



## City profile

## Saigon-Ho Chi Minh City

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## ABSTRACT

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) has existed for over three centuries and has developed into the financial capital and most important economic hub of Vietnam. This profile outlines the history of HCMC's development and its impact on current conditions and physical structure of the city. The paper analyzes some of the problems with respect to urban land use that have occurred in HCMC in the transitional period after Doi Moi and discusses the city's future challenges, in the perspective of climate change and further economic and population growth.

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## 1. Introduction

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC)—once known as Saigon—is nowadays the most populous city in Vietnam with 7.97 million inhabitants (2014). The city is situated in the Southern part of Vietnam, around 1,730 km by road to Hanoi—the capital city of Vietnam—in the North (Fig. 1). HCMC covers an area of 2,095 km<sup>2</sup> with 494,01 km<sup>2</sup> urbanized area consisting of 19 districts and counties, and rural area that comprises 5 subdistricts with 98 communes (Fig. 2). Nowadays, HCMC is the nation's financial capital and the prime economic hub that has attracted people from all across the country.

The profile aims at providing a brief review of HCMC's development history as well as the institutional changes that have affected the planning and urban form of the city, followed by a discussion of the current and future major land use management challenges for the city. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the context for urban development in HCMC, providing a brief historical overview of the city. Section 3 describes HCMC's economic and real estate market dynamics. In Section 4, some issues and problems related to HCMC's urban land use in the transition period are analyzed followed by the discussion of future challenges in urban spatial development in Section 5. The final section contains some concluding remarks both with respect to HCMC's history and its future urban planning challenges.

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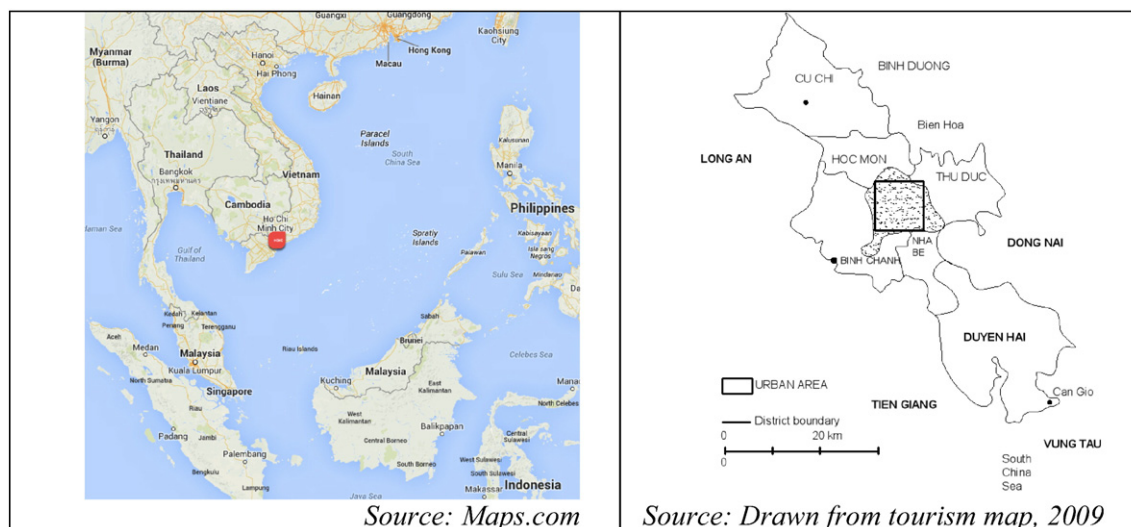
## 2. Overview of the historical and urban development of the city

HCMC has evolved through time under different regimes and experienced many institutional changes related to urban planning and development. Here we distinguish four periods in the history of HCMC based on significant change of institutional regimes especially related to planning and urban development, from its ancient period till now.

## 2.1. 1698–1859

Information regarding HCMC's early period in ancient times is only provided in reports from Chinese traders translated by Pelliot (1903). According to these reports, the area belonged to the Kingdom of *Nokor Phnom* (or Kingdom of *Funan*, which today comprises part of Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam) until the 6th century and then the *Chenla* Kingdom until the 8th century. In this paper, however, we start the history of HCMC's development in the late 17th century (Fig. 3) because there is not enough information about those kingdoms and long periods afterwards until the Chinese and Vietnamese people arrived in that area during that time.

In 1698, the *Nguyen* Dynasty gave an order to establish a Vietnamese town from a junk seaport area called *Prey Nokor* that was occupied by the Khmer. The Vietnamese named the town *Gia Dinh*. The Vietnamese ruler established a new administration system in this new town that allowed it to organize itself and benefit from its revenues without any intervention from the central government in the North part of Vietnam (Wook, 2004). During this period, everybody could more or less freely use and develop his/her land, although permission from the authorities was needed (Wook, 2004). It was also common at that time that property, especially land, tended to be communal within family or clan (Smith, 1972). The



Source: Maps.com

Source: Drawn from tourism map, 2009

Fig. 1. Ho Chi Minh City in South East Asia.

Nguyen Dynasty also established foundation of commercial, monetary and taxation system in the area. The city has then developed mainly along the Saigon river as the port played an important role and is still the city's nucleus. In 1790, French architects were hired to build a *Vauban style* citadel for military purposes, which became the most prominent landmark of the town at that time (Fig. 4) (Vo, 2011). Ironically, it was also the French who destroyed the citadel (tabula rasa) when they conquered and took control of the town in 1859.

## 2.2. 1859–1975

In 1862, the French built a totally new city in the area, at first for 500,000 residents, and adopted *Saigon* as the name for the city (Fig. 5). The French planned to make Saigon the administrative and commercial hub of South Vietnam (Bird, 1883). From 1887–1902, Saigon served as the capital of the *Cochinchina* region as part of the *French Indochina* or the *United Indochinese Federation* which comprised parts of the modern Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, with Hanoi (Tonkin) as its capital (Anh, 2005).

During the French occupation, several subsequent master plans including the plan by Coffyn in 1862 (Trân & Trương, 2011), Ernest Hébrard in 1923, and Cerutti in 1942 (Thai, 1998) were made which transformed Saigon from a small town into a modern city. It was during this time that the main layout of the city in a straight style with wide tree-lined avenues and parks was introduced and soon the city developed a reputation for its beauty and cosmopolitan atmosphere. Saigon was called the "Pearls of the Far East" (*Hon Ngoc Vien Dong*) for its elegance, diversity, and prosperity (see the remnants of French Architectural buildings in HCMC in Fig. 6). With regard to land use regime, the French preserved the communal ownership over land in Saigon, although under supervision of the colonial government. Later in 1946, the state enacted a law that clearly recognized three different kinds of landownership: state, collective, and private ownership.

During this period, Chinese migrants from *Guangdong* province moved to Cholon (today China Town in District 5), 6 km away from the city of Saigon. They lived mainly on boats along the river or in temporary small houses (Bird, 1883). In 1932, Saigon and Cholon were merged and called Saigon-Cholon, later, in 1956, the Region of Saigon.

The French ruled Saigon for nearly a century. After the *Geneva Agreements* in 1954, the US came to replace the French military presence, and Vietnam was divided into two parts: the *Democratic Republic of Vietnam* in the North—influenced by socialist ideology from the former Soviet Union and China—with Hanoi as the capital; and the *Republic of Vietnam* in the South—influenced by the US and its capitalist

ideology—with Saigon as the capital. As the war broken between the North and the South from 1954 to 1975, Saigon also served as the military headquarters for US forces in the area. During the war, after the French had left, the land and property ownership regime more or less remained as it was and served as the main rationale for any urban development.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, at least a million immigrants from the rural areas poured into the city to avoid the war (Goodman & Franks, 1975). Rapid population increase created serious housing problems and overcrowding. Many slum areas appeared along the river (Fig. 7). To solve these problems, the South Vietnam government implemented a series of master plans for Saigon's development, including the *Hoàng Hùng* plan in 1958, the *Ngô Việt Thụ* plan in 1960, the *Doxiadis* plan in 1962, and the *WBE* plan in 1972. However, proper implementation of these plans was prevented by the war (Thai, 1998).

## 2.3. 1975–1985

The civil war ended in 1975 resulting in the reunification of Vietnam into the *Socialist Republic of Vietnam*. Saigon lost its status as capital, and in 1976 it was renamed into *Ho Chi Minh City* to honor the late President of the Vietnamese Revolution. The new government adopted a strong centralized socialist system. It took responsibility for providing housing for those working for the state (Coit, 1998). Unoccupied houses and private enterprises were nationalized (Gainsborough, 2004). The new government abandoned private landownership and established the collectivization of agriculture land.

In the first fifteen years after the war, hardly any spatial development took place in HCMC (Thái, 2015). The few developments were mostly concentrated in a radius of less than 5 km from the city center. Nevertheless, even during the difficult situation after the war, people from the rural areas still moved to the city. Due to housing shortages, people usually had to share houses. HCMC's typical alley system, which has lasted until now, was then formed (Kim, 2012).

## 2.4. 1986–Now

In 1986, the central government decided to introduce the *Doi Moi* policy aiming to create a more market-oriented economy, in order to improve the country's economic power (Tsuboi, 2007). Along with this policy, the state enacted a land law in 1988 that, permitting the grant of land use rights to organizational and individual land users, still affirmed that only the state, in the name of all citizens, is the sole administrator of the land. This law still prohibited many types of land

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