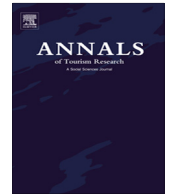




ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/atoures

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

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 ngàn 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 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

* Corresponding author.

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

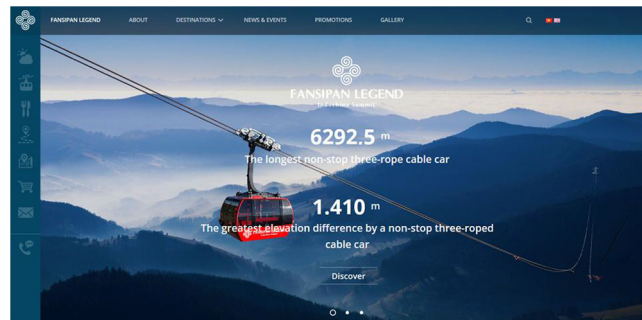


Fig. 1. Promotional website for Sun Group's cable car, Sa Pa District (Fansipan Legend, 2015, online).

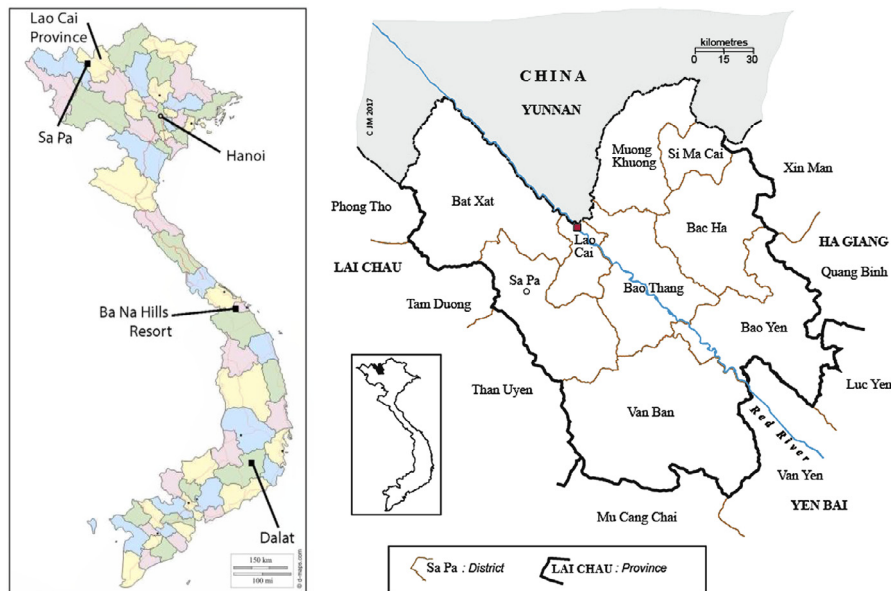


Fig. 2. Vietnam with locations mentioned in this article; Lào Cai province. Source: D-Maps.com; Michaud 2017.

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 interviewed 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

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5107881>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5107881>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)