sense of nostalgia, particularly about their native land and childhood, which is counterpart of the modernity on which these populations put their claim, reflecting a singular relationship that individuals now have with the passing of time. The recent use of the *bao cấp* (subsidy) period for tourism and leisure purposes exemplifies this (Peyvel 2021a). Some bars, cafés, restaurants, and gift or decoration shops now use socialist aesthetics such as propaganda slogans or objects from (or copying) this period in order to thematize commercial venues.

Free Time and Self-Concern in the Context of Social Change

Domestic tourism contributes more broadly to a revolution of the individual in Vietnam, by legitimizing self-concern, the development of a private life, and the preservation of intimacy, all of which complicate the social and



Figure 12.4: Domestic tourists in Gành Đá Đĩa, Central Vietnam. (Photo by the author, 2021)

spatial relationships between public and private (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009). This is striking in a country marked by both Confucianism and socialism, systems in which modesty, a sense of hierarchy, and obedience remain important values.

Furthermore, the development of domestic tourism is deeply linked to social and economic changes, of which it is as much a witness. For the past 30 years, Vietnam has been experiencing strong economic growth, averaging nearly 7 percent, resulting in a general increase in living standards. According to the World Bank, the poverty rate was 6.7 percent in 2018 in Vietnam, and the GDP/capita was US\$3,461, placing the country in the middle-income category. However, city dwellers remain privileged in the distribution of this wealth. Hồ Chí Minh City accounts for nearly one fourth of the national GDP, and Hà Nội 12 percent. This unequal distribution of wealth is linked to rapid urbanization. At 20.1 percent in 1989, the urbanization rate has now reached 36.8 percent with an annual urban growth estimated at 3 percent

(Business France 2020a). Unquestionably, middle-class and affluent city dwellers are the breeding ground for domestic tourism, even if they do not account for all of it.

These city dwellers, increasingly rich and numerous, are often employed in the industrial and service sectors. Agriculture accounted for only 15 percent of GDP in 2020, while industry represented 34 percent. According to the World Bank, the rate of wage employment has risen from 19 percent in 1997 to 45.7 percent in 2019, and it is within the skilled labor force that this rate is growing fastest. Wage employment introduces lasting changes in time management. When a population lives mainly in rural areas of an agricultural economy, the rhythm of work depends essentially on that of the harvest, allowing little time off. Even if there are times when people do not work, they most often coincide with forced idleness during the off season. They are therefore not really chosen, and more difficult to structure as free time. In addition, this interruption of work is often used to temporarily engage in another income-generating activity, such as a craft industry, or to get a job in the city. In urban areas, on the contrary, an employee in the industrial or service sector lives according to a much more structured separation of work and free time. The simple fact of having a weekly or monthly contract, rather than a daily one, guarantees the consistency not only of income but also of time use. This helps structuring and financing free time, and therefore organizing tourism projects.

In Vietnam, free time is governed by the Labour Code, adopted by the Assembly of the Ninth Legislature on 23 June 1994. Today, the legal working hours are eight hours a day and 48 hours a week (Chapter 7, Article 68), which can be reduced for very arduous jobs. According to Article 72, the employee is entitled to one day off per week, or four days per month if weekly rest is impossible, and he or she earns an extra day off every five years (Article 75). In addition to this, there are ten public holidays (*ngày nghỉ lễ*).

In total, Vietnamese people enjoy an average of twenty to twenty-five days off per year, although a large part of the economy is still informal, and therefore more difficult to track. As a result, some Vietnamese may have fewer vacations than expected, while others are more fortunate. Some foreign companies and administrations may grant extra days, notably to comply with vacations of their expatriate staff. However, these exceptions benefit managers working at headquarters often located in Hà Nội and Hồ

Chí Minh City, rather than workers employed in peri-urban and rural factories, further reinforcing social and spatial discrimination.

However, the increased number of people working in cities and in the secondary and tertiary sectors creates a favorable time for the development of tourism. Weekends gradually become more structured and are increasingly reserved for rest and recreation, even as people continue working. It is important to highlight this situation as it complicates the traditional definition of the middle class by its income. While it is true that the middle class typically has higher incomes, it also has more and more free time, flexibility, and resources to enjoy leisure activities.

The changing consumer practices are also driven by the country's youth. According to the last population census, half of the population is below thirty years of age. Socialism has brought a high level of education and care to the masses, making it easier for them to join the consumer and communication society. Indeed, school is understood as a place not only of formal learning and diplomas but also of preparation for globalization and mobility: students learn foreign languages, study geography, and go on school trips. According to the World Bank, more than 70 percent of the population is connected to the Internet today, while the rate of cell phone equipment is 142.7, which means that there are 1.5 subscriptions per person. The development of these technologies actively contributes to the development e-tourism, and specific platforms such as Luxstay, the Vietnamese equivalent of Airbnb.

All these social changes suggest a nonproblematic relationship with mobility. In 1993, 81 percent of the Hà Nội population and 65 percent of the Hồ Chí Minh City population owned a bicycle (Godart and Cusset 1996); in 2020, there were between 45 million (according to the Ministry of Transport) and 58 million (according to the Department of Road Safety) motorcycles in the country. Eighty percent of urban trips in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City are made with this type of vehicle, while the rate of car ownership continues to grow (Hansen 2016). This has led to a spectacular increase in mobility, particularly for tourism and leisure purposes, closely combining mobility and well-being (Nguyen 2020; Truitt 2008).

Social and Spatial Inequalities of Domestic Tourism

While the country as a whole is richer, not all Vietnamese are: *Đổi mới* has increased wealth and inequality at the same time (Harms 2016; King 2008). According to Oxfam,² there are currently 13 million poor people in the country. Among them, ethnic minority groups are overrepresented: although constituting only 14 percent of the total population, they make up half of the population of “most impoverished people.” In contrast, the country now has 12,327 millionaires and 142 ultrarich people, defined as those possessing at least US\$30 million (Business France 2020b). Tourism has followed the same trend and remains socially discriminatory.

According to the General Statistics Office surveys of foreign and domestic visitor spending in 2003, 2005, 2009, and 2013 (Tổng cục Du lịch Việt nam 2003, 2005, 2009 and 2013), which regrettably have stopped, the inequalities become visible through nine variables relating to gender, age, occupation, expenditure, means of transport, accommodation, reasons for visiting, length of stay, and management (use or not of a travel agency). These statistics are now about ten years old, which is why I will present a summary of them here, to identify structural characteristics, supplemented by more recent specific statistics when they exist, notably in the Statistical Yearbooks³ that contains data on the average length of stay. In 2013, it was 3.7 days. In 2019, it was still less than 4 days (3.57 in the case of visiting friends and family, 3.96 days when using a commercial establishment). This shows that short stays dominate, and while vacations are gradually normalized, long vacations are neither common, nor widely socially accepted. In terms of spending, in 2019, it averaged VND 1,122,800/day for domestic tourists (around US\$45), compared to US\$96/day for foreigners. Unsurprisingly, guests in the most expensive accommodations spend the most: VND 1,845,100 (around US\$75) for a five-star hotel customer in 2019, compared to VND 1,020,200 (around US\$40) for a guest house customer. However, according to the 2013 surveys, it is the most modest accommodations that are the most frequented: the share of hotels with none through 2 stars concentrated more than 55 percent of domestic visitors, while 4- and 5-star hotels gathered only 10 percent.

Beyond this general profile, three variables further characterize domestic tourism: age, gender, and occupation. Most domestic tourists are young: twenty-five- to forty-four-year-olds represented 65 percent of the sample in

2013. The ratio of men to women appears clearly unbalanced, since 60.3 percent of men were surveyed against 39.7 percent of women in 2013, which suggests a gendered access to tourist mobility, the equality of which is only slightly progressing (in 2003, this ratio was respectively 67.4 percent against 32.6 percent). The generational and domination effects combine here, explaining why most Vietnamese tourists are in fact young men. Professional occupation is also discriminating. Farmers are indeed the numerically least important category in the sample (less than 3 percent in 2013), which is explained in part by their low income, but not only: it is more difficult to autonomously spend free time in this profession. Between the 2003 and 2013 surveys, farmers are the only ones who are less likely to go on vacation, an indication of the difficulties faced by the rural population. On the contrary, all the other socio-professional categories, as well as retirees, have seen their departure rate increase in ten years, with blue-collar workers recording the strongest growth, going from 2.2 percent to 11 percent of the sample, which suggests, beyond the massification of flows, a certain democratization of the tourist activity. However, this must be nuanced according to income. On the one hand, income determines the length of the stay: while 30 percent of civil servants and 16.3 percent of entrepreneurs spend more than 15 days away, only 8.1 percent of workers, 6.1 percent of retirees, and 0.4 percent of farmers could afford it in 2013. On the other hand, income determines the expenses incurred during the stay: entrepreneurs are the ones who spend the most (more than VND 5 million/day), twice as much as farmers, the socio-professional category that spends the least (VND 2.5 million/day) in 2013. The gap had been the same ten years earlier. This means that while living standards are rising for all, this does not significantly reduce the gaps between social classes in tourism practices.

Finally, income, while indispensable to the realization of a tourism project, is combined with other discriminating variables: that of being able to free up time, which puts farmers at a disadvantage; and the social acceptance of mobility, which favors men. However, it is impossible to go further in the intersectional study of these relations of domination because certain variables are missing, such as the geographic origin and ethnic categorization of the respondents, which would have been useful in approaching the rural-urban and ethnic inequalities. By observations alone, Kinh city dwellers are indeed the majority going to tourist sites, reinforcing the ethnic and gender domination effects.

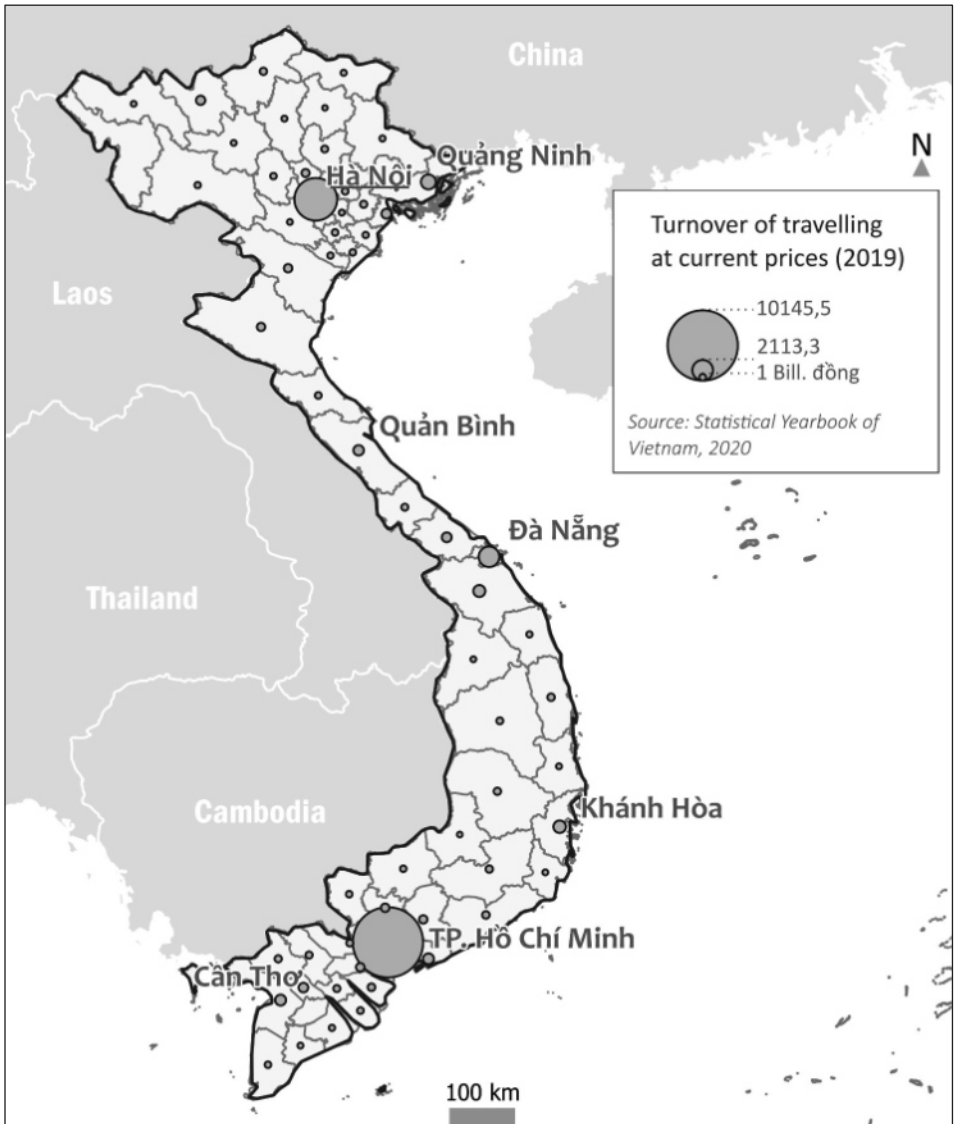
Not only is tourism socially discriminatory, but its practice generates integration or exclusion, leading to further axes of inequalities. This unequal distribution can be analyzed at two levels: the national level, to differentiate between privileged and disadvantaged regions, and the local level, where cities appear as centers of tourist. Map 12.2 shows that tourism in Vietnam is ultimately concentrated in two quite distinct regions: the north, polarized by Hà Nội, and the south, around Hồ Chí Minh City. While the eleven provinces of the Red River Delta alone account for more than 25 percent of revenues, Hồ Chí Minh City and Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu gather 60 percent. Beyond the influence of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, Central Vietnam collects only 6.3 percent of revenues, shared among Huế, Đà Nẵng, and Hội An.

This north/south dichotomy is combined with an east/west one: tourist activity is more concentrated on the eastern coast than in the western mountainous region. The five provinces of the Central Highlands account for only 0.3 percent of the country's tourism revenue. This dichotomy refers more broadly to an unequal development of the country, between a much richer Kinh territory in the plains and rice-growing deltas, conceived as the center of the country, and the mountainous territories, often relegated to a peripheral status. In the north, however, tourism is increasingly gaining traction with itineraries linking villages marketed as "ethnic": Hòa Bình, Mai Châu, Sơn La, Điện Biên Phủ, Lai Châu, Sa Pa, Hà Giang, Ba Bể, Cao Bằng, Bắc Kạn, and Lạng Sơn. In the Central Highlands, conflicts between Kinh and local ethnic groups are still recent, so tourism development in these provinces remains limited around the three main cities of Kon Tum, Pleiku, and Buôn Ma Thuột. In the east, 70 percent of the revenue generated from tourism is concentrated on the coastline, where 54.5 percent of Vietnamese tourists travel (Business France 2020b).

Furthermore, larger cities, especially Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City, are the focal points of this tourism system. They play a triple function: as destinations, as a transit point to other regions, and as emitting hubs, with their residents supplying the largest number of domestic tourists in the country. Above all, it is there that the command structures of the activity are concentrated, not only public (the country's largest agency, Saigontourist, has its headquarters in Hồ Chí Minh City), but also private actors.

Tell Me Where You Travel, I'll Tell You Who You Are

While statistical surveys outline the main characteristics of domestic tourism in Vietnam, qualitative field surveys finely differentiate middle class practices according to the forms of capital employed (Bourdieu 1979). Indeed,



Map 12.2: Provincial distribution of tourism revenue in Vietnam in 2019.

the practices, places, and imaginaries of domestic tourism are not uniform, and some can be conflicting, as they are claimed by social groups aiming to achieve distinction and belonging at the same time.

Bà Nà Hills is a good example of these class dynamics. The destination is an iconic landmark of Vietnamese mass tourism. Designed almost exclusively for a domestic clientele, this place represents a “middle-class landscape” (Drummond 2012). Indeed, Bà Nà Hills is a clear spatial manifestation of global consumption, materializing the good life as idealized by the current Vietnamese middle class (Earl 2014). Evidence that this place has a strong social identity is that it has been criticized specifically by a social class having a strong cultural capital. Professors, architects, artists, and journalists have exposed the destruction of the natural environment and mocked a monumental faux pas on social networks, as a forty-two-year-old project manager for an International Cooperation in Hà Nội posted on Facebook in 2023 with photos of the construction site:

Now Sun has demolished the entire mountain peak at an altitude of 1,500 in Bà Nà's sacred mountain conservation area, destroying nature to create a complex of super-class, fake European concrete fortresses that speak in today's language. Looking at the images of brutal butchering of a nature reserve like this, you must see that going to Bà Nà Hills is aiding in crime. (Translation by author.)

Rather than a place for the middle class as a fixed and bounded category, Bà Nà Hills is therefore the place of a certain middle class, from which other social groups seek to distinguish themselves. Attendance surveys conducted on-site show that the most represented professions correspond to middle classes possessing a certain amount of economic capital, but relatively low cultural capital, such as retailers, managers of small and medium-sized businesses in transport or import-export, or office workers. On the contrary, professions requiring a high level of cultural capital, what R. Florida called the “creative classes” (2002), are not prevalent. This socially demarcated attendance helps us to understand why this leisure park, the largest and most frequented in the country, the flagship of Sun Group (the third largest group in the sector after Vin Group and FLC), is at the same time the most reviled, especially in the press and on social networks.

These middle-class conflicts reveal that tourism, and by extension leisure, can be used to acquire skills and knowledge that can serve as an economic, social, cultural, and symbolic tool kit within the educational, professional,

and even matrimonial markets. Tourism does not only allow encounters; it is a means of acquiring and capitalizing on skills and knowledge: holiday camps that are blossoming in the urban economies of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City today are a case in point. It would be restrictive to understand them only as entertainment or child care. Rather, they allow middle class and wealthy children to practice music, painting, chess, physical activities, computer coding, or a foreign language, especially English or Chinese. These activities are marketed as means to reinforce multilingualism, muster a sense of teamwork, foster a taste for competition, and promote logic, rigor, and creativity, not to mention self-confidence. These are all skills and attitudes that are not strictly part of the academic learning process, but which nonetheless have a discriminating effect on academic and professional careers. They fuel this “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), where cosmopolitanism, initiative, dynamism, and mobility are central values. This investment is a characteristic not only of upper classes with a certain international capital (Wagner and Réau 2015), but also of middle classes with an “international goodwill” (Nogueira and Aguiar 2008), seeking to integrate as best they can into globalization. In this sense, tourism can condition other social and spatial mobilities. Despite its frivolous appearance, tourism may be purposeful: it can be made profitable, build up reputation, and lead to the formation of wealth.

The unequal access to tourism, both socially and spatially, is also the result of a progressive withdrawal of the party-state from the tourism sector in favor of the private sector (Gillen 2016). It has maintained majority control of the most profitable companies such as the national airline Vietnam Airlines while progressively parting with smaller infrastructures such as state-owned accommodation. In 2004, for the first time, the private sector surpassed the state one in tourism (Tổng cục thống kê 2007:165–166). Ten years later, 26.7 percent of the revenue generated by tourism still went to the state, while 63.1 percent went to the private sector and 10.1 percent to companies with foreign participation (Tổng cục thống kê 2010:536–537). In 2019, these figures were respectively 12.6 percent, 75.6 percent, and 11.3 percent (Tổng cục thống kê 2020:652).

Global Encounters of Domestic Tourism

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) officially defines a domestic tourist as a visitor traveling within the tourist's country of residence, and the category of domestic tourism therefore includes people who live in the country they are visiting. However, establishing a statistical group based on the country of residence may result in an artificial separation from international tourists, with the risk of overestimating the common features within each category and setting them up as particularism, without providing the means to envisage heuristic bridges between Vietnamese and foreigners in the places, practices, and imaginaries that they may share. The danger would then be to fall into essentialism, by assigning specificities to each nationality, instead of focusing on the circulations, hybridizations, and reappropriations that they entail in a globalized context.

Current domestic tourism practices involve multiple circulations, both in time and on various spatial scales. Some are ancient legacies, such as *du xuân*, the practice of going to the mountains at the time of the lunar new year to admire the blossoming fruit trees, a practice common to other countries in the region, such as Japan (*hanami*) and Korea (*beotkkot kugyeong*). The French colonization marked the moment when the spatial model of the resort appeared, by the sea (the seaside resort of Cap St. Jacques, which later became Vũng Tàu, but also Nhà Trang, Đồ Sơn, and Sầm Sơn) or in the mountains (the hill stations of Đà Lạt, Bà Nà, Tam Đảo, and Sa Pa), promoting new practices and landscape aesthetics from Europe. These were sometimes appropriated by the Vietnamese from that time, sometimes valued (Goscha 1996; Nguyen 1995), sometimes mocked (Durand 2011; Vũ 1936). Today, the attendance of these resorts is essentially domestic and consists of fundamentally hybrid practices. Far from being prisoners of the French scheme, the Vietnamese have also developed their own practices and imaginations, such as going to the seaside without sunbathing, since white skin is still considered aesthetically and socially attractive. The current syncretism of mountain travel, between tourism and pilgrimage, is also interesting to highlight (Peyvel 2021b). It is fully in line with the three Ps of tourism in the region, identified long ago (Graburn 1983): pray, play, and pay.

The socialist era was an important stage in the conception of domestic tourism, which was then designed to serve national construction (Gorsuch

and Koenker 2006). No longer a market sector, tourism was considered a reward, captured by the apparatchiks but also granted to peasants or workers considered deserving, with the aim of building a new person (*người mới*). Today, there are still trips offered by mass organizations and trade unions to their members. It would be interesting to study them further, because although their members are getting older, these organizations continue to play a role in democratizing tourism, especially in rural areas. Their actions show how transnational neoliberalism and state socialism have intersected (Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012).

Since *Đổi mới*, Vietnamese tourism has continued to grow. It is therefore important not to completely separate inbound and outbound tourism. In addition to domestic tourism, most Vietnamese tourists travel within the region, primarily to China and then to ASEAN. In 2009, there were 1.4 million Vietnamese trips to ASEAN, ten years later there were 4.1 million, mainly to Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.⁴ These circulations allow for a better understanding of practices such as gambling and casino tourism, which are officially forbidden to the Vietnamese in their own country, but which are nevertheless very popular.

Finally, between inside and outside, at the crossroads of the foreign and the familiar, the Vietnamese abroad occupy a special place on the tourist spectrum in present Vietnam, which is poorly represented by official statistics. They straddle the line between domestic and foreign tourists. However, this status is not only an administrative issue, but also a matter of personal membership: some claim it and ask for dual nationality, while others reject it. Moreover, traveling to the native country fulfills several functions, which are often difficult to summarize solely on the grounds of “tourism.” For example, the business deals concluded on such occasions may also motivate the visit. Finally, the matter remains political. Between 1975 and 1986, it was unimaginable for those living in countries designated as capitalist enemies to come to Vietnam for tourism. If such tourism practices can be deployed today, it is because the Vietnamese authorities have now opened up their borders and are encouraging these populations to invest locally. The tourism dimension of these trips is in fact twofold: not only do Vietnamese emigrants and their descendants go to Vietnam for tourism, but they can also organize trips with their families back home, which is particularly conducive to sharing views, discovering new places, and renewing certain practices.

This brief overview does not claim to cover the entire history of tourism in Vietnam, but it does demonstrate that domestic tourism cannot be reduced to a simple phenomenon of diffusion from Europe. The issue here is to distinguish between Westernization and globalization, and not to confuse an object with the multiple uses that can be made of it. Vietnamese tourists today are not receivers of a tourism globalization that will affect them sooner or later, but rather producers, transmitters, users, and manufacturers of tourism discourses, practices, and standards. Moreover, restricting this vitality to a mere Westernization can revive racist clichés forged from the colonial era. This is not unique to Vietnam: it could be generalized to many former European colonies, such as Morocco (Berriane 1993).

Conclusion

All these arguments show how domestic tourism can be used to examine the Vietnamese middle classes. These mobilities constitute an excellent means of concretely approaching the uses of the newly produced wealth since *Đổi mới*, its distribution, and the meaning assigned to it. Furthermore, leisure offers an original perspective on the construction of identities and the rise of the individual in society. Urban, recreational, and social mobility are finely interwoven: the Vietnamese rely in part on the recreational sphere to showcase their social success and build their urban identity. However, it is fundamental to avoid making it an essentialized category: beyond the figures that show a constant growth over thirty consecutive years, not all Vietnamese are tourists, and, among them, not all engage in it in the same way: social, spatial, ethnic, and gender inequalities continue to be strong and require careful analysis.

Nevertheless, unpacking Vietnamese domestic tourism should not lead to a total deconstruction of this category of mobility. Indeed, even though it is imperfect, it has two major benefits. First, it recognizes the existence of these tourists. To name them is to make them exist alongside international tourism, which has long captured most of the attention. Although international tourism generates foreign currency and contributes to the balance of trade, it represents a smaller volume compared to domestic tourism, and is more volatile and sensitive to crises, as evidenced by the recent Covid crisis. Moreover, it is not the category itself that is the problem, but the use that

can be made of it, for example to serve an essentialist or nationalist discourse. In contrast, there is considerable reward to approach it in a dynamic and transformative way in a globalized context.

Notes

- 1 This issue is regularly covered in the Vietnamese press, e.g., Hoang Anh, “Enduring Battle to Save Beaches from Erosion,” *Vietnam Investment Review*, 6 May 2021, <https://vir.com.vn/enduring-battle-to-save-beaches-from-erosion-84062.html>.
- 2 See <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/countries/vietnam>.
- 3 Niên giám Thống kê quốc gia, General Statistics Office yearly publication: <https://www.gso.gov.vn/en/?s=statistical+yearbook&lang=en>.
- 4 See <https://data.aseanstats.org/dashboard/tourism>.

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